

## Earth Day 2020

### A Personal and Spiritual Reflection

There is a west road in my home.  
Its farthings and furrows lay flat  
And shepherd in snow with winter's evening.  
There is a turning road that runs and looms with stones.  
I pound this road in long poundings,  
In cold dusking, and on rich days in the afternoon  
Where the sun moves through summers clouding  
Light and loving, and my soul slips on sliding bankments  
Of high snow or brown grass...

... A very young poet wrote those clumsy, earnest lines long ago, while daydreaming in a senior-year high school study hall. A boy bored with science, confused by math, yet having recently discovered, it seemed, the music in words, while at the same time a fascination with the beauty and lure and welcome peace of God's created world.

As you might already have guessed that boy was me. And his vague imitation of greater poets more stirring verse was a first attempt at declaring just how much the things of nature around him meant to him, as he walked along a deserted country road one winter twilight. The road itself was not, of course, natural but man-made. Still, I think it proved nonetheless a pathway for me into a world of grace and meaning, a new experience of sight and sound and thought.

I can't recall exactly when or why I came to be so aware. It helped, I suppose, to have grown up in the country, as I did, and so to have had the luxury of falling in love with an ever-present landscape with woods and hills and streams, with the shapes of scudding clouds on a breezy day, the sound of birds in the morning and crickets late into the night; the change of seasons, the turnings of the year. With these joys also went the gratitude the all but complete sense of thankfulness that I simply could step outside, in the open air, and breathe that air into my lungs without having to wear a spacesuit! That I could revel in the miracle mixture of all the right elements the right place in the cosmos, the right temperature, the right atmosphere that I could partake, in other words, in the supreme gift of a loving God this sweet, tender, heartbreakingly beautiful, desperately fragile planet of ours.

Still, it is not only country folk who can feel this way. I'm convinced that there dwells in every person's mind and heart in their aesthetic DNA? a desire for green things, for the things of earth. No one knows fully why this is so. Perhaps it's because that, in one version of the Creation story at least, we were MADE from the dust of the earth. So, we are part and parcel of the earth. We carry our inbred love for it around with us. And perhaps that's why we have such a 'natural' tendency to want to preserve it.

Perhaps it's why 840 acres was set aside a century and more ago, on then the most prime real estate in the nation (and in the middle of a densely crowded city), to form what became known as Central Park. It's why vast expanses of virgin wilderness have been preserved across the country simply, it would seem, for the enjoyment of our senses, for no other reason than to give us occasion to celebrate what the great John Muir called the " Sacrament of Nature."

This natural, and I would say spiritual, desire for nature continues to compete, however, with our equally compelling desire to utilize nature as we wish, to exploit it, while not caring of the cost or

the consequences. Our greed and blindness and arrogance all have outstripped our God-gifted love for the air we breathe and the earth we walk on the same earth from which we came and what we carry with us. We have imagined ourselves lords of all we survey, and yet we've forgotten that with such dominion goes responsibility; with enjoyment of use comes stewardship.

So, the reckoning we are facing now on this earth is a direct result of our forgetting these basic truths. Our wasteful pride, our rapaciousness is taking its toll at last. The earth is not bending to our will; it is breaking because of it! Some of us comfort ourselves by thinking that climate change is somehow just a hoax, or, if it's true, that we humans have had no part in it. Yet deep down we know our real motives; deep down we know that our rejection of the weight of scientific fact stems only from our reluctance to change the way we live.

The most honest thing we can do in this crisis, then, is also the bravest thing it is first to acknowledge that it's real. And immediately after that, to humbly acknowledge that we humans must, I repeat must, make changes in the way we use the resources of God's world. Intentional, determined, daily changes, each of which may seem small and incremental, but ones that can and will have substantial restorative results if, in God's mercy, it's not too late.

There are a whole host of practical activities and habits by which we can make a difference. Our sister Bernadette Roche, as one of the Dioceses 'Green Ministers' has already assisted us by recommending and helping to coordinate any number of them. She and others in our community continue to serve both as valuable resources of information and inspiring leaders in what must be a concerted action. Each of us has a part to play.

But in addition to embracing these measures, I'd like us to do something else, something more contemplative than practical, and yet a consideration that must, I believe, accompany any of the actions we take to save our planet.

I'd like you to regard the children around you, the children and grandchildren of your immediate family. For a moment concentrate only on those closest and dearest to us. Imagine the world that will greet them when they are grown when they're the age of their parents; when they're our age! What will the earth look like for them? How will the air feel? Will their day-to-day lives have changed because the earth has changed, because you and I have done little or nothing to have stemmed that change, to have altered the degree and extent of the destruction? Because we have not made things any better, only worse? Look into their eyes. Watch their goings and comings, their playfulness, their hopefulness, their unguarded innocence.

My hope and prayer for the children that I see around me (if only a hope against hope?) is that they will continue, in years to come, to find beauty and wonder and peace in the forms of nature in green and growing things, in signs and seasons, in the things of earth. I hope they will be able to step outside, in the open air, and freely breathe that air the original breath of God's love into their lungs.

In other words, I hope they will have reason to discover all of what I found at their age, and to my astonishment and delight, in that first unforgettable moment of awareness and welcome and grace...

*This road I know is always small and narrow however seasons turn.  
But holding all times in gray or green or white fingers  
Lifts my plodding feet across lines of wooded lining,  
And twigs and trees of budding boughs at spring,*

*Or rayant leafing in yellow autumn,  
Or bleak brown wiring over my head and hands.*

*I count these afternoons and moments and covet them  
On this seasoned road in these times.  
For in my fields and groves I've heard for strange years  
My roots and seedings shake deep through this road,  
And on these weeds in ice, or virgin greenening, or rayant embers moving.  
And I ply its cut face with joys of this world as my home.*