Documentary Moyers: Spirit and Nature is breath of fresh air: [FINAL Edition]


Abstract (summary)

The [Dalai Lama] was the star of the Middlebury conference (he drew a standing-room-only crowd to the college's fieldhouse), but [Bill Moyers] and his film crew sought the views of lesser known but equally provocative thinkers: Audrey Shenandoah, elder of the Onondaga tribe; Sallie McFague, professor of theology at Vanderbilt University; scientist and Islamic scholar Seyyed Hossein Nasr; Rabbi Ismar Schorsch; and Ronald Engel, professor of social ethics at the University of Chicago's theological school.

Seminar speeches, conversations with Moyers and some terrific questions from Middlebury students (they restore one's faith in college-age youth) are cleverly combined with postcard-pretty shots of rural Vermont, visits to the seminar's accompanying art exhibit and haunting musical interludes provided by the Paul Winter Consort, the New Age/Jazz/Classical ensemble that performed at the conference.

Growing Pains star and former Kirkland Lake, Ont., rink rat Alan Thicke is the host, Guests include John Candy; Michael Ontkean, the former major junior hockey player who played Sheriff Harry Truman in Twin Peaks; Richard Dean Anderson, who skates a bit and plays the title role in MacGyver; Jeopardy host Alex Trebek; Helen Shaver; former major league pitcher Ferguson Jenkins; Gordon Lightfoot; Toronto Blue Jays slugger Kelly Gruber (but no one from the Expos); shmoozmeister and sports nut Larry King; Entertainment Tonight co-host Mary Hart (best pins this side of Paul Coffey); Sob Soglet and Dave Coulier of Full House and the ABC home-video shows; Murray Westgate, brought back from the boneyard in this season's Esso commercials; and "actress" Shannon Tweed.

Full Text

Why wait for the weekend to visit Vermont? Television can take you there tonight.

Minutes in the country is positively therapeutic for stressed-out city folks on a Wednesday. Moyers: Spirit and Nature (Vermont ETV-33 at 9) is good for what ails you - a particularly effective antidote to heartache, ennui or midweek anxiety levels that threaten to top off the top of the graph.

In addition to spending a pleasant evening in the delightful company of Bill Moyers, viewers who tune tonight's special will benefit from the profound wisdom of the Dalai Lama and other religious leaders who visited Vermont last summer to speak at the Spirit and Nature Symposium, a four-day conference at Middlebury College.

The documentary is being telescast to mark World Environment Day. Spirit and Nature, the TV record of a seminar organized by Middlebury professor of religion Steven Rockefeller, is a thought-provoking and profoundly moving examination of how some of the world's major religions view the environmental crisis that threatens the future of our planet.

I know, I know; your eyes glaze over at the mention of "environment." Tonight's telescast is not, however, a soporific rehearsh of problems that are familiar to anyone who reads the papers or watches TV news.

The greenhouse effect, burning of the Amazon rain forest, poisoned water from Alaska to the Kuwaiti coast ... the Earth is in a jam, and most Earthlings know it. There are many scientists and a few enlightened (or opportunistic) politicians who are formulating ways of saving the planet.

Spirit and Nature isn't a litany of environmental problems and possible solutions. Instead, the special examines the spiritual dimension of the crisis. It's a different approach and makes for excellent television.

There is no shortage of religion on TV. We've all been subjected to the charlatans selling salvation on Sunday mornings.

He's no Jimmy Swaggart

The Dalai Lama will never be mistaken for Jimmy Swaggart. Spirit and Nature offers the exiled Tibetan leader a chance to explain, rather than preach, the Buddhist view of mankind's relationship to the environment.

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Haunting musical interludes

Seminar speeches, conversations with Moyers and some terrific questions from Middlebury students (they restore one's faith in college-age youth) are cleverly combined with postcard-pretty shots of rural Vermont, visits to the seminar's accompanying art exhibit and haunting musical interludes provided by the Paul Winter Consort, the New Age/jazz/classical ensemble that performed at the conference.

The heart of the program is its talking heads. Spirit and Nature offers more good chat than you'll hear on a year of the Tonight Show, a decade of Oprah or a millennium - perish the thought! - of Arsenio Hall. Shenandoah, the native elder, talks about her tribe's belief that each person has a responsibility for the next seven generations. Nasr, an Iranian graduate of MIT and Harvard, criticizes post-Renaissance western science's claim to absolute and exclusive validity.

McFague - the conference's most interesting speaker - advocates a "new creation theology" that recognizes humans as the result of 15 billion years of evolution, advanced beings with a special responsibility to the planet.

Schorsch, chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, believes we must practise asceticism, learning to live with less so that "as consciousness is raised, we will rein in our appetites and the benefits will be immense."

Spirit and Nature is a program to tape for repeat viewing, an invaluable educational tool for parents and teachers. The air and water won't be any cleaner at 10:30 tonight when the final credits roll on Spirit and Nature, but viewers will feel good about themselves and a whole lot better about the prospects for change.

* Moyers: Spirit and Nature is on Vermont ETV-33 tonight at 9.

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Canadian television is never more embarrassingly bad than when it attempts to imitate American TV.

The saddest of the bad are homegrown awards shows. With the exception of the music industry's Junos, which occasionally offer good performances and genuine warmth and good humor from winners and losers, Canada's answers to the Oscars and Emmys make you wish we'd never heard the question.

The National Hockey League honors its individual trophy winners tonight. The CBC will teletcast the show live from Toronto (that hotbed of great hockey) at 8.

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With so many stars, how can an awards show go wrong?

Just watch and see.

* NHL Awards is on CBMT-6 tonight at 8 p.m.

Illustration
Black & White Photo; Bill Moyers (left) talks with Dalai Lama. Actor Alan Thicke is host of annual NHL Awards.

Credit: GAZETTE

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