

Jeanne Marcus: Watershed as Practice of the Presence of God

Jeanne Marcus
Seekers Church
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Watershed as Practice of the Presence of God

Until quite recently, I have never really appreciated what a nature mystic I was as a child and young adult. I have been more aware of my childhood Roman Catholicism, which provided language, visual images and sacramental acts that touched my soul in deep ways. Now I am aware that my soul was equally touched by the natural world of my neighborhood.

1950s American Catholicism validated what moved me when I sat in a building named "church." But it did not provide words to understand or validate what stirred me when I climbed up high to my special place in a neighbor's tree; or crept through the bushy mysteries of the vacant lot across the street; or ran delightedly through evenings of long summer dusk, gathering fireflies.

In my teen years, the connection to the natural found expression in the compelling need I felt most afternoons to shed my high school uniform, get into jeans and Keds and walk, to the closest places where there was still some open ground.

That same daily visiting with the specifics of the earth around me was my true spiritual practice and deepest place of belonging when I left home, first to Fort Worth, and then to Austin. There was a day when I was in Fort Worth when I was lying facedown in a sunny field and I could literally feel gravity-it was like an enormous hug.

It would delight me to bring to memory and describe the many specific spaces I have loved: and their mineral, plant and animal inhabitants. However, in the few minutes I have now, it would sound like an Academy Awards acceptance speech, trying to talk fast to get everyone in. However, like a typical Academy Award winner, I cannot resist naming at least one-maybe as a way of honoring them all. So I name the Pedernales River-and especially the places where it had spent much of its life as an underground stream running through soft limestone; until the surface finally collapsed, creating enchanted valleys, with waterfalls dropping into deep pools at one end, containing giant boulders and caves, and creating their own micro-habitats in the otherwise dusty Central Texas hills.

There is a Sufi legend about some anxious fish that kept swimming around looking for the sea. At last, they met a wise fish who said to them that if they would simply stop and look then they would notice that the sea was already all around them. If that wise fish had been in my life then, I believe I would have known a name for who I was and what I was doing.

I do not believe for a minute that my story is unique, except in the details of what my body has loved. We are all born into bodies designed to be in connection to the earth in this deep and spiritually satisfying way. Human nerves, synapses, and brains all evolved in intimate connection to the sounds,

colors, textures and atmospheres of a natural world that humans had not tried to extract themselves out of, so it is only natural that our souls would feel at home back within the earth's larger circle of life.

I believe that most of us have an instinctive certainty that the natural world we experience is manifesting God's love and God's creativity; that the earth and all its particular and unique forms of life are sacraments of God's presence. All of us, humans or birds or bugs or trees-live and move and have our being from and within God.

Our liturgists often offer prayers on Sunday mornings in language that embodies this understanding. These prayers express the joy we take in the small natural details: the sight of blue heron or a rock that speaks to us, the sounds of songbirds or of acorns falling onto roofs; the changes in the winds that bring us word of the coming of a new season. Almost all of us have shared experiences of connecting to the web of life around us at Dayspring. I feel blessed to be in a community where so very many people are aware of their joy in connecting to the web of life around us.

I do not know if I have ever told the story of how I came to begin a mature Christian spiritual journey. I had been away from church for about 10 years, and not missing it at all, thank you very much. I was fully immersed in my rising law career, and on weekends, Steve and I were driving around Central Texas enjoying identifying wildflowers and eating small-town barbecue.

One Sunday morning, I startled awake suddenly, with the sense that I had been spoken to, and that the words had been that I

should go back to church. Now that message seemed a bit bizarre, meeting no need of which I was aware. So I rolled over and went back to sleep. I would not be in a church telling this story if that was the end of it: it took several of these unbidden messages, but I did finally find myself heading to a near-by Episcopal church.

I tell you this because recently I have had an uncannily similar sense of being spoken to. However, this time, instead of the word "Church," the essential word has been "Watershed." I think the message I'm hearing is to consciously re-locate my sense of self and the ways I'm living my life in a new way: that is, in relationship to the bioregion I am now part of.

Seekers had a map up once, years ago, showing where each Seeker lived in terms of streets. It is undoubtedly helpful to know where you are in terms of these human-imposed grids. Now I want to hold a dual vision, and know where we all live underneath those grids as well. Therefore, I am calling up a different map, of where we live in terms of watershed. I see Sallie and Paul's home connected to the Northwest Branch, which they can reach by a short path from their back yard. Kate and Billy's home is not far downstream; and then a little further downstream is David and Sharon: though the hill down to the water from there is too steep to climb.

Brenda and Keith have to walk a couple of blocks west to reach Sligo Creek; half a mile downstream, Colleen has to walk a couple of blocks east to reach the creek. Another half-mile downstream I walk a couple of blocks south to the creek; another mile down, Pat and Trish have a very short walk. Bill and Michele live just below where Sligo Creek flows into the Northwest Branch. Northwest Branch then flows into the

Anacostia River.

Rock Creek is a short walk for Mary Sue. Downstream from Mary Sue, Deborah and Glen are about the same distance from the creek, but on its east bank. The distance is a little shorter for Sandra, and a little longer for Sherri Alms. Then Kate Cudlipp has a very short walk-to the high Duke Ellington Bridge to look out on Rock Creek from above.

I am not nearly as knowledgeable about Virginia, but I know Four-Mile Run is virtually next door for Richard and Nancy, and then for Kris and Tiffany; it is a couple of short blocks for Kevin and Carol Ann's. Then downstream, Sheri's apartment virtually looks down on Four Mile Run; then downstream from Sheri, it is a short walk for Marjory and Peter.

All of our streams end up flowing into the wide Potomac, and from there into the Chesapeake Bay.

It strikes me as crucial for us to be able to see the lay of the land and rivers beneath the grids of human construction. The old saying goes: "If the only tool we have is a hammer, then everything looks like a nail." If what we know best about our surroundings is how to get around in a car, then all our perceptions will filter through the lens of roads. It is that kind of road-infused vision that creates the sense that it is more important to have the Inter-County Connector than to preserve the natural habitat around Dayspring. We need the deepening of our connections to the natural world to shake us free from our self-constructed mirror-worlds, where all that is reflected back is our self-referential agendas.

Now I want to return to talk of Sligo Creek. On my stretch of the creek, there are many signs of natural life thriving. True, invasive vines cover the trees closest to heavily traveled areas. The area's sycamore trees are dying: I am surmising that auto emissions have something to do with that. Yet the stands of tall oaks seem to be doing well. Wildlife is becoming more diverse: deer, fox, raccoon, possum, groundhogs, blue heron, Black-crowned night heron, red-tailed hawk, mallards. Overall, I am pleased that my part of the watershed seems to be thriving.

Yet I am uncomfortably aware that I am living a charmed life in the winners' circle of the global economy, and thus am able to live in natural surroundings that are relatively healthy. I am aware that elsewhere in my own bioregion, the environment is not thriving so well: the Chesapeake Bay continues to suffer significant degradation, despite well-organized efforts of environmentalists to pass legislation to limit pollutants into its waters, and to get funding to restore the Bay's aquatic life. I am aware that acid rain is killing many North American forests; commercial farming methods are stripping much of our nation's topsoil; strip-mining for coal or even for gravel brings down mountaintops; dams are silting up numerous rivers; urban areas are eating into farmland and wilderness; and of course, there is much more if I turn my eyes around the globe. Moreover, I do not doubt the reality of global warming, a more ominous development.

I have never set out to harm the natural world. Nevertheless, I have no doubt that the way I live does indeed harm the earth. I am, as all of us are, living within a set of structures that determine many of our actions. Some of these

are physical structures, such as our giant farming corporations, and the attendant distribution systems for food grown far from our cities.

Deeper still are the structures in our minds: the worldviews we carry that have been shaped by our Western culture and that filter all our perceptions through an interpretive grid. My lifestyle makes perfect sense within these physical and mental structures. It is so in accordance with the norm for our consumer culture that its problematic nature is typically invisible to me. It is difficult to see the world differently.

When I **do** become aware of the cost of my lifestyle to the earth, I am overwhelmed when I think of what would need to change to live sustainably, using no more than my share of earth's resources. I drive comparatively little, but I really do like the freedom using my little car to get where I want to go, when I want to go. It is hard to imagine another way. I take advantage of there being plentiful and cheap electricity, and I take advantage of the convenience of getting food I like at the nearby grocery. I have had periods of being vegetarian, but I am not one now. In addition, enough plastic goes through my house that I have reason to blush.

I would love to have the economic and political system create options that would better support my desires for a sustainable economy. I would prefer energy pricing that would keep SUVs from guzzling gas. I would prefer water pricing that would convince us not to water lawns. I would prefer farm subsidies to benefit family farmers, not large agribusinesses. I would prefer lower levels of consumption and more equitable systems of wages. I want to confess my despair at the prospect of systemic economic change of this magnitude. Nevertheless, I

also want to confess my dismay and despair my personal failure to live in right relationship.

What I do not want to do is to become deliberately blind and speechless about the effects of my choices and our collective choices. Even if I do not know how it can change, I want the honesty and integrity to at least acknowledge the situation, and not rationalize it away.

How will it be possible to find the strength and the will to change course, and create for ourselves ways of life that are not so destructive to the earth? Maybe we never will: I am not an optimist, but as a Christian, I try to keep myself open to hope, to God's surprising work in my heart, our hearts and our world.

If we **are** to find the strength and the will, my sense is that it will take a shift in the deep structures of our worldview. Maybe the most important shift will be a new kind of species humility. Currently we humans think and act as if we are a species apart from and over against the rest of creation. We are not. We will need to recognize ourselves as one species among others, in a God-created universe that works through relationships to form an interdependent whole. The history we are creating now is more than national history or international history; we have to recognize that the more crucial history we are creating now is human-earth history.

The strength and will to change will also require that we allow ourselves to be moved by the beauty and grandeur of the world around us. It has taken 4 $\frac{1}{2}$ billion years of effort by

the earth to come to this moment in time, to complete the development of these oceans and continents, these mountains and rivers, these plants and animals, and this self-conscious species that we are. All of it and all of us are precious and beautiful. When we hold this understanding, we react with a certain horror when we consider all those activities that humanity is undertaking that violate the integrity and sustainability of the planet.

We as Christians know through the Incarnation that we are meant to recognize the earth as the embodiment of God's love, and the expression of God's presence with us. Earth is one of our primary revelations of the divine, and our practice of the presence of God in our lives takes place not just within ourselves, but in our lives lived in God's world.

We Seekers understand our lives as defined by our call to come together in weekly worship rooted in the Biblical faith, and then to disperse with a common commitment to understand and implement Christian servanthood in the structures in which we live our lives. Perhaps it's time to re-think our call not only in terms of servanthood to other men and women, but also to other species and to earth as a whole.

Each of us can love only a tiny fragment of the earth, like a watershed, or a bioregion. However, to love and to care for our fragment is our calling. Our vocation as Christians who are living the Incarnation includes finding out what makes things and people flourish there, and then trying to live what we learn. So many people here are walking or stumbling towards this consciousness: I thought to list all of you here, but there are too many. I am hoping that we will become more aware of each other's passions and projects. I am hoping that we

will find ourselves working together to create a shared theology, and experiencing together ways to care for our own earth fragment.