Loretto Earth Network Lenten Reflection: March 13, 2019

Excerpts from “Simplify, Simplify” Elizabeth J. Canham, Obl. O.H.C.

In order to love Earth we need to know Earth as Earth, and that may take a radical shift in our thinking. We have become accustomed to regarding the resources of Earth as primarily there for us to use as though they had no intrinsic worth beyond their value to us. We have harnessed water and mass-produced harvests. Factory farming has grown as our demand for inexpensive and ready-prepared food products has increased. Our demand for fast, prepackaged food has resulted in a stripping of rain forests – essential to Earth’s natural balance– in order to provide pasture land for more cattle so that our hamburgers will cost less. In the process, many Indigenous Peoples have been rendered homeless and the habitat of many endangered species has been lost forever. Much of the food sold by fast food chains is packaged in Styrofoam containers, which constitute a hazard to Earth: they are not biodegradable and produce poisonous gasses if burned.

Goods come to us from unknown manufacturers, food from distant places, fuel from underground conduits. We have demanded efficiency, speed, and convenience as our lifestyles have become more complex. Most of us have little direct involvement with the living, growing things so necessary to sustain life. It is not surprising that we often lack a sense of connectedness to and stewardship for Earth since we do not touch, nourish, or see it. Increasingly, this alienation has caused us to forget our place in the total scheme of things. The cry of Henry David Thoreau, “Simplify, simplify…” calls us to a spirituality rooted in simplicity. His choice, more than a century ago, to build a rustic shelter and live as simply as possible on what he could grow or earn by his labor, led him to profoundly rich insights about the nature of humanity and what we really need.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Our alienation from Earth perhaps reflects a cultural obsession even deeper than convenience. It may be that the great energy our culture expends on speed and efficiency represents an attempt to eliminate or minimize risk. We want predictability, and where life is uncertain, we are ready to pay in order to avoid the discomfort of living with its vicissitudes. In the process we can easily lose sight of the transforming newness that takes place each time we act, trusting ourselves to Providence as we face what is unknown and different.

Our movement toward simplicity, toward a more God-like embracing of life, is therefore countercultural. It challenges the assumption that predictability is essential for human well-being. Thus it causes us to question cultural norms that demand convenient, instant, or synthetic commodities at the expense of whole peoples and ecosystems. More than that, it brings into focus a lost image of power which is not the supposed power of acquisitiveness and domination but the Divine energy of imagination set free to revision the cosmos. This hopeful, active imagination invites us to live and work in a way that echoes the divine refrain: “Behold, it is very good!”

It is no longer enough to discuss ecology across the coffee table or to theorize about how much time we have before ecological devastation becomes irreversible. It is a moment to resist relentlessly every act of violence against Earth. Some of us will be called to public and prophetic action which calls attention in dramatic ways to the devastating future we face if we refuse to change. Others will be drawn to less noticeable forms of action. Our prayer needs to be one of discernment: How am I called to act, choose, pray in this moment so that my way of life enhances the goodness of Earth?

How do we begin to know this Earth and so regain that reverence for life which leads to change? The first step in this process is to recognize that we are an integral part of all that is, not superior beings for whom everything else is there to be used. We are woven into the “web of the universe “and nothing we do is without significance to the rest. We will then need to wrestle prayerfully with questions about how we can adopt a simpler lifestyle even if it means letting go of some of the quick and easy ways of living on which we have learned to depend. It will mean opting for less convenient but more wholesome things.

Beyond the question of personal inconvenience lies an even more disconcerting issue. The destructive aspects of our affluent lifestyle sometimes seem so overwhelmingly great that a hopeless inertia may tempt us to give up. I stop eating hamburgers from a particular fast food chain, or insist on organically grown vegetables, or refuse the plastic bag offered in the grocery store. So what? Does this really have any lasting impact on the global problems of our day? Behind this question lies the assumption that only what is large and observable has value. When we begin to live a spirituality of simplicity, our primary concern ceases to be success and becomes faithfulness. We are called to live with integrity, to express the truth as we perceive it, and to trust. Here, too, we will be counter-cultural.

A starting point for hearing the call to action is learning to listen. We are bombarded by words from the media, colleagues, our mailboxes, and the endless billboards that assault us along our highways. We need to give some time simply to being in the presence of the Universe with no other purpose than to give attention to what is there. Listening to the voice of nature will help us attune ourselves to the words spoken in silence before time to the depths of our being: *The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament shows God’s handiwork. One day tells its tale to another, and one night imparts knowledge to another. Although they have no words or language, and their voices are not heard, their sound has gone out into all lands, and their message to the ends of Earth. – Psalm 19:1-4*

Questions for Reflection:

1. What is one action you can take this Lenten season to better “know Earth as Earth is”?
2. Is there a convenience in your life you can let go of in favor of a deeper simplicity?
3. *Some of us will be called to public and prophetic action which calls attention in dramatic ways to the devastating future we face if we refuse to change. Others will be drawn to less noticeable forms of action. Our prayer needs to be one of discernment: How am I called to act, choose, pray in this moment so that my way of life enhances the goodness of Earth?* Spend some time in prayer and meditation. What is Earth calling you to do at this time?

1. See Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (New York: Doubleday, 1960). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)