

I pledge allegiance to the earth
and to the flora, fauna, and human life
that it supports;
one planet, indivisible,
with safe air, water, and soil,
economic justice,
equal rights,
and peace for all.

From the Women's Environment and Development Organization of the Women's Foreign Policy Council "Pledge of Allegiance to the Family of Earth."

What does it take to get your attention? St. Paul was thrown to the ground on the road to Damascus, got up blind, and was healed by one of those terrible Christians he'd been persecuting. Ananias laid hands on him, went into that wounded place with him, and used the power of God to heal. It was this experience of healing as much as the blinding, that turned his life around. Peter was asked three times by Jesus if he really loved him, and the right answer had something less to do with what he might have felt in his heart than what actions he took in his life. With these stories of radical transformation we Christians come to the celebration of International Earth Day. The environment has finally got our attention.

It would seem natural to speak of the issues that are so much in the news: pollution of many and various kinds, global warming, the extinction of so many species of animals. There's much we could do – recycle, plant trees, ride a bike, or buy Fair Trade Coffee. Of course all these are important, but what is on my mind this morning is repentance, conversion and transformation, which aren't so easily placed within the context of public discussion about the fate of the earth. I speak of these things from a place of deep grief and enormous failure, and if that seems a strange place to start, remember that grief and failure are the prelude to resurrection. The disciples were at the point of failure after Golgotha,

and the women were in grief when they went to the tomb. In this Easter season that's an appropriate place to begin.

Several years ago, during the time my father was dying, the state of Ohio decided that all dirt and gravel country roads would be paved. This would make it easier for the road crews to maintain. The house where my parents lived was on land which had been in our family for several generations. A hundred years ago the road leading to the property had probably been a dirt track. For my entire life, driving out to this land was associated with a slowing down, and the sound of tires crunching on gravel. This was soon to be followed by exploring the woods and the stream, looking at wild fungus growing on fallen trees or catching crayfish in the stream. At night the sounds of frogs and owls and the wind in the trees lulled us to sleep, along with the background noise of water flowing over the old brick dam.

The road had an earthen berm at the edge that prevented oil and grunk from cars running down the sides of the ravine into the stream that flowed into the Akron reservoir. Blackberries, wild peas, and Queen Anne's lace grew along its sides. Paving it meant two things: cutting down all the flowers and plants and trees within ten feet of the edge, and increasing the speed of the traffic. All country roads in Ohio have a speed limit of 45 mph, but you can't drive that fast on a gravel road. I know. You have to slow down.

Everyone on Kile Road fought the county engineer. It was a valiant battle, and we lost. I was there the day the asphalt went down, and I walked the road when it was still hot beneath my hiking boots. The fact that my father was dying seemed connected somehow with what I call in my own mind, The Last Country Road. And I was filled with grief.

Embedded deep within our tradition is a reverence for what I'll call for the moment "the natural world" – meaning everything that's not human – plants, animals, oceans, mountains, and so on. The psalms speak poetically about hills

skipping like little sheep. In a few weeks we'll sing one of our favorite hymns, St. Patrick's breastplate. Part of what makes it so thrilling is that in it we bind ourselves with the glory of the starlit heaven, the moon, lightning and wind, the deep salt sea. One of our favorite saints, St. Francis, wrote a canticle of the sun and referred to the elements as "sister" or "brother". Whether we realize it consciously or not, our spirits are trained to connect with the spirit of God that moves through all of creation, including all that is not us – not human. When we lose some of that creation, our spirits grieve. When the bachelor buttons are gone from the side of the road we may not notice it immediately, but our unconscious does. Our spirit does. The spirit of God within us which connects with the spirit of God that's revealed in the bachelor button knows that something has been severed.

Much of our religious thinking and writing, beginning with the book of Genesis, also teaches us to regard ourselves as the most superior living things on the planet, and to take for ourselves a divine authority to use everything for our own purposes. We're trained to regard the spiritual life as primarily interior, that is, having to do with our thoughts and feelings, our attitudes and conceptions. We have a very difficult time comprehending a spirituality that is physical and material, or a spirituality that encompasses action. "Faith, not works," we say, keeping that old mind/body split intact.

The essential task of becoming an advocate for God's creation consists primarily of being open to the conversion of our souls, and to recognize the commonality we share with everything else on the planet, from pigeons to oak trees. And the way to begin that task is to pay attention to the grief we will feel once we let ourselves acknowledge the loss. This is the beginning of wisdom and transformation. We have to change as radically as St. Paul did.

Because in the end, issues of the environment are always issues of justice, and even if you care nothing at all about trees or flowers or ivory-billed

woodpeckers, Jesus says that being a disciple of his means caring about other people who are also children of God. The behavior of the wealthiest people on earth makes the poor suffer disproportionately. The paved road in Ohio not only sends poisonous runoff into the stream, it encourages more consumption of fossil fuel. And we know where that leads. Every decision we make has a consequence, no matter how small. In a wealthy country like ours where we have so much control over our consumption, the power of the marketplace is real power indeed. It does indeed make a difference if we buy Fair Trade coffee or insist on local produce. Just as the small decisions can be fateful in a negative way, they can be positive as well.

We are as blind to all this as St. Paul was blind to the truth of Christ, and we need to be healed. We need someone to go into the wounded place in each one of us, just as Ananias did when he summoned up the courage to meet with the infamous enemy of the new church. Ananias was converted to the possibilities in Paul, just as Paul was converted to the gospel of Christ. When we recognize that the world is wounded, that we are wounded with it and need to be healed, when we understand that the healing has something to do with the choices and decisions we make, the scales fall from our own eyes. Once that happens, you can never go back. You will never be the same, because you will know that what we call “the natural world” includes you. There is no environment that you are separate from. It is all one.

Dr. Peter Raven, who is head of the Missouri Botanical Gardens, makes Al Gore look positively mild. I heard the other day that Rush Limbaugh referred to Dr. Raven as “an environmentalist wacko”. What a compliment! Count me in. Count me among the wackos. I don’t know what Jesus would think of all this, but I feel certain he’d like to be with the wackos. I think Jesus would be standing in the grocery store holding a cucumber for the Easter salad, looking up at the label that says it comes from Chile and thinking of planeloads

of cucumbers flying at 40,000 feet for hours and hours so he could have a perfect cucumber. Gallons of fuel burned up, the air polluted and warmed. I know Jesus would always make the right decision – me, I don't. Sometimes the cucumber debate is just too much and I can't bear this moral reasoning in the grocery store. But I am no longer under the delusion that it doesn't matter. And I know that there is more hope than we dare to think and that some of that hope depends on me.

When Mt. Helens erupted in 1980 in Washington, the mountain was devastated. Miles of green forest were flattened, and covered in ash and mud and debris that turned to concrete. The prognosis was extraordinarily grim. Scientists flew over in helicopters and hiked in to examine the damage. Nothing would grow on that mountain for a hundred years they said, and we were all very very sad. The very next spring someone found a new green plant sprouting up from the supposedly dead hillside.

We do not know what will happen. What we do know is that we can have an effect. On this earth day, I pray that we may all fall in love with a bit of creation, fall so hard in love that its loss matters, and that we can use the energy of grief for healing. On this earth day may God's holy spirit convert each one of us into environmentalist wackos.

And finally, in the words of Mary Oliver's poem, Mindful:

Every day
I see or I hear
something
that more or less

kills me
with delight,
that leave me
like a needle

in the haystack

of light.

It is what I was born for –
to look, to listen,

to lose myself

inside this soft world –
to instruct myself
over and over

in joy,

and acclamation.

Nor am I talking
about the exceptional,

the fearful, the dreadful,

the very extravagant –
but of the ordinary,
the common, the very drab,

the daily presentations.

Oh, good scholar,
I say to myself,
how can you help

but grow wise

with such teachings
as these –
the untrimmable light

of the world,

the ocean's shine,
the prayers that are made
out of grass?

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