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A long, loving look at where you are

Rich Heffern | Apr. 7, 2011 Eco Catholic

Beauty is commonplace in our world, part and parcel of every bioregion. Beauty is bestowed on all of us ? especially in springtime. Some take the time to wonder. We know it when we see it, but how exactly does beauty work?

Are its complex theorems within our grasp? Is there some kind of prism lens which can reverse this varied spectrum of our experience and reveal the burning orb of its origin?

Do the incalculable depths which nourish its roots reach down through the stoked furnaces of the Earth? Is beauty a confidence trick on nature?s part? Or is it a keystone in the living scheme of things? Does it hint at a closely guarded secret?

Rain-dampened tree bark, weathered limestones, rain water, root-tangled soil, fog, frost and morning mists. It is from these earthbound things as the days unwind that the fabric of nature?s beauty is woven. Scampering things under dried grass, feathery wings aloft, glowing arches and domes of cloud, the whirling passage of the winds, the rollercoaster slopes of forested hills under painted desert skies tinted all with eggshell colors, the sight of vast convocations of stars across the black enamel of night, moonlight?s gleaming silver spells on ice in midwinter, the cinnamon leaves painted with frost down deep in the solitudes of mountain valleys.

Nature?s beauty is spun out of luminous colors, the fairygold of light, sunrise ceremonies, pleasing contours and lines, extravagant detail. The unshorn domes and high windblown belfries of hills. Flocks of sparrows singing in mid-flight and circling a pasture?s half-reaped harvest of wild berries while nighthawks overhead plummet and rise on carefree currents of air. Mountain streams rushing over falls and paused in deep, quiet eddies against dams of rock with long level stretches flowing calmly out over the bright pebbled bottoms shaded on both sides by scented thickets of redbud, spicebush and elm.

Boundless forces reveal themselves in the metaphor or tree and wildflower, the everyday clichés of raindrops spreading ripples on clear pond water.

The bioregion in which you live may not be as dramatic or spectacular as the Rocky Mountains or Sierra Nevada, not as Homeric as the Pacific Coast or as austerely awesome as the High Sonoran Deserts in the Southwest. But wherever you are, it?s a complex totality made up of many varied and subtle details, phenomena, moments, and interrelationships ? moods evoked by combinations of weather and scene, fortuitously serendipitous encounters during long walks in the early evenings, glimpses of faraway spaces framed by oak or pine.

Beauty indwells in the morning mystery of hill, valley or plain under changeable skies, the fragrances and breezes and hazy light of summer evenings, subdued sunsets and cloudy purple distances, the sharp contours of height="166" width="250" height="166" width="250" ridges where the tops of pines brush low-lying clouds, the evocative music of birds like the wood thrush or meadowlark in spring, the glad carnival colors of black-eyed susans in a field, silvery white oak bark, the midnight wind in the treetops, or thunder prowling a stormy evening.

The parts make up the whole. The whole is more than the sum of the parts. The places where we live can enchant us, grow on us, get under our skins, charm us in unexpected ways. Weather can be monotonous, and often violent.

The natural beauty of the place where you live is linked also to the familiar passage of seasons, the great circular procession from equinox to solstice and back to equinox, now and forever. Each season has its own distinctive character, its ways, its style, smells and moods, its excesses and fancies, its especially elegant and expressive ways. Each has its own particular kind of light.

Autumn and spring are transition times. Winter is the dramatic opposite of summer in every way. They are both statements on the extremes. Spring is a quantum leap into resurrection. Autumn is a languid requiem.

Spring is here in my bioregion in the Midwest. Wild plums bloom in the countryside. The earliest migrant birds have arrived ? red-winged blackbirds, meadowlarks, wood phoebes. Tree frogs hold a nightly dialogue. Dogwood and redbud are in bloom.

Someone once said that contemplation was a "long, loving look at the real."
Tell me about the place where you live now? What's it like? Have you taken a long, loving look lately?

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