In Memoriam Forrest Clingerman

It is with deep sadness that I mark the untimely passing on April 21, 2024 of a dear friend and colleague, Forrest Clingerman. Forrest was an outstanding scholar in the field of religion and ecology known especially for his pioneering work in environmental hermeneutics. He played an active role in the *Worldviews* community where he published two notable essays, served as a peer reviewer for thirteen, and recently took over the position of associate editor.

Forrest was intrigued by the possibility of reading and interpreting nature. In his 2009 essay, “Reading the Book of Nature: A Hermeneutical Account of Nature for Philosophical Theology,” he set out a philosophical argument for reviving and reinterpreting the concept of the Book of Nature. In doing so he sought to restore an engagement between science and religion that had been broken since Galileo’s famous dictum that the language of nature was mathematics (2006: 75). For Clingerman, nature was to be understood not only through reductive mathematical abstractions but also, following Paul Ricoeur’s hermeneutics, as a book, a text, and a textuality. Unlike a fixed text, however, nature was to be understood as “a discourse that is not objectively fixed in nature, but rather fluidly moves in the physical presence of nature itself” (81; original emphasis). Such a discourse, moreover, could only ever be interpreted reflexively since “[w]e find some part of ourselves when we interpret nature,” leading to the remarkable insight that we “readers are characters, reading from inside the book itself” (82). From a theological perspective, the Book of Nature, when interpreted with this reflexive hermeneutics, can possess a revelatory character.

His second essay, “Place and the Hermeneutics of the Anthropocene” (2016), introduced a hermeneutical dimension to the declaration of the geological epoch of the Anthropocene. The Anthropocene, he argued, was more than an objective scientific declaration of the impact of human activity on the evolution of our planetary systems. Developing the logic of his earlier essay, he argued that the Anthropocene stood as a “signpost for the human condition” that spoke of “a reflexive emergence of meaning and value created by the intersubjective engagement between humanity and the material world” (229; original emphasis). Such a value could be seen in the way that “humanity has overstepped its boundaries, and is re-creating what is not human into the image of what is human” (230). This argument he then connected to the “spatial turn” in theology, prompting us to see the evidence of this “overhumanization of the
world” not so much in the abstract, global transformation of our planetary systems, but in the particular landscapes that we inhabit (232–233). In the end, our attention must be brought back to the local, and the near-at-hand.

Forrest’s attention to the local context could be seen most clearly in his poetic descriptions of the flora and fauna he encountered in his daily life. Drawing on the rich American tradition of nature spirituality, he wrote movingly of the trees and birds and sunlight. It is only fitting that I should conclude this brief tribute to Forrest in his own words:

On a fall day, I meandered by a small stand of paper birch, illuminated by the sun. Indeed, illumination is perhaps the only possible way to describe their stance: the cascade of leaves turning from green to the color of brilliant autumn yellow seems to indicate that a birch is always in the process of being gradually gilded by the autumn sun.

... Seemingly before our eyes, the text of a birch—glistening in the fall sun, showering with leaves and the infinite blue of sky—questions us: am I text or tree? What is the meaning contained in my trunk? It offers to the passerby an opportunity to read, and reflect, and enter into a new sense of the meaning of nature.

clingerman 2009: 88–90

James Miller
Duke Kunshan University, Kunshan, China
j.e.miller@dukekunshan.edu.cn

Works Cited