

Earth Day Sermon **by Brian Merritt**

Yesterday something stirred me out of bed. It was not the smell of morning coffee that my wife had made, it was not the fact that I needed desperately to run to the bathroom nor had the alarm on my cell phone began its annoying chime. It was something much more exhilarating. It was the beautiful cacophony of birds beckoning the rising sun. Something that is always startling to me is how loud these birds sound. I walked out on the back porch to be surrounded by this natural score. Along with the blooming tulips, a bustling farmer's market and 85 degree temperatures these bird's songs reminded me again that spring is in our midst.

So, I began to reflect upon why being amongst nature's beauty is so important to me and why when I am away from it I get so stir crazy. Of course I grew up in a state that is mostly rural state and lived only blocks away from the nearest cornfield. Yet, growing up in the city meant that I sometimes still felt isolated from the natural world.

I think it was those early trips my family made to a wooded area outside of town called Pioneer Park. We would jump into the station wagon and head west out of town. At that time it was not the easiest place to get to. The first challenge was crossing the one lane bridge made out of wood that took passengers over the railroad tracks on the edge of town. We learned that there was a reason that that bridge was nicknamed "the old rickety bridge" as our car slowly creaked and groaned over each ancient plank. Then we would stop at a restaurant with a giant fiberglass rooster on top named Lee's Chicken. I would always beg to go inside to help pick up the bucket of chicken my parents had ordered. I was fascinated to see the blind woman whom the owners had hired to play an organ for the diners.

With our lunch in hand we would go the last mile to the entrance of that 1,100-acre park donated to the city of Lincoln in 1928. When we entered this park I always felt like I owned a part of it and it filled me with such great pride. What was it that made me swell up inside whenever we entered this wooded gate? Was it the statue of the Indian making smoke signals, the herd of fenced in buffalo, the columns in a field that President Lincoln supposedly gave a speech from or was it the geese we fed with old bags of Wonder bread that filled me with a sense that this park was mine? No, it was something much more personal.

Every time we approached the park my mother made sure to remind my sister and I that my Grandfather planted many of the trees in Pioneer Park in the 1930's for the Work Projects Administration. As I would play in this park I wondered at the tall trees that had sprung from those saplings 40 years earlier. I wondered which trees my grandfather had actually dug into the hard prairie soil.

Trees are no simple plant in Nebraska. There are very few that haven't been planted by some hearty pioneer over the years and here was an entire park filled with trees. The best thing about these trees was that I had a deep and personal connection with them because of my grandfather.

In our postmodern society we have become separated from the reality of our natural existence. Our meat comes in plastic wrapped trays, our tomatoes come in cans and we are told that our children are suffering from nature deficiency syndrome. Our place in the universe has become exaggerated by the cities of concrete and steel that we

have created. It is that arrogant and pesky anthropomorphic claim that we are absolutely necessary to this world, that it was created for us that sometimes gets in the way of us seeing our true place in creation. We are not the center of this world, nor is this world made as our playground. The Psalmist bellows out to the holy one, “The heavens are yours, the earth is yours; the world and all that is in it—you have founded them.” The divine is the beginning and the end of all creation and every creation sings praise to its maker. We are important caretakers of divine property.

I never understand there being a debate over the environment. Yes, there are some who believe that global warming is a hoax, that believe our ability to create technology will cure any environmental ill that we engender to this planet. Yet, even if they are correct this does not change the very spiritual stewardship that we have as created beings in the midst of a larger creation. We still have responsibilities to take care of the natural system that our creator has placed us in.

So, where do we begin? It seems that there is so much that needs to be done and we are only a small percentage of the world’s environmental problems. We may leave a foot print, but what about deregulation, the agribusinesses, the trucking companies, the refineries, the chemical plants and the factories? Well, those who cause our greatest systemic pollution will need to be addressed through intelligent policy and a radical shift in cultural values. Still it is important that we as individual witness to these institutions through sustainable changes in our own behaviors. As with any spiritual change I think that it begins with contact. We value those things that we know and have experienced. If we have a connection to the natural world around us all of it becomes vitally important to us.

This means we must begin taking hikes in the woods, gardening, visiting farmer’s markets, understanding the production of our meat and planting a tree. It is much easier to know the value of an apple grove when you have trudged its rows, a basket in hand, and have picked the red fruit from a dangling branch. When we are intimately involved with the creation of which we are a part it only makes sense that we will want to take care of the precious resources that our creator has surrounded us with. We will make those achievable changes in our world that will lessen our negative impact on other living things. Still, we do not merely take care of our world for survival, but because in doing so we participate with all creation in praising the one who made all things. Come join creation’s song!