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Friendly Freethinker: A Sunday Morning in Nature's Wild Church

By Chris Highland
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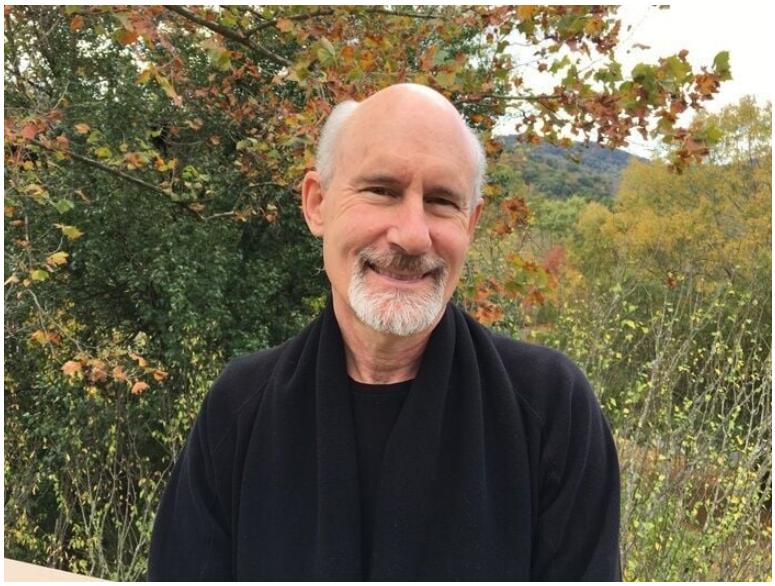

Carol and I enjoyed a week on the South Carolina coast this summer. Sea breezes and the shade of pines, oaks and palms kept us cool. Wading into warm ocean waves refreshed us in the intense Southern sun.

On Sunday morning, we rode our bicycles along shaded pathways, pedaling by parks and ponds. Always on the lookout for wildlife, we stopped to observe two alligators feeding on the edge of a pond before they ambled back into the water. Our eyes were drawn to the treetops as we heard the cries of two circling bald eagles. Through the binoculars we peered into their lofty nest while keeping wary eyes on the pond as the alligators silently swam in our direction.

Later in the day, after watching soaring osprey, white flocks of ibis and egrets, standing eye to eye with green lizards, and spying on grazing deer, we joined a boatload of visitors to float toward the sunset. At one point on the wide river, we were delighted to find playful dolphins frolicking around the boat.

This was our Sunday in sand, sea and sunshine.

We were both parish ministers for a number of years before serving as chaplains and religious leaders with interfaith organizations. While I left the church years ago, Carol stays connected to the church. Her ministry is now primarily counseling and teaching. My “secular ministry” is teaching, writing and volunteering.

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That Sunday on the coast we felt we had entered Nature's Church. The wildness around us was exhilarating, even as our senses were energized, fully awake and alert to the active, living environment.

East Coast naturalist and writer John Burroughs wrote: "If we do not go to church so much as did our [parents], we go to the woods much more, and are much more inclined to make a temple of them than they were." ("The Gospel of Nature")

From the West Coast, Burroughs' friend John Muir echoed this sentiment while in Yosemite Valley: "This I may say is the first time I have been at church ... In our best times everything turns into religion, all the world seems a church ..." ("My First Summer in the Sierra").

Both of these writers drew from the well of wisdom of their perceptive predecessor, New Englander Henry Thoreau. In a journal entry, Henry wrote: "I suppose that what in others is religion is in me love of nature." That may not satisfy those who believe in something greater than what our senses, and our sense of reason, present—those who envision a reality beyond, behind, beneath, above Nature. Yet, we can be grateful for the insights of these earth-loving thinkers.

The contemporary New Englander, writer Annie Dillard, died in recent days. I read her book, "Pilgrim at Tinker Creek" when it was published

in the 1970's. She wrote: "Mountains are giant, restful, absorbent. You can heave your spirit into a mountain and the mountain will keep it, folded, and not throw it back as some creeks will. The creeks are the world with all its stimulus and beauty; I live there. But the mountains are home." Only a sensitive, reflective, contemplative person could see and feel that kind of absorption. Dillard was drawn closer to Nature, not as a mere observer or visitor to the wild places, but as a participant in the world, around her and within her. When going to Nature is going home, one realizes the truth of Walt Whitman's statement: "We are Nature."

Each of these "secular sages" understood that Nature is the great classroom and cathedral, a wide open space for those who believe in a super-nature, and those who do not.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel taught that "the true sanctuary has no walls." ("God in Search of Man"). Religious traditions often seem to unconsciously forget or consciously conceal this belief. Solomon builds a grand temple in Jerusalem, then realizes no imagined "house of God"could contain the Creator of the Universe. Yet, the sacred building projects continue. As I see it, this is one reason Religion needs the naturalists, scientists, poets and philosophers. Believers need reminding that the natural world is good and great enough for religious practice

as well as for non-religious saunterers who discover delightful lessons and wonders in every step.

When we were carried by bikes and boats into the temple, baptized by the pond, river and sea, we found something that felt more meaningful than prayer, worship or scriptures. The Word of Nature was preached. We found the living church, synagogue, mosque, temple and university. . .; we discovered Life.

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