

Highland

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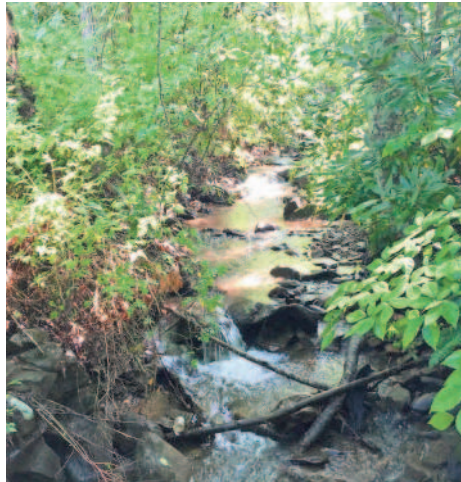
that The Preacher spoke of religion when he sat on their porch on hot August afternoons. As he removed his hat and wiped the sweat from his forehead, he talked about the people, their lives, births and deaths, the history of the community.

The creek that babbles under the bridge on their land, became for her a symbol that stood for “the understandable things in life.” Wading into its mysteries, the stream became a classroom and sanctuary for her education and imagination.

“We have often heard life compared with the flowing ceaselessness of a river. My life always seemed more like the bed of a creek, the bed which remains fairly constant through the years while a stream of physical, mental and emotional events flowed swiftly by on its surface.”

We wade in with her, and find our own footing in the bedrock. Not merely to watch the flow, but feel it, digging our toes down deep in soil, sand and stone.

In a wonderful description of her fa-



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ther Willard, who died when Wilma was only 14, Dykeman says he was rather Puritanical and conservative, but he had a quality that balanced this: a sense of humor.

“It was not the rich, droll humor like my mother knew; rather, it was a humor which saw the ironies in life, the paradoxes in [people], and fitted them together in a philosophy of life which found these facts a human, healthy part of natural life.”

This recalls my own father’s conservative beliefs, punctuated by his laughter and self-amusing puns. He always found great enjoyment in making others laugh — if not groan — as he looked for the lighter side of life. I think this helped him handle the heaviness of family, faith and personal failures.

As I see it, Wilma Dykeman was a “spiritual” as well as “secular” sage in the best possible sense—she didn’t need to use religious language to talk about life and living. She seems to have stood at the confluence of both streams absorbed from her parents: a mother who was “a believer in humanity” and her father who was “a believer in nature.”

In no way an idealist, she had a keen eye for “the darker aspects of the natural world” like forest fires and death. Hearing hounds on the hunt in autumn she felt a longing and lonesomeness: “All the world around me was enfolded in beauty and in strangeness.”

There’s a fresh spring and creek to contemplate in the writing of Wilma Dykeman. I’m curious what other readers discover in the streams, forests and hollers she opens for us.