

## Easter Living and Earth Keeping

Denise Cumbee Long

Genesis 1:1-5,11-12,20-28  
Isaiah 24:4-5  
Romans 8:22-25

April 18,2010  
Elon Community Church

Mexican laureate Octavio Paz said that “we are living through a change of times” in which we reach for a re-beginning, “the reappearance of what was forgotten and repressed,” a return to origins. (*Quoted in Larry Rasmussen, Earth Community Earth Ethics, Orbis Books, Maryknoll: New York, 1996, p. 268.*)

I think his words are particularly appropriate for today, the Sunday after Easter when we also honor Earth Day. Easter is a symbol for re-beginning, the life that resurges again after being buried, forgotten or repressed. The resurrection is also the second great story in our scriptures, one that companions the story of creation, the story of first things. While creation tells of beginnings, Easter is the archetype for re-beginnings, fresh starts that refuse to be thwarted by attempts to tear apart or destroy.

As human creatures, we can't go back. Professor of Christian Ethics Larry Rasmussen says, “There is no return to first beginnings. We all live east of Eden. The garden is gone. It wasn't our destiny, anyway. Nonetheless, nature still holds ‘incalculable promise.’ There need be, and can be, re-beginnings.” (*Ibid.*)

The garden of Eden may be gone, but there is a new garden where a resurrected Christ, one resembling a humble gardener, walks between tombs and trees. The gospel of John tells us that this is where Mary Magdalene meets Jesus on Easter morning. This garden is one of life and death and life again. And this garden is here with us now. It is all around us.

A couple of weeks ago, my husband and I were working in our own garden, preparing the soil for planting vegetables. We had removed a nylon mesh fence a few days before so that it would be easier to till the ground, and the mesh lay in a pile near the edge of the woods. As we worked, we heard an unusual rustling sound, and going over to investigate, we discovered that a young black snake had become trapped in the netting. It had attempted to pass through the mesh holes and had become hopelessly entangled, the nylon strands so tight around its body they were digging into its scales.

At first, we despaired of ever freeing the snake. But we found a couple of sharp knives, and after carefully holding the snake's head so that it couldn't express its frustration by biting us, we began to slowly cut away the netting from its body. It was a tedious process, and we had to be careful not to leave any nylon loops around the snake as these would kill it later when it grew or tried to eat.

Finally, after much snipping, the last of the mesh slipped off its body, and we pulled the netting away. The black snake raised its head and looked directly at us for a few seconds, its erect posture, ancient eyes and flickering tongue reminding me of Egyptian carvings of cobras. Finally, it dropped its neck and slipped silently away under the pine trees, disappearing completely in a few seconds.

Afterwards, I felt relieved and strangely satisfied, as if the act of freeing the snake had somehow adjusted the cosmic equation, tipping the scales ever so slightly toward goodness. I had been

directly responsible for that snake's predicament, even unintentionally, but I had luckily been given the opportunity to make amends. The snake had his own chance at a re-beginning. And I was once again reminded of the power we wield as humans to impact every level of life, from microbe to mountain, atom to atmosphere.

The garden where we all live is a place of complex connections, a closed system. It is a community, the Great Community, where the beat of a butterfly's wings in my own back yard can influence a hurricane across the ocean. All that exists, coexists. But we humans have largely ignored this truth, and elevated ourselves as a species apart with unlimited resources at our disposal and little accountability for the cost of our actions.

We have to step back for a bigger view. There is a web of connection that entangles us together on this earth. When even one species, black snake, water system, or bioregion is struggling in this net of mutuality, we are all affected.

My daughter shared a poem with me that was written a few years ago by one of her professors at the UNC Institute of the Environment, William Stott. It is a wonderful depiction of the truth of interdependence and a lovely homage to the sacred nature of those connections. Stott wrote it in honor of the baptism of his niece, so I think it is particularly appropriate for today when we celebrate the baptism of Mia Sanburn.

#### *Ceremonial time*

*In the hour of our gathering, Zoe Elizabeth Mary, while the words  
of the baptismal rite rang in the vaults of the Fordham chapel, the earth  
you have graced with your quiet presence pitched 0.01076 degrees  
on its axis like a gyroscope, slightly away from the detonating sun;  
the subtle shift was felt across the street in the New York  
Botanical Gardens by an earthworm, who swallowed several fern spores  
down a slender vein, renewing the earth from within  
as it canted toward equilucity;*

*as our family moved together to the altar a school of shad dappled  
the Hudson River to the east with their glinting lavender tails,  
their metallic blue-green backs faded to silver  
as they surged through mythic waters  
beneath the Tappan Zee bridge over slumbering beds of PCBs;*

*as the light lengthened in that northern noon in New York  
a female sponge crab far to the south released 500,000 zoea  
into the briny water of Croatan Sound,  
yielding to the mute demands of salinity and the lunar drive of tides,  
the estuary's abundant life fanned out like stars  
while Alma read the litany of saints and  
Liam called out the prayers of the faithful;*

*in that same hour we professed  
our faith, a dusting of monarch butterflies danced like petrels  
in the lead edge gusts of tropical storm Fay,  
which brought to the flood-battered coast of Texas more water;  
and in that hour, first daughter of my beloved*

*sister Rachel and brother Steve,  
 while we blessed your beautiful, naked body  
 in the waters of life and death  
 the glucose bonds in the stems of eighteen oak leaves in your yard  
 in Hartsdale slackened, the amber leaves fluttered to the ground  
 like discarded lottery tickets from the 36<sup>th</sup> floor  
 of a Coop City housing project;  
 and while John Donahue -- Jesuit, prophet, family friend -presented you with a wooden cross  
 fashioned by amputee Phillipine children  
 made artists by land mines,  
 three Belarussian heroin addicts contracted AIDS  
 in a squalid Minsk apartment;*

*our tears of joy mingled with tears of farmers  
 in Jamaica whose debt to the IMF compounded \$240,000 as we sang;  
 and while we clasped hands and prayed the Lord's Prayer  
 the hardening of Israeli and Palestinian hearts moved with American aid a measurable  
 quantum towards war;*

*welcome Zoe, to a world of infinite life and continuous death,  
 a material world whose God is forever  
 weaving into and around the transfiguring form of her own moment;  
 at the close of that hour, and forever, I thanked God for you as you lay  
 in the arms of my wife Jessica, echoing cries of hunger and nativity.*

As those who profess to be Easter people, we know we live in a world of infinite life and continuous death, the garden where we walk among both tombs and trees. As William Stott says so beautifully, ours is “a material world whose God is forever weaving into and around the transfiguring form of her own moment.”

Easter living calls us to a vocation of earth keeping. We remember the deep knowledge that we are all part of the Great Community. Easter living means that we appreciate diversity while at the same time understanding that we are all branches on the same vine. As Jesus says in the gospel of John, “I am the true Vine, my Father is the Vine Grower, and every branch that bears fruit is pruned back to make it bear more fruit.” (John 15:1)

Jay McDaniel has a wonderful way of describing this process of mutuality in his essay, “An Acoustic Theology of Ecology”. (*The Ecozoic, published by the Center for Ecozoic Studies, Number 1, 2008, p.41.*) McDaniel is an ecological writer, a fan of the philosopher, Alfred North Whitehead, and a self-described jazz fanatic. His image of God is not that of a heavenly monarch cut off from the earthy aspects of the world. Rather, he thinks of God as a Deep Listening, an encompassing compassion which listens to all the voices in the universe and experiences the feelings of all living beings.

McDaniel believes that our faith and our notions of ecology would be enriched if we thought of life as musicians gathering for a jazz performance. “It is the idea of people getting together,” he writes, “each with a different voice, sharing in one another’s feelings, and seeing if they can work together to help create something beautiful.

They take delight in their different voices; they agree to hang in there together even when things may seem to fall apart; and they forgive one another their mistakes. They have respect for the past

but are willing to improvise and add new ideas, because they are sensitive to the call of each moment. They trust in the availability of fresh possibilities.” (*Ibid*, p.44)

If we imagined ourselves inside this concert, McDaniel says, the world would be a better place. Life is like an improvisational jazz performance. It is live music that changes from moment to moment as we, along with the rocks and hills, forests and oceans, animals and trees, add our voices to the Song of the Universe. This is Easter living.

The Dalai Lama says that compassion is “the common connective tissue of the body of human life.” Compassion is God’s Deep Listening, and it is also the impetus which moves us to confront the systems and institutions which create the conditions for suffering. It is how we take action, even when the situation seems hopeless. Adrienne Rich puts it this way:

*My heart is moved by all I cannot save:  
So much has been destroyed  
I have to cast my lot with those  
Who age after age, perversely,  
With no extraordinary power,  
Reconstitute the world.*

Reconstituting the world. In the book of Romans, Paul says that creation itself will be set free to obtain the glorious freedom of the children of God. (Romans 8:21). We set free what we love.

In December of 2006 a female humpback whale became entangled in crab nets near the Farallon Islands. A rescue team of local divers set out to help the huge mammal as she struggled to stay afloat while the ropes dug into her flesh and the weights pulled her down. According to the journalist who covered the story, the whale remained perfectly still as the divers cut through the ropes.

When she was freed, witnesses said that she swam out 100 yards to sea, and then returned to her rescuers, gently nudging each of them one by one. The divers said that it felt “amazing and unforgettable, as though she were saying thank you.” (*Sanguin*, p. 266.)

Paul writes that all creation “waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God.” Creation is waiting for all of us to show up, ready and willing, to set free what we love, whether it be black snake or humpback whale, shrinking rainforest or melting arctic ice. May we cast our lot with those who live in the garden of re-beginnings, those who age after age find new ways to reconstitute the world.

AMEN.