

Nature calls us to step back, consider



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Our first exploration of February took us out of town, off the highways into the hills and “hollers.” Winding up the mountains, we were a little stunned by the poverty tucked back in the woods, not far from the mansions and money of the city. Who are the people of the “sticks” and what are their stories?

The images stick with you, disturbing, intriguing. We drove on until the pavement became a bumpy gravel road over and down into the national park. Elk outnumbered the iPhone crowd and we arrived at the trailhead in Cata-loochee.

Hitching up the hiking shoes, we followed a main branch of the stream a few miles, crossed some bridges and never saw a soul. The chilly winter’s night left notes for us along the way — icicles on branches and moss, icy patches by the cold waters. Snapping a few photos in an attempt to capture beauty that cannot be captured, the forest absorbed our attention and soaked us in.

I was so captivated by one icy fall cascading over slick green boulders that I completely missed another branch of the river washing into the flow a stone’s throw away. So focused on focusing the camera on the up-close artistry of nature, I neglected to look just a little out of my field of vision to see the greater picture. My wife pointed out small rivulets snaking down under tree roots and leafy bushes.

Nature’s simple lessons are usually basic and rather obvious — if we’re paying attention. Yet the instructors and textbooks in the natural classrooms can be as perplexing and complex as the human brain. (I often think of the brain as a pulsing landscape of living streams churning with blood and ideas.)

What is the greatest river on the planet? The Nile (the longest)? The Amazon (largest amount of water)? The Congo (deepest)? Growing up in Washington State, I thought the greatest river was the mighty Columbia. But my favorite rivers had Native American names like Skykomish, Stillaguamish and Skagit. The best ones had lots of fish and were so clear, bubbling from the Cascade or Olympic mountains, you could drink from them.

It didn’t take too many years to realize that the greatest river was the one I was standing by or hiking near or skin-



COURTESY OF CHRIS HIGHLAND.

A digital photo by Chris Highland illustrating nature’s beauty.

ny dipping in. More honestly, maybe the greatest one is yet to be found.

It seems that when we step back a little, we see something “greater” and “better” than what we see in a narrow, restricted view. I enjoy observing the world close up, to find something delightful right at my feet. But it constantly amazes me to stand or climb higher, to take in the larger, deeper, wider perspective.

Here’s a real-time example from the current turbulence of political streams. Many people want to change a law — the Johnson Amendment — to allow religious congregations to support, endorse and campaign for candidates. Some feel that the government has not allowed free speech for people of faith, although no one has been prosecuted under this amendment since it was adopted in the 1950s and those who participate in “Pulpit Freedom Sunday” are not bothered by the IRS.

These folks think that if their pastor could proclaim one candidate as “God’s chosen” (as some did in the last election), there would once again be true religious freedom in America.

Rather than debate this here, I want to step back, stand up straight and imagine what the land would look like if Lyndon Johnson’s law was “destroyed.” Let’s say every church, synagogue, mosque and temple was suddenly free to be as partisan as they wish. Joyous congregations would gather every Sunday, especially during an election sea-

son, in celebration of this or that politician. Think of it. All of their tax-free monies could flow into the great Republican river or Democratic stream.

As we know, these houses of worship are nonprofit organizations untaxed by the government, which means all Americans — all of us, religious or not — give religious groups a break and congregations can raise millions to give to anyone they choose.

Now, step up a little higher on this boulder in the stream of imagination. Local churches (and other “houses of God”) could finally be free to identify as First Church of the Redeemer’s Republicans or First Church of the Democratic Christ. Then (OMG) churches could begin to paint their sanctuaries either red or blue, making it convenient for townsfolk or tourists to immediately see from a distance which political persuasion is praised in that holy place. What a wonderful world we can imagine! Well...

How does all this relate to streams, rivers, forests, mountains?

Perhaps it doesn’t directly relate. But, I suspect, nature is calling us back to class.

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