

Does spirituality exist in nature?



Highland Views

Chris Highland
Columnist

My wife Carol and I were leaving to join friends for a secular seder meal but didn't make it out of the driveway before coming face to face (shell to steel) with a snapping turtle in the middle of the road.

Nudging it with my walkingstick, I wasn't about to get too close, knowing they have a powerful bite. A neighbor carefully picked it up to place it back by the pond.

Later, at dinner, we told the story of the turtle and I brought up a question about a female cardinal who has been pecking and flapping against several different windows. We've guessed she may be seeing her reflection and imagining competition. Or she wants to build a nest in nearby bushes so warns us to stay away.

I tried different ways to discourage her. On a whim, I placed a cherished portrait of Chief Joseph in the window. Her strange behavior ceased.

Someone at the dinner table suggested it could be a "message." I smiled. I don't tend to lean toward anything other than a natural explanation for these events. We'd like to think an animal wants to "tell us" something, that it "represents" some lesson for us. Maybe. But I suspect that's mostly wishful thinking.

I suppose I keep asking the same set of questions over and over, year by year. It isn't that I sit around and stew in them, or steep in them (questions have an edible quality). Perhaps I consume them? I hear a comment or belief that catches my attention, like an aroma of something that draws you in the door, but you're not quite sure you're ready to take a bite right then.

One question I can't help but nibble on from time to time — because people keep dishing it out and serving it up — concerns this endlessly troubling notion of the spiritual or "spirituality."

Taking another bite of it now, I find it's not so much



A snapping turtle in the road. Is it a spiritual sign? Probably not. COURTESY OF CHRIS HIGHLAND

a bitter taste — just a bit bland. People like me in the secular community simply don't find the same comfort or satisfaction with the idea, the word or the worldview suggested by "spirituality."

What particularly sticks in my throat (or gives me indigestion) is the popular notion that being in a natural setting somehow elicits, evokes or emotes a sense of "connection" or "relation" described as "spiritual experience."

Some First Nations communities (and "First World" folks who want to be like them) speak of nature in very personal terms — both as a personality (or personalities) or simply as an environment for personal "transcendence."

I get that. But I can't accept that. It seems to impose a lot of humanity and human imagination on the world. I honestly can't stomach the anthropocentric (human-centered) view that says, "I go into nature so God can speak to me." Is that all nature is — a useful tool for "spiritual" feelings?

In his early journals, John Muir described the beauty of the California mountains in very dramatic, even "spiritual" ways. While tending sheep in the foothills he discovered a valley of 20 small hills that he called "Twenty-Hill Hollow." He was ecstatic to be among millions of wildflowers in all their glory. He "blessed them for their beauty."

Muir carried a Bible in his brain yet loved to practice botany and geology with intense delight and almost religious fervor. In other words, he knew the science and used scientific terms to explain the world as he saw it, while at the same time he enjoyed vividly painting the landscape with colorful "spiritual" language.

He knew his readers would relate to his allusions and illustrations drawn directly from familiar scriptures. He wanted to convert them to the gospel of preservation, to save these "holy" lands as National Parks.

In Twenty-Hill Hollow he quotes Moses asking God to, "Show me Your glory." Muir writes that he would like to take Moses to the Hollow "to drink the glories of flower, mountain and sky." He would ask the great prophet "how he had the conscience to ask for more glory" when the world is filled with it.

The sage of the Sierra presses his sermon even further. "[If] a revivalist, intoxicated with religion" were to find himself in the Hollow, he would "fancy himself in heaven." He would behold "streets of gold ... breathing the atmosphere of angels ... beneath the cloudless sky of New Jerusalem."

Nature's evangelist seems to proclaim: "Heaven? I'll show you heaven!"

Muir knew the religious words were dramatic representations. Like "spiritual" things. Words like "spirituality" are placeholders, when we have no words to describe the indescribable feelings — the beauty, the wonder beyond words.

Food for thought, or wings on the window?

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