

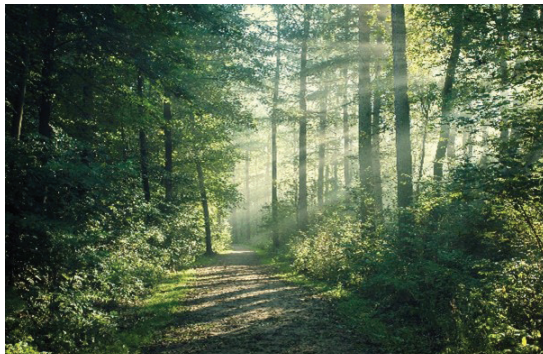
Holy Ground

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A quarterly reflection on
the contemplative life



WHAT THE TREES SAID



*Give up. Stop fixing,
yearning
grasping*

*As I am in you, be
in me*

*This effort to separate
distinguish
yourself
is so
hard
on you*

I took trees for granted for years yet was drawn to them over and over without my conscious intent. They were there, when as an infant, I lay on a quilt under the elm tree. Decades later I watch my four-month-old granddaughter on a quilt under

her backyard oak tree. She and I are both transfixed by the movements of the limbs and leaves in the breeze above us. Trees have always saved me.

Among trees I find solace, wonder, and instruction. Have they have saved you, too from your fraught self, your grief, weariness, confusion, and isolation? The vibrancy, which trees radiate, seems to embrace and restore us two-legged mammals. We keep returning to walk among them, lean up against them, delight in their changing colors, and watch their boughs tossed by the wind.

As kids we played under the shade of maples and oaks, climbed up to treehouses, and crawled beneath the draping branches of spruce trees to the secret spaces within. In the late 1950s I learned how significant trees were from the depth of my mother's grief. When the Dutch elm disease swept through the Midwest eventually killing 95% of the elms in the United States, my mother cringed at the sound of the saws and crash of limbs as the diseased trees were removed from Mt. Pleasant, Iowa. So, she wrote a poem.

BEREFT

*I watched them rip the limbs apart.
I watched them sever soil from tree.*

*I felt a tearing in my heart
 As though the saws were sawing me.
 I watched and thought how yesterday
 The rain came down to wash the leaves.
 Leaves, whose patterned shadows lay
 Like sleepy elves beneath the eaves.
 I watched and thought I heard a song
 That whispered through the trees at night.
 A song of beauty, void of wrong,
 A tapered wing of sound in flight.
 I watched them rend, and slice and break
 My friends in ruthless savagery.
 I watched them load, and haul, and take
 The fragments of a part of me.*

—Irma Ross, published in *Caravan*, and
The Better Choice

In the 2020 derecho Iowa lost an estimated 7.2 million trees in cities and farms, according to the report of Iowa Department of Natural Resources. Cedar Rapids, Des Moines and Davenport suffered the largest tree losses in the Aug.10 storm, as winds surged up to 140 mph in some counties. The storm damaged thousands of homes, businesses and vehicles, along with millions of acres of cropland.

The growth of urban areas, disease, climate change, floods, and wildfires all contribute to tree loss. Meanwhile Bark Beetles are decimating the Bristle Cone Pines, one of the most resilient trees in the world. Unlike our species, trees are not weighed down with self-pity, guilt or shame. Nor do they desire to be something other than what they are. They do not argue and

debate. They live. They release seeds. And they slowly return to the soil from which they grew. They accept what is so and adapt.

Kentucky farmer and writer, Wendell Berry goes among trees, where he finds things fall into place and he is righted and restored. When I go to the trees, I recall a poem I learned in English class and had to memorize. Maybe, as with this poet, it is the sea, or mountains, not the trees that draw you.

SEA-FEVER

*I must go down to the seas again, to the lonely
 sea and the sky,
 And all I ask is a tall ship and a star to steer
 her by;
 And the wheel's kick and the wind's song and
 the white sail's shaking,
 And a grey mist on the sea's face, and a grey
 dawn breaking.
 I must go down to the seas again, for the call of
 the running tide
 Is a wild call and a clear call that may not be
 denied;
 And all I ask is a windy day with the white
 clouds flying,
 And the flung spray and the blown spume, and
 the seagulls crying.*

Excerpts from *Sea Fever* by John Masfield

Have you heard the wild, clear call to go out of your mind and enter physically into some portion of the natural world and open all your senses to it? Can you



remember how it feels to put your feet and whole body into the water, as the man born blind did at the pool of Siloam? What about a bracing wind carrying the harsh cries of crows? We live so much in our heads, busy with our thoughts and opinions. In a daily onslaught of screen images and artificial stimuli of all kinds, we lose awareness of our corporeal selves, and become addicted to constant stimulation and distractions.

Pause here and consider. Are there places you must go? Places that tug at your heart and call out to you? What arouses, satisfies and replenishes your soul? As Rumi says, “Let yourself be silently drawn to what you really love.”

Some have come to expect the encounter with the wonder of God in temple, mosque, or church. We have confined the definition of church and religion with mental constructs of theological beliefs, creeds, traditions, which isn’t necessarily wrong or bad. Yet God and “church” are so much bigger and are not limited to what our minds conjure up and the structures we build.

In the Presbyterian church, where I grew up, the combined senior and youth choirs sang a song I will never forget. Pauline Thayer, our choir director, had chosen “Green Cathedral,” composed by Carl Hahn in 1921, for us to sing that morning. Few songs have had such an impact on me.

*I know a green cathedral, a shadowed forest shrine,
Where leaves in love join hands above and arch
your prayer and mine;
Within its cool depths sacred, the priestly cedar sighs,
And the fir and pine lift arms divine unto the
pure blue skies. . . .*
Some may fuss about the lyric’s theology or the sentimental, individualistic tone.

However, at thirteen, singing the soaring words of the song, I put together that God was not limited to a church and that natural cathedrals held divinity as well. God was drawing and meeting me both in the hymn and in those trees. I found permission to name my experience and that energy pulling and drawing me, as Holy.

Let us return to the trees and listen.

COYOTE FINDS A SAFE PLACE

*Last night coyote,
whose mother,
raven said,
was hit
on the highway,
turned himself
three times
scratched
sank
midst the gnarled
knees
of grandfather oak*



*tucked his face
beneath his tail
and slept till noon*

KNOW YOUR ROOTS



*Pull up a few.
See those sallow
rangy threads
sinewy cords
thick as your arm
splintering stone
slurping up existence
quenching
your
thirst?*

*We are all tangled up in heritage and ancestor
– those tough ties to blood, tribe, family. Long
scattered to dust, hidden, yet flowing through
our veins, tenacious forebearers animate our
lives.*

Can you hear them?

*Clusters of gnarled and tangled cheerleaders,
waving stringy fingers, muttering:*

Stop slouching and grow up for pity's sake!

OUR BELLIES



*We have missed you
stepping lightly
patting our
rough bellies
with your small
soft palms
leaning
into us
when you
are weary.*

WHERE PRAYERS GO

*Your prayers -
like birdwings
flutter among
our leaves
settle in the
crotch
where eagle
builds her nest
cushion and
cling*



*to the little talons of her brood
who carry them off to towering
cliffs, broad rivers, wetlands, tundra,
borne on ascending thermals*



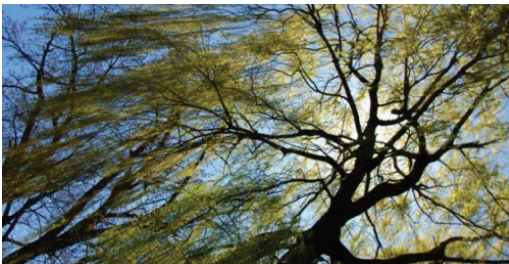
to deliver your hearts' longing back
to your frail lives
transformed,
untamed, fierce,
windswept

BLOOM WHERE YOU ARE PLANTED



*It is true. We are not going anywhere.
"Stabilitas loci" as the monks say.
How boring you think.*

*But have you seen willow dance?
Letting the wind have his way with her
whooshing up her dress tail
bending her backwards in his arms
shimmying her long trembling limbs
in that torrid way?*



Spring Willow in the Wind © Sheila Creighton 2013 Imagery of Light. Used with permission

PSALM 19: 1-4

Heaven is declaring God's glory; the sky is proclaiming God's handiwork. One day gushes the news to the next, and one night informs another what needs to be known. Of course, there's no speech, no words - their voices can't be heard - but their sound extends throughout the world; their words reach the ends of the earth.

Language is a rather recent invention in the story of life on earth. With or without words, communication occurs among all species. We affect each other deeply - interpenetrating, colonizing, living off, consuming, giving ourselves away, and taking in each other in an intricate network of dynamic, everchanging relationships. Our destinies are connected to each other and together we form the body of life on our shared planet.

Yet our species has been steadily backing away from many of our cousins. Cities, industry, and technology have increasingly allowed us to disassociate ourselves from our dance of interdependency with fish, fowl, insect, animal, vegetable, and mineral.

For some humans, language has become, not a tool of communion, understanding, and edification, but, rather, a knife which separates our experience of reality into sharp, hard slivers of "meaning," with which we stab and poke each other. Words, mere symbols, which only point toward reality, ideas, and emotions,



become swords of power to weld against the powerless and attempt to force our view on others. We build idols of abstract constructs and tottering paradigms of what we believe is *The Truth*, which we then feel constrained to defend and guard against all contradiction.

I do not know how to listen to trees, to frogs, to polar bears, or whales. I do not know how to listen to the woman who has lost her home and family in the flood, or the old pastor who told me I was not ready to be preaching and needed to read a lot more books, and then walked out of my presentation.

I only know I have to try, and that language is secondary- a pale, feeble gesture - bound to miss its mark much of the time. Primary is that inexpressible intimate connection, where I am touched by and touch into the miraculous life of the woman and the old preacher I offended with all the kindness and reverence as I can muster.

It is there - as life meets life and bows before and honors this mysterious, energetic vitality of Being in and around all that is, that I know, once again, that I belong. Here is my community. I see how we have been created to need one another and are bound together by a strange and marvelous Love. In cathedral, backyard, bar, or kitchen - here is church.

Even when my words and efforts fail, and I suffer the isolation and estrangement

of broken connection, I am grateful. That pain shows me how we are wedded and welded as one in the very formation of the universe. When that bond is broken, we will suffer and mourn. The pain reminds us that there is more, that we could be more, and that love is refined through its failures.



Last evening, I buried a grey squirrel in the tall grass at the edge of the forest, where he lived. His fur was thick and gleamed in the waning sun. I saw him lying against the curb, where the whizzing car had tossed him as it sped by.

I am so glad I found him at dusk in the softness of the day and got to hold his small body and see his dear face and ears before I tucked him into the woods. I loved him so.

Go gentle, my friends. Listen with the psalmist for what needs to be known.

Loretta F. Ross

Some of the content here, appeared previously in *The Praying Life*, a blog by Loretta F Ross



**AN OPPORTUNITY
TO CONNECT!**

Zoom Contemplative Prayer Group

To heal our society, our psyches must heal as well. The military, social, and environmental dangers that threaten us do not come from sources outside the human heart; they are reflections of it, mirroring the fears, greed, and hostility that separate us from ourselves and each other.

—Joanna Macy

You are not alone in this difficult time. Join a group to practice contemplative prayer, reflect on your life in God, and find strength and peace.

We use a simple liturgy for prayer, which includes an extended period of silence.

A donation in the amount of your choice helps pay our costs.

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or phone 785-230-0365

We need each other.

THE Praying Life

A BLOG ABOUT CONTEMPLATIVE LIVING

Stay current with Sanctuary news.
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Read and follow The Praying Life Blog at
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Find us and follow the Sanctuary
and Loretta F Ross on Facebook,
Instagram, Twitter.

And if social media is not your thing, just email
info@fromhollyground.org or call 785-230-0365.

News Notes

Thanks to a retreat funded by the Presbyterian Church (USA), I find myself among trees, as I am wrapping up this issue of *Holy Ground*. I am yours from Downhill Rd on the backroads of Iowa on the banks of the twisty Wapsipinicon River. The trees, deer, crickets, and the river all send their best and said to tell you they miss you.

Your subscription renewals, gifts to the The Sanctuary Fund, and prayers are deeply appreciated. Your generosity is making a difference as we work to offer the love and compassion of Christ to people all over the world.

Copies of *Holy Ground* are available at \$2.00 each, 10 copies for \$15.00, 20 copies for \$30.00. Shipping included.



I did not read books that first summer; I hoed beans. Nay, I often did better than this. There were times when I could not afford to sacrifice the bloom of the present moment to any work, whether of head or hands. I love a broad margin to my life. Sometimes, in a summer morning, having taken my accustomed bath, I sat in my sunny doorstep from sunrise till noon, rapt in a reverie, amidst the pines and hickories and sumacs, in undisturbed solitude and stillness, while the birds sang around or flitted noiseless through the house, until by the sun falling in at my west window, or the noise of some traveler's wagon on the distant highway, I was reminded of the lapse of time. I grew in those seasons like corn in the night, and they were far better than any work of the hands would have been.

—Henry David Thoreau *Reflections at Walden*, p 25-26



Holy Ground is published by The Sanctuary Foundation for Prayer.

...the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. Revelation 22:2-3

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