

'Bright winds God walks down every single day'

Rich Heffern | Mar. 2, 2011 Eco Catholic

Southern Missouri hollows are somewhat mysterious places, with clear-water streams that disappear then reappear a hundred or two hundred yards down the hollow. There are shadowy nooks and high walls of limestone cliffs above under the ridgetops. Logging roads crisscross the streams taking advantage of any flat terrain.

One afternoon I was exploring a remote hollow I had never before visited. It was in late March, a stormy day. The somber pageantry of the clouds hid the sun. Mists were forming up around the garrets and lofts of the ridgecrests. As I entered the deeper woods of the lower hollow, the sky darkened. Down the path an animal disappeared quickly in a blur of movement before I could get a good look. A rain crow's long labored call echoed against the stern hillsides. A nuthatch circled the trunk of a hickory upside down searching for larvae and making its high-pitched liquid tin trumpet call.

A squall of rain passed over. Raindrops ran down the silken stems of the grass on the path. The sharp notes of a phoebe sounded in the deepening gloom. Well lost to where I came from, my senses spellbound with the walking, with the hush and quiet, with this particular place and its spirit. My head a bit giddy, I could feel my heart beating beneath my shirt. There were nameless feelings riding the winds, and even intimations of menace, foreboding, warning. This was a seldom visited place.

I could turn up one of the arcades opening off the hollow and work my way up a forested passageway up into the shadowed shut-ins that sheltered fern-bordered pools, turn a corner made of ancient mossy boulders and stumble onto?. What? A sight, a spectacle, a discovery, a glimpse of something lost, a marvel, a theophany ? or nothing much! But anything could happen.

I stooped down next to a deep pool in the creek. In the mud nearby were the crisscrossed tracks of both deer and wild turkey. As I gulped water from my cupped hands, I could feel that the clear pool tapped all the way down to a the fierce core of the Earth where subterranean rivers rush and roar in the darkness. The sweet gums, ash, white oaks and sycamores that stood on the creek banks all leaned in over the pool. The still waters reflected a small patch of sky above the encircling trees, and in the mirrored reflection I could see also the rocky, palisaded heights and high stone eyries beneath the ridges, which echoed the far-off cry of a red-tailed hawk cruising beneath the clouds.

Just about the time you have lost faith in your life in the world, something comes along to restore it. My thirst slaked, I climbed up to a rock ledge above sheltering flowering columbines and sat quietly in the gloom. I had crossed some kind of threshold here. New and unconsidered aspects dawned in me. Impossible dreams awakened. I became convinced that I had been sleep walking most of my life.

'The wildest and most desolate scenes,' wrote Henry Thoreau, 'are strangely familiar to me.' This rocky bend in the hollow where I rested was a sacred place ? as holy as any church sanctuary.

'Behold,' exclaimed King Solomon after completing his temple thousands of years ago, 'the heaven and the

heaven of heavens cannot contain thee: how much less this house that I have builded??

Lying on that rock ledge above the drinking pool I found a lichen-decorated stone I had picked up and put in my pocket to take home. That wonderfully decorated piece of limestone was a lodestone, ever pointing to a great mystery that is everywhere. It spoke to me of the need to keep my image of God footloose and large. The Creator is wholly other, yet in all things. Nature reminds us again and again of this. Poet and farmer Wendell Berry points out the crucial importance of keeping this always in mind:

"Solomon and St. Paul insisted on the largeness and at-largeness of God, setting God free, so to speak, from ideas about him. He is not to be fenced in, under human control, like some domestic creature. God is the wildest being in existence. The presence of his spirit in us is our wildness, our oneness with the wildness of Creation. That is why subduing the things of nature is so dangerous, and why it so often results in evil, in separation and desecration. It is why the poets of our tradition so often have given nature the role, not only of mother and grandmother, but of the highest earthly teacher and judge, a figure of great mystery and power."

Nature can be an antidote to idolatry, keeping us from clutching those tight definitions of the Great Mystery that screen from our view the sacredness of the world and can drain us of the rushing blood of hope like some pale vampire. The stone in my pocket became a smoldering coal that kindled tongues of fire for a pentecost full of the bright winds God walks down every single day.

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