Loretto Earth Network Lenten Reflection: March 27, 2019

Excerpt from Silent Spring by Rachel Carson

It took hundreds of millions of years to produce the life that now inhabits the earth – eons of time in which that developing and evolving and diversifying life reached a state of adjustment and balance with its surroundings. The environment, rigorously shaping and directing the life it supported, contained elements that were hostile as well as supporting. Certain rocks gave out dangerous radiation; even within the light of the sun, from which all life draws its energy, there were short-wave radiations with power to injure. Given time – time not in years but in millennia – life adjusts, and a balance has been reached. For time is the essential ingredient; but in the modern world there is not time.

Excerpt from “Shifting Time: How to Pace Your Life to Natural Rhythms” by Stephen Rechtschaffen

I believe that most of us in modern society have become “entrained” or synchronized to a rhythm of speed, even though we’re unaware of it. Entrainment is a dynamic of nature as pervasive as gravity and involves the process by which one system falls in sync with another. If, for example, you were to place two out-of-sync pendulum clocks next to each other, after some period of time the ticking of the clocks would fall into rhythm with each other.

Nature is full of harmonic rhythms, but modern society is entraining us to rhythms very different from those our ancestors experienced. For example, we no longer entrain to the sounds of birds, the wind in the trees, the waves on the shore. Today, instead, we move to the rhythms of computers, phones, and sirens. We complain that our computers do not boot up fast enough. We want everything to happen instantaneously. This is the rhythm of modern times.

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We can be fully present by learning to expand each moment – an experience in Buddhist practice known as “mindfulness.” Thich Nhat Hanh, a well-known Vietnamese Buddhist teacher and monk, provides a wonderful example of this practice. A number of years ago, as I watched him from my office, he was leading a walking meditation through a beautiful garden with a few hundred people following him. I became transfixed just watching Thich Nhat Hanh walk. Even as I write this I can feel what happened in that moment: I became deeply silent, very present, and saw that with each step he was kissing the Earth. There was absolutely nothing else happening. He was just kissing the Earth.

Later that evening as I was walking to our dining hall, my mind was on all sorts of things. Suddenly I thought of Thich Nhat Hanh and realized that if he were walking to dinner and somebody asked him what he was doing, he would say, “I’m walking.” If somebody asked me the same questions, I would have said, “I’m going to dinner.” In truth, this is the way we are living most of the time, headed toward the high intensity events without stopping in between.

Questions for Reflection:

1. How would thinking about time in millennia, not years, change your perception of your relationship with Earth?
2. Take some time alone in nature this week. Sit and listen to the rhythms of Earth that surround you. To which part of Earth can you become entrained?
3. What would your life look like if you lived more in sync with the systems of Earth?