

EARTH DAY: HOW OUR GARDENS GROW

A Sermon By
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I picked this bundle of sage the day after Earth Day, when Curtiss and I went on a hike and picnic in Catalina State Park. We have a favorite spot, not in Romero Canyon, but along the north trail that leads up the wash to where the creek still runs feeding cottonwoods and Arizona Ash. The sun was low in the sky, and we had forgotten to bring flashlights, but we know the trail well enough so we went on anyway. When we stopped to catch our breath for a moment on one of the benches above the wash, the stillness descended upon us, the sounds of our own footsteps suddenly silenced, and we began to hear the many songs of the wrens and quail.

The trail led on down into the wash, through a green shadowy pass that reeked of the elusive skunk which I have smelled numerous times on paths or even outside my bedroom window at home, but never seen here. And then, as we walked through the wash, before we had even reached water, we felt it, cool on our faces and arms and legs, flowing down from the north invisibly - a stream of moisture in the air.

The earth is a very sensual place! We walked on up the ridge, along the wash, crossing it again, a little more, then we heard it: water gurgling on rocks. Down into the wash, which was no longer a wash, but a creek with enough water we had to balance on rocks to cross it. Up the other side under green, green trees, and I said, "How green is this!" The color in itself was healing to me.

We picnicked on the sandy beach, and watch a hummingbird try to distract us from its nest in the tree beside us. It would say, "Look! Follow me!" and zoom up to a ocotillo blooming bright red on every tip, then back down to us. As we sat quiet and became a part of the landscape, a frog sang out loud downstream, sounding like a bleating sheep. We watched the sun slowly set, and decided we had better get back.

So we picked up everything, of course, and headed back down the trail, but right then, not too far from our picnic site, we paused at the grey blue luminous hue of sage on the side of the path. Have you noticed how the plants hold the light just at sunset? I do not think it is an optical illusion. I think the plants really do give back the light they've absorbed just at that time, shining on their own. So we picked bursage, which is the plant that smells so incredibly fragrant in the monsoon time where it grows in the washes. And I picked some regular sage, too, to bring to you.

I left the bundle in our car overnight, and Curtiss said it smelled like the sweat lodge we hold up at SAWUURA camp every year.

I'm not done with this story. We still have to get back. So we walked in the growing dark, watching and listening for larger creatures who might be drawn to the water. We didn't see any, but just before we reached the skunk place, as we crossed the dry wash, we heard "hoo hoo!" On a dead tree in the wash, which Curtiss said is the Canada del Oro wash, two giant Great-horned Owls flapped their wings at each other and snuggled in the dusk. It was too dark to take pictures or I would be showing them to you right now. We stood still and watched them and remembered that this is the same place we've seen owls in years past, at this same time of evening.

Then we headed on in the almost dark, feeling the coolness of moisture, hearing the calls of birds, and clutching sage so fragrant you never want to put it down; back to the parking lot where our Isuzu Trooper sat alone in the dark, waiting for us. We had experienced an Earth Day celebration all our own.

You have to go outside to be reminded that the world is filled with scents and life and amazing enlightening events. We don't head out expecting anything; in fact, we more often than not have forgotten the feelings, the connections, the surprises, and are surprised over and over at the beauty of the earth.

This is our garden, not given to us as our closing song will say and as the Bible teaches; on the contrary, we are given to the earth. We are the earth alive, and we need to reconnect even if that means stepping outside our doors each day to feel the sunlight and the breeze, to catch the elusive raindrops or the downpour on our faces, to hear what four walls buffer us from day after day after day. Inside our homes, we can't connect with the life that is the earth. For this we need gardens, yards, washes, alleyways, even a field of grass and a tree will help, and the sun, and the wind, and the inevitable insect or bird. Listen, and the earth will speak to us again, and touch us with its song.

There is a game in Joseph Cornell's book *Sharing Nature with Children*, a game I converted to a worship experience for a Memorial Day Weekend long ago that was on Nature, Religion and the Arts. This was at our UU camp, SAWUURA, in the Sierra Ancha Wilderness near Young. The game is called "Still Hunting," and is practiced by Native Americans. We did it in the meadow where everyone found a place to sit that called to them. And sitting as quiet and still as possible, you become part of the nature, and if you are lucky, small animals will crawl out of hiding and sneak up on you to check you out. The practice is to become the wind, to move with the grass, to be as a tree and breathe the breath of nature. If I remember correctly, the only animals that snuck up on us were grasshoppers and a squirrel, but just sitting on native grass surrounded by wilderness is a wonderful experience. (p. 112)

This same book is mentioned as a resource in the Northwest Earth Institute's *Discussion Course on Exploring Deep Ecology*. I've been carrying the book on Deep Ecology with me for a year now, planning to use it as I wrote my essays on Sacred Spaces, but I had never gotten around to reading it until yesterday. I found myself caught by the chapter on ecopsychology, a term new to me, but which is close to ideas I've been shaping for at least twenty years about our relationship with nature and how we become the nature which surrounds us, especially in our formative years. Theodore Roszak framed the question well: "Is it possible...that every nature poet since Wordsworth has been right in telling us our sanity depends upon access to wilderness...upon the companionship of trees and beasts...?" Ecopsychology explores the idea that "our emotional well-being is affected by the strength of our connection to nature." (p. VI-1)

Deep Ecology is an environmental approach which values all species and views human beings as one part of this interdependent ecosystem. It's not about saving the earth so we have more resources, or managing the earth to provide more for our growing human numbers. Ecological sustainability is the focus rather than economic growth, all species are valued equally, and all is interconnected. The word ecology is from the Greek oikos, meaning home, so ecology means learning to live at home on the earth. John Muir expressed this notion well when he wrote, "I only went out for a walk and finally concluded to stay until sundown, for going out, I discovered, was actually going in." (p I-5)

We as a congregation have chosen a Green Collective Ministry, and at our last retreat we decided on four projects to work on: Food Choices for a Healthy Body, Community and Planet;

Water Collection and Erosion Issues; Feasibility Study for a Community Garden and Desert Plant Oasis; and Green Neighborhood Improvement Projects and Citrus Gleaning. These can be added to many projects already started by our Green Sanctuary Committee. We are very active in our attempts to transform ourselves and engage in ecological action. But we won't be successful if we don't attend to the inner values that guide us to do this work in the first place.

Marina Schauffler points out the paradox between our desire to live in healthy settings and the choices we continue to make that lead to degradation of the earth. She writes in *Exploring Deep Ecology* that in addition to restoring a healthy outer ecology, we must pay attention to a "renewal of inner ecology, the spiritual beliefs and ethical values that guide our actions." (p. I-8)

One of my favorite hymns is "We Are the Earth Upright and Proud." (303) It wasn't listed in the hymnal's index under "Earth," so I didn't think of it until yesterday. I love the words: "We are the earth upright and proud; in us the earth is knowing. Its winds are music in our mouths, in us its rivers flowing." I learned to play it in piano lessons which I took from a member of my church, Mr. McCreary. I was thinking about him the other day, about how someone teaches you one thing and you remember them forever. He taught me for eight years, but the hymns were what I wanted to learn in high school, and this hymn was one that expressed my outlook on life itself. We are the earth upright and proud, and to think this way is to guide many of our choices.

Our UU *Purposes and Principles* are guides as well to the spiritual beliefs and ethical values that Schauffler urges us to pay attention to. But we have to do that work ourselves, reflected and supported by community. Or challenged. What do we really think about life and what the term "ethical eating" means? Do we believe that people should change all at once, or can we acknowledge that some people can change all at once while others must take things a step at a time to change life-long habits. I noticed in the *Exploring Deep Ecology* book that in their "What You Can Do To Protect the Earth" list they say "Eat at least two meatless dinners each week." It's not an all or nothing undertaking. People need those steps to take to change and learn and feel at home in living new ways in concert with actions that encourage a healthy planet.

The very first practice they recommend in their first lesson is to "take time each week to walk somewhere--a park, a trail, a public garden, a woods near your home--where you can feel your connection to the natural world around you." (p. I-2) Most of you can get over to Saguaro National Park, or Catalina State Park, or even Tohono Chul Park and walk in the desert. I remember hearing that four of you who are not able to walk very well drove up the mountain one time to see the forest and feel the air. That's being in nature. We also have a handicapped accessible tent in addition to tent cabins and a winter cabin up at SAWUURA, and able folks to help get you there and around the property. We're holding the Memorial Day Weekend again this year if you want to go.

In an article from the *Arizona Daily Star* this week (April 19, 2009) entitled "Tear down the wall between us and nature," Michael Rosenzweig, an Evolutionary Biologist at the U of A, talks about "Reconciliation Ecology." He believes that we need to create natural habitats right where we are, encouraging the kind of plants to grow that are native and necessary for the sustenance of various species that could live among us within our cities. This doesn't solve the problem for those species that need extensive wilderness to survive, but it does help create a more healthy natural environment around our homes and allow those animals that can live among humans a better chance.

Around our house near Ina and La Canada we have seen a bobcat twice, coyotes regularly every year - I think a path runs through our front yard. It's been a while since we saw the javelina, but we have hordes of rabbits and quail and dove, at least one Great Horned owl that hoots at night, three Harris Hawks that live across the cul-de-sac, and a pair of cardinals, woodpeckers, curved bill Thrasher, finches, and cactus wrens. Lizards and scorpions and the occasional bullsnake and rattlesnake. We decided long ago not to ever use pesticides on any property, but what really draws all this wildlife are the big mesquites, paloverdes, oak, African Sumac, Eucalyptus, and desert areas where we don't usually go and don't clear.

I love this wildlife in the city. It's my garden. These animals know me as their pet, too, because they're born in my presence and know my movements, watching me every day as I move about the house and go outside. They know me as I know them, only I use language and labels. I don't know what they use.

I saw a baby rabbit in the yard last week, and a covey of baby quail. It's spring and the earth is busy renewing itself. As we work so hard to change our ways and protect this earth, this beautiful garden, I hope we celebrate the beauty that is the earth that surrounds us and is us. It is this ability and practice of appreciation and celebration that will nurture our spirits and enable us to stay the path of ecological revolution.