

I Married a “Thinker”

Jane Rolston

circa 2000

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My name is Holmes, as in Sherlock, Rolston, as in "Shredded".¹ So it was that at age 16, moving to a new city, entering a new high school his senior year, Holmes Rolston, III introduced himself to the youth at Ginter Park Presbyterian Church. And so began my long career of observing him — first from a distance, and later from the most intimate relationship.

What is the "father" of environmental ethics, this deep thinker, this Gifford lecturer, really like? Dare I expose his true self to the world?

He began his childhood as a barefoot boy roaming the countryside in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia — picking up bugs, throwing rocks on the water, looking at wildflowers, lying in the fields watching the clouds roll by, and learning to swim in the Maury River. Rural electricity had not yet reached his cultured home.

Moving from the peaceful hills of Virginia to the thriving city of Charlotte, North Carolina, opened to this ten-year old a new perspective on life. His Virginia accent gave amusement to his classmates as they pinned him down on the ground and made him say "out" and "about". Ten year old vanity made him change the pronunciation of the diphthong "ou".

A crystal set on the upstairs back porch was an early invention. A radio and a hi-fi set followed as his

tastes sophisticated. His academic high school record attracted a prestigious New England prep school to seek him out. But he and his father decided it wise to remain in Charlotte, though that stay was soon to end with the family's move back to Virginia – this time to Richmond, where he took his senior year in high school.

Holmes entered Davidson College, North Carolina, determined to become a physicist. When in the last weeks of his senior year, he told his chief advisor he was not pursuing graduate work in physics, the professor's reply was, "I only wish there were two of you." Although his chief pursuit those college years was physics, the world of biology was made fascinating to him by his beloved Dr. Tom Daggy. Perhaps those field trips with Dr. Daggy rooted in him the idea of the intrinsic value of nature. He never looked upon nature the same way after that.

Even though his theological and philosophical careers brought a professional separation from physics and biology, he continued to study all aspects of biology, roaming the hills of Scotland and western Virginia. A rumor in a rural area where he lived and pastored a church was that there was the worst looking man down by the creek getting weeds out of the water. It was he collecting specimens to examine under a microscope.

Thus, educating himself independently, the roaming of hills and valleys, the nights over a microscope wedded him to the wonders of nature. But this wonder went deeper. It entwined with his theology and brought the magnificence of creation and the creator

God to coincide. One has only to read his essay on the Pasqueflower² to find Holmes Rolston likening the way of nature to the way of the cross. Like the pasqueflower, returning early in the spring out of winter's darkness, new life comes to humankind through the cross. The pasqueflower is an example of his comparing nature to the Christian journey; "the breaking up of raging winter, is such a reminder of life's survival."³ Decomposing of nature, he writes, only leads to recomposing – just as the cross only leads to new life.

Amid this is a sensitivity to nature which allows him to pause for examination and adoration at the pasqueflower's daring to bloom when the winter is not yet gone. Examination leads to more adoration as the "downy surface of transparent hairs on its palmate leaves and stems insulates ... and allows a radiation heating to temperatures high enough for development, providing a miniature, greenhouse effect in the snow."⁴

In his own words, "We walk too hurriedly if ever we pass the season's first pasqueflower by, too busy to let its meeting stay us for a quiet moment before this token of the covenant of life to continue in beauty despite the storm."⁵

To Holmes, nature is the sign of the meaning of life; nature is constantly one of his spiritual experiences. Responsibility to the Earth is parallel to a responsibility to God. Hence his life devoted to environmental ethics and intrinsic value. Edgar Mitchell's comment made seeing earthrise from the moon: We are "managing a small pearl in a thick sea of black mystery," meant much

to Rolston when describing the Earth and we humans as stewards of it.⁶

There is respect and awareness of each petal, stamen, pistil, seed. And, oh, how he loves mosses! Boxes and bags of moss samples have provided hours of study of their spores much to the amusement of his high school children and their friends. But slipped in and out of his writings one is likely to find references to those spores or those petals!

Thinkers have a non-philosophical side too. Or maybe the philosophy comes out in everything. Rolston always knows a way to figure out how to make things work with simple homemade instruments. It may be a nail on a string, a little block attached to something, or an addition to a curtain rod. He considers himself an electrician; one-hundred complicated labeled cords wire the house for his stereo system. But, lo, he can't get the knobs and burners on the kitchen range straight. And wait until he gets to the washing machine. His ambidexterity make left and right decisions difficult.

He can only think of one thing at a time. A one-track mind eliminates conversation while on the computer, or driving, or working on his bank books. But his mind can decipher any textbook, tax form, instructions for assemblage. His thinking is like a complicated math problem – step by step, exactness, exhausting every angle until completed. Research is done with care, checking and rechecking, working slowly, deliberately. But from this comes his own creative thinking.

Holmes is aware of the value of time. The first alarm goes off at 5:45 a.m. A stack of periodicals stays by his breakfast table, so he can read while he eats his breakfast (which he prepares). A cot in his hide-away office offers a place for an afternoon nap. He jogs in sun, rain, or snow, 3 miles 3 days a week. His workday runs about 15 hours seven days a week.

There are some dislikes in this human being! Television commercials are high on his list, too loud and a waste of time. Long winded stories irritate him, though Sir John Polkinghorne states that "Rolston' s somewhat expansive style can lead him to produce cascades of examples in support of the case he is making."⁷ He hates wearing slippers and says eating breakfast in pajamas is like saying one is not quite ready for the world.

There are some special likes too. Background music mixed up on his CD player goes from jazz to classical to Sinatra all one after the other. Driving old cars, wearing 20 year old suits seem to give him a sense of pride, not needing to keep up with the latest width of ties. But somehow he needs three microscopes for his "environmental thinking."

Holmes is a jewel for whom to cook, for he likes everything. Only twice do I remember his explaining about my cooking, novice though I was as a bride. Once he asked if the only way I knew to fix beans was on toast with cheese under the broiler. The other was some years later when I burned the steak.

Is he an introvert? Yes. He is quiet, formerly shy, a loner. He doesn't need a buddy to hang out with; he studies alone, hikes alone often, makes decisions alone. It's hard to know his thoughts; occasionally I am allowed into that sanctuary. Moist eyes come easily; touching stories, needs, sentimentality bring tears. But laughing tears also come when he tells an old joke he especially thinks funny. Humble? Definitely! He never tries to pretend he is something else, nor does he try to impress, nor brag. Writing books is to get people to read and think, not for publication's splendor. His department head once said that Holmes does not suffer from "limelight disease."

Upon telling Holmes that an acquaintance asked what he really did, his reply was, "Tell her I am a thinker." Truly, since an early age wheels of his mind have been thinking, figuring out the why and the how of those things he has encountered. Perhaps I lost a husband to work, study, microscopes, computers, books, preoccupations, and nature. But what I got was not bad. I got an interesting life with an interesting "thinker!" And the world has gained a lot too.

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1. Ralston Purina Shredded Wheat, once a well-known cereal; note difference in spelling of Ralston.
 2. *Natural History* 88 (No. 4, 1979):6-16.
 3. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
 4. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
 5. *Ibid.*, p. 14.
 6. Edgar Mitchell quoted in Kevin W. Kelley, ed., *The*

- Home Planet*, 1988, at photographs 42-45. Also Rolston, *Conserving Natural Value*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994, p. 204.
7. Polkinghorne, Review of *Genes. Genesis and God*. *Zvqon*_35 (No. 1, 2000):192.