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Beauty will save the world

by Rich Heffern

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Russian novelist Dostoevski wrote: "It is beauty that will save the world." I think I believe that. But what did he mean?

It's almost a platitude now that the future of the planet depends on reawakening a sense of the sacred, a knowledge that the earth is sacred, holy. What are the connections here? How does this work? Can a bloodshot Arizona sunset reverse the troublesome outcomes of our shortsighted public policies? Can an afternoon encounter in a mountain meadow knee-deep in shooting star and Indian paintbrush blow the whistle for good on our greed and consumer avarice? Can a tiny indigo bunting chirping from a treetop bring gentleness and understanding to racism's stiff necks and hearts of soften the rage of tribes against one another?

Maybe the whole thing works something like this.

A long and loving look at the natural world we inhabit can actually physically change us. We can become different persons. In his book *The Universe is a Green Dragon*, physicist Brian Swimme points out that when you stand in the presence of the moon, for example, you become a new creation. There is an actual physical interaction between the photons, the reflected sunlight from the moon's surface, and the optic nerves in your brain.

The feeling of awe that arises in the presence of the dazzling, luminous night sky is as much the creation of the moon and stars as it is yours. The universe conspires with us in that moment of contemplation. It enters into us in a new way. We become something other than what we were before. "To live," Swimme writes, "is to enter this beauty, surrounded by enchantment, summoned by magnificence."

So, captivated, charmed and entranced by the world, an inner and outer evolution takes place. While

surprised once again by spring's bursting wildflowers or while stalking orchids of praise in a summer forest, I begin to notice that I too, in my own way, am beginning to bloom and flourish.

Praying with nature is not just a good way to spend some idle moments. An hour of ardent birdwatching is an hour of letting go of myself as the center of things. Anyone who can be content to perch on a rock for an hour and listen to the southwestern desert come alive at sunset or watch the nighthawks rise and plummet on carefree currents of air over the Kansas prairie, anyone who is busy awakening and nourishing that appreciation of the wholeness in nature is also developing an ability to live more fully, more heartily, more effectively, more genuinely. Enjoyment and contemplative attention put us in touch with our own best energies. Our capacity to grapple creatively with life's most difficult challenges is increased.

We know we are better persons somehow for our lifelong love affair with the natural world.

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