

VOICES OF FAITH

The bond between nature, faith

By **HOLMES ROLSTON III**

Life is full of surprises.

I started out getting fired from my first job as a rural pastor in southwest Virginia. I ended up getting the two major prizes in religion: I gave the Gifford Lectures at the University of Edinburgh. I was awarded the Templeton Prize by Prince Philip in Buckingham Palace.

I have spent my life in a lover's quarrel, not with my wife of five decades, but with the two disciplines I love: science and religion.

I once started a Science and Religion class with the claim that these are the two most important things in the world. A student promptly objected: No, professor, you are wrong: That's sex and money. I convinced him otherwise before the semester was over.

But I am still trying to keep science and religion in dialogue. The trouble is making peace between the two. But, equally, I have had to quarrel with both. Science thought nature to be value-free. Christians thought nature fallen, owing to human sin. They agreed that humans were the center of value on Earth. I had to fight both theology and science to love nature.

Denied a theology of nature, I found philosophers of science, but they said philosophy of nature was too romantic and naive. So I equally had to fight philosophy to love nature.

Socrates said: The unexamined life is not worth living. I found out: Life in an unexamined world is not worthy living, either.

I've been lucky that my own personal agenda, figuring nature out, has during my lifetime turned out to be the world agenda, figuring out the human place on the planet. Living locally led me to think globally. My autobiography is "writ large" in the Earth story. That brought me invitations to speak on all seven continents.

I didn't want to live a de-natured life. Humans neither can nor ought to de-nature their planet. My sense of wonder turned to horror when I encountered the environmental crisis. No sooner did I discover that nature is grace than I found we were treating it disgracefully.

Facing the new millennium, the four principal challenges are: war and peace, population, development, and environment. They are inter-related. Science alone doesn't teach us what we most need to know about any of the four.

I kept arguing that if anything at all on Earth is sacred, if there is any holy ground, any land of promise, this promising Earth is it.

The biblical faith I found originated with a land ethic. Keeping the commandments, the Hebrew people entered a promised land. Justice is to run down like waters, and the land flows with milk and honey.

No people can live in harmony with their landscape, in a sustainable relationship with their natural resources, unless there is social justice. The Land of Promise is now the Planet of Promise.

It is not simply what a society does to its slaves, women, blacks, minorities, handicapped, children or future generations, but what it does to its fauna, flora, species, ecosystems and landscapes that reveals the character of that society.

God loves "the world," and in the landscape surrounding him Jesus found ample evidence of the presence of God. Not even Solomon is arrayed with the glory of the lilies, though the grass of the field, today alive, perishes tomorrow. There is a bond between nature and spirit, from mustard seed to saving grace.

That became my living faith. I was trying to preach loving nature to those Appalachian farmers. They thought their pastor gone wild was spending too much time roaming the woods.

This month brings yet another surprise. A former student Christopher Preston, now himself a philosophy professor, has expanded this tale in an intellectual biography: "Saving Nature: Nature and Faith in the Life of Holmes Rolston III." You can get it on Amazon.com.

Or since we are nearing Easter, find my Web site (put my name in Google) and read my article on The Pasqueflower. When I first find this earliest spring flower in the Rocky Mountains, my faith lives again. Maybe finding trilliums in New York woods will do the same for you.

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