



# La Vista Visions

A NEWSLETTER ON THE INTEGRITY OF CREATION

Published by the Oblate Ecological Initiative

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Winter 2013  
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## Let All the Trees of the Forest Exult!

by Norm Comtois, OMI and Maxine Pohlman, SSND

La Vista rests atop limestone bluffs in the beautiful mid-Mississippi River Valley which was formed over thousands of years when glaciers from the last Ice Age advanced and receded as the climate cooled and warmed. The bluffs are over 300,000 years old! Even though trees first appeared on Earth more than 380 million years ago, the oak and hickory forest here is only about 10,000 years old. For all these years, the river, the bluffs and forests have been significant on Earth, manifesting the diversity and beauty of our Creator.

More recently, for the past 60 years, the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate have had a special presence on this land, calling it home for their Novitiate and other religious programs. About twelve years ago, the Oblate forest was the first to be protected in Illinois under the Forest Legacy Program which helps protect environmentally important forests from conversion to non-forest uses.

How does care for the forest connect with the mission of the Oblates? We are led to ask: What is the connection among the biblical accounts of creation, the story of Jesus, and the ecological issues confronting humanity today? Why should the Oblates be committed to ecology?

### Deep Connections

When we explore the intimate connection between our Creator and creation, between the Judeo Christian tradition and ecological action, we are able to understand the need to care for creation. When we link these, then all of us who are religious can be challenged to ecological conversion.

Throughout Christian history, for example, Jesus has been remembered as the Son of God as well as a prophet and a masterful teacher in the wisdom tradition. As a wisdom teacher, Jesus saw the natural world as a place of God.

In many parables and sayings Jesus uses the natural world to tell us what God is like and how God acts. His images come from all of life: sowing seed and reaping harvest, growth of trees from mustard seed, vines and branches, sheep and shepherds, foxes and their lairs.

Jesus reflects on God's compassionate care for the plant and animal species of creation when he teaches us that God feeds and clothes each bird of the air and lily of the field and cares for every sparrow that falls to the ground. Jesus presents God's compassion and provident care as embracing both the human and the natural world.

Jesus also experienced the natural world as a place of encounter with the living God. Recall stories of Jesus going into the wilderness to pray – before his ministry begins, throughout his ministry when he sought out mountain tops and deserts for solitude and prayer, and in a garden before his death.

We can conclude that Jesus would look on forests and see them as revealing God to us, as places of encounter with the Divine. Caring for the forest makes sense in this context. Following of Jesus in our time calls for the kind of ecological commitment we see expressed by the Oblates who protect and care for their forested land.

Protecting the forest is also an important part of the Oblates' commitment to justice and the integrity of creation. As they strive to live in right relationship with people, they also strive to establish justice and right relationships so

that all creation might flourish. Their sense of community is inclusive, embracing water, soil, atmosphere, forests, wildlife – the whole Earth community which together sustains all of us in being.

### Ecological Importance

Keeping forests as forests should be the number one conservation goal for two important reasons; first, they take more carbon out of the air per acre than any other ecosystem on Earth. They are the cleanest and most efficient remover of carbon dioxide from our atmosphere, helping to curb climate change. Second, they are the greatest reservoirs of biological diversity on Earth, and we need biodiversity for a healthy planet and sustainable life.



*(continued on page 6)*

## Letter from the Editor

Winter 2013

Dear Friends of La Vista,

*"How do we see the land? As a commodity with no other worth than real estate appraisal? Or do we see land as holy and manifesting God, as habitat and home for untold numbers of species, as that which is essential for the ongoing life-journey of the planet?"*

This questioning paragraph is taken from the Oblate Land Ethic drafted in 2008. It reminds us that there is a difference between **living on** the land and **dwelling in** it, understanding its seasonal rhythms, its amazing potential, and its need for us to assume responsibility for its health and continuity.

Years before the land ethic was written, in a prophetic move, the Oblates entered into a legal agreement, placing 255 acres of bluffs, woods and pastures in trust for perpetuity.

This past autumn care of this special ecosystem continued as students from Principia College, our neighbor up the river, conducted a forest inventory at La Vista as a final project for their class. Led by their teacher, John Lovseth, they helped to deepen our awareness of the great variety of native trees that grace this land. Their analysis suggested what we need to do to manage the forest for its continuing

health, and their youthful enthusiasm reminded us that our behaviors today can be a significant gift to future generations of people and to native species inhabiting the forest.

Caring for land is one important way to contribute to the health of the local bioregion. The Community Supported Garden at La Vista is entering its twelfth season, offering another way to value the land and health of people. The Learning Center's calendar of events offers both practical programs that foster sustainable living and opportunities to nurture the kind of spirituality that spawned the Oblate Land Ethic.

I hope you can join us in 2013 as a Garden member or at a Learning Center program so together we can promote healthy and holy lives on our rare and precious planet. ☺

For La Vista,  
Maxine Pohlman, SSND

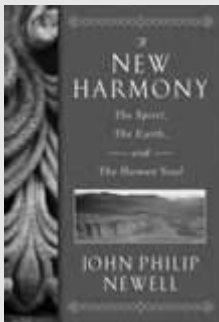


John Lovseth (far right)  
with Principia students

## Creating a Mutually Enhancing Human/Earth Relationship: A Book Recommendation

### A New Harmony: The Spirit, the Earth, and the Human Soul

by John Philip Newell



How many ways are there to speak of the essential interrelatedness of the whole cosmos? Alternative synonyms seem to emerge daily as we try to grasp this new awareness science is raising in us. "A new harmony" is another of those efforts, and it is a very apt one that John Philip Newell explores in his book by the same name.

The first part of the book beautifully probes the **ancient harmony** that is deep in the matter of the universe. Drawing on the thinking of Teilhard de Chardin we read, "The great mystery of Christianity...is not the 'appearance' of God in the universe but the 'transparence' of God in the universe." Quoting Chardin, he reminds us that we are invited to leave the surface and plunge into the divine milieu, "where the soul is most deep and where matter is most dense."

The stark reality of **disharmony** is examined in the second part as Newell reflects on the life and writings of Etty Hillesum who died in a concentration camp. Through Etty's words he calls all of us to look life straight in the eye, to see its pain and to see its beauty – as an essential part of the healing process we need so much today.

In the third part, Newell draws on the ancient wisdom of Jesus to speak of the **new harmony** that is drawing us into the future. In a poignant reflection on the symbol of the cross, he tells us that it "is pointing to the nature of love itself...Oneness is costly. It will be born within us and among us only if we are willing to die to our separateness." Exploring how each of us can be a part of a new harmony he asks, "What is the cost, both personal and collective, of releasing life's essential oneness in radically new and transformative ways?"

Take time this winter to delve into a new harmony with this thought-provoking author. Listening to the Heartbeat of God and The Book of Creation are two more of his works that will speak to a heart longing to deepen Earth spirituality.



**“The future belongs to those who give the next generation reason for hope.”**

- Pierre Teilhard de Chardin

## Exploring the Sacred Universe: Earth Literacy Program August 4 – 11, 2013

*We need a common and compelling vision of the nature of the universe and the role of the human within it . . . . Only such a vision has a chance of awakening the deep psychic energies necessary to shape a new era of health, well-being, and true prosperity.*

- Brian Swimme

La Vista's Earth Literacy Program is an opportunity to embrace a "common and compelling vision" based on contemporary scientific understandings of the evolution of the Universe, Earth, life, and human consciousness as a single, unfolding process, a new cosmology.

Throughout the week participants will **AWAKEN** to the sacred Mystery of our origins and our place within the evolutionary process, **CONTEMPLATE** the sacredness of the Universe Story as a transforming context for our lives, **CRITICALLY EXAMINE** the perceptions that fashion our cultural worldview, **PARTICIPATE** in guided activities, instruction, dialogue, reflection, journaling, art, ritual, cooking, gardening, and field trip, **BE IMMERSED** in direct experience of the natural world, **DEVELOP** practical skills for a more ecologically conscious life, and **ENJOY** expertly prepared vegetarian meals.

**Join us for a truly transformative learning experience!**

Call 618-466-5004 and request a registration form or e-mail your request to [info@lavistaelc.org](mailto:info@lavistaelc.org).  
For more information: [www.lavistaelc.org](http://www.lavistaelc.org). Cost: \$550.



### Shopping Responsibly: Your Choices Can Change the World

Sat., April 20, 9:00 – 11:30 am

How can ordinary people use their shopping dollars to support ethical companies? You can find out when you join us for this informative seminar! Our presenter, Dr. Ellis Jones, researched companies' impact in five areas: the

environment, human rights, community involvement, animal protection and social justice. Using this information he created *The Better World Shopping Guide*, a pocket-sized book which grades brands of everything from cars and cell phones to veggies and eggs. It helps you to make the best choices for our planet and for people!

Cost: \$20. Student rate: \$10.

Held in the Visitor's Center at the Shrine of Our Lady of the Snows.

To register, visit the Shrine's web site: [www.snows.org](http://www.snows.org)

La Vista is a member of the Partnership for Peace,  
a local interfaith group sponsoring this event.

**Dr. Ellis Jones** is a sociology professor at the College of the Holy Cross and scholar of social responsibility, global citizenship and everyday activism. He has dedicated himself to uncovering practical ways for people to turn lofty ideals into practical actions.

### Earth Day Sabbath - An Alternative Celebration of Earth Day Sunday, April 21, 2:00 - 4:00 pm

*We need to rest and to allow Earth to rest.*

*We need a space of quiet  
to reconnect with Mystery, ground of all being.*

*We need to energize our spiritual lives  
so we can persevere in our efforts to restore health  
to our rare and precious planet.*

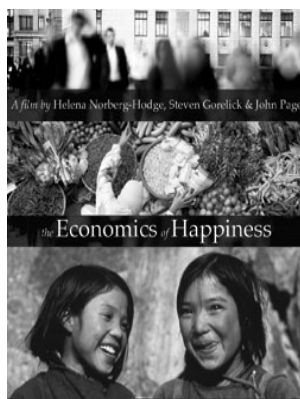
Earth Day Sabbath invites us into communion with  
**the Holy One, one another, and all creation**,  
in the spirit of the sabbath tradition practiced by many  
faith communities.

This **sabbath celebration** includes song and communal  
contemplation to prepare us for a mindful procession on  
our suffering Earth.

A free will offering may be made during the ritual.

Rain date: Sunday, April 28

**“Imagine what millions of us can accomplish...  
we will make our dream of a better world a reality.” -Ellis Jones**



### **“The Economics of Happiness” Film and Discussion**

Friday, February 8,  
7:00 – 8:30 pm

*The Economics of Happiness* is an award winning documentary describing a world moving simultaneously in two opposing directions. On the one hand, government and big business continue to promote globalization and the consolidation of corporate power. On the other hand, people all over the world are working from grassroots to nurture smaller scale, ecological and local economies.

The film shows how “going local” is a powerful strategy to repair our fractured world – our ecosystems, our societies and our selves. The 67 minute film will be viewed interactively, with time for discussion.

Suggested donation: \$5 - \$10.

Registration is required. Call 618-466-5004.



### **Weaving a Blanket Basket**

Saturday, February 9,  
9:30 am – about 4:00 pm

This ancient and satisfying craft unites us with our human ancestors who have been weaving baskets for more than 10,000 years. As we

learn to make a base, weave reeds, and finish off, we'll also enjoy the act of weaving as a meditative practice. For those who have enjoyed our other basket classes, the difficulty level is midway between the bread basket and the tote.

Please bring your lunch. Drinks and snacks will be provided.

**Registration is due by Jan. 26th** so reeds can be ordered.

Led by **Mary Jo Jacobs** who has been weaving baskets for over 10 years.

Cost: \$40.

### **Winterfires Coffeehouse Returns!**

Saturday, January 26, 2013 7:00 - 8:30 pm

This popular gathering promises an intimate evening of camaraderie around a glowing fire in our rustic lodge! This is a magical night of sharing your favorite poems and/or original poetry, as well as inspiring music - real soul food that nourishes us through this wonderful winter season.

Along with your poetry and/or songs, please bring a dessert to share. We'll provide coffee, tea, and hot chocolate. Dress warmly!!



Suggested donation of \$5 - \$10 is appreciated.

### **Raising and Caring for Backyard Chickens: Good for Chickens, Earth, and You!**

Sunday, February 10, 1:30 – 3:30 pm

The reasons for raising chickens are many and compelling: an alternative to the mistreatment of chickens and pollution of factory farms; eggs that are fresh, great-tasting and nutritious; chemical-free bug and weed control; manufacture the world's best fertilizer; and fun and friendly pets with personality! Topics include:

- understanding the “culture” of chickens
- nutrition and general health care
- sustainable shelter design
- how and where to purchase your chicks
- preparing for the arrival of your chicks
- local efforts to promote keeping backyard chickens

Presented by **Bill Ruppert**, St. Louis area urban chicken enthusiast, and **Felicia Breen**, Alton chicken activist.

Donations collected will be sent to Bill's favorite non-profit, Gateway Greening.



**La Vista Program Registration Options**

1. Call to register at 618-466-5004
2. Email us at [info@lavistaelc.org](mailto:info@lavistaelc.org).
3. Complete and mail the form below with your check.

Event Title: \_\_\_\_\_ Date(s) \_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Phone \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_  
Street City State Zip

E-mail: \_\_\_\_\_ I have enclosed a check for: \_\_\_\_\_

**Return to: La Vista Ecological Learning Center 4300 Levis Lane Godfrey, IL 62035**

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**Supporting the Work of La Vista Ecological Learning Center****We are grateful for your support through donations or service.**

- To continue receiving La Vista Visions Newsletter please mail your donation of \$10 to the address above.
- If you would like to receive La Vista Visions electronically, please make that request by emailing us at [info@lavistaelc.org](mailto:info@lavistaelc.org).
- To make a donation to support the Great Work of La Vista, please mail your check to the address above.
- To volunteer at La Vista, please call Sister Maxine at 618-466-5004.

**A World of Health: Connecting People, Place, and Planet****Six Session Discussion Course**

Mondays, 2/18, 25; 3/4, 11, 18, 25 1:00 - 2:30 pm

Together we'll discuss ways we can promote personal health and the health of the world that sustains us in being. We'll also explore the limitations of our current medical model, as well as the connections between human health and our environment. Each session includes readings, video clips, assignments and group discussion questions.

**Discovering a Sense of Place:****Seven Session Discussion Course**

Thurs., 2/28; 3/14, 21; 4/11, 25; 5/9, 23 7:00 – 8:30 pm

Your local region of life is a unique place with its own watershed, soils, climate, plants, animals, and history. How much do you know about it? This discussion course will both deepen your sense of place and explore ways to live in place so we can assure the long-term health of our local regions.

**For both courses please register by January 31 so books can be ordered.** Cost: \$30 for discussion guide.

**Celebrating the Seasons on the Bluffs: Spring Equinox**

Saturday, March 16, 2:00 – 4:00 pm

Join us for a meditative walk in the Oblate woods as we immerse ourselves in the beginning of this lovely season! Please bring your favorite found or original poem about spring to share. Refreshments will be provided. Come dressed to be in the woods. Free will offering is always appreciated.

**The Mystical Perspective of Earth and Cosmic Consciousness**

March 9-23, 2013 and September 1-29, 2013

Those familiar with the Universe Story and eco-spirituality will discover the next step to integrate their understanding with a unitive spirituality that brings hope and meaning to all life. The program includes meditation, teachings, rituals, outdoor experiences, sharing, and reflection time. Presenters: Norman Comtois, OMI, Dorothy Landry, and Denise Turcotte, CSC bring their respective expertise in cosmology, mysticism, and ecology.

**A residential program held at Berakah in Pittsfield, NH.**

For information contact: [berakah@aol.com](mailto:berakah@aol.com); [www.berakah.org](http://www.berakah.org).

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La Vista Ecological Learning Center  
4300 Levis Lane  
Godfrey, IL 62035

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**Offering  
programs  
and resources  
for living  
consciously  
within the  
integrity of Creation.**

**The Oblate Ecological Initiative  
is a ministry of the  
Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate.**

RETURN SERVICE REQUESTED



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or on **Facebook**: [www.facebook.com/EcologicalLearningCenter](https://www.facebook.com/EcologicalLearningCenter)

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There are also important reasons to preserve this particular forest. It

- provides habitat for plants and animals including many federal and state endangered species,
- protects the Youngblood Hollow watershed, local water supplies, and reduces erosion and pollution threat to the Mississippi River,
- is located in the middle of one of the largest contiguous forested areas in Illinois, contributing to the protection of this special area,
- preserves this unique river corridor which provides a habitat for the thousands of migratory birds that pass through here each year.

### Forest Threats and Our Response

Forests worldwide are threatened today. They are cut for timber and pastureland, cleared for agriculture, ruined by acid rain and damaged by invasive species that upset the balance of the eco system. Protecting and caring for a particular forest draws attention to the present threats to forests worldwide.

Most people do not have forests to place in a trust to ensure their protection; however, there are practical things each of us can do to

preserve them. We can

- avoid using paper products like bags, newspapers, paper plates, cups and napkins, since paper production is one main cause of deforestation,
- walk more and drive less since car exhaust is one of the main contributors to acid rain which damages leaves of trees and causes them to produce smaller and fewer seeds,
- choose to eat less meat, (Whether we get our protein from animals or plants has direct implications for how much more of the world's remaining forest is destroyed.)
- reject the notion that we are merely consumers and see ourselves instead as members of the Earth community with responsibility for its well-being.

These are a few behaviors we might change as we listen to the forest, and they have beneficial effects.

Recently we saw a poignant and relevant cartoon. The setting is a psychiatrist's office with a harvested tree lying on the couch. The psychiatrist is saying, "I'm sorry. I wasn't listening." In contrast, our hope is that we will tune in to hear the voice of the forest so the psalmist's words become our heartfelt prayer, "Let all the trees of the forest exult." ☺

(Theological content of this article was inspired by [Ecology at the Heart of Creation](#) by Denis Edwards.)

