

## Nature Is Everything There Is

Last May along one of the many hiking trails in the foothills of the city of Santa Barbara, California, a couple of guys were clearing brush with a chain saw and a spark from the saw started a fire. It was a hot day, temperatures were in the eighties, and it was windy and very dry. The region had been suffering from a three-year drought, and everything everywhere was ready to burn.

Santa Barbara sits on the California coast ninety miles north of Los Angeles in a place where the coastline runs east and west. The city is built right up to the edge of the Pacific Ocean and flows up into the Santa Ynez Mountains less than ten miles from the shore. The canyon where the fire started is called Jesusita Canyon. As you know, the Franciscans settled this area in the eighteenth century, and named and renamed everything in their native Spanish—San Francisco, Los Angeles, Santa Barbara, Jesusita. Jesusita means “little baby Jesus.”

At first the fire burned straight up hill in a well-fueled niche between two earlier fires. The flames shot forty feet into the air; you could see billows of black and gray smoke from the Santa Barbara harbor. Residents of Foothill and Mission Canyon Road were turned back from their homes as the first fire fighters arrived and began to assess the situation.

They hoped the fire would continue to burn up, away from the city, but then the wind changed and it began to move downhill. Mandatory evacuations were ordered. Schools were closed. The Museum of Natural History began to move its collections into fireproof vaults. Six fire engines were stationed at the historic Santa Barbara Mission. Over a hundred and fifty goats were discovered just as the flames were bearing down on them and safely evacuated.

The Jesusita Fire burned for ten days. Four thousand fire fighters from all over came to fight the fire. Almost nine thousand acres were burned, including sixty of the seventy-five acres of the Santa Barbara Botanic Garden. Sixty thousand people were impacted by the fire. Eighty-five

homes were destroyed. Thirty people were injured. No one was killed

Ten months later my husband Paul and I went for a hike on the Jesusita Trail without knowing anything about this fire. We were on vacation, and we just picked the trail out of a guidebook. So we're hiking into this high desert terrain, expecting to go along for a couple of hours, gain maybe a thousand feet in elevation, stretch our legs, enjoy the beautiful day, and pretty soon we start to see burned trees and bare hillsides. It had rained pretty hard the day before, and there was some erosion along parts of the trail, mud slides, rock slides. The rain water had just poured down the burned slopes where there was nothing to hold the soil back and washed it away.

Gradually as Paul and I walked on, we realized there had been a pretty extensive forest fire in the canyon. But we didn't even notice how widespread it was right away because except for some burned trees and the bare steep places, everything everywhere was green. Most of the

ground was covered with lush new growth, and the spring flowers were in full bloom.

One native tree in these canyons is the coast live oak, which is well adapted to fire. The oaks have a thick fire-resistant bark and can resprout from the base, the trunk, and the branches after a fire. So what we saw was a fire-ravaged landscape coming back to life, all these black skeletons of trees and shrubs with three or four feet of new growth springing up from their bases.

After we came down from our hike, we stopped at the Botanic Garden to see what we could find out about the fire, and the woman at the ticket booth told us they were lucky because there were no other fires burning at that time so they had the help of all the fire fighters they needed. As we left the area, we saw homes that had been burned to the ground. We saw homes that were being rebuilt, and signs that said, "Beware of scammers. Be sure your contractor is licensed."

At first I thought the story of the Jesusita Fire was about the resilience of the natural world. The recovery of the land,

the new green growth asserting itself in the burned places looked to me like the triumph of nature over human carelessness. But the Botanic Garden newsletter sounds a more pessimistic note: “the fire that destroyed much of the Santa Barbara Botanic Garden is just a portent of things to come. Climate changes coupled with the encroachment of civilization on Southern California’s back country will result in a 50% increase in wildland fires in the coming years. The garden is now a stark map of our future – a black and white relief map of the losses we will sustain if we continue on our current course” (*Cartas*, May 23, 2009).

In her poem called “Evening Star,” Mary Oliver tells about a snake hunting a mouse. The mouse is hiding in his hole, and the snake comes into the hole, searching. “The snake never shuts its eyes./The mouse sits tight/in the beautiful field...If God exists he isn’t just butter and good luck--/he isn’t just the summer day the red rose,/ he’s the snake he’s the mouse,/he’s the hole in the ground” (*The Leaf and the Cloud*, 50).

Nature is everything there is: the chain saw, the fire, the rescued goats, the goats who perished, the blackened oak trees, the new growth, the houses that burned, the houses that were saved. The Jesusita Fire asks about our place in the natural world, about how we must reorder our cities and our priorities, about what we need to learn and what we need to remember in order to survive.

Sallie McFague is a theologian and an ecologist who now holds the office of Distinguished Theologian in Residence at the Vancouver School of Theology in British Columbia. In a recent article in the *Harvard Divinity Bulletin*, McFague explores the relationships among cities, climate change, and religion. Speaking about nature, she writes, “We postmoderns are so focused on our social constructions, our interpretations, and the products which we build (such as cities), that we forget what lies behind and beyond all our constructions, both mental and physical: it is ‘nature,’ that encompassing and mysterious term for everything that is...that upon which we rely every moment

of our lives for air, water, food, and habitat” (Winter/Spring 2010, 57).

We have forgotten that we depend on nature, according to MacFague, because most of us are city dwellers, living in habitats dominated by human constructions. “We must recall,” she writes, “that ‘nature’ is not just the trees, parks, and flowers in our cities, but, rather, it is the foundation of cities, the material from which cities are made. Every sidewalk, condo, office building, sewer pipe, electric grid, shopping mall, concert hall, parking lot, car and bus—*everything* in a city is made from nature” (ibid).

She distinguishes between “first nature,” the raw material of the natural world, and “second nature,” what we have created from the world’s natural resources. First nature is “more than us” and “never reducible to us and our constructions” (57).

Because we have forgotten our dependence on first nature, the city is “both our greatest accomplishment and our greatest danger.” City dwellers are “energy hogs... [T]rillions of energy exchanges...take place for every school,

hospital, and jail that is built. Energy is used not only for transportation and electricity—*everything we do that involves change of any sort takes place through an exchange of energy, and energy is nothing but ‘first nature’* (57).

McFague recalls the 2007 United Nations Report on Climate Change with its “unequivocal” affirmation that global warming is real and is caused by human activity, with more recent updates showing “worst-case projections are being realized, leading to an increasing risk for abrupt and irreversible climactic shifts” (56).

She links this climate change to the recent economic meltdown: “the two are the product of the same insatiable desire for more: more money, more energy. Uncontrolled greed underlies both of these planetary disasters” and quotes Thomas Friedman, the *New York Times* columnist, who wrote:

What if the crisis of 2008 represents something more fundamental than a deep recession? What if it’s telling us that the whole growth model we’ve created over the last 50 years is simply unsustainable economically and ecologically and that 2008 was when we hit the wall—

when Mother Nature and the market both said: “No more.’ What if we face up to the fact that unlike the U.S. government, Mother Nature doesn’t do bailouts? (56)

Santa Barbara caters to an affluent tourist population and has a significant retirement community. The downtown shopping is high-end: Nordstrom, Saks Fifth Avenue, Coach, and the restaurants are pleasant and pricey. It’s a rich city with a poor underclass. Homeless people with their shopping carts gather along the main thoroughfare in the sun.

The population of more than 90,000 is spread out over nineteen square miles. There are no high rise buildings. The predominant architecture is one and two structures in the Spanish Colonial Revival style. Most of the plantings are imported species, lots of lawn with sprinkler heads built in so the grass can be watered every day and a lot of palm trees. Bicycles, skateboards, and a few buses provide alternative transportation but most people drive so Highway 101, which bisects the city, is bumper-to-bumper during rush hour.

It’s a typical southern California city, and not so different from the cities where we live. We, too, live spread out, rely on our own cars, water our lawns. I like to drink a

bottled sparkling water that comes from across the ocean and eat strawberries from Mexico or California.

Addressing the global warming crisis and the global economic crisis calls for us to change our lives, for us to become less greedy, for us to make decisions about our lives in the understanding that our survival depends on conserving first nature. McFague explains:

[I]t has to do with how we live on a daily basis—the food we eat, the transportation we use, the size of the house we live in, the consumer goods we buy, the luxuries we allow ourselves, the amount of long-distance air travel we permit ourselves...

The enemy is the ordinary life we ourselves are leading as well-off North Americans...this way of life, multiplied by billions of people, is both unjust to those who cannot attain this lifestyle and destructive of the very planet that supports us...

Second nature, the built environment, must be minimalized...small condos and apartments, not mansions; living spaces that go up, not out; small, hybrid cars, not Hummers; food that is grown locally, not halfway around the world...[This change] means saying NO, saying 'enough.'

Second nature is built upon first nature, and first nature is, increasingly, a vulnerable, deteriorating body unable to support the Western high-energy lifestyle...One of the great challenges of the twenty-first century is decent, livable conditions for the billions who will live in cities. We well-off city dwellers need to take up less space, use less

energy, lower our desires for more, attend to ‘needs’ before ‘wants’— become small, in other words (62-63).

Nature is everything there is. Our wonderful, vulnerable human bodies—these marvelous skulls and hands and pelvises and legs—cannot live apart from the rest of our world. Elizabeth Tarbox, a Unitarian Universalist minister, writes, “Do you think the world doesn’t need you? Think again: You cleanse the world with your breathing, you beautify the world with your giving, you perfect the world with your thinking and acting and caring” (*Evening Tide 2*).

Rusty Schweickart, one of the Apollo 9 astronauts, wrote about seeing the Earth from space when from his perspective our planet was so small he could block it out with his thumb:

And the contrast between that bright blue and white Christmas tree ornament and the black sky, that infinite universe, really comes through...the size of it, the significance of it. It is so small and so fragile...and you realize that on that spot, that little blue and white thing, is everything that means anything to you—all of history and music and poetry and art and death and birth and love, tears, joy, games all of it on the little spot out there that you can cover with your thumb. And you realize from that perspective that you’ve changed, that there’s something new there, that the relationship is not longer what it was.

Like the coast live oaks in Jesusita Canyon, each of us can sprout again from our roots, reconnect with the sacredness that is in the natural world, honor it. First nature teaches us who we are, how to live, what is real. Living smaller is a religious response to the ecological and economic challenge of our time: countercultural, self-sacrificing, deeply radical.

It begins in consciousness, in becoming aware, what the Buddhists call waking up. And I believe it can be grounded in gratitude. It begins when we are no longer taking our lives for granted. That's what Schweickart learned when he went to the Moon, a new perspective, a realization of gratitude so profound it changed his whole way of seeing things.

Life is rare and precious and fleeting. Let us learn from the poet Jeanne Lohmann, "To Say Nothing But Thank You":

All day I try to say nothing but thank you,  
breathe the syllables in and out with every step I  
take through the rooms of my house and outside into  
a profusion of shaggy-headed dandelions in the garden  
where the tulips' black stamens shake in their crimson  
cups.

I am saying, thank you, yes, to this burgeoning spring  
and to the cold wind of its changes. Gratitude comes  
easy

after a hot shower, when my loosened muscles work,  
when eyes and mind begin to clear and even unruly  
hair combs into place.

Dialogue with the invisible can go on every minute,  
and with surprising gaiety I am saying thank you as I  
remember who I am, a woman learning to praise  
something as small as dandelion petals floating on the  
steaming surface of this bowl of vegetable soup,  
my happy, savoring tongue.

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