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# DAVIDSON

## *Journal*



THE NATURE OF THINGS

HOLMES ROLSTON '53



# THE NATURE OF THINGS

## Using the Earth with Justice and Charity

Holmes Rolston '53 says he has spent his life "in a lover's quarrel, not with my wife of four decades, but with the two disciplines I love: science and religion."

**T**his spring, a country boy who grew up roaming the woods of the Shenandoah Valley traveled to London to see the prince. On May 7, Prince Philip placed a check for 750,000 pounds—over \$1,000,000—into the hands of Holmes Rolston III, 2003 laureate of the Templeton Prize for Research or Discoveries in Spiritual Realities. The check was made out to Davidson College.

Holmes Rolston, Class of 1953, says he came to Davidson "to begin a career in search of places to understand nature." Now, fifty years after graduation, he is using one of the most tangible rewards for that career to endow a chair in science and religion at his *alma mater*. He says that nothing would please him more than that the intellectual adventures that began for him at Davidson half a century ago continue in bright young minds at Davidson for the next half century, and beyond.

BY MEG KIMMEL '77





Just over the ridge as the crow flies from where Holmes grew up in Rockbridge Baths, Virginia, runs Tinker Creek. There author Annie Dillard roams the woods, in thrall to nature. Stunned by Earth's miracles and mysteries, she cries that we must "wail the right question into the swaddling band of darkness, or if it comes to that, choir the proper praise."

Holmes Rolston has done both. In his five decades of study, research, writing, and teaching, he has been asking tough questions about "the nature of nature," while singing Earth's praise.

"Why do I get the award?" he asked, and answered, "Because I've been noisy about respect for nature, reverence for nature, the intrinsic value of nature."

He has been steadily challenging both science and religion in scores of books and papers translated into eighteen languages and lectures on every continent. He has delivered the prestigious Gifford Lectures at the University of Edinburgh, often said to be the Nobel Prize within theology and philosophy, joining the company of theologians and philosophers such as: William James, John Dewey, Henri Bergson, Arnold Toynbee, Karl Barth, Reinhold Niebuhr, Herbert Butterfield, Hans Driesch, J. S. Haldane, Werner Heisenberg, Arthur Eddington, Hilary Putnam, Niels Bohr, Michael Polanyi, Alfred North Whitehead, Albert Schweitzer, and Paul Tillich.

Now University Distinguished Professor at Colorado State, this Presbyterian minister is called the "father of environmental ethics," a field today well established as a discipline within philosophy, but unknown and unnamed before Holmes started it in the 1970s. And what he has said and written in praise of nature sounds far more like poetry than noise.

This year, Holmes Rolston's persuasive eloquence caught the attention (through a 3,500-word nomination by his Davidson classmate Perry Biddle) of the panel of international judges deciding the John Templeton Prize. Templeton, now ninety, made his fortune as one of the canniest investors in the world, and created a foundation dedicated to exploring "the boundary between theology and science." His foundation funds studies on the effects of religious faith on medical healing, the

roots of unselfish love, the relationship between character education and academic achievement, and the origins of the universe, among many others. Each year, it hands out the world's richest prize, purposely larger than Nobel awards, to make the point that progress toward spiritual understanding is ultimately more valuable than progress toward scientific understanding.

If we could go back in time and bend space a bit, we might be able to see Holmes Rolston and John Templeton meeting in the woods. Holmes learned to love nature in the mountains of Virginia; John, in the hills of middle Tennessee. Both boys of rural childhood from thrifty, Presbyterian families, and both with a respect for the spiritual magic that can take place in the natural world, they would have had much to talk about as they walked among the trees.

"The mosses, John," Holmes says.

"Look down; don't miss them."

"What if," John might ask, "we prayed for these mosses? Would they grow faster, greener, stronger? Could we get someone to figure that out?"

"John, those mosses are already an adapted fit filling a niche in these rich woods, and natural selection presses their survival, making them greener and stronger. Maybe God already figured that out; and they don't need to be prayed for, only celebrated."

These two did not meet in the woods, but their paths have crossed in the adventures of their ideas. John left the countryside in 1930 for Yale; Holmes in 1950 for Davidson. John became one kind of anomaly: a consummate capitalist and deeply religious philanthropist, especially concerned about altruism. Holmes was another anomaly: a philosopher gone wild, deeply religious and caring for nature, concerned to extend this altruism to the non-human life

on Earth.

Holmes' Davidson mentors sometimes had doubts. On May 7, 1953, fifty years to the day before he would be in Buckingham Palace to accept the 2003 Templeton Prize, Holmes received a letter from John C. Bailey, Jr., then Davidson dean of students. "Dear Mr. Rolston," the letter begins, and goes on to say that his excessive number of absences has forced the faculty to restrict him "to the limits of the Town of Davidson from May 8, 1953 for a period of four weeks or until the day of his last examination," under threat of being dismissed from school, just weeks before his graduation. The dean was calling his parents. Bill McGavock, Holmes' math professor, told him that he did vote for the probation, but also pointed out to the faculty that the wayward student had a few days before been elected to Phi Beta Kappa.

Davidson classmate Clarence Morrison remembers his friend as studious and organized, able to complete his coursework in just three years. "He had a to-do list even then." Perhaps that is why, even with all those absences, Holmes graduated a few weeks later with a degree in physics and a minor in mathematics.

Maybe Holmes had been off in the woods with Professor Tom Daggy: "The other students considered him a buggy freak," Holmes recalls, "but he saw things nobody else was seeing. I learned that you could see things in a binocular microscope that you did not catch in cloud chambers... [Daggy] kept vials in his shirt pockets, and instead of swatting the bugs, he popped them into formaldehyde for later examination. He could name the birds, the plants; I couldn't."

But now he can. Self-taught and taught by others, Holmes never stopped learning. After Davidson, he turned to religion, studying at Union Theological Seminary in Virginia. While a young pastor in southwestern Virginia, he slipped across the state line to sit in on some twenty classes at East Tennessee State University: botany and zoology, then geology, mineralogy, paleontology, meteorology.

When he wasn't in the church sanctuary or at ETSU, Holmes was outdoors. "I spent nearly a decade being a pastor, but becoming a naturalist," he said, "bringing in the



Kingdom five days a week, going wild the other two. I learned the mountain woods in splendid detail."

"And I began to become alarmed," he told an audience gathered to honor him as Presbyterian Writer of the Year in 1999.

"The natural world I had so long taken for granted, that once seemed so vast, was now vanishing with the surge of development."

Does nature exist simply to benefit us humans?

Biologists are constantly referring to the survival value of this or that trait in plants and animals. Doesn't that suggest that there is value there, whether or not humans are around?

Can we study nature simply to know and appreciate its wildness, its spontaneous generative powers, its beauty?

Still looking for a discipline within which to frame his mounting questions, Holmes turned back to the academy. Without one course in philosophy on his transcript, he applied to graduate schools. Most turned him down. Accepted at the University of Pittsburgh, he rather naively wanted to do "philosophy of nature." But he found himself among hard-nosed philosophers of science who insisted that doing "natural history was the worst kind of science," rather like stamp collecting, but without hard logic.

To them, "Nonhuman nature was value-free," he remembers. "Nothing but a resource for the satisfaction of human desires, abetted by the skills of science. Value was entirely in the eye of the beholder. ..."

Unwilling to accept this value-free nature as nothing but human resource, Holmes escaped again into the woods, to the mosses. "I had developed a particular interest in them because they are so luxuriantly developed in the Southern Appalachians, and also because nobody else seemed much to care about them. There they were, doing nobody any good, yet flourishing on their own, not listening at all to the philosophers and the theologians."

His own ethic of nature was evolving, one that challenged the value-free assumption to which both humanists and scientists adhered. The mosses were beautiful, growing because they were growing, regardless of their value to people. They were good in themselves, and symbols of the wonderland

of biodiversity on Earth.

"My teachers all said I was all wrong. ... But in the wilderness, hearing a thrush singing to defend its territory, maybe even singing because it enjoyed it, seeing a coyote pounce on a ground squirrel, spooking the deer who fled fearing that I was a hunter, searching for signs of spring after winter, even peering through a hand lens at those minuscule mosses, I knew they had to be wrong. There was life abundant in the midst of its perpetual perishing. These creatures valued life, each in their own way, regardless of whether humans were around."

With a degree in philosophy, Holmes took a position at Colorado State University, and found the perfect place to

> (left) Holmes Rolston in his student days

> (below) Holmes Rolston accepts his prize—and Davidson's—from His Royal Highness Prince Philip.

> (right) Vice President for College Relations Kristin Hills Bradberry '85 enjoys Dr. Rolston's remarks as he presents his gift to Davidson.



articulate his questions, with answers that created a new field of study.

"Along came the environmental movement, Earth Day, and here I was, at a University open to conservation, with twenty-three departments in which biology is taught in one way or another, strong in botany, zoology, biochemistry, microbiology, forestry, fishery and wildlife biology, veterinary medicine, agriculture, natural resource economics, natural resource law and policy, but without a philosopher interested in these domains. I ventured a class in environmental ethics; it filled at once."

Holmes continued to be a student as well, over his three decades there sitting in on more than sixty more classes between teaching, writing, and exploring the wild. With his mind and heart full, he began to ask his questions out loud. To make noise.

He wondered, "Is there an ecological ethic? One that is philosophically respectable?" He wrote an article suggesting the answer was "yes." He sent it at first to journals on the edges of mainstream philosophy, where he thought the chances of acceptance were better. It was rejected.

"I sent it, timidly, to *Ethics*, the leading journal in the field; and, to my consternation, it was accepted almost by return mail."





## Holmes Rolston received an honorary degree from Davidson in 2002. These excerpts from the citation show why:

Professor Rolston is an authentic intellectual pioneer, leading scholars and laypersons to think about nature in new ways and providing us with a language to talk about and value the natural world in new dimensions. Blending his love and reverence for nature with theology and science, he has created an environmental philosophy. ...

The pioneer and poet is also a prophet, for he has challenged us not just to think right, but to act right. He said, "In an age of ecological catastrophes it is positively hazardous to live as if nature were valueless. It is difficult to recognize this value without reverence and without generating a process which makes such reverence possible."

Environmental ethics was born.

"I enjoyed the pasqueflowers in the Western spring," he said, "and wrote an article celebrating this flower, a kind of disguised sermon. I sent it to some religion journals. It was rejected. I sent it to *Natural History*, the magazine of the American Museum of Natural History. It was accepted."

The philosopher was off and running—wild. He was a co-founder of the journal *Environmental Ethics*, and he kept writing. And teaching. And wondering, filled with wonder. In 2001 Holmes was featured as one of *Fifty Key Thinkers on the Environment* (Joy Palmer, ed., Routledge), a collection including St. Francis of Assisi, William Wordsworth, Charles Darwin, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Henry David Thoreau.

"No one can really become a philosopher, loving wisdom, without caring for these sources in which we live, move, and have our being, the community of life on Earth."

So after all, the country boy stood in a palace next to royalty, hailed as one of Earth's great thinkers, rewarded with a great deal of earthly gold. And he gave it to Davidson College.

And Davidson is grateful, welcoming the new professorship with pride and excitement.

"What an honor for Dr. Rolston, one that caps his distinguished career," said Academic Dean Clark Ross, hearing the Templeton news. "Needless to say, we are overwhelmed with his generosity in using the prize to establish this professorship to enrich our curriculum in the area of religion and science."

Ross will lead the faculty in considering the best use of the Rolston Chair, looking at how the interdisciplinary relationships—among, for example, religion, philosophy, biology—can be used to strengthen and enrich the college curriculum.

"But for now," Ross continued, "we bask in the reflected honor accorded Dr. Rolston, and we so appreciate the curricular opportunity he has provided us."

During the press conference announcing his award, the 2003 Templeton Prize winner expressed his hopes for the future: "After we learn altruism for each other, we need to become altruists toward our fellow creatures. ... We must encounter nature with grace, with an Earth ethics, because our ultimate Environment is God—in whom we live, move, and have our being."

With his extraordinary gift, Holmes Rolston has given Davidson the chance to make a little *noise* of its own about what the father of environmental ethics calls, "using the Earth with justice and charity." ♦



In nominating his friend and schoolmate for this prestigious honor, Perry Biddle cited his many accomplishments in a document that ran more than 3,000 words. Just a few of them:

Rolston has become, over the past thirty years, the most widely effective and original researcher into the goodness of God's creation in nature, including its divinely endowed intrinsic value, and of the renewed plausibility of a natural theology in the light of contemporary biology, and the deepening possibility of spiritual experiences in encounter with evolutionary and ecological nature.

Rolston delivered the prestigious Gifford Lectures. Published in 1999 as *Genes, Genesis and God*, his book has been reviewed (by John A. Bryant, a molecular biologist, Exeter University) as "a real masterpiece ... mind-blowing."

Donald W. Shriver (Davidson, '51), *emeritus* president of Union Theological Seminary, New York, says that *Science and Religion* is "one of the most important books I have read in years and absolutely the best on science and religion that I have ever read." He says of *Genes, Genesis and God*: "It is ... a landmark book, ... an awesome achievement."