

Dayspring Earth Ministry



Sketchbook/Journal

Spring 2010

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The cover photo is from the Dear Children of the Earth event at Rolling Ridge in 2009.

Making a Place, Marking a Trail for Soul

As Dayspring Creek flows from its headwaters down through county parkland north of our silent retreat border, it passes over a series of rock ledges, the backbone of old mountains, creating a series of small waterfalls and deep pools. Next to the water at the last and largest of these falls, there is a small clearing alongside the footpath. Two fallen trees invite a sitting, resting place.

This is the spot the older children and teenagers in our Earth Sunday School program found and claimed as their ceremonial or soul place. It is a place close by, a wild place near at hand. It is a place tucked into forest in-between suburban housing developments.

It is a place for a small winter campfire in a circle of creek stones. It is a place to listen to the voice of the creek as it cascades and pools. It is a place for prayers and rituals, blessings and sacred stories. It is a place for discovery, play and delight.

When the group first identified this location as their soul place, we decided to clear a rough trail--along



the sometimes steep descent--from our boundary fence to the path that runs alongside the creek. Raking leaves, pulling fallen branches to the side, we laid out a winding path down to the water, leading to the falls.



In her scholarly and evocative work on the spiritual longing of children, Sofia Cavalletti writes that within every child is a voice which cries out: *Help me find God for myself*. Our work, she says, is not to tell our children *about God*, but rather to companion and nourish their searching. To do this we shelter time, and a place--an "atrium"-- where children use carefully crafted, handmade materials to explore the parables and stories

appropriate for their age.

I think of our soul place by the creek as a kind of "atrium", a sacred place in the living world, under the canopy of trees. Instead of beautiful, carved figures of The Good Shepherd and his flock of sheep, there are rocks and trees, seeds and salamanders, a young hawk and a red fox. It is a place for uncovering what Thomas Merton, in his hermitage in the woods at Gethsemane, called the "hidden wholeness" in all things.



Even crouched down low out of the wind, some of us are still shivering. We huddle closer. The January sun, high and far away in the branches of winter bare trees along the ridge, cannot find us here in this place by the water. It's too windy for even a small camp fire. So I light the candle I've brought and set it into its carved metal cup surrounding the cup with creek stones.

Ice edges and patterns the creek bank.

We have just come from the farmhouse where we looked at pictures of candlelight vigils held all over the world just before the United Nations conference on global climate change. We've come

here, to our soul place by the creek, to have our own small earth vigil.

I ask the group to listen for a few minutes, in silence, to the voice of the creek. Then one by one they read the short prayers they've written for the healing of our planet and the human family:

May the creek stay the same; beautiful and left alone. May the trees stay alive, ready to climb.

Bless the waters, help us not pollute it anymore than we already have. Bless the air. Help us not pollute that anymore. May we try our hardest to help stop global warming.

May the ice caps stay frozen, may the pollution start to be stopped, may the trees and grasses continue to thrive, and regrow in places they have died.

Help people that are poor to have shelter.

Help people to stop the war.

Please bless the Earth's forests and animals so that they may continue to be present and safe.

*May all animals be blessed for long life and health.
May all small creatures live in peace.*

*May the creek continue to flow. May the trees
continue to grow. May the creatures continue to live.
May the forest continue to survive.*

At the end, we listen again to the water song and to the wind song in the trees above us. On our way back, we take time to explore the ice shapes and layered designs along the edge of the creek and in the low pools at the bottom of the seeps. We climb the steep path out of the creek valley and return to the farmhouse through the woods.



A line drawn on a county map marks a proposed six lane highway which will pass near our silent retreat border and traverse the creek valley. Our small clearing in the woods, our soul place by the waterfalls, is an endangered place.

*May the creek stay the same; beautiful and left
alone. . .*

We continue to monitor, seasonally, the water quality of the creek, give public testimony, write letters, bring government officials out to walk Dayspring and the adjoining creek valley. We do what we can, working to preserve the possibility of this place with all it means for those who come here.

But in our time, it is not only the outer world we call "earth" or "nature" which is endangered. Endangered also is the inner world, the landscape of soul.

Silence and mystery, beauty and direct encounter with living things--these also are endangered. And at what cost to our children?

That silence and mystery, beauty and direct encounter, remain here now--still possible in this small wild place--shelters our hope, as we work to preserve them.

Cheryl Hellner

Going Home

*We are the work of Your hands,
the glory of Your love,
Your living work of art!
You cherish us all,
creating us still,
O Lover of the living.*

-- the Monks of the Weston Priory
based on *Wisdom 11:24-26*

This year I have had many dreams -- some are visionary dreams. They come in response to a question like, "If you could imagine life 20 years into the future, what would a rich and thriving human way of life on the earth look like?"

Some are nighttime dreams, dreams of going home, to a house I lived in long ago, to children who have been waiting for me, or into a hut to assist in the birth of a baby. A few days ago I dreamt of a room full of children. A two year old was trying to pull a nine month old along with him, the baby not yet able to walk, falling down, being pulled up again. The two year old was saying urgently, *puerta, puerta, puerta!*

La puerta is a Spanish word meaning "door," as in *la puerta de la casa*, the door of the house. Last



winter I made a door for our new passive solar heated greenhouse and potting shed at Dayspring. Rather than plane and smooth the old rough-sawn boards, cut from oaks that once stood tall in the Dayspring forest, I left the wood

surface rough -- a match for the rough stone and the rough plaster walls. Wood, stone, clay, our local Dayspring building materials.

The inside walls of the potting shed are now covered with clay plaster. A begonia and fern, rescued from

our porch at the turn of season, thrive contentedly on the rough oak windowsill. Tropical plants finding a new home in this shed/greenhouse heated by the sun.

It is vegetables, of course, that will mostly grow here in cold seasons to come -- lettuce, spinach, broccoli, and maybe a hardy tomato. Local food. At one level, with some intention, we are experimenting with living more locally, food and building materials logging less transport miles from source to point of use. We know that the age of cheap oil is ending. We realize that our burning oil, gas, and coal is warming the earth. A transition to less use of fossil fuels will happen, one way or another, we're told. Perhaps, if we begin to change now, the shock won't be so bad. People doing things like this in the worldwide Transition Movement call it "relocalization." I call it going home.

Looking again at the potting shed door, it seems to belong to a long ago time. But just inside that door is a box of batteries that store electricity from the solar panels on the roof. I wonder, how do we take the wisdom of our ancestors and modern technology and craft a new way of living that is rich and resilient, for human and earth alike, in this time of transition?

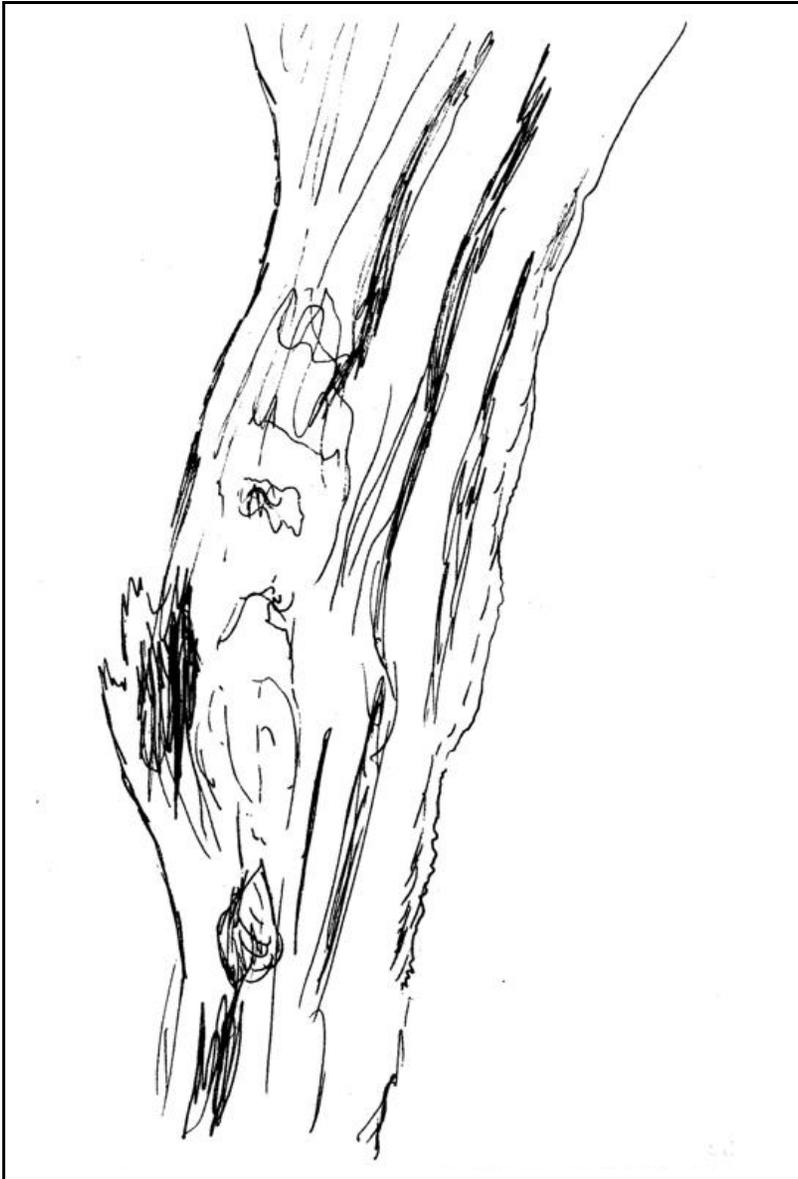


Could the potting shed door be a doorway to our own new creation -- a return to a life of handmade things, birthing a life rich in soul and in community?

What dreams lie behind this door, a door to a home that is at once ancient, and yet also new and unexplored?

We are going home. It's time. Our children are calling us. As we shape the clay walls, the clay is shaping us; as we experiment with new ways of growing plants, we are also the experiment. A child is tugging us by the arm. Stand up. Open the door. We are going home.

Jim Hall



LAYERS

Lichen and moss engulfing a tree,
Leaves upon leaves blanketing the ground,
Twigs and tumbled leaves intertwining the
stream-crossing branches.

Slate, slate, slate forming the rock within
the stream,

pebbles, pebbles, more pebbles,

Soil, stream, leaves, branches, fallen trees,
lichen, moss, mayapples, jack-in-the-pulpit,
seedlings, acorn shells, water droplets,
ants, spiders, buzzing insects,
yellow jackets, grasses, towering
trees, more leaves, birds, sky, sun,...
... neverending...

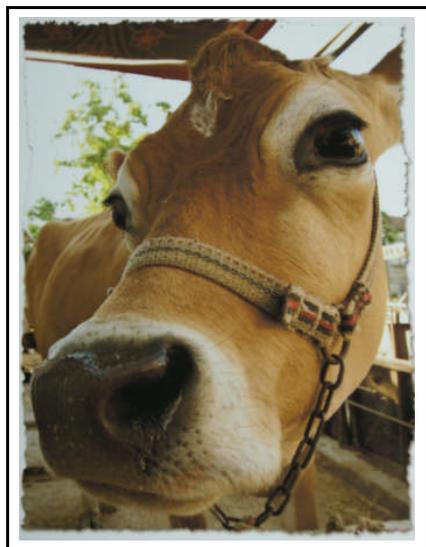
... Heaven is here amongst the layers...
including those within oneself where
Heaven is sometimes the most, most
difficult to see.

Wendelyn Duke

(a parent's journal reflections
while on the Dear Children of the
Earth Retreat at Rolling Ridge)

A Christmas Heifer

It's a gentle, natural, almost smiling face. For sure, looking at her gives me much pleasure. She gazes across my desk as I write. Not the Mona Lisa, but a humble cow, gifted to a poor but deserving family somewhere in the developing world through Heifer International. Barbara and I had chosen to give each other gifts to Heifer International for Christmas, and this is the card Barbara printed for me from the donation web site. I gave her a "knitting basket", a llama, sheep, and alpaca to provide some families with wool for making clothing, blankets, and income.



On at least one Christmas in the recent past I have felt somewhat empty over the lack of gifts to each other - real, tangible gifts I could unwrap. Previously, opening a present, even just a needed shirt or other basic necessity requested in advance, gave a certain pleasure, harkening back to childhood, no doubt.

But this lovely heifer makes me smile, bringing complete satisfaction. We've come to appreciate Heifer International for the great work they do, preparing families to own and care for animals, and then providing everything from chickens to goats, to rabbits and heifers, with the requirement that the first offspring be gifted to yet another family.

For a number of years, Barbara has been coordinating "read-to-feed" fund raisers for Heifer at her elementary school, and has traveled with a Heifer educator's tour to Honduras where she saw these animal gifts at work. She has motivated the children in Dayspring's school of Christian Growing to support Heifer through their families and the church community. All of this contributes to the depth of my pleasure over this simple gift.

So you can imagine my complete surprise at one result of this gift choice. Barbara was gathered with some of her youngest colleagues before Christmas, where the topic of spousal gifts came up. When she mentioned our plans to give each other honorary gifts to Heifer, they were shocked, seemingly even disturbed at the idea. "You always need Bling!" one offered. I hope the seed Barbara planted there will grow into greater awareness of real human needs.

In a recent interview on NPR, Wendell Berry, a Kentucky farmer, writer, and earth poet, responded to a question about global climate change something like this:

I'm not a climate scientist, so I could quickly talk beyond my knowledge of the subject. But even if there were no climate crisis, we would be wasting too much, spoiling too much, and polluting too much. We must revert to our longest and most honored understanding of ourselves as human beings, with (inclination toward) thrift, generosity, temperance, compassion, and forgiveness. *

I was recently reminded of then president George H.W. Bush's remark at the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro. Resisting efforts by the international community to protect the world from our over consumption, he declared that "The American way of life is not negotiable." Many Americans probably still feel that way.

With another snowfall spreading a soft white blanket upon the fields of Dayspring, it indeed seems as

though all is well with the world, and our comfortable lifestyle remains secure. But it is alarmingly clear that earth's resources, which fuel all of our consumption, are in sharp decline. We are indeed wasting too much. And polluting too much; our land, waters, and atmosphere severely stressed.

Mr. Berry continued his comments in the interview with these thoughts (again paraphrasing):

Answering that (global climate change) question begins with self-criticism, and it requires a good standard. Consumerism is not a good standard.

In the midst of all the fears, uncertainties, and great human suffering surrounding climate, peak oil, wars, and other crises of our time, we need some good standards, and it's quite clear we need to renegotiate some of the basic assumptions of the American lifestyle. I am currently finding the most hope in the Transition Movement, which Earth Ministry mission group is studying. This movement, begun a few years ago in England and now in over 260 cities worldwide, is pointing to a simpler, more locally resilient, and surprisingly more satisfying lifestyle. Their focus is on local production of food, clothing, building materials, and most manufactured goods, to reduce

the energy and carbon footprints of those products.

I realize I fall short of the fundamental goal of living a life which is sustainable for all of earth's inhabitants, but I'm trying to take steps in that direction as they become clear. I think, and I hope, the Transition Movement is pointing to important next steps. A final thought from Wendell Berry:

If we revive that old, honored definition of ourselves, then we'll understand (what) we must do in our personal life, and how we must carry it on, without respect for official instructions, and without waiting for official permissions.

It's clear government lacks the political will to enact substantial change. If we're going to save this fragile planet, change must arise among ordinary people - you and me. Perhaps a Christmas heifer will lead us.

Gale Quist

* Link to Wendell Berry's inspiring interview at:
<http://wamu.org/programs/dr/09/12/31.php#31001>

The most remarkable feature of this historical moment on earth is not that we are on the way to destroying the world -- we've actually been on the way for quite awhile. It is that we are beginning to wake up, as from a millenia long sleep, to a whole new relationship to our world, to ourselves, and each other.

Joanna Macy

*The hidden promise of our dark age:
the wisdom, strength and beauty
we are discovering*

(www.joannamacy.net)