

Humus and Hubris
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Genesis 2:5-7
Isaiah 24:4-5

October 12, 2008
Luke 15:1-10

Wendell Berry's poem, *Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front*, is one that begs to be memorized. I'm sure that Elise Goldman probably has already done so, since she sent me a few of her favorite lines recently. My own memory is not so good, so I enjoy reading and re-reading these verses and want to share with you a passage that I think is a fitting inauguration to Creation Season here at Binkley:

*Invest in the millennium. Plant sequoias.
Say that your main crop is the forest
that you did not plant,
that you will not live to harvest.
Say that the leaves are harvested
when they have rotted into the mold.*

*Call that profit. Prophecy such returns.
Put your faith in the two inches of humus
that will build under the trees
every thousand years.*

The sadness of our time is that most of civilized society has lost its faith in humus. We have forgotten that we belong to the earth, that we rise from soil and return to a final rest in its embrace. The second epic poem of the Creation account in Genesis Chapter 2 reminds us of this connection. For in the early days of the world, we are told. "there was no human (*adam*, in Hebrew) to till the soil (*adamah*).” And God formed the human, *adam*, from humus, the dust of the soil (*adamah*) and breathed life into that body. It is a deep memory of our origins, a reminder that we are of the very earth itself.

But civilized society has mostly lost this memory, and the consequences are blight and loss. "The earth is mourning, withering", cries the prophet Isaiah. "The world is pining, withering; the heavens are pining away with the earth. The earth is defiled under its inhabitant's feet, for they have transgressed the law, violated the precept, broken the everlasting covenant." (Isa. 24:4-5)

We live in a world marked by loss. Loss of species, wild rivers, unspoiled habitat. And Jesus tells us that God loves best that which is lost. It does not matter if there are other coins, other sheep, or as in the parable of the Prodigal Son, other children. That which seems to be lost is most precious because it is uniquely loved and also in danger.

Recently, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature released a report authored by more than 100 scientists from around the world which puts the magnitude of species loss in

stark perspective. The report estimates that one in four mammal species is threatened with extinction and that the population of one in two is declining.

"I think the bottom line is, what kind of a world do you want to leave for your children," Andrew Smith, a professor in the Arizona State University School of Life Sciences, said in a telephone interview. "How impoverished we would be if we lost 25 percent of the world's mammals." Marine mammals are among those listed as especially endangered, especially those that are large, reproduce slowly, and are often struck by boats or killed by fishing gear. (<http://www.cnn.com/2008/TECH/science/10/06/endangered.mammals.ap/index.html>)

This grim news leaves me sad and trying to imagine a world where there are no more right whales, belugas, walruses, or manatees. Three years ago, I spent my birthday swimming in a river in north Florida where the annual manatee migration had begun. I had always longed for a close encounter with these strange and gentle creatures, and so my husband and I joined a small group on a boat which took us out from a harbor lined with expensive homes to a spot where there was still a bit of undeveloped riverbank lined with tall grasses.

The river was clear and cool, as it was November, and we donned wet suits and snorkel masks and jumped overboard. I was thrilled to see some splashing a bit further from the boat and began to swim toward the spot, away from the rest of the group. We had been told that we could get close to the manatees, but we were not to approach too close or touch them unless they came up to us, because that would be intrusive. I was hoping to just get close enough to be able to see them a bit more clearly.

Suddenly, I felt a gentle bump on my leg. I looked down to see a mother manatee who had just nudged me, swimming below with her calf. This huge, leathery creature looked directly at me with large, dark eyes, and rolled on her side. I was transfixed. I gently reached out a hand and scratched her back and then touched her baby. It was apparent that she had deliberately initiated this contact, almost as if she were showing off her child. I was amazed.

In the water, these big animals move effortlessly, grazing on the water grasses, surfacing to blow out air, and then sinking back down to walk and swim along the sandy bottom. They were completely unafraid, their intelligent curious eyes looking right at us as they swam close by, occasionally stopping for a good scratch. It was wonderful; it was incredible; it was like swimming with Volkswagens!

That was a day of encounter, both physical and spiritual. It was subject to subject, one life form greeting another and wishing the other well. I came away blessed and delighted. These are the encounters that will be lost as creatures like the manatee become fewer and fewer, finally disappearing forever while the fancy houses and speed boats remain on the Florida rivers.

When one has experienced an encounter with wildness, soul to soul, then deep memory is stirred and we remember again our connections as distant cousins, each shaped from the primal mud of

the earth. That other being becomes precious to us, and we become willing to leave the 99 other creatures to protect the one who is in danger of disappearing.

But we have insulated ourselves so well from wildness with our cement and cities and technology, that many of us rarely experience the gift of such encounters. We suffer from nature deficit disorder, the psychosis of urban dwellers who are deprived of contact with the natural world. (See, Bradford Kee, "Growing Up Denatured", *New York Times*, April 28, 2005). We need contact with the nonhuman to remind us of our true humanity. But if we can't get the actual experience, sometimes photos can help. They can also show us what we are losing.

David Eliot Cohen, in his book *What Matters*, points out the critical importance of pictures in documenting the environmental destruction happening all over the world due to global warming. He writes:

For a long time -- the first 15 years that we knew about global warming and did nothing -- there were no pictures. That was one of the reasons for inaction. Climate change was still "theoretical," the word that people in power use to dismiss anything for which pictures do not exist. It is the reason we don't see shots of coffins coming back from Iraq; it's the reason the only prison abuse we really know about was at Abu Ghraib. Without pictures, no uproar; not in a visual age.

But now the pictures have started to come, and they will not cease. Some show people: airlifted off the roofs of their houses in New Orleans' Lower Ninth Ward in the mad wake of Katrina, staring at their houses crumbling into the sea on the Alaskan coast, watching their graveyards flood on South Seas islands.

Some show the massive power of nature, made more massive by our injection of chemicals into the atmosphere: walls of flame crashing up Southern California hillsides, enormous waves breaking over Mississippi seawalls. Some are almost clinical: the bathtub rings around drying reservoirs as evaporation takes its course. And some have the stately, cold precision of the really big view: the satellite pictures, for instance, that show the steady melt of the sea ice above the Arctic Ocean. (whatmattersonline.com)

We need the visual reminders of the consequences of our actions. We need the photographers, the prophets, and the poets to point out our pride and call us to accountability.

Our arrogance, our hubris, is huge. We have placed ourselves and human needs at the center of our own artificially contrived universe. We forget our connections to the non-human life forms who share this planet with us, and we assume that only people have rights, and even then, only those humans most like us. We refuse to see that the earth, indeed the universe itself, is a body, a divine body, and that injuring one part does damage to the whole.

Theologian Sallie McFague, plays with the metaphor of the universe as God's body in her book, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age*. We are fortunate that McFague

will be one of the speakers at Binkley's Seymour Symposium next May. She extends the traditional idea of the "resurrection of the body" to also mean God's promise to be with us always **in** God's body, our world. She writes:

*What if God's promise of permanent presence to all space and time were imagined as a wordly reality, a palpable, bodily presence? What if, then, we did not have to go somewhere special (church) or somewhere else (another world) to be in the presence of God but could feel ourselves in that presence at all times and in all places? What if we imagined God's presence as in us and in all others, including the last and the least? (**Models of God**, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1987, p. 70)*

McFague says that one of the implications of this metaphor of the universe as God's self expression, is that this model of God puts God at risk. Just as we care for our own bodies and are made vulnerable by them, so the world, God's body, may be poorly cared for, ravaged, or even destroyed, "in spite of God's loving attention to it, because of one creature, ourselves, who can choose or not choose to join with God in conscious care of the world." (Ibid, p. 72).

I wonder what it would be like if we truly thought of the world as God's body. Perhaps religions would be as quick to decry injury to the earth as they are to denounce perceived insults to their sacred institutions or creeds. If we see the earth as God's body, then we would not allow corporations to continue to use economic arguments as the trump card for every action which extracts resources for financial gain at the cost of environmental loss.

Herman Greene has been gently suggesting for months that I need to read some of Thomas Berry's works. I'm sure he'll be glad that I finally got around to reading Berry's visionary book, **The Great Work**, this past week. Berry believes that the future can only exist when we understand the universe as composed of subjects to be communed with, not as objects to be exploited. He points out that "use" is our primary relationship with the planet in this present day and this attitude must be abandoned, not only for the sake of the survival of other species, like the manatee, but also for the sake of our own survival.

Our concern for financial profit has created losses of unparalleled magnitude. We have lost 99 sheep, instead of only one. Human presence on the earth, by virtue of our capacity to change the surface of the planet, has become a power greater than that of natural forces such as the glaciers in earlier ages. And with that destructive power, comes the need for a new consciousness if we are to survive.

Berry, like McFague, believes that we must recapture that deep memory of our connection to the earth. He writes:

We live in cities, a world of concrete and steel, of wheels and wires, a world of undending work... We no longer read the Book of Nature. While we have more scientific knowledge of the universe than any people ever had, it is not the type of knowledge that leads to an intimate presence within a meaningful universe.

(The Great Work, Bell Tower, New York, 1999, p. 15)

Intimacy with the natural world is meaningful. It is the spark that shines in the eye after meeting a manatee. Berry believes that we must remember the sacred nature of the universe, that the world about us is a “thou”, and not an “it”, and that God is present in the elements, molecules, and organic life of Earth, as well as in the profound emotional and spiritual experiences of the human. As he says, “There is a spiritual capacity in carbon as there is a carbon component functioning in our highest spiritual experience.” (p.25)

This is a critical juncture in the history of the Earth. Berry says that we live at the end of the Cenozoic Era and stand on the threshold of a new Ecozoic Age. Our “great work” is to make our human presence on the world a benign one, to transform every human institution or structure- our government, economy, education system, technology, religious institutions- so that the relationship we share with the rest of the earth is mutually beneficial.

For that great work, we must recapture the magic of encounter, intimacy with other beings who are also part of this meaningful universe. As I finished this sermon last night, two owls began a chorus of hooting in the darkness outside my window, calling to each other in a crescendo of sound. They were an unseen presence, mysterious, yet comforting. They reminded me that I am not alone.

We live in uncertain and anxious times. As I read yet another headline about stock market declines and lost profits, I am glad for the poets and the prophets like the two Berry’s, Thomas and Wendell. And I remember again the wonderful lines of Wendell’s poem:

*Invest in the millennium. Plant sequoias.
Say that your main crop is the forest
that you did not plant,
that you will not live to harvest.
Say that the leaves are harvested
when they have rotted into the mold.*

*Call that profit. Prophecy such returns.
Put your faith in the two inches of humus
that will build under the trees
every thousand years.*

.....Practice resurrection.