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July 08, 2009

468: Interview with a true green giant— Holmes Rolston & ecology's secret story

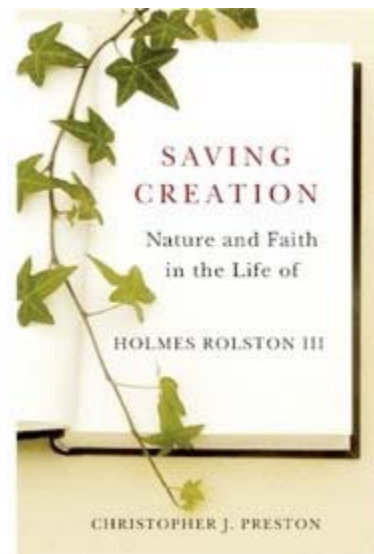


Holmes Rolston III isn't a household name in the movement to protect our natural world—but he should be. What's more, while he's still in his mid-70s, someone should rush out to the Rockies and produce some documentary films of the great philosopher, theologian and eco-activist so that, for years to come, we all can virtually take a walk into the wilderness with him.

Over my 30-plus years as a journalist, I've interviewed green activists around the world—and I can't recall a figure who more effectively invites all parties toward the pure wonderment in nature. Holmes is talking about much more than a feel-good experience. He's promoting the kind of crucial experience we all need to share—if we're to survive as a species.

This isn't exaggeration. There's solid evidence of his accomplishments. In 2003, Holmes was honored at Buckingham Palace with the Templeton Prize. He'd already given the internationally famous Gilford Lectures in the mid 1990s.

Yet—at age 76 with shelves of honors to his credit—Holmes still is working to knit together a most unlikely community of secular scientists, nature lovers, public-policy wonks—and people of faith.



If you've never heard of him until today—grab a copy of the brand-new biography, "Saving Creation." Click on the Amazon link at right. When I opened the cover, I couldn't put it down.

This is a man who—once he begins to understand his beloved themes—begins to sound like a first cousin to Billy Graham, Charles Darwin, Al Gore and the Dalai Lama. Wouldn't that be a stunning family tree?

With today's article, at Holmes' request, [we're including a link to download one of his own favorite articles](#)—about the rebirth each spring of a Rocky Mountain flower. This article first appeared in 1979 in *Natural History*, the esteemed magazine that also included the work of Stephen Jay Gould for many years.

Holmes says that he does his best teaching by "sneaking up on people and inviting them to get in a whole lot deeper than they ever thought possible."

In publishing the 1979 story of the humble pasqueflower (also pictured below), Holmes snuck up on readers around the world. He chuckles that the pasqueflower story was "the best sermon anyone ever snuck into *Natural History* magazine."

SPECIAL NOTE: Because of the significance of Holmes' work—and the important online record that this interview with him represents—we're publishing this in 2 parts.

TODAY: Discovering the Secret Story of Life

TOMORROW: The Problem of Beauty—and the Power of Psalms

HIGHLIGHTS OF OUR CONVERSATION WITH HOLMES ROLSTON III

DAVID: Let's start by bringing readers up to speed about your life: You're a third-generation Presbyterian pastor who grew up in America's Appalachian region and earned your doctorate in Scotland—but you're best known around the world as a founding father of environmental ethics from your post at Colorado State University as a professor of philosophy.

Probably the accomplishment that has earned you the highest accolades is your development of a purely hard-edged, secular argument to support the preservation of the natural world.

In defending nature, it's easy to appeal to religious faith or to beauty—or even to our own human survival on this planet. But you built a new kind of philosophical argument that stands up even in completely cold, secular analysis.

Am I describing this accurately?

HOLMES: Yes, that's about right. But, I don't like to use the word "cold" to describe this kind of argument. I would use the word "hard," though. That's opposed to "soft" arguments about this.

Actually, I make both kinds of arguments—hard and soft. I am well known for writing things that invite people to come and experience the aesthetic side of nature. But that's only half of what I do.

The half you're describing there—the hard side of my work—is what I use when I argue to biologists, and argue with biologists, and sometimes argue against biologists that nature has real value in itself.

DAVID: Why does anyone need to make that argument? Today, millions of Americans simply assume we should preserve the natural world. Why is your hard-edged argument so important?

HOLMES: There has been a widespread idea that nature is "value free" and only humans bring value to the natural world when we use it or we enjoy experiences in it.



[Saving Creation](#)

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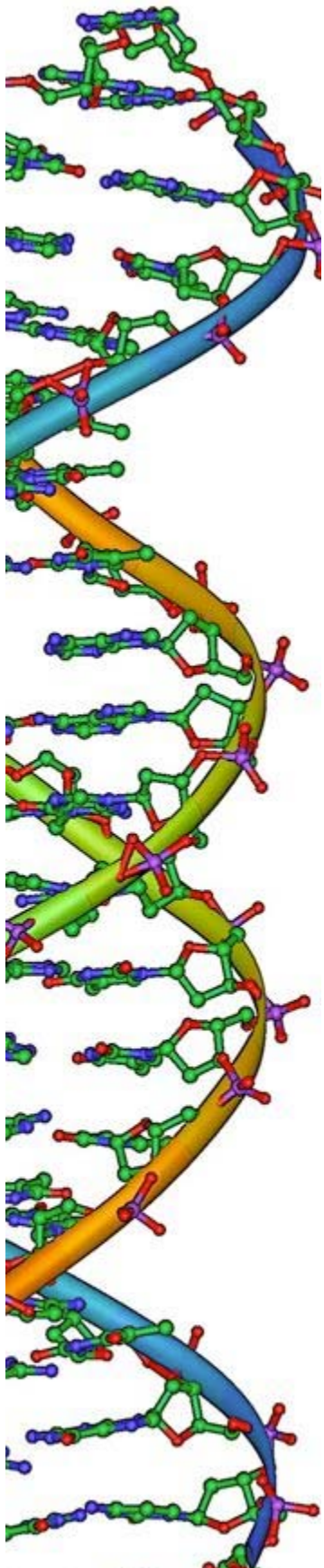


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In my work, I argue that living things have their own value. And living things value their own lives.

When biologists tell me that there are no values in nature—I remind them of Darwin and what he taught us about nature. I ask them to think about the value of a thorn to a rose, the value of grasses to rabbits. The value of rabbits to foxes. Biology is soaked full of values in competition with each other.



DAVID: But you go a whole lot further than that. As you talk about this ongoing competition for survival in nature—you point out that the natural world also has its stories that have been preserved for millions of years.

We're not talking about human stories about nature. You argue that DNA code itself is a kind of story, a precious record, that species in the natural world carry with them down through the millennia. The DNA is a life-story shared from one generation to the next—and, through evolution, DNA actually accumulates lessons of adaptation learned by the particular family.

Beyond human stories about the natural world—you argue that the natural world itself is a real storyteller and has this brilliant way of allowing each species to carry the accumulated story within each body.

Am I saying that right?

HOLMES: To use a religious word, I say: Amen!

Scientists deal most effectively with things that resemble laws. We know that from the mathematics of physics and it's true in other scientific disciplines, too. Scientists look for law-like forms in their research.

I've argued that, within biology, these laws of nature are transformed into the history of life forms through their DNA. What DNA molecules can do is accumulate discoveries, repeat lessons learned, and elaborate them over thousands of years.

DNA becomes a record of storied achievements.

DAVID: The moment I began reading about your work, this particular idea jumps out as very compelling. You're arguing that living things carry this ancient record within their own cells. Until recent years, we didn't even know this record existed and, until recently, we could not even begin to "read" this DNA story. Now we can see that the story of evolution and DNA has this amazing grandeur within it.

HOLMES: It's a very distinctive part of biology on Earth. You don't get that studying asteroids or the surface of Mars. I'm not trying to dismiss the stories in geology or cosmology. There are elements of story in the Big Bang and the creation of the galaxies that we still can "read" today.

But we haven't found any pro-active accumulation of information in astronomy, let's say, like the DNA record in living things. We actually store up this story in our genes and we pass it along generation to generation. In religious words, I think that's a miracle.

A scientific person would at least say it's a "wonder." There is this storied history that's passed along individual to individual in ways we don't see going on in other parts of the universe. That's what I celebrate as distinctive on earth and of great value.

We ought to admire and celebrate and conserve these storied achievements of the millennia. That's why nature has value in itself. Eventually, this long process of evolution gives rise to human beings. This means that we clearly should admire and care for this storied earth.

DAVID: It's such an elegant argument.

HOLMES: Thank you. Yes, I think so. In the past, we couldn't appreciate the brilliance of what is packed inside those DNA molecules.

And I don't want to overplay the idea of DNA itself, because DNA is useless unless it's in a

living organism within an environment where it can be expressed—and where the story can continue to unfold over the millennia.

That's what I use when I'm sneaking up on biologists. I ask them: Look, is life a good thing? Is there value out there? Isn't there essentially a biology textbook out there?

I ask them: Can you imagine a richer story than beginning with some simple forms of life and elaborating all of this into millions of species today? Isn't that a story that should be celebrated and admired?

And the biologists may scratch their heads a bit at me, but they say: Yes, you're right.

Then, to Christians, I say the Bible stories of creation may be a bit simplified, but think about this huge, marvelous story that unfolds in creation.

DAVID: Now, I know from reading your biography that you're not an advocate of Intelligent Design. Your work rests on what we would call the scientific process of evolution. You're not arguing for some back-door form of what's often called Creationism. So, let's clarify that point.

HOLMES: Right. I don't think Genesis teaches Intelligent Design. The first chapter of Genesis teaches that God brought forth the heavens and the earth and then God says to the earth (in verses 11 and 24) that it should bring forth life—all kinds of plants and creatures—and God calls on the waters (verse 20) to bring forth all kinds of life.

It sounds to me that, in evolution, biologists are just giving us a much more elaborate account of how the earth does all of that—how the earth brings forth swarms of creatures.

DAVID: So, you're not arguing that God somehow kept a divine finger in every twist and turn of this design. You're arguing that God set all these marvelous processes in motion and evolution itself did quite a job of bringing us everything we see today. Of course, this process also leads to death of some species, fires, devastation, entire families of creatures that don't adapt.

That's what you mean by "storied achievements" and the "grandeur" of this story for the species that have survived.

You even use the word "grace" to describe what God provided for the natural world. That's a key term in your work so tell us just a bit about how you use the word "grace."

HOLMES: In the seminary tradition out of which I came, they made a big contrast between nature and grace.

Nature was one thing. It was how the world works. But God came in Jesus—and we were saved through grace. This strong contrast was set up between nature and grace. What I'm trying to do is mellow that out and ask: Don't we want to think of nature also as a kind of gift, as well as whatever else may be added or increased by what we receive from Jesus in the Bible?

I came out of a tradition of teaching that wanted to set aside anything that could be learned in nature. They'd say: Oh, you can get everything you need out of the Bible and out of Jesus. There was this strong opposition to a natural theology. To that kind of theologian, I've been preaching that nature, too, is grace.

DAVID: You're not alone in this, of course. I think immediately of the Celtic tradition.

HOLMES: The classical tradition knew this truth. They all believed that God created earth and in that sense earth was a gift of God. But a whole lot of people forgot that along the way. For so many, we've left out the idea that nature, too, has this marvelous long history that leads up to human history and human history continues. Maybe we ought to think of earth and all life on earth as a kind of gift. That's grace.

I can use that idea of "gift" to get into the bloodstream of some people who might not



think of themselves originally as religious. I might say: Isn't earth a kind of wonderland that we've inherited—more than we deserve. It's so surprising, isn't it? And, we find ourselves at the apex of these developments. Shouldn't we think of all we have as a kind of gift?

And even people who aren't religious will say: Well, that's right. They may go on to tell me: I don't believe in any Giver with a capital G. But we do have something we've been given.

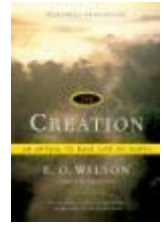
DAVID: This is sounding close to what E.O. Wilson argues in his book, "The Creation." He doesn't believe in God, but believes that devout believers and secularists can agree that the Creation is too precious to destroy.

HOLMES: That's right. Wilson has pretty thoroughly rejected any supernatural belief in God. But he still writes about the marvelous wonder of life on earth in his book. He wants to incorporate all the allies he can in preserving this wonderful natural world. He knows there are billions of Christians in the world and he'd like to incorporate religious people and their energies along with his work in preserving nature. In that book he's mellows out some toward the religious people whose supernatural elements he would reject. He tries to invite them to join him in celebrating the diversity of life.

DAVID: And there you might join hands.

HOLMES: We do need to get together the evolutionary biologists and the religious people in this idea we can share of being responsible stewards of this earth that we've been given.

[CLICK HERE FOR PART 2](#), in which Holmes talks about the problem of beauty—and the power of Psalms. (NOTE: The photograph at right above is a magnified detail of a sunflower in bloom.)



[The Creation](#)

E. O. Wilson

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July 09, 2009

469: Interview with a green giant, Pt. 2 Holmes Rolston & the Power of Psalms



Holmes Rolston III is in his mid-70s, now, and has devoted many years to helping faith and science meet—all to protect our natural world. He has so much accumulated wisdom to share that we've continued our Interview With Holmes Rolston into Part 2 today. ([CLICK HERE to jump back and read Part 1.](#))

With today's article, at Holmes' request, [we're including a link to download one of his own favorite articles](#)—about the rebirth each spring of a Rocky Mountain flower. This article first appeared in 1979 in Natural History, the esteemed magazine that also included the work of Stephen Jay Gould for many years.

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[PART 2 OF OUR CONVERSATION WITH HOLMES ROLSTON III](#)



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DAVID: In the first half of our interview, you explained at least some of the arguments you've developed to bring together science and religion in a deeper appreciation of our natural world. We also urged readers to pick up a copy of your new biography and learn more about your life's work. (There's a link to Amazon above.)

NOW, let's talk about two more important arguments you've made that I think also will fascinate people of faith. One we might call "the problem of beauty." And another is your appreciation of how Psalms can fit into all of this.

First of all—the problem of beauty:

One easy way to inspire people to protect nature is to show them the most beautiful places in the world—like mountain peaks in the western United States.

That's fine, you say. You've led lots of hikes into the mountains yourself. But it's not sufficient to protect nature—because a lot of places people think are beautiful actually don't contain much life. Everyone wants to save mountain peaks. But, it may be that a valley far below or even an ugly swamp are more important to save, right?

Beauty actually can become a problem of misplaced priorities.

ROLSTON: I think it's a problem we can turn into an opportunity.

In talking with people about nature, I sometimes do start out with the beauty and grandeur of the Grand Canyon or the Grand Tetons. Nobody denies these are beautiful places we must preserve.

But then, once we've established that, I like to say: You know, you have to look more closely and you may find beauty where you don't expect it.

We all can look up at a mountain peak, but I'll say: Look at where we're standing right now. Look at this little flower over there. And let's look at this little bug on that flower.

And I'll say: Let's talk about the DNA carried by this little bug. Isn't there a kind of splendor in the minute proportions in these things and the way that these things fit together?

A bird will eat this bug and the bird will have its young and the young will live here a while, at least the ones that survive. Some of the young birds will be eaten by a fox that passes through. Some of the birds will migrate south for the fall. And you begin to tell this story of the interdependence of life in these landscapes.

DAVID: So far, you're sounding like a Disney nature film, which is fine. But you don't stop there. You're also known for pointing out the dramatic stories in landscapes that may seem downright ugly—like a forest ravaged by a wildfire.

ROLSTON: Yes. I'll say: We can find lots of pretty things to look at. But now, let's look over there at those burned trees on that hillside. It's ugly over there, isn't it?

Then, we look more closely and we realize that new trees are coming up again where these fires occurred. That's how a tree like the lodgepole pine works. It replaces itself after fires.

What I'm pointing out is the grandeur of the whole story: Life persisting in the midst of its perpetual perishing.

Now that truly is beautiful.

Yes, the Tetons are grand, but what's truly grand is life's persistence.

DAVID: I know that you love the Psalms. And you've got an interpretation of Psalm 23 that relates to what we're discussing.

ROLSTON: Yes, I have an ecological interpretation of Psalm 23. That's everybody's favorite Psalm, isn't it?



But what is Psalm 23 all about? It says that life should be in green pastures beside still waters. Isn't that a kind of ecological metaphor? Life requires green pastures. Life requires water. Isn't our world full of green? Isn't Earth a marvelous planet in which to live because of the water around us?

But, wait a minute! There's more in this Psalm, isn't there? The Psalm goes on to talk about being led through a valley of deep darkness and it says there will be comfort as well. Isn't this Psalmist saying that there always will be death as well as life. Isn't this Psalmist celebrating a world in which death and life—exist together. Death. Life. Death. Life.

Life persists in the midst of its perpetual perishing.

It's right there in Psalm 23. This is how life has persisted over the millennia here on Earth.

Now, that's a grand story!

DAVID: So, in the end, are you hopeful? Or are you worried about our future?

ROLSTON: Well, the future holds more of this living—and this perishing. We're going to lose some things. I'm afraid that a lot of the charismatic mega-fauna in Africa will be lost or reduced to zoos.

But we're also going to win some things. Early in my life, I never would have dreamed that we'd have 600 wilderness areas in the United States. We've got the Clean Water Act. We've got the Clean Air Act. We've got the Endangered Species Act. We've had a lot of successes. And in other parts of the world, like the European Union, environmental protection has outpaced what we've done here in the United States.

DAVID: There may be an even deeper problem, though, with our human species. We may not have the global willpower to actually change our direction as a species in time to save the world as we know it. That's a real threat, isn't it?

ROLSTON: There are people who say that human beings are not capable of facing a crisis at this level. They say that human beings' ability to adapt is too focused on ourselves and our families. We did figure out how to make it through winter here on Earth. Humans figured out how to raise their children into adulthood.

But humans never were naturally selected to care for an entire planet. There are people who argue that our human genes are maladaptive to a world crisis, because we're too short sighted. We're too centered on ourselves and our children and grandchildren.

We can't cope with a crisis on a global scale.

But, when I hear that argument coming at me, I say: Now, wait a minute! There is something else at work here. The religions of the world are global institutions. Religion has transcended nations for thousands of years. Look at how these religions have moved all around the globe.

My background is Presbyterian. We started out in Geneva, Switzerland, but we've moved and adapted all around the world. Do you know where the most Presbyterians live today? In Korea.

Our great world faiths focus our vision on the whole world. We need that. If anybody can supply a vision that enables us to transcend our immediate self-interest, it's surely the world's great religions.

We need that vision of respect for life all around the Earth. That's our biggest hope. Faith is more likely to help us face this environmental crisis than any other institution we've got on this planet.

