

CARING
FOR
CREATION

JOURNAL
OF THE
NORTH CAROLINA YEARLY MEETING
(CONSERVATIVE)

NUMBER 5 SUMMER 2008

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Introduction

By Carole Edgerton Treadway

Friends from every branch of the Religious Society of Friends are united in a common concern for the health of our planetary home. We are challenged to examine our way of life and to consider how we have participated in the actions and attitudes that have brought us to this place. We desire to ground our concern in something deeper and more basic than the urgency of finding ways to maintain our way of life.

At our yearly meeting sessions in 2007, a Friend shared her Spirit-given vision that our yearly meeting have its own earth care committee, as many yearly meetings have done. Friends were of one mind that such a committee would be established and several of those present came forward to “share in this opportunity to lead us in learning to treat all of creation with the love that God feels for it.”* At our representative body meeting in Tenth month the Journal Editorial Committee was charged with preparing an issue of the Journal on the theme of caring for creation..

The editorial committee sought contributions that would approach the topic in a variety of ways. Lloyd Lee Wilson establishes the theme with his consideration that the theological basis of caring for creation is God’s love. Nan Bowles offers a lyrical reflection on our intimate relationship with all of creation and what we lose when we don’t acknowledge that relationship and nurture it. Charles Ansell writes of how his love of nature has changed him from being a consumer of its resources to being one who appreciates creation as a manifestation of God’s love. He describes the profound impact this growth has had on his way of life.

The fourth essay in this issue of the Journal, by David Perry, is the first, we hope, of several observations of our yearly meeting from

the perspectives of those who, although not members, have attended the annual sessions enough to have formed a sense of it. We see that these opportunities to see ourselves as others see us can stimulate us in examining ourselves as a yearly meeting, asking ourselves if we are faithful in our participation in the transforming and reconciling work of Christ in the world.

* Taken from the 2007 minutes of North Carolina Yearly Meeting (Conservative).

Carole Edgerton Treadway is a member of Friendship Monthly Meeting in Greensboro, NC.

Earthcare and the Great Commandments

By Lloyd Lee Wilson

“Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest”? He said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

Many Christians who seek explicit guidance about how we should treat, or be in relationship with, our environment have sought direction from the Old Testament, and particularly the creation stories in Genesis. The guidance they seek can be found, however, in the two commandments (see above) which Jesus enumerated as greatest of all, upholding all the rest. On the surface, these commandments concern our direct relationship to God and to human beings, not the world around us. As one explores them more deeply, however, the ways in which one’s right relationship to all the world is inseparably woven into each becomes clear.

The nature of commandments in the divine-human relationship may benefit from some brief attention at this point. The first motion in the biblical story is love: God’s love for human beings. That love was first expressed or understood in the divine choice to be in loving relationship with Abraham, then all of Israel, and finally all of humankind. The question answered by the commandments in the Bible is not “How can I get God to love me?” but “How can I respond appropriately to the love for me that God has already declared and expressed?” In the text quoted above, Jesus is not saying what we must do to get God’s approval; he is saying how we should live in response to God’s already-present love.

Love the Lord your God

The first of the great commandments is to love God deeply and unreservedly, with all our heart and soul and mind. The Gospel according to Luke adds “and with all your strength,” but the intent is the same in both places: we are called to love God as fully as we are capable, without limits or bounds to our love. The proper response to the unwavering and infinite love God has for each of us is to love God back – with everything we’ve got, holding nothing back.

In my experience, love this strong and deep cannot be restricted simply to the person of the beloved. Inevitably, this love changes the way we see and relate to the rest of the world as well. To love someone in this way is to begin to see the rest of the world from their perspective, through their eyes. Because I love my wife Susan deeply, I have come to “see” many parts of the world in a new way – as she sees them. New genres of music and art, the beauty of the immense vistas of the American southwest, and the joys of sharing a house with Swedish Vallhunds have come to have great value and meaning to me because loving Susan has brought me to see the world more nearly as she sees it.

One cannot separate the aspect of one’s beloved that loves from the rest of the beloved and say “I love you, but not that part of you that loves wild asparagus. I detest wild asparagus.” If I love with all my heart and soul and mind, then I must love that part of my beloved as much as all the rest. Inevitably, this means I come to love what my beloved loves. To love God deeply and unreservedly is to love what God loves, and that includes not only all of humanity but all the rest of creation as well.

God’s love of creation and loving presence in the created order is well attested by Scripture and witnessed by all who open themselves to the beauty and order of nature. From Genesis (“And God saw that it was good” in the first creation story) and the Psalms (e.g., Psalm 104) in the Hebrew Bible to Jesus’ teachings on the lilies of the

field and the sparrow in the New Testament, God's love for and care for the non-human parts of creation are manifest in Scripture.

Clearly, God loves all of creation. Our love of God, therefore, must be expressed in our deeds of love toward the rest of creation as well as to the Godhead.

To love God with our heart and mind and soul brings us to love all of creation, which God pronounced good at the moment of creation and which God sustains from moment to moment by divine intent. One characteristic of deep human love is the willingness to put the welfare of the beloved ahead of our own welfare and safety. To love God with all our heart and mind and strength means to love creation in the same way, and to be willing to put the welfare of the created universe ahead of our own perceived personal welfare.

This shift in perspective brings a change in the perceived basis of the value of creation. The value of the non-human world is no longer determined by its usefulness to humans, but has intrinsic value because God created it, and because God loves and sustains it. The value of the northern Alaska wilderness is not its potential oil production or the pleasure it brings to those who hike or ski or hunt and fish there, or its awe-inspiring scenery as viewed in person or in photographs; the value of that wilderness is that God created it and loves it. Because God loves it, so should we. The value of a corn field is not the profitable use (for humans) to which it can be put, but that it is God's field: created, loved and sustained by the Creator. The morning glories growing in our side yard may have little value to me directly, but they have great value because Susan planted them and cares for them. Because of her love, I am moved to care for them as well.

When we come to love creation as God loves creation, our relationship to each part of creation inevitably changes. Our first principle must be to do no harm. Only when this standard is met can

we begin to explore how creation might meet some of our wants and needs. Seen this way, arguments that we cannot make this or that change in policy or actions because our personal standard of living would decline lose their power to persuade. To get out of our present environmental predicament(s), we are going to have to act in ways that put the long-term health of the earth ahead of our personal, (relatively) short-term interests. In so doing, we will learn that our true standard of living and personal welfare are something other than our immediate economic circumstances, and must be measured differently.

Love Your Neighbor

The second great commandment is to love our neighbor as if our neighbor were part of our very self. Here the principle recounted earlier is clearly present: in response to God's love for us, we are also called to love the one God loves, our neighbor, as we love ourselves.

Much prayer and thought has gone into the question of identifying just who is our neighbor. Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan makes clear that our neighbor is anyone who needs our care and mercy. The Samaritan had every reason to pass by the man who had fallen victim to thieves, but he recognized the injured man's need and interrupted his own plans in order to restore the other to health. The ill-feeling between Samaritans and Jews dated back to the division of the nation into two kingdoms after Solomon's death, and was as bitter as religious divisions can be, with racial overtones as well. The injured man was not simply a stranger to the Samaritan, but also the representative of people who hated him for his religion, politics, and ethnicity. The Samaritan owed him nothing, but the injured man needed him. By caring, the Samaritan made the injured man his neighbor.

As it is for humans, so it is for the rest of creation. To understand God's love for all creation is to understand that all of creation is our neighbor, in need of our care and mercy as much as humanity. Wherever creation needs our mercy, our care and our help

to be restored to health and wholeness, we have an obligation to act. Almost everywhere we look, we see yet another part of creation in need of our action -- often in need of a cure for the injuries done by us humans. It is time to love our neighbors in creation.

To love our neighbor requires (among other things) that we act in ways that do no harm to our neighbor. When we act in ways that cause the environment to deteriorate, we are harming our neighbors, both human and non-human. When we fail to act to remedy harm that has been done or is still being done to the rest of creation, we fail to keep the second great commandment. The prophet Isaiah denounced those “who join house to house, who add field to field, until there is room for no one but you, and you are left to live alone in the midst of the land.” In the present day, this oracle also refers to the continuing expansion of human development over a greater and greater portion of the world, in both land use and in pollution of air and water, leaving no room for the rest of created life. Woe to human beings indeed!

On the human side, our neighbors include the humans who will live on earth in future generations. We must learn to do them no harm as well, by leaving them a healthy and whole world. The slogan “We have not inherited the world from our ancestors; we have borrowed it from our grandchildren,” is true and to the point.

The meaning of this commandment is not that we are not to love ourselves; that would be pathological. We are each part of creation, beloved and sustained by God. The commandment is that we are to love these others as much as we do ourselves. Decisions affecting the relative benefit to human and non-human creation cannot be made in favor of humans simply because they are human. What we need is a new understanding of the proper balance of the needs of humans and the needs of the rest of creation, so that we can live together in the balance of the original creation, before humans were so numerous and powerful as to affect that balance unilaterally.

Servanthood

How can we live in the love relationship with all of creation to which the great commandments call us? Neither the steward/gardener nor the one with dominion over the creation will serve as the archetype for the human side of this relationship. A new archetype is needed, and Christ has named it for us: the servant. “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” Christ is the model servant, and the servant is the model for the Christian in the midst of God’s creation. As Paul wrote to the Philippians:

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus...

Christ’s servanthood turns our Western notion of the relative positions of humans and creation on its head. We North Americans live in a culture that understands creation to be the temporary storehouse of raw materials to be used to satisfy our human wants and needs; Christ instead calls us to be servants with the intention of helping creation reach and sustain a condition of health and wholeness. Rather than lords of creation, or even the stewards and gardeners of creation, we are called to be the servants of creation out of our whole-hearted love of God and our recognition that each part of creation is our neighbor, just as each human being is our neighbor. This will entail deep and lasting changes in our ways of thinking and acting – part of the process of being “born again” to which we are each called.

To be true servants, to live in that love relationship with God and the rest of God’s creation to which the great commandments direct us, we must give up the idea that we are at the center of our story. The only story that really matters is God’s story, and God is at the center of that story, not ourselves. To be servants in the model of Christ, we must give up the idea that the most important aspect of any policy is

how it affects me personally. The deciding point of energy policy is not what price I pay for a gallon of gasoline or kilowatt of electricity. The deciding point of water policy is not whether I can water my front lawn at will or what happens to the price of hamburger when beef cattle can no longer be supported by scarce water resources in the American Southwest. The deciding point must be how a policy or behavior affects the overall health, or shalom, or gospel order, of creation as a whole. My personal life must be lived in an awareness of how my actions serve (or fail to serve) the health of all creation.

Conclusion

We humans can no longer act as if the rest of creation were a commodity: a pool of natural resources through which we can move once, use as we wish, and dispose of with abandon. The tragic consequences of this type of behavior are becoming all too clear to even the most skeptical of observers. Christians are given a radically different model and precept for living in and with creation, valuing creation as God's beloved work, not as a potentially useful commodity. Christ has shown us the way to live out this new understanding: the servant. By thinking and acting as the Christian servant of all of creation, we carry out our role of being Christ's hands and feet in this world, and do our part to restore and sustain the gospel order which has always been God's intention for everything.

The notion of creation as commodity deserves our attention. Because we view the non-human world as an object, a commodity, the Western world in particular operates as a one-time flow-through economy, with devastating results. We talk of extracting resources from nature and disposing of the waste and byproducts, and do not give sufficient attention to the damage our actions inflict on creation at both ends of this process. In contrast, moving into a love relationship with creation helps us see the world with new eyes, so that we see that all the rest of earthly creation operates in a series of closed cycles. All the parts of creation are in active relationship with one another, moving

in millions of repeating cycles, fast and slow. Only humans persist in this one-time, flow-through world view. As we move into servanthood, our own activities will necessarily change to fit into and not overpower those cycles.

The only possible object of our love that remains beyond the commandments to live in love with God, with all humanity present and future, and with all of God's creation, is self. The theological implication, then, is that our environmental sin is untoward love of self. As individuals, as families and nations and societies and as the human race, we have been operating under the false assumption that we are the most important part of creation – so important that the rest of creation must suffer to build us up. It is time for repentance: for re-thinking our relationships and our behaviors.

The concept of an environmental “footprint” for an individual, family, or nation is a helpful starting point. Certainly, as a servant, one would want to impose a small footprint, rather than a larger one on the environment. If we are to live up to the great commandments, we must learn to leave no footprint at all. The standard for living with my beloved is not an acceptable level of violence, but a life in loving harmony. Such a standard cannot be easily met; some would argue that it is impossible to meet. At the very least, it is a compass by which we can choose a direction for changes in individual behavior and societal policy to bring us closer to the gospel order which God has always intended for creation, humans included.

Lloyd Lee Wilson is a member of Rich Square Monthly Meeting, Cedar Grove Preparative Meeting, Woodland, North Carolina.

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Written for environmentalists and Christians, to encourage both (overlapping) groups to examine Christian teaching with fresh eyes.

Listening to the Earth

By Nan Bowles

Touch the Earth. Touch Spirit. Listen to the Earth. Spirit Speaks
Faith community, how do we care for Creation?
We are listening through the waiting silence
We are part of the message.

North Carolina Yearly Meeting Conservative has been listening to Spirit this past year. Out of the waiting silence was heard, “How do Conservative Friends care for Creation?” I am listening, knowing we will find union as we share our stories in response to this query, coming together into the One. For now, I speak from where I stand, listening to the immediate and perceptible guidance of Spirit. Looking deep within me, my response to the query is one of recognizing and acknowledging how all the other species care for me, how all of Creation cares for all of me. From this perspective all species, other humans, the land, moon, stars, sun, and water become potential teachers. Spirit often touches me by speaking through others, teaching me how to interact in nurturing ways with the rest of the interconnected world. If I misuse, abuse, destroy any of God’s creations, no one will be able to hear their messages, including me. Holding in my heart the sense of Spirit caring for me through Creation, a deep desire to nurture and interact with the rest of the natural world rises up and flows naturally. The desire to walk lightly upon the Earth, with respect and acceptance, comes naturally. I am part of the message. You are part of the message and together we are part of the message.

Can listening be a way to care for Creation?

Touch the Earth. Touch Spirit. Listen to the Earth. Spirit Speaks

***Hear the voices of their Red-Winged Blackbirds.
Do we hear their Truth?***

Spirit is calling us to listen.

Listen with all of our presence, awareness, and consciousness.

Listen to the place where words come from.

Listen to the language older than words.

Listen to the heart.

As I have been listening I have heard the chant that is woven through the body of this article. The chant sets the rhythm for the message or teaching that has come to me and led me to action. This rhythm has helped to open my senses to feeling Spirit all around me, allowing Spirit to manifest within me at deeper levels. For example, picture me coming down the road one day on my way to town, passing by our neighbor's open field. A huge flock of red-winged blackbirds swirled up from the grass as I drove by. The flock spun and spiraled about me, rising up not far above the ground. They remained so close it felt as though their numerous red patches jumped out over and over, touching me and lifting me, so that I became the red within their red patches. I became an inner glow of Knowing. Their patches flashing a pulsing blood red, the birds gathered and turned as one, then settled back into the field of grass. The vibrancy of those red patches filled me up completely and flowed through me with a feeling of mystery and awe. I give thanks to brother Patches, the red-winged blackbird, for being there and allowing me to listen to his red patches against deep black feathers, turning an image of feeling into an experience and listening with the heart.

*Can listening with our hearts to the rhythms of the Earth be a way to
care for Creation?*

***Touch the Earth. Touch Spirit. Listen to the Earth. Spirit Speaks
Circle of seasons
Rhythms come and rhythms go***

Do we feel the heartbeat of the Earth?

I want to live the rhythms of the Earth, our Earth, our home, the Blue Planet. I live those rhythms by listening, by opening myself to the feelings and sensations of the Earth.

Smelling the air just after rain,

Feeling warm sunlight upon my skin.

Tasting the raindrop on the tip of the pine needle.

Watching the weaving of clouds as the days come and go.

Paying attention to the changing seasons, or the change in light throughout the day.

Asking myself, Where is the moon in its monthly cycle?

Does the full moon rise in the same place each season?

How about the crescent moon?

These are some of the queries I live into. In taking time to listen and be, there is movement into a place of deep stillness within. From this place I might feel the voice of Grandmother Live Oak tree say, "Go forth and be clear," or hear the swamp water of the deep woods speak of how it is spiced with the essence of forest leaves and pine needles. There is an inner knowing that Spirit is speaking to me through the oak tree or the swamp water.

Living is feeling the rhythms of the earth, the pulse of Life, and connecting to that of God in all of it. We listen and are open to the teachings of God through the Earth around us. To commune with the Earth and listen is to know I am not better than the lizard or the fly. If I think I am better I will never hear their message no matter how long I sit and wait. We might do well to pay attention to the life around us and listen to what lessons others have to tell us. The time I spend walking the land at home or somewhere else, or spend sitting and being, or spend feeling the rhythm of breathing is time when I am listening. It is about becoming familiar with the sounds, sights, smells and feelings of the earth, the plants, animals, cloud shapes of the community that is my home. It is about living the rhythms of the Earth

through the framework of the Quaker way of life, by applying the teachings of Friends to all parts of our planet. When we live life through the Spirit of the Universe, the Creator, the Living Presence that is all, the One of all shapes and no shape, then the Divine One appears even in the mundane parts of life.

Is recognizing Spirit in the everyday parts of our lives and giving thanks a way we care for Creation?

Touch the Earth. Touch Spirit. Listen to the Earth. Spirit Speaks
Golden Sweetness flows
Light illuminates
Small lives are being expressed everyday.
Did we take the time to give thanks?

Spirit's messages can come in ordinary moments of every day life. One February morning I was baking bread. In making the dough, I added honey to feed the yeast. Sweet golden liquid flowed from a glass jar into the mixing bowl. I felt the morning light shining through the kitchen window and turned toward it, holding up the jar of honey. Sunlight shone directly through the honey in the glass jar. I was stunned by what I saw and what I felt within me. It was an experience of being transported to a place of comfort, safety and love, a place where time was still but energy flowed, a place of being, not this or that, but just being. The color of the honey had so much warmth and golden radiance within it. With clarity, I realized that place of comfort, safety, and love, that place of being, was right in my kitchen, was my home, was Spirit inside of me. Strong feelings, warm with contentment and satisfaction, flowed around and through me, never quite leaving. Now that I have had that experience, the image of the honey jar can be brought into my immediate awareness and consciousness anytime. The reality of the warmth and radiance of the light in the honey jar flows and remains alive within me. However, I don't always remember

to let it rise up and flow out. There are times when in the moment I forget. I want to practice being the living image. And so I give thanks to the bees, small creatures giving large gifts of pollination and honey, for taking time to visit the flowers one by one. I give thanks to the wildflowers, for their fragrance, beauty and good cheer. I give thanks for the sun that nurtured the flowers, the rain in the passing clouds, and the moist soil supporting them. Heartfelt gratitude is also expressed to Spirit for giving me the gift of light shining through the honey jar. Thanksgiving is offered for sustaining and supporting the flowers and the bees that made the gift possible, breathing life through them and through me. Giving thanks is part of caring for Creation. I am grateful I listened.

Is acknowledging Spirit in the very small lives expressed and unnoticed caring for Creation?

Touch the Earth. Touch Spirit. Listen to the Earth. Spirit Speaks.

A small tree springs up,

The last snowflake from winter's blanket melted.

Do we feel the honor in witnessing this event?

There is Truth in honoring the small and unobtrusive as well as the ordinary everyday life. I share a story that takes place in the high country of the North Cascades Mountains of Washington State. On one ridge of one mountain is a grove of large old growth mountain hemlock trees, their thick black trunks green with patches of moss. Branches with needles arranged in green stars add their spicy fragrance to crisp mountain air. On the edge of the grove lives a young hemlock tree with other youngsters of its kind. From the place where the small hemlocks live, I can see down into three different valleys. Rivers of glacial water flow far below. Snow capped peaks surround me.

During the winter months a deep blanket of snow covers the area, burying the small hemlock saplings, bending them to the ground

with the weight of the snow. Every spring, which at this altitude comes in June, the snow melts off. On one particular day, I hiked around a bend in the trail just in time to see the tip of one small sapling bound up into the air. I was witnessing the exact moment the very last snowflake melted. After enduring being bent and supporting heavy snow, the tree was at last able to grow straight and tall, to stretch its branches up to the sky. Free to breathe, its sap rises, pushing off old needles to be replaced with fresh tender green ones. It was a significant moment in the life of this small mountain hemlock tree and I felt honored to be there as a witness to that particular Now, to pause in my life and share in the life of this sapling the exact instant the last snow flake disappeared. Seventeen years later I still remember and am still awed! I give thanks for you, small tree, and to Spirit for bringing us together at that time and place and also for giving both of us life. Through this encounter with a small tree, Spirit shows me there is significance and purpose in what may appear as the small things of life. I can feel their meaning in my life as I listen.

We can listen with sensitive hearts to Spirit's message in the life of a small tree, but I wonder how our Quaker ancestors listened?

Touch the Earth. Touch Spirit. Listen to the Earth. Spirit Speaks
The Book of Nature is available to all.
Earth colors. Subtle messages for the sensitive heart.
Do we cultivate this sensitivity within one another?

The sensitivity of the heart mentioned in the chant above puts me directly in touch with our Quaker ancestors. When I listen into their living memories, I find that the art of reading the Bible with an open listening to Spirit which they practiced reveals their sensitive hearts. These Friends placed great value on the spontaneity of the Holy Spirit. Their practice was to read a word or passage while being open to where Spirit might lead. Our ancestors listened deeply from the still quiet

place within them, to the place from which words come. They listened for how that word or phrase was associated to some aspect of their everyday lives and how it might lead to a new truth and/or move them into action.

This practice emerges into our present Now, to show us the teaching of hospitality, allowing another species to speak to our condition, to touch our hearts. This time the book we are to read is the Book of Nature, of which we are a living part. This book is written in a language older than words, the language of the heart. The teachings and messages that come through other species and from the land are held up to Spirit, helping me listen to the meaning, just as early Friends did with Scripture. Spirit speaks in many, many ways. The meaning or the call to action I am to take is not always understood immediately but comes out of the waiting silence. For example, by slowing down, taking time to breathe consciously and look around me, I might notice all the different earth colors of brown, green, yellow or blue. When listening with my heart, with all the cells in my body, I might come to understand that Spirit also touches me in different shades and at different levels of my life, sometimes subtly and sometimes with boldness. The lesson that comes through might be very simple such as “I am here, I am here, remember I live here too,” when I hear the cardinal sing.

To hear a deeper meaning in this voice might be to learn what cardinals need in their habitat to survive and thrive. When mushrooms pop up suddenly where they weren't before, the message might be that it rained recently and conditions are great for mushrooms to grow. Or on another level, I might discern, “It has rained recently. Go out and observe the new life emerging!” One more example is from the pines as the wind moves softly through their needles. The teaching here might be, “Come, come and listen to Spirit strumming my harp strings. Smell the refreshing healing scent of my needles. Breathe deeply of the fragrance and find peace within you.” In this way, when another species or person crosses my path, I listen into what Spirit is speaking to me, calling me to listen and adjust my life accordingly.

Where does this leave us in our journey into caring for Creation?

***Touch the Earth. Touch Spirit. Listen to the Earth. Spirit Speaks.
Our lives are intertwined in support of one another.
Love. Listen. Touch. Feel.
Are we living into it?***

We are intertwined and connected through the Earth, and thus through all that is the God. I feel Spirit calling us, calling us to listen, to touch the earth and in doing so to touch Spirit. Spirit speaks to us everyday through a fragrance, a flower color, an encounter with an animal, the feel of the air, a bird song, a human friend or a stranger. In listening we might recognize and acknowledge how Spirit cares for us through the rest of Creation. Spirit calls us to listen deeply with all the cells in our bodies, to listen with our hearts, to the place where words come from, to the language older than words. We listen deeply by feeling the rhythms of the Earth through the moon, tides, and seasonal cycles, by feeling the rhythm of our walk and breathing. We open ourselves to sights, sounds, smells and atmosphere of the living Earth. We see, observe, and give thanks for the small lives expressed all around us. It is then that we will want in turn to care for Creation. Community with the natural world is an open-ended path to walk; giving and receiving, listening and speaking, being and doing. Energy flows both ways through us all. We will want to serve the Earth in love, knowing that life style changes we make are acts of love. To reuse, recycle, and reduce our consumption level of resources becomes an act of love. The living memory of early Friends invites us to hold our experiences thoughtfully, prayerfully up to Spirit, to listen and hear Spirit speak through other species and the land where we live in the Book of Nature. Mother Earth opens her door to us everyday.

Let us listen to the Earth, our home, our blue planet.

Nan Bowles lives in Beaufort, North Carolina and is a member of Friendship Monthly Meeting, Greensboro.

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Reverence for God's Creation

By Charles Ansell

Have you ever been in a place, a space, or a time when love surrounded everything? The Earth we live on is a manifestation of God's love for us, but it has taken years for me to see this. God's love is available and manifest in each moment, but we often perceive it only as an aberration of the normal, a miracle, a mountaintop experience. The ocean of Light and Love displayed in our world is so immense that I often only see, respond to, and give thanks for small pools or reflections of its vastness.

My sense is that, when John reports that "God so loved the world" that he gave his only son (John 3:16), the "world" John speaks of is Earth and everything and everyone inhabiting the Earth. Should I not return this Love by reverencing God's gifts? To be fully centered in this reality, I must care for that which God has given us: I must be caring of the Earth.

While I have enjoyed what the Earth offers, I have often done so solely for my own benefit and pleasure. As a child, I was so enamored by nature that I don't think I came into the house unless compelled by hunger or fatigue. My life centered on the water or the woods. I was a serious fisherman, oysterman, explorer and casual hunter. The Earth's resources were endless for a young, self-centered grandson of a "high-tider and sound-sider," a man who relied for his family's food and income on the fruits of the sea (fish, crabs, oysters, clams), the bounty of farming the Earth, and the gifts of fowl from the sky. Consumption was unquestioned because the world had no limit on its ability to provide.

Like St. Paul in 1st Corinthians 13:12, however, I was seeing in a mirror dimly. Eventually, I came to better understand my place in God's creation. The body of Christ is made up of arms, ankles, ears, elbows and voices. We have different functions in God's plan and, if

open, can come to this knowledge in different ways. My awareness has come through the love I feel for others – a desire to hurt no one. At first, it was only in this desire not to hurt others that I acknowledged God. I did not link the magnificence of the world surrounding me with God. But time, a great but slow teacher for me, has taught me that my love for people must include the Earth on which we all stand, and that God, out of love for us, was and is the center of all creation.

There have been many opportunities, classrooms, and occasions to see God surrounding me. My field of vision has widened, I believe, as I have been faithful to that which is revealed to me, however slowly I am able to learn. I have spoken of being a casual hunter. In my youth, I owned a gun and felt pride in my shooting skill. I would sometimes shoot a snake or bird to prove this point. After successfully demonstrating this skill, I was always confronted with the corpse. Soon I realized I had stolen a life without considering the love that others had for that life, or that other lives had depended on this life. I was extinguishing life, hope, and love. Soon, I could only lay the gun aside.

As a bait boy on a sports fishing boat, I was confronted with how a precious resource could be wasted solely for personal enjoyment. On a trip to the fishing grounds surrounding the old Chesapeake Light Tower, a party of two boated 412 bluefish and 138 bonita. Upon docking, the party walked away, giving directions to discard the dead fish. This act impoverished the world. Yet I am still not free myself of the excess or cruelty of fishing. I still encourage others in this endeavor by eating locally caught “wild” fish, despite the energy expended per gram of protein and the inhuman way fish are allowed to die. As our meeting’s clerk witnessed in a recent meeting for business, life is full of choices. I can choose to live in the shadow, shielding myself from the Light, or I can choose to live in the Light I know. Thankfully, God is generous and continually illuminates the gray areas in my life, offering different paths.

History has also been a wonderful tool of the Spirit for me. By the time our country's war in Viet Nam came along, I was aware of the torment to which the Vietnamese had been subjected over the centuries by the Chinese, Japanese, French and now the Americans. Our country's self-centered adventures in Southeast Asia didn't hold the best interest of the Vietnamese people in hand. Napalm, Agent Orange, bombs and bullets randomly destroyed both the environment and the people. I did feel an obligation to serve my country during that time in my life, but could not kill out of this obligation. Another classroom, the Coast Guard, offered an alternative. Search and Rescue work and tending buoys not only kept me from the killing fields, it introduced me to people who grew in respect for the world as they rescued its inhabitants at peril and worked on our deteriorating waterways. Work as a deckhand covered me not only with the polluted, slimy water of rivers along the Mid-Atlantic coast, but also with the firsthand knowledge of the effect of industrial, farm and residential pollution. DDT-weakened eggs decimated our hawk, eagle, and falcon populations. Spurred by others, the Coast Guard recognized this danger and would not allow us to "work" any buoy supporting an osprey nest. The benefit of the ruling to a Coast Guard deckhand was that a large whistling, flashing, dirty, slimy buoy would not have to be cleaned, painted and reenergized. In addition, we became more aware of our precious vulnerable environment.

Following transfer by the Coast Guard to San Francisco, I was introduced to another ocean, different opportunities and other abuses. As a photographer with aerial assignments, I gathered a different perspective of God's creation. Our family was also introduced to living in a city populated by just about every nationality on Earth. Living with other races and people was no longer an issue simply of black and white, as it had been for us in Virginia, nor of heterosexuality being the only acknowledged way of life.

I also became more aware of the costs of a petroleum-dependent society. The oil embargo of the early 1970's compelled us

to leave the car and take to San Francisco's marvelous public transportation via streetcar, bus, and cable car, or to walk or ride a bicycle. In this manner, the seeds of my energy awareness were planted but would not germinate until some years later. The burning bush experience for me was the buildup to and invasion of Iraq, which knit together the experiences of my previous 59 years. Our country's covetousness for oil at the precious expense of life required that I reduce my contribution to war. A hybrid car was a first step. I saw that greed and a lack of imagination were narrowing our country's vision, enabling us to go to war over oil, when our generous Creator provided other resources. What was a country that could put people on the moon, conquer polio and smallpox, create artificial limbs and power a space station doing by using the 100-plus-year-old internal combustion engine for power when God gave us the sun?

How has my changing understanding of God's creation affected the way I live my life? We recycle and compost more than we dispose of in the trash. We try to be vigilant about turning off lights, using compact fluorescent bulbs, driving hybrid cars, and keeping the heat turned down and the AC up. We conserve water in many ways, including collecting the cold water that flows while awaiting a warm shower to flush the toilet, limiting our time in the shower, not running the tap while brushing our teeth and freezing water used in cooking vegetables for future pots of soup. We use self-supplied cloth bags rather than paper or plastic for purchases. Our inspiration comes from our life's experiences and our association with other committed f/Friends. In addition, a 2006 presentation by Robert Kennedy, Jr., son of Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy, environmentalist and advocate for the Earth, compelled me to look more closely at the political, ecological and social effect of our energy production and use. Al Gore's keynote address to architects the following year brought home the consequences of ignoring how we relate to and use the Earth. That address and the commitment of a friend in our yearly and monthly

meeting has encouraged me to park my car and ride a bicycle to work and around the community as often as possible.

On business trips, I listened to a book about how we produce and consume food. The book took an in-depth look at our energy input versus nutritional output, the waste production and environmental degradation of feed lots and fish farms, the treatment of animals, the loss of plant species through corporate greed in developing species that cannot be reproduced -- only purchased -- and the impact of altering the physiology of animals through the use of drugs and genetic engineering. The truths revealed were staggering. Justification for and enjoyment of my lifelong eating patterns disappeared. Observing my change in diet, Janis set aside more than forty years of experience in cooking for omnivores to share in the quest for unity with God's world. We rely on our garden as part of our diet rather than just for my relief from workaday stress. We are beginning to discover and support local organic farmers. One of our first considerations is balancing the amount of energy expended to produce and transport what we feel we need with the nutritional and social benefit of our purchases.

I recognize that all of these things may contribute less to real change than to my ability to speak about reverencing God in the World. Does my life speak? There are Friends who live below the poverty line as a method for taking away our government's mandates to pay for war through taxation. There are Friends whose commitment to sharing the world's resources enables them to live and thrive on a food budget of one dollar a day. Some live their commitment to the highest and best use of energy by not owning a car. Others in our society are committed to maximizing their contribution to the ethical treatment of animals by living as vegetarians or vegans. While maintaining personal health, we can also support community economic health by buying locally produced organic foods. Making purchases from local businesses contributes to our tax base, thus supporting local schools and infrastructure; spending locally also supports charities serving a local

population and enables each of us to pay taxes at less energy cost than required by going outside the community. Those who make such choices are healthy, comfortable and contributing. They are letting their lives speak.

Is there more I can do? The Quaker tradition of queries challenges me to think. In this electronic age, why do I maintain a business model that requires long distance travel? Can my business activities be conducted closer to the Earth? With a change in my business model, would one car, let alone two, be a necessity? Why is a house that briefly housed five children and two adults necessary or desirable for two adults? With more of life behind me, how can I live out all that experience has taught me? Am I centered in the knowledge that God so loved the World that I can fully return this love to God through right living?

When George Fox said to William Penn, "Carry thy sword as long as thou canst," he was not referring to being green, but the message rings true. I am still carrying my sword; it is heavy and uncomfortable. My footprint on this earth is large.

The Lord says "Take My yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls, for My yoke is easy and My burden light" (Matthew 11:29-30). Work with the Lord and the opportunities continue to blossom. It is possible to reduce our energy, environmental, and ethical impact: our footprint on this Earth. There is only one charge: "Love God with all your heart, mind and soul" (Deuteronomy 6:5), for we are all passengers on this spaceship Earth.

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A Visitor's Observations about North Carolina Yearly Meeting (Conservative)

By David Neil Perry

Over the course of the past two years I have attended two of the annual sessions of North Carolina Yearly Meeting (Conservative) [NCYMC] as well as three representative body meetings. The following writing is based on my observations and experiences with this community. These reflections often refer to the yearly meeting or "this community" and I wish to be clear that these references are to that group of Friends that gathers for the functions, rather than all of those who are members or attenders of the constituent local faith communities.

The community that gathers as the North Carolina Yearly Meeting (Conservative) is welcoming, loving, prayerful, small, rooted in experience of Christ, and open to new direction while consciously holding on to historical practices. The community created by these Friends is consistent with the statement made in the introduction to the yearly meeting's Book of Discipline (1983 revision) that the document represents the efforts of the members "to re-examine their doctrines and procedures and set them down in a way that is both faithful to their religious heritage and applicable in the contemporary world." Many of the matters addressed by this group are basic business and communication matters, but there is much loving searching for Divine guidance and much potential to affect lives positively with the experience of Christianity that I have encountered amongst these Friends. Although not all participants are oriented toward encountering the spirit of Christ, the yearly meeting is striving to determine what it means to be a community of disciples in the midst of the rapidly changing United States culture of the beginning of the 21st century, while being open to revelations of God's Truth leading to new understandings.

My time with this faith community has been rewarding. I appreciate that there is a deep value placed on the role of Christ in the church, but I have no sense that this means that I must believe that Jesus died for me personally and that if I believe this, that belief will bring me into full harmony with the Divine. Instead, the centrality of Christ for this yearly meeting seems to match my understanding of Christ's importance: That historically the Religious Society of Friends has been a people seeking to be disciples of the living spirit of Christ; That the teachings of Jesus written in the Christian scriptures are fundamental to learning about the Transcendent Power in our lives; That the experience of continuing revelation is attributed to the wisdom aspect of God known among many people as the spirit of Christ, the Word; That the death and resurrection of Christ are deeply valued as metaphors for the real spiritual death and resurrection necessary for everyone's life. In experiencing this community where these understandings seem deeply present, the yearly meeting has proven to be both a comfort and a challenge to my faith.

My impression is that Christ is central to the yearly meeting in a natural way, but I suspect that these Friends will face challenges about whether this will continue to be the case. The community is very comfortable speaking about and frequently referencing Christ and Jesus and biblical passages. However, the group is not made up exclusively of people who value such expression. This is true in the small group that participates in yearly meeting activities, and is even more true (both from what I understand and what I have experienced) among the members and attenders of the local meetings that make up the yearly meeting. It is my perspective that a critical part of sustaining and attracting membership in the local meetings and the yearly meeting will be to strongly reconnect the body as a whole in spiritual fellowship that is based in Friends' historical understanding of Christianity and the resulting experience of the Divine.

The Friends who attend yearly meeting functions seem to be offering a unity of Christianity and Universalism. However, I have the

impression that within almost all of the local meetings there is a challenge to maintain both and not become Universalist only, forgetting Christianity. Several of the meetings reflect a very wide diversity of beliefs, and there may be a risk that they will slowly transform into ethical humanist societies as I have seen in several unprogrammed meetings in the United States. Yet most of those who participate in the community that gathers for yearly meeting events clearly value deeply the yearly meeting's rootedness in the Christian scripture. They are very deeply centered and frequently in touch with that Divine Love, Divine Power, that "gift of light and Grace through Christ Jesus freely bestowed on all men" as Elizabeth Bathurst wrote. As with many groups of Friends in the modern world, faithfulness to Divine guidance is constantly tested, but remains very, very strong among the yearly meeting participants. When I have worshiped with some of the local meetings, I have found that these communities also are often deeply centered, but I have heard that this is not the case for all of the meetings. Happily, the Power that passes through many of the core participants has been able also to nurture the understanding that to be a Friend is to be a friend of Christ Jesus. To be a friend of Christ Jesus is to be a person who draws strength from the Gospels and whose life is an outgrowth of seeking to live in discipleship as did the apostles. While I feel that this is a way of life for many of the NCYMC participants, it is lovingly present in them and is not imposed on others. I believe that this understanding of friendship is what has held the community together in faithfulness. In the Book of Discipline, there is the advice, "Watch over one another for good, manifesting an earnest desire that each may be well grounded in the Light of Christ." I think those present for yearly meeting face a challenge when trying to bring back their experiences to the local meetings and to carry out that advice. During my time visiting with these Friends, the yearly meeting has been rediscovering its role as a nurturer of that life that grows out of a belief in the presence of the Light of Christ in every person in

world. There has been focus on inter-visitation between the meetings, and work to support the smaller communities in particular.

The participants in the yearly meeting activities are very cautious about change (which makes the “Conservative” label appropriate). This caution is illustrated by a recent sense of the meeting to leave the Book of Discipline unchanged after considering whether there was a leading to update it, in particular the Queries. There was a sense that the Discipline is a reliable guide to living a centered life. There was also a sense of the value of the old phrases that stems from the way they create an opening for deeper contemplation when one seeks to translate them into modern applications. At the same time, the community is not stuck in the past, and has been very welcoming and inclusive of homosexuals. I am left with a bit of a question as to whether the general caution on the part of the yearly meeting regarding change has maintained and strengthened the Christian understanding of the basis of the faith and practice of the community, or if it has maintained aspects of the yearly meeting that are actually not meaningful for or reflective of the local meetings.

The community present for the sessions tends to be small, which is consistent with the overall size of the membership in the monthly meetings. There were up to 76 people present at yearly meeting sessions in 2005 and 102 people in 2006. My experience is that there is a core group of perhaps 30 people who sustain the yearly meeting body. They are representatives of the eight monthly meetings, an allowed meeting and a worship group, yet there seems to be a disconnect between the concerns and activities of the yearly meeting in its functions and the members and attenders of the constituent faith communities. From my limited observations I understand that this disconnect may not be an unusual condition among yearly meetings in the United States, but it is a critical point when the communities of NCYM(C) consist of so few people, perhaps 1,000 total members and attenders. The yearly meeting may continue for a long time, but while Friendship, Durham, and Virginia Beach meetings have large groups,

several meetings have few participants. Rich Square Meeting, in many ways the heart of the yearly meeting historically, has no young participants and is affected by the continued population shift in the United States away from rural living to urban and suburban living

A major focus of the yearly meeting body is the sharing of various reports on the lives of the local faith communities, and this helps to keep the communities interconnected. The other significant focus of the yearly meeting is to keep the local communities connected with other groups of the Religious Society of Friends through the exchanges of epistles, and reports. To a lesser extent, the yearly meeting serves as the venue for hearing about and nurturing individual leadings that may transcend the local faith community, such as participating in the World Gathering of Young Friends, engaging with the Associated Committee of Friends on Indian Affairs, engaging with the three Friends schools associated with local meetings, and participating in the Quaker Initiative to End Torture (QUIT). The body may be seeking to live out the testimony of simplicity by not taking on large leadings that require support from the grouping together of local meetings, or this may be simply recognition of the limited resources available in the yearly meeting in terms of time, money, and human energy. I was struck by the absence of programs that might be supported by some yearly meetings such as prison ministry, Alternatives to Violence Project work, and in particular, youth conferences. I am sure that this is not from a lack of concern for these programs but is perhaps simply from a lack of people to carry them out and the absence of clear leadings. I must point out that the yearly meeting has been a long-time supporter of Quaker House in Fayetteville with its work counseling members of the military. It is also very noteworthy that in 2007 the yearly meeting found unity on creating a Quaker Earth Care Committee with an initial vision of gathering technical and spiritual information for the use and benefit of the local meetings regarding care of all creation. Much of the work of

the yearly meeting currently seems to be facilitation of communication between Friends within the local communities and in the larger world.

The North Carolina Yearly Meeting (Conservative) has proven to be an unusual and special faith community for me to engage with, and I am very grateful for that. In my limited experience, I have not previously found a community among Friends or other groups that seems to relate to God and embrace the Christian tradition in the same way. I pray that NCYMC is able to continue to communicate with and nurture Friends within the yearly meeting and beyond. I also pray that it is able to face the challenge of maintaining (recognizing, finding vitality in, experiencing) the core theology while lovingly caring for those who do not share that theology and reaching out to more who do.

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