

# Evangelizing on the value of what we can't see



## Highland Views

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Columnist

I presented a brief “secular sermon” up on Grandfather Mountain for their John Muir Day. Startling with Muir’s stirring call to “Climb the mountains and get their good tidings,” I circled around the throng like an evangelist for nature — and so I was, in good Muir fashion: “Nature’s peace will flow into you; like the sunshine into the trees, the winds will blow their freshness into you” (from “Our National Parks”).

A better altar-call I’ve not heard — just as I am ... with bread and tea.

Muir sauntered through the Appalachians and ran up Grandfather Mountain in 1898. He hadn’t been feeling well, but after walking for miles along the Blue Ridge he announced, “the air has healed me.”

High on the peak, Muir, the mountain muezzin, could not contain his joy as he “began to jump about and sing and glory in it all.” In that special place, he could “stand in the face of all Heaven come down to earth.”

This is what the gospel of natural wonder can do to a person.

The main speaker for the evening was author Leigh Ann Henion — a nature evangelist in her own right — holding our rapt attention with stories from her book “Phenomenal: A Hesitant Adventurer’s Search for Wonder in the Natural World.”

As a young mother traveling the world from Puerto Rico to Sweden to



**Leigh Ann Henion and Chris Highland after their presentations at Grandfather Mountain.** COURTESY OF CHRIS HIGHLAND

Tanzania and beyond, Leigh Ann sounds like a convert when she exclaims, “instead of choosing my religion, I feel like I’m creating my own, piecemeal, as I stumble through the wilds.”

In Tanzania, on the Serengeti, she camps right in the midst of the immense annual (or continual) migration of animals. The Maasai camp manager, Ivan, tells Leigh Ann that the National Park exists because of the tsetse fly. She asks how that’s possible. He explains that

people avoided the area for many years because of the flies. So, in a real sense, “they protected it. They became soldiers of the Serengeti. Things have value that we don’t know and cannot see. Nature serves as a reminder of how we fit into all this.”

Closer to home, this was made all the more clear when young family members were visiting. Their reaction to several spiders, ladybugs, centipedes and stinkbugs, who were also “visiting” our home, was a bit disappointing. The kids were bugged by bugs. Sadly, they were quick to call for the execution of their fellow visitors. “Kill it!” was the battle cry (why is nature such an enemy?).

This thoughtless disregard for nature goes against my nature. I tried to model a less violent response using my “patented bug capture device” (BCD: clear glass with 3x5 notecard) to plop down over each critter, sliding the card under and calmly walking to the door to toss them out.

“Why didn’t you just KILL it?” was the reaction. Trying to be gentle and reasonable, I replied, “It has just as much right to live as we do. This land is their home too.” Yawns — back to the glowing screens.

I thought of the hunter in upstate South Carolina who shot one of the largest bears ever recorded in that state. With great “sport” he killed the 600 pound “beast” with a high-powered rifle at 200 yards. He was so proud to have something to hang on his wall. Then I saw an article on “managing” grizzlies and bison that wander beyond “their boundary” in Yellowstone.

I’m not against hunting for food. I simply wonder if people ever stop to think about the impact of killing things, large or small. Is there any balance in nature? Are there relationships between living things that we aren’t even aware of? Could even a tiny fly serve some purpose in the network of life?

When I was growing up in the Pacific Northwest, where lumber companies thrived, my dad took me fishing with my uncles. Even as a young boy I learned that we depended on the gifts of the sea and streams and we should protect them. When fish and forests began to disappear and logging — especially clear-cutting — threatened the crystal-clear rivers I loved as a child, the debate over “resources” flared up.

When industries (and livelihoods) collide, and conflict with the nonhuman world is evident, serious discussion and action is needed.

What’s all this have to do with spiritual and secular issues? If a person has to ask, then they have not heard the gospel of natural wonder or converted to the living, breathing religion created when we “stumble through the wilds.”

We have much to learn. Some of the most invaluable teachers are vulnerable. Let’s hope we don’t eliminate them (squish, stomp or shoot them) before we can show gratitude and honor.

*Chris Highland served as a Protestant minister and interfaith chaplain for nearly 30 years. He is a teacher, writer, free-thinker and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife, Carol, a Presbyterian minister, live in Asheville. Learn more at [chIGHLAND.com](http://chIGHLAND.com)*