



# La Vista Visions

A NEWSLETTER ON THE INTEGRITY OF CREATION

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## Where We Belong

by Judy Cannato

As I write this it is autumn, and it is impossible not to get caught up in the sight of flocks of Canada geese when they fly overhead in V formation. They are beautiful creatures with their brownish-feathered bodies, long black necks, and white cheek patches.

Unfortunately, in some urban settings, they can be a hazard to both humans and themselves when they seek to land in places that are not geese-friendly.

Not long ago while driving home I saw several Canadian geese on the berm of the highway. Traffic had slowed a bit and I could see them clearly. One goose, evidently struck by a car, lay at the side of the road, body limp, one wing extended awkwardly. It appeared to be dying. But the goose was not alone. Four others flanked the injured one, one in front, one behind, one on either side. These fearless attendants stood erect, attentive, as rush-hour traffic passed by. I had heard that Canadian geese, rather than abandon one of their own, will stand watch until a fallen member of the flock either dies or is able to fly again. What I witnessed that day leads me to believe that this is true.



I began to learn about Canadian geese. The more I reflect upon their behavior, the more they speak to me of the sense of belonging that is such an essential part of community.

Geese speak to me of what it means to be part of something larger than the ego-self, to be connected with others in a way that is vital and meaningful. They do not have the characteristics of rugged individualists with no sense of connectedness to others. Instead, these geese exemplify shared responsibility and attentiveness to one another's needs. When a flock takes flight, for example, there is no single leader who heads the formation for the duration of their flight. When a lead goose tires, it drops to the tail of the V where there is less drag and it can almost coast along for a while. In the spring, while the female is incubating the nest, the gander stands guard, protecting his partner and future offspring from predators. In the summer months the female stands watch so that her mate and children can feed. The stronger geese will not feed until the weaker ones have eaten.

Anyone who has observed Canadian geese may have noticed that they seem to make the most noise when they land – and they do not have an especially melodious honk! The noise is not superfluous, however. The honking acts as a signal, a honing

device for those geese who may be straggling behind or who have flown off course. No one gets left behind or remains lost, but everyone is guided to a safe landing.

During the summer months the geese molt, then grow new flight feathers. Unable to fly for about a month, the flock walks, sometimes very long distances, as they feed and seek shelter. Walking means that the geese may move slowly, even clumsily, from place to place. They must be vigilant, for it is during this time that they are most vulnerable. This experience of the shared vulnerability of the whole flock is the characteristic that most invites me to deeper reflection about belonging in community.

In my association with the Sisters of St. Joseph I have been privileged to experience what it means to have a sense of belonging. The community is composed of many powerfully gifted women. Some lead for a while, having visible public roles, then move on to ministries that are often on the margins of society where they continue to respond to "the dear neighbor" in whatever flock they have been called to serve. During the past de-

cade or more I have been brought along, mentored by those whose experience and wisdom have offered protection when I needed it. They have honked attentively, helping me find my bearings when my wings were weakened and I fell behind, or when I began to stray off course. And I have been invited to use my gifts as well, sharing responsibilities for living a charism that works for unity and reconciliation in the world. This is community, the place where I belong.

Being in a committed community relationship is not easy, even when there is a great sense of belonging. We walk together, sometimes gracefully, sometimes clumsily. Unfortunately, unlike geese, there is no designated time of year that we all shed old feathers together. It seems that there is always someone molting. Eventually we see one another's weaknesses. Our shadows are exposed. We become vulnerable to one another in ways that challenge us to love like we have never loved before. It would be foolish to say that we always rise to the occasion. We don't. But on those occasions when we are present and open and attentive to

*(continued on page 3)*

## Letter from the Director

## Winter Solstice, 2008



Winter Greetings from *La Vista* ! As I write these words our mild Autumn has quickly turned frigid. May this newsletter find you warm and well!

How does the natural world in the northern hemisphere respond to this time of year? The phrase that comes to my mind is “by slowing down”. Bears hibernate, plants go dormant, pets sleep, rivers freeze.....everything slows.

Except for Western humans. *It seems that we are the ones that largely live alienated from a seasonal consciousness.* 24/7/365 availability and staying continually busy are our cultural aspirations. Celebrating the Winter Solstice strikes us as quaint or even heretical. Fasting from tomatoes and strawberries this time of year is judged as weird.

How might we enter into the deep wisdom of the natural world at this time? Maybe we can pull up a chair to a window and gaze upon the out-of-doors: really see what's before us and learn. Or take a Winter walk and observe. Perhaps taking up centering prayer, journaling and/or meditating can align us with the slowed speed of so much else just now.

The fields of the *Community Supported Garden at La Vista*

have provided tens of thousands of pounds of produce in these first six years of the farm. This land, along with our farmers, have worked hard. The fields are now planted with cover crop and rest at this time. This healthy soil and its innumerable microbes are refreshed in Winter's respite.

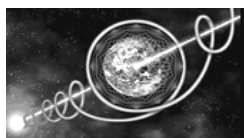
We also take a bit of time from the work of *La Vista Ecological Learning Center*. Maxine, Mary Jo and myself reflect on the year of blessing that has gone by and recall the folks we have been able to be with: participants in the Earth Literacy program and those attending seasonal celebrations, eco-spiritual retreats and days of reflection. Our work with the Integrity of Creation has taken us from Ontario, Canada to San Fernando, CA to Baltimore, MD to San Antonio, TX. We step back at this time extremely grateful for the chance to participate in what our mentor Thomas Berry calls “the Great Work”.

A word that has followed the recent elections is “hope”. It was striking how so many from around the world found this event to be a hope-filled time. Let us also find hope in these upcoming holy days on the Christian calendar. How might we understand anew for these new times Jesus' birth, life, witness, prophetic challenge and death? How might Jesus' example embolden hope?

How can this Winter season, which ultimately comes from the Word, teach us to hope? Let us slow down and attune ourselves to the beauty, the simplicity and the reflection that this season brings forth.

-Maurice Lange, OMI

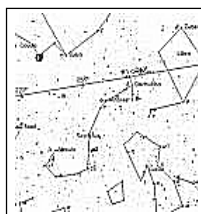
## Creating a Mutually Enhancing Human / Earth Relationship



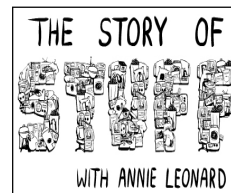
**“The Only Solution is Our Own Conscious Evolution”** If this motto rings true to you, you may want to visit Barbara Marx Hubbard's “Foundation for Conscious Evolution” web site and learn more. Her DVD “Humanity Ascending” is available for purchase, and offers a compelling vision of hope that sees us at an evolutionary edge where the old world is dying and the new world is being born. Visit [www.barbaramarxhubbard.com](http://www.barbaramarxhubbard.com).

### The Story of Stuff by Annie Leonard

As you are inundated with ads, sales, and “shop ‘til you drop” messages this season, spend a precious 20 minutes viewing **The Story of Stuff**. This fast-paced, fact-filled look at the underside of our production and consumption patterns will encourage your efforts to live in a countercultural way during the holidays. It'll teach you something, it'll make you laugh, and it just may change the way you look at all the stuff in your life forever. Visit [www.storyofstuff.com](http://www.storyofstuff.com) and view this very informative movie online.



**Your Sky** Wintertime provides us with many crystal clear nights to view wonderful subjects in the sky! If you need help locating constellations you'll appreciate *Your Sky*, the interactive planetarium of the Web, offering stargazers different skymaps created from data about your specific location. For example, **Sky Map** shows the entire sky as viewed from a given location at a specified time and date; **Horizon Views** shows the stars above the horizon as seen from a specified observing site at a given date and time. To take advantage of this amazing site, go to [www.fourmilab.ch/yoursky/](http://www.fourmilab.ch/yoursky/) or Google “Your Sky”.

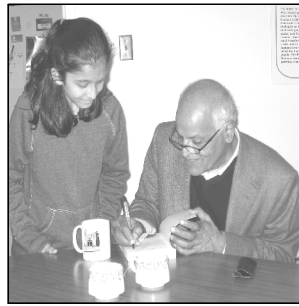




Participants in Lenten Discussion Course



"Ethics of Eating" Conference



Satish Kumar Lecture



Jan Novotka Concert



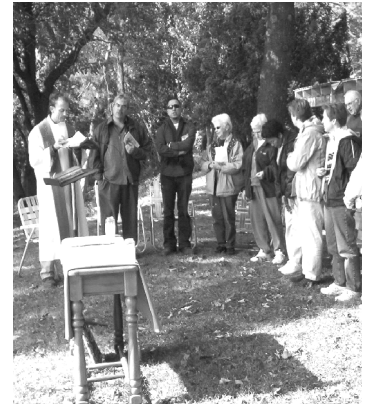
Earth Literacy Revisited



High School Day at LaVista



Earth Literacy Staff



Intercommunity Novitiate Day



Autumn Equinox



## 2008 Year in Review



Holy Trinity Field Day



Earth Literacy

(continued from page 1)

one another – when we behave a bit like Canadian geese – we come together in love. And love is where we all belong.

*We all belong in the heart of God.* We belong in God; that is where our heart has its home. In God's heart we always find what we need: the attentiveness, the responsiveness, the safe haven for our vulnerable selves.

*We all belong in the heart of God.* We belong to God, not as a possession to be grasped, but as a partner in a loving union in which we become free and vibrantly alive. And, paradoxically, God belongs to us – again, not as a possession to be grasped, but as a pouring out of Godself that infuses us with love and sends us forth to be that love for others.

*We all belong in the heart of God.* Everyone belongs. No one is excluded. No one is left alone or behind, for we journey together and are who we are by virtue of our belonging to one another.

We are invited to community by Love itself. This call at the heart of community means not only that we are responsible to belong, but that we make sure others experience a sense of belonging as well. It is in belonging that we are stretched,

that we learn how to be responsible and attentive. It is in belonging that we find out who we are and walk in the vulnerability of that knowledge. It is in belonging that we learn things about life and love that we can learn in no other way. It is in community that we grow to appreciate the meaning of belonging, for to be attentive and responsive and vulnerable will not only allow us to belong, but will open our hearts so that others may belong as well. This is a community at its best – the experience of communion and connectedness rooted in something bigger than ourselves – and Canadian geese are mentors capable of teaching us what belonging in community really is. ☺

*Judy Cannato is an author, a retreat facilitator and spiritual director. She is married, with two grown sons, and is an Associate member of the Congregation of St. Joseph. Judy has been doing retreat ministry and spiritual direction for twenty years. Her books include Radical Amazement: Contemplative Lessons from Black Holes, Supernovas, and other Wonders of the Universe. Watch for her new book, Fields of Compassion, to be published in 2009.*

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## Our Oblate Future: Color it Green!

by Maurice Lange, OMI

Since 1950, the land here at *La Vista* has served as novitiate for hundreds (thousands?) of Oblate novices. These bluffs are also home to countless species of plants, animals, birds and microbes. Together, novices and these other creatures form *one community* of life.

*One community of life.* Certainly this reality is not at the forefront of our consciousness as Western people. (And yet, we can't take our next breath without this community!) The reality of this broadened sense of community seems under-emphasized in our religious houses. The point of this article is to share what is happening at one religious formation house where "community" is an inclusive and broadened term!

Since 2001, the land here at *La Vista* has also served as home for the Oblate Ecological Initiative: the *La Vista Ecological Learning Center* and the *Community Supported Garden at La Vista*. Our ministry has included outreach to both the local Oblate novices and the St. Louis intercommunity novitiate. In such days of reflection, field trips and classes we strive to evoke from the novices a broadened and deepened perception of "community".

Kentucky farmer, poet, and philosopher Wendell Berry has said that "*you can't know who you are until you know where you are*".

If there is any truth to this statement, then my own novitiate year might have been invalid!! During religious formation in the 1980's, there was a wonderful and very helpful emphasis put on psychology. We were really encouraged to get to know ourselves as well as our "family of origin". If we had issues that

needed further work, psychological counseling was made available. As helpful as all this was in getting to know ourselves, there wasn't much attention given assisting us getting to know where we were! I had no idea that where I was was actually at an area of confluence of 3 great rivers: the *Mississippi*, the *Illinois* and the *Missouri*. I was making my novitiate year on bluffs where Indigenous peoples likely made vision quests. That much of the geographical area for my tender year of formation was (and is still) being used for huge monocropping of corn and soybeans. Looking out from my novitiate house was not only a wonderful view but part of a major migratory route for waterfowl.

While my novitiate year back in the Eighties was certainly *not* invalid, it can be judged as lacking. I did not get to know my deep self in that I did not get to know my surroundings. What truth is there in the statement that "me and my surroundings are one"?

Perhaps a more holistic sense of self is emerging in today's novices.

In the early stages of each contemporary novitiate year the *Ecological Learning Center* is asked to provide a time for the novices to appreciate this land and this place. We first ask the young men to reflect on their own "bioregions": where they are from, the animal and plant life there, the geographical features, the human cultures, the weather patterns, their source of drinking water. Often we are overwhelmed at the novice's abundant energy for this reflection exercise: they tell the story of their native region of life with much energy, zest and zeal! Of course they are missing home, but in this, we are attempting to help them re-root themselves as novice missionaries in this new community of life here on the bluffs. We take them for a hike on our 255 acres of preserved woods, fields and trails. We introduce them to the view of "*La Vista*". We point out our source of drinking water (the *Mississippi*). We link our usage of electricity to the coal-fired power plant obscuring our view just across the river. We explain the concept of sustainable agriculture in the midst of the beauty of the *Community Supported Garden* (the source of some of our food).

We tour the novitiate house and point out recycling stations and clotheslines. This orientation to our own "backyard" elicits a deepened sense of place and belonging.

Soon thereafter in the novitiate year comes a change in seasons: the Autumnal Equinox. (The *Ecological Learning Center* observes each new season with its solstice and





equinox celebrations. These orient us not only to where we are geographically but also where we are in Earth's annual journey around its star, the Sun. We reflect on each new season by engaging memories, telling stories and being blessed by poetry.) For the Autumn Equinox this past September we strolled out to the lovely "bluff pasture" here at *La Vista*. There, novices and laity alike were invited to



interact with nature and their own creativity to come up with a "balancing stick": a stick decorated with Autumn grasses, flowers, and leaves bound up with yarn and ribbon. All enjoyed the simple challenge of balancing their unique creations on one finger symbolizing the balance of "*equi-nox*", that is- a time in our year of equal night and day. The youngest helped turn the sun staff to ring in Autumn before we walked to the lodge for a pot-luck feast.

As the leaves began to turn in earnest in late October, we took the novices on a bioregional field trip. I can't help but think they got to know themselves better that day learning first-hand *where* they were! We journeyed up the *Mississippi* to its confluence with the *Illinois*. Just past the river town of Grafton, IL, we rode a ferry boat into Calhoun County and were treated by a native-born gentleman to a walking tour of open space and apple orchard. What a delight it was to breathe fresh air and to pick and eat fresh apples! These trees giving of themselves and inspiring us to give generously in return! There was much laughter and lightness in the novices stride walking upon Mother Earth that day.

We picnicked at Pere Marquette Park and hiked her lovely trails coming across exposed rock billions of years old. The views of the Illinois River valley left the novices awestruck.

That same week saw us treated by another local to a boat ride on the *Illinois* and *Mississippi*. The tour guide provided some interesting narration as to the history, hydrology and local lore of this bioregion. Seeing the beauty of the bluffs from the perspective of



the rivers helped each of us to treasure where we get to live. Witnessing the famous Asian carp flying out of the river gave us new respect for the balance of ecosystems and the disruption that can occur when exotic species are introduced.

With currently nine months left in this novitiate year, these seven young men from Texas, California and Zambia, Africa, are coming to feel at home in this new region of life. While immersing themselves in Oblate community, they are also consciously entering into a Great Communion.

This brings to mind the words of songwriter Jan Novotka:

*"We are one in the spirit,  
we are one body,  
there is One Great Communion  
with Earth, Sky and Sea."*

After all, aren't we all novices when it comes to consciously entering the Great Communion of God's ongoing creation?! This time of year, let us learn from our Oblate novices and enter with much energy, zest and zeal ! ☻

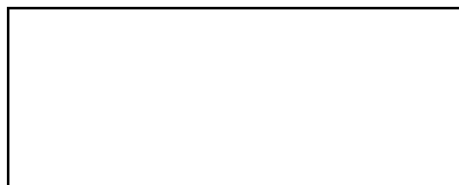




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***"I felt so small  
in comparison  
to the Universe  
and its Story;  
nevertheless,  
I felt precious  
and deeply loved  
by God"***

- Oblate novice  
Jesse Esqueda



Visit us at [www.lavistaELC.org](http://www.lavistaELC.org) & [www.lavistaCSA.org](http://www.lavistaCSA.org)

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From the Oblate novices here at *La Vista* . . .

*"Participating in the Cosmic Walk helped broaden my perspective and recognize that I am part of something greater than myself and deepen my appreciation of ancestral beginnings. It was an experience of awe and wonder.*



*As much as we have been able to discover how nature works and its origins through science, the universe and all its creation is a mystery and is something I embrace."*  
Lucio Castillo

*"Through the video shown of Sister Dorothy Stang's example, and now, martyrdom, she personifies, for me, the voice for the voiceless in today's greedy and consumerist world."*  
David Uribe

*"We often think that we take care of nature, which in some ways is true, but the basic truth is that Mother Nature takes care of us more than we do."*  
Felix Nyambe

*"Many thanks to La Vista Ecological Learning Center for making us remember certain important things about Mother Earth."*

Joseph Nkomeshya

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

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