

The Sanctity of Place

by Nancy Wright

Nancy G. Wright, who commutes monthly from New York City to Seattle to work as a Program Associate at Earth Ministry is a spiritual director in both cities. This is excerpted from Earth Letter, November 2000 by permission of Earth Ministry, which was born out of a desire to help people of faith see more clearly the connection between their faith, daily lives, and ecological concerns. A schedule of events, the Earth Ministry mission statement, and more about Earth Letter can be found on www.earthministry.org. "So shall thou see and hear the lovely shapes and sounds intelligible of that eternal language which thy God utters, who from eternity doth teach ... [God's] self in all, and all things in ...[God's] self."

Samuel Taylor Coleridge

A piece of my heart has been stolen by the beautiful spot where I live, St. Mary's Convent, Bellevue. Here, I hear God's "voice" and see the "lovely shapes" of God's intelligence. I believe that I am the better for it. Never in my life have I lived in such a beautiful setting. The sisters and the convent overlook the eastern shores of Lake Washington. The retired sisters of the order, St. Joseph of Peace, live here.

Here also live towhees, eagles, hummingbirds, red-tailed hawks, creepers, owls, flickers, wrens, Steller's jays, woodpeckers, pine siskins, chickadees, American pipits, varied thrushes, juncos, raccoons, moles, muskrats, two-hundred-year old red cedar trees, hemlocks, pines, spruces, aspens, fruit trees, a cedar of Lebanon, and an uncountable number of insects and butterflies.

The grounds of the convent, although planted with some nonnative plant species, still represent a remnant ecosystem of special significance in the Seattle metropolis. The area of Bellevue has been greatly transformed in the past sixty years, "developed" because of the economic boom. Many of the sisters remember it as farm and woodland; school children took the ferry over to Seattle until I-90 was built in 1948. The creation of I-90 destroyed many wetland and slough areas. Seemingly overnight, a rival to downtown Seattle is arising in Bellevue. I have stood on SW16th and Main Streets and counted eight construction cranes building glass and steel monuments to commerce and wealth. Few who walk there would know of the natural life that the convent protects only several blocks away.

The preferred method by which people have tried to integrate the city with the country – suburbs – provides a no-win solution. For suburbs tend to destroy both. Flowing inexorably in one direction, suburbs corrode the inner city, in the other direction they gobble up farmland and wild nature. Each suburban household, with its leafblower, automobile, lawnmower, exerts a net drain on nature's benefits: water, clean air, land, forests, biodiversity. I grew up in the suburbs of Denver, Colorado. I remember the sadness of losing a creek and cow pasture as other new homes inevitably were built. Yet certainly a suburban life can be emotionally and spiritually rich, although not sustainable environmentally. To a certain degree such a life still represents and may fulfill the American dream.

A tragedy is that human expansion seems inevitably to erode natural diversity. Salmon, monarch butterflies, bluebirds, and thousands of other creatures are threatened as we pollute and destroy waterways and forested and meadow homelands. Today, human activities have initiated an "extinction spasm," with wild species going extinct at a rate one hundred to one thousand times faster than normal.

Fundamentally, the question for all of us, wherever we live, is how to protect natural diversity from our activities. There are at least three reasons for doing so. First, God created the diversity of life and called it good. Second, any biologist will tell us that diversity enhances life's productivity, beauty, and resiliency. Third, diversity reveals the many facets of God, in which Gerard Manley Hopkins rejoiced:

Glory be to God for Dappled things ...
... Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches' wings;
Landscape plotted and pieced - fold, fallow, and plough; ...
... All things counter, original, spare, strange; ...

(From "Pied Beauty")

We don't protect diversity by living in a virtual reality. Wherever we live, to spend many of our waking hours with computers, cell phones, and television set dilutes our visual and aural stimulation and therefore malnourishes souls and imaginations. We hear only our own voice or, rather, words of our own making. We become blind to nature's beauty, complexity, intricacy. The din drowns out the voices of our own hearts and of other creatures, the stammerings of our imaginations and prayers, the silence of the powerless and voiceless around the world. We, indeed, are deprived of silence. So much so that Barbara Brown Taylor notes that in a world awash with words, only through silence can God capture our attention. She writes in *When God Is Silent*:

Sometimes I think we do all the talking because we are afraid God won't. Or, conversely, that God will. Either way, staying preoccupied with our words seems a safer bet than opening ourselves up either to God's silence or God's speech, both of which have the power to undo us. In our own age, I believe God's silence is the more threatening, perhaps because it is the more frequently experienced of the two. Very few people come to see me because they want to discuss something God said to them last night. The large majority come because they cannot get God to say anything at all.

To ask where we hear God's language, or see God's forms, is to ask a question of spiritual life or death. If many people have heard and seen God in nature and in the city, it follows that the church should rush to confirm such perceptions and to build vibrant ministries upon them.

We have biblical precedent. Our forebears knew it as "natural," even good, to see God through nature and the city. The Israelites were blessed because God gave them a fertile, beautiful land. They also longed for the city of Jerusalem.

Jesus looked to nature for spiritual wisdom: "Look at the lilies of the field ... do not be anxious." But at a certain time he set his face toward Jerusalem. He loved the city: "Jerusalem, Jerusalem . . . How often

have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings." (Matthew 23:37).

Having said all this, rarely are we certain that we have seen or heard God. And, woe to the person who claims this certainty! Yet, sightings and hearings do occur, even frequently. To speak personally, I have long felt God's loving presence in the city that has nourished me for thirty years – New York. My experience at St. Mary's now leads me to feel that I may see God's outlines manifested in nature around me. The sightings and hearings jar me out of my usual distractions and self-introspection. They teach and bless. They correct failings of narrowed feeling, thought, and perception.

If I hope to go for a swim, jewel-like spider's webs on both ladders leading into Lake Washington require that I step high to avoid destroying the delicate fibers. They incarnate fragility, beauty, and patient, perfect crafting. The waters of Lake Washington feel like a blest immersion and cleansing on my skin. The muskrat below the dock, swimming forward jerkily, intent on an errand of its own, unknown to me, evokes purposefulness. One afternoon, a commotion arises. An eagle flies past my window, pursued by several smaller birds. I am suddenly totally alert, trying to follow until it sails into trees: majesty heightened by drama of which I only guess the beginning and end. Outside and all around, the red cedars stand, huge, comforting, stable. The straight trunks and large-fan-like boughs convey dignity, warmth, and comfort. On another day, a butterfly circles on the warm updrafts. I am charmed.

This sacred place has seeped into my soul, I see new dimensions to God: delicate (the butterfly), magnificent (eagle, Mt. Rainier), beautiful (spider web), mysterious (the dark pointed cedar trees against a moonlit sky), humorous (a horsechestnut that drops at my feet, knocked to the ground by a crow perched above), luminous (the moon over the water), and redemptive (rains followed by spring and golden summer). I live with more attentiveness and purpose. I grow as a Christian.

I yearn to protect.