

Treasure Highlands

What do Saint Francis of Assisi, Lao Tzu, John Muir, and Henry David Thoreau have in common? It is a realization that we are a part of nature and at our best when connected to the amazing natural world of the land, water, air, plants, and animals.

Last week, I attended the annual celebration event of the Highlands-Cashiers Land Trust, the oldest organization of its kind in North Carolina. Mercedes Heller was the keynote speaker and honoree. She faithfully served as the land trust president for several years, and many of the organization's achievements occurred under her watch.

Mercedes's speech about the uniqueness of the natural world and the land of the plateau made me think about those mystics of the past who called for humanity not to forsake our connection and communion with the natural world. I am reminded of the poem by Williams Wordsworth, "The World Is Too Much With Us." One line in the poem is: "Little we see in Nature that is ours; We grave given our hearts away, a sordid boon!" In this poem, Sordid boon refers to the 'materialistic progress of society'. Wordsworth thinks that we, I say many of us, are obsessed with our materialistic needs and are not devoting time to nature.

Mercedes reminded the assembled group of conservationists that the community cannot lose sight, even in the face of growing development and economic boom, of our mission of stewardship to maintain and preserve this unique mountain realm. As she relocates to be closer to her family, Mercedes's voice will be sorely missed. But there are many other voices of the Highlands Cashiers Land Trust that will continue to proclaim this ongoing commitment to preservation.

Sallie and I have lived on the plateau for almost 25 glorious years (moving from a cluttered, trashy, polluted, 24/7 environment right off I-75). We have witnessed several generations of folks move here to get away from the sordid boon of urban life. They sought to reconnect with nature and the people of a small community. As I have often said, people seek to retreat to Highlands for a simpler and more natural life.

Here is what I heard from Mercedes and others at the land trust meeting. The community has to continue to be vigilant and mindful of not embracing actions that will degrade and destroy this natural and unique environment.

I hope our new residents and ones in the future will develop a mindfulness of a sense of thankful privilege and, at the same time, a commitment to stewardship of this land. It begins with understanding that the baggage that one acquired living in urban, metropolitan

communities can be left behind. Most of the conveniences and amenities of big city living are not found on this plateau, such as fast food with drive-in windows, malls, and 24-hour shopping. Generations of Highlanders have guided our progress with the belief that an accumulation of such things would degrade what is found naturally here.

One concern I noted at last week's gathering was the notion that it is acceptable to cut down any number of trees to gain a mountain view. Another concern is the rationale that the new house being built on the plateau has to be the same size as the house next door, or it should be a clone of the home they continue to own in the city they left. One of my current concerns is the idea that when developing a property, one has to create and impound a small pond. While bogs are critical to local species, ponds are not a natural occurrence on the plateau. When small creeks fed by cold water springs are dammed, those impoundments tend to function as water heaters. In this time of climate change, the rise in water temperatures certainly impacts the viability of aquatic life on the plateau. It should be noted that higher water temperatures degrade the town's efforts to make the cleanest water possible.

Above are just a few examples of simple actions that have an accumulative effect on this mountain paradise, but there are certainly more. It is my hope that all of us residing here, with our busy, active lives, don't lose sight of what Mother Nature and what the previous generations of Highlanders shared with us. Their wisdom is for our contemplation and understanding in this modern age.