

A book review:

Reflections from the North Country, by Sigurd F. Olson; 1977, Alfred Knopf Press

Only when we look at the earth
as civilized thinking men with enlightened insight
will the full measure of human evolution
be possible. We must know the values
which once sustained us are still there
in those parts of the world we have not ravished. – Sigurd Olson

I imagine most mid-westerners who love and care for the natural world are familiar with the writings of Sigurd Olson, especially his book, The Singing Wilderness. I also had, Reflections from the North Country, on my shelf, having never read it. I recently picked it up and was pleasantly surprised at how insightful, relevant, and eloquent his reflections remain as modern human beings are faced with the reality that we are putting the planet and our very human existence in crisis mode.

Some quotes from the book will show Olson's relevance to today's concerns about climate change, environmental integrity, and recognizing our oneness with the earth.

"We no longer face a physical frontier, but a change in philosophy, a complete reversal of our attitude toward the earth that might open the door to a golden era far more resplendent than the old. Never in man's long evolution have such ideas arisen, never has he had a more dramatic choice or one that could change his life more drastically. "Now we are on the verge of making the greatest decision of all, a change in the goals and philosophies that brought about the present ecological crises, a complete realignment of our relationship to the earth, a man-land ethic that it is hoped will recognize our responsibilities and stewardship."

"The ultimate question is what kind of world we really want: more of endless exploitation or one involving proper relationship with our land? Would we choose wisely in the crucial years ahead?"

"Without love of the land, conservation lacks meaning or purpose, for only in a deep and inherent feeling for the land can there be dedication to preserving it."

"A basic ecological truth which we still ignore, is the inter-dependence and interaction of all living things, including man. This is the guiding principle underlying human destiny, and we know unless we choose wisely in the few decades ahead, the fragile and intricate web of life could become a web of death."

I hope you can see, as I experienced, the amazing relevance of his perspective on human interactions with the environment, and what could happen if don't heed what Sigurd and countless other environmentalists are saying about the crisis we have put the earth in.

Other chapters reflect on concepts such as harmony, awareness, aliveness, oneness, beauty, simplicity, courage, freedom, tradition and wholeness. This part of the book is worth the read itself. Sigurd also reflects on the faith concepts of immortality and the "Emergent God" that I find fascinating as a retired Lutheran pastor. He writes: "If the saying in the scriptures, "The Kingdom of God is within you" has any credence, the new emergence of its true meaning becomes one of ultimate and conclusive simplicity, with God the symbol of a broader and more beautiful concept." Fascinating thought to me.

John Hanson