

Finding spirituality in the natural world



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My wife Carol and I drove the length of the Blue Ridge Parkway from Waynesboro, Virginia, to Asheville. We've done more of the parkway here, but haven't quite completed the whole 469-mile "Belt of Beauty." It's an amazement at every turn with vistas that will leave you speechless.

At a trailhead in Virginia we met an elderly couple from the north of England who had driven all the way from New Orleans. They suggested we stop at a country store further south at Meadows of Dan.

We stopped by the market and were immediately aware of something unusual. As we wandered the aisles of jams and hams, nooks and books, we found ourselves singing along with the music playing on the store PA. It was all "sacred" music, catchy old tunes about faith and Jesus.

Humming and singing all the songs among the shoppers and shelves, I was smiling, aware that some might think I was a faithful churchgoing believer.

Hearing these old tunes brought back youth group and camp songs like "Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus": "Look full in his wonderful face, and the things of earth will grow strangely dim, in the light of his glory and grace." We would weep as we strummed our cheap guitars, gazing up to heaven.

Music is a powerful way to turn and shape our emotions and beliefs. Like



Chris Highland titled this photo "Sun Crescents (Eclipse of God?)"

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the parkway, music takes us to the heights and depths — to mountains and hollers of feeling.

What I wonder about sometimes is how much we allow melodies and lyrics to sink into our minds and color the world around us. I think of those songs and the message they tell of sin and sorrow and salvation. I can appreciate the melodies and don't mind singing along, sometimes. Yet I feel some concern that many don't realize the questionable theologies that get buried in your brain.

We sang earnestly of a face so bright it would cause "the things of earth" to "grow strangely dim" (a kind of spiritual eclipse). As the verse in Isaiah says, "The grass withers, the flower fades" because the glorious presence above outshines it all.

What does this say about valuing our life here or caring for our world?

There are those on the other end of the spiritual spectrum who see the "face of God" everywhere in all things. For these folks (sometimes calling

themselves pantheists), looking into the eyes of nature is gazing into the face of God (gods or goddesses).

This is a pagan way of viewing the world, and since "pagan" simply means a person of the wild and open countryside I would guess many of us are secret pagans — or at least sense that "land and lord" are not far apart.

Though most Christian theologies reject this notion of God in nature, many people experience "spirituality" in the natural world. They feel closer to the "divine," to the "sacred" earth. What does this language suggest?

This leads back to my main concern. The more we are seeking a "presence" or "spirit" in nature, the more we seem to lose the immediate (un-mediated) experience of nature's endlessly wonderful lessons. We'd rather listen to preachers and scriptures than park naturalists and scientists — to hear church music rather than bird music.

We become distracted by our beliefs about the world, particularly other worlds. As I see it, we lose the goodness

of nature when we look beyond it to ward something or Someone above or behind it. We overlook the "face value" of nature.

When the earth fades and grows "strangely dim," this can lead to not caring what happens to the natural environment — our home. As they say, some people are "so heavenly minded they're no earthly good."

Why support efforts to conserve and preserve wild areas or protect wildlife when it's all "passing away" and the incredible beauty around us is "just a distraction" from "living for God" and preparing for heaven? This mentality can have serious consequences.

I once felt that nature was God — that the world was, in a sense, God incarnate. In ministry, it was people, human beings, who could embody the divine. When I cleared trails in the Pacific Northwest, I felt I was coming closer to the "spirit of nature" (I even wrote a song about that).

Then I realized what I was doing. I was denigrating, you might say desecrating, the world all around me by spiritualizing it. I stopped in my tracks, literally, and let go of a "spiritual" way of seeing the world. That felt natural.

When our world no longer has the "face of God" or speaks with the "voice of God" there can be meaningful music too — singing of nature as nature, for itself and itself alone.

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