

Streaming wisdom from Wilma Dykeman



Highland Views

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Guest columnist

“There is for children a fascination in everything alive. Later, when adult fears and superstitions have been implanted in their minds, their curiosity and trust are dulled. But before that time, a hornet’s nest, a mud-dauber’s home, an ant hill, are all as exciting as any adult-written fairy tale or adventure book.”

These wise and perceptive words

from Wilma Dykeman (1920-2006) appear in the conclusion of her insightful memoir, “Family of Earth: A Southern Mountain Childhood.” The manuscript was found after her death and in less than 200 pages she presents vivid images of her life in Western North Carolina.

Walking with her son, Jim Stokely, at the old Dykeman home in North Asheville, it was easy to imagine young Wilma by the pond, in the creek, under the poplar and pine. Jim confirmed my impression that his mother understood our natural interconnection with land and our co-inhabitants. This relational

worldview may be her most enduring legacy.

One refreshing stream of thought flowing through her writing is almost a statement of faith: “But the earth is with us always and we are one family upon it.”

It isn’t hard to see that Wilma was a sensitive and thoughtful child. From her youthful days in the holler she drew from a well of earthy wisdom. She expresses what we all know, or sense, in our relationship with place and people:

“The life of one human is the life of every other living thing on earth. ... All life is kin and all men are brothers. yet

each is a stranger, one to the other, and will always be so.”

Her memory saunters back and forth across the terrain of those early years and the stories are close and personal.

She takes several pages to describe the annual visits of The Preacher, a man in his seventies who ventured into the valley as a familiar guest and storyteller. “He had been one of the first men to hold a pastorate in the community, and he had grown to know every family and every member of each family.” As Wilma presents this gentleman she never says

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