



La Vista Visions

A NEWSLETTER ON THE INTEGRITY OF CREATION

Published by the Oblate Ecological Initiative

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Spring 2005
Volume 4, Issue 13

'The Integrity of All of Creation'... The Basis for Contemporary Theology and Spirituality

By Dianne Bergant, CSA

Time and again we have heard it said that we are in the midst of a paradigm shift. Our scientific-technological achievements have thrust us out of the confines of classical western civilization into a new age, but our advances in devising a corresponding theological worldview have not kept pace. Traditional patterns of religious thought and conventional expressions of spirituality once so meaningful and reassuring now seem empty and obsolete, at times making religion itself appear to be archaic. Today we face the challenge of either devising a viable religious worldview that is more compatible with contemporary knowledge and experience, or resigning ourselves to religious thinking that is either out of date or, if attuned to contemporary science, lacking a solid theological foundation.



One of the areas where this has become most obvious is our attitude toward the rest of the natural world. Many of us see creation as simply a storehouse of natural resources, created by God to meet our needs and fulfill our desires. Sensitivity to the needs of others often led the more privileged to do what they could so that the less fortunate might have 'a bigger piece of the pie.' This caused no hardship when it seemed that there was no limit to that 'pie.' However, in many cases we have not only reached the limits of the 'pie,' but have come to discover that the 'pie' is getting smaller. This means that we will have to deprive ourselves for the sake of others. Add to this the fact that along the way we have contaminated some of the ingredients of the pie. It seems that our foolhardiness has put us all at risk. What are we to do?

The Integrity of Creation

We are natural creatures and everything about us is a part of the natural world or mediated to us through it. We are not independent of it; we are dependent on it. Technology has often led

us to believe that we can step outside of our environment to examine it and control it. However, it is important to remember that we do not merely live within our environment as we live within a building. We may be a unique dimension of the natural world, but we are not separate from it. We are part of it, and it is

part of us. Humankind is embedded in nature, in the very creative matrix that has given life and continues to give life.

Nature is also embedded in human beings. We are truly children of the universe, made of the same stuff as the mountains and the rain, the sand and the stars. We are governed by the laws of life and growth and death as are the birds and the fish and the grass of the field. We thrive in the warmth of and through the agency of the sun as does every other living thing.

We come from the earth as from a mother, and we are nourished from this same source of life. It should be easy to see that the intrinsic integrity of all creation is basic to everything about us.

What does the phrase 'integrity of all creation' mean? It has been defined in the following way: "The value of all creatures in and for themselves, for one another, and for God, and their interconnectedness in a diverse whole that has unique value for God, together constitute the integrity of creation" (Annecy report of the World Council of Churches, 1988). The emphasis in this definition is on the interconnectedness of creation. All creatures have meaning in themselves, but they do not exist in, for, or by themselves. This is as true of humankind as it is of other creatures.

The biblical narratives provide us with a distinct understanding of creation's intrinsic integrity. The world has not been created merely for human use. The Bible is very clear on this point. Most interpreters contend that the Bible disallows a fundamentally

Letter from the Director

Spring has sprung! In mid-late March as I write the daffodils have confidently emerged from underneath the piles of decaying leaves on the nearby forest floor and are nearing bloom. The Vernal Equinox happened amidst a sunny day yesterday. Indeed Spring is here! What is the gift that this season presents to you? New vision? Fresh perspective? Renewed commitment? A lively heart?

Spring calls forth new hope in so many ways; not the least of which can be found in the ritual of planting seeds. The **La Vista Ecological Learning Center** recently initiated the season with our annual Spring Equinox celebration that included potato planting, poetry, pondering, procession and prayer. Perhaps you too can find a way to ritualize this meaning-filled time of year. Is it any wonder the Christian church celebrates the seasons of Lent and Easter during late Winter and early Spring?!

Seed planting is exactly what our farmer, Amy Cloud, has been quite busy with as the **Community Supported Garden**

at La Vista kicks off its third season. Our greenhouse is filled with trays and trays of delicate seedlings. These will be transplanted to



Spring Potato Planting in the nearby Discovery Garden

Spring Equinox, 2005

the fields in due time which will in turn bear fruit for our shareholders. As we enlarge our shareholder base this season, we currently have some slots open for new shareholders- please call 618-467-2104 or go to www.lavistacsa.org to learn more.

Spring began a bit early for me this year. In late January I was graced to attend a retreat with my Oblate Brothers in Dickinson, Texas. Our director was **Sr. Dianne Bergant, CSA**, noted scripture scholar currently serving at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago. I believe she is one of the first women to direct a retreat for our new province of Oblates. Dianne's authoritative words certainly led to a new and fresh perspective, to renewed and lively hearts! One day during the retreat, when focusing on the gospel of Mark 4: 26-34, Dianne invited us to reflect on the **Integrity of Creation**. Toward the end of the very informative and inspiring presentation Dianne stated "...and I don't believe that ecology is a justice issue, (pause) justice is an ecological issue; everything is an ecological issue, we are fighting wars over ecological issues." I am sure you will find it worth your (and the Earth's) while to spend some time with Dianne's article (which flows from her retreat presentation) in this issue of *La Vista Visions*. As we all try to deepen our perception of Creation's Integrity, voices like Dianne's make an immense contribution.

May the seeds *you* sow this Spring bear abundant fruit! May new awareness arise within you and our society that will help birth a mutually enhancing human/Earth relationship! ☯

- Maurice Lange, OMI

Creating A Mutually Enhancing Human/Earth Relationship

Spring Green Cleaning!

A lot of over the counter cleaning products are harsh, abrasive and even potentially dangerous to your home and family. Since you are concerned about risks to your health and the environment, you may want to consider using homemade, all-natural cleaning products. Here are some effective cleaning products you can easily make at home.

Stain Remover

1 tsp. vegetable-oil based soap
1/4 cup vinegar
1/2 cup water

Drain Opener

1/2 cup baking soda
1/2 cup vinegar
warm water to rinse

Dusting Spray

1 tsp. olive oil
1/2 cup white vinegar

Fabric Softener

add 1/4 cup white vinegar
to last rinse cycle

Glass Cleaner

1/2 cup white vinegar
gallon of water

Wood Polish

1/8 cup food-grade
linseed oil
1/8 cup vinegar 1/4 cup
lemon juice

All Purpose Cleaner

1/2 cup pure soap
gallon hot water
1/4 cup lemon juice



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Discovery Garden Wins 2004 Illinois Governor's Hometown Award!



The "Discovery Garden - A Children's Organic Community Garden" is located next door to the Ecological Initiative on former Oblate land. It is situated in a natural-setting park owned by the village of Godfrey. Over one thousand children dug into the garden during 2004! The mission of the Discovery Gar-



den is carried out by the *Community Cultivators*: a local non-profit corporation co-founded by Maurice Lange. The work of the Discovery Garden is clearly not only in the cultivating of food, but also of consciousness and community. For more information contact 618-465-1725.



Discovery Garden's Mission Statement

The Discovery Garden at La Vista Park will teach children, through organic means, about their natural source of food. This tangible learning experience will promote the children's connection with the soil and natural cycles of Earth. The fostering of an appreciation of nature will increase the children's Earth Literacy.

The Garden will provide an alternative, creative outdoor activity and will encourage the holistic growth of our community's consciousness. ©



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theocentric (God-centered) perspective within which the principal value of creation lies more in the fact of its existence from God (intrinsic value) than in its usefulness to humans (instrumental value). For example, the intrinsic value of creatures is presumed in biblical passages such as the creation narratives (Genesis 1-3), the YHWH Speeches (Job 38-41), and various other poetic sections (e.g., Psalm 104). A brief look at the role played by the natural world in these passages will reveal the theocentric character of biblical theology and its recognition of the intrinsic value of the natural world.

Creation

Some people blame the Bible for the ecological crisis within which we find ourselves. In doing this, they quote the command found in the first account of creation given by God to the newly created man and woman: “subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and all the living things that move on the earth” (Gen 1:28). However, such an accusation fails to remember that this first couple were told to “subdue” and “have dominion” as images of God, not as gods themselves. They were not to exercise independent control, but were to be agents of God in the world. In fact, in the second account we read that the first sin was one of hubris. They wanted to “be like gods who know what is good and what is bad.” It is also in this second account that we get another glimpse of the role that human beings are to play in the created world. The man is told “to till and care for [the garden]” (Gen 2:15.) Since the word for “till” comes from the Hebrew word for ‘serve,’ we might translate the injunction: “serve and care for it.” This is hardly a license for exploitation.

The creation accounts certainly do portray human beings as exercising a certain control over the rest of creation. However, they are to exercise this control in God’s place and to do so in the way that God would exercise control. Theirs is the responsibility of caring for the world. While earlier understandings of these accounts may have resulted in forms of arrogant exploitation, contemporary understandings challenge such attitudes.

Job

The book of Job is much more than the story of a holy man who, in the face of misfortune, never gave up trusting in God. In fact, this sketch is only found in the first two chapters and last ten verses of a forty-two chapter book. What is happening in the other forty chapters of the book? Job is criticizing his visitors as well as the God he judges to be responsible for the hardships that are overwhelming him. In fact, the suffering of Job simply sets the stage for the profound theological drama that is taking place: How is one to reconcile innocent suffering and the justice of God? Throughout the book, Job agonizes over questions of divine justice: What is the meaning of innocent suffering? Why has God allowed it to all but consume the righteous? These are questions that challenge the very order in the universe. From Job’s point of view, his life is in shambles, the universe itself might just as well revert to chaos too.

How does God respond to Job’s entreaties and demands? God never even addresses Job’s plight, never even mentions questions of justice. Rather, God points to the natural world. ‘Behold the spectacular created world I have made. Can you do this? Can you even understand it?’ The animals to which God points are all out of the control of the people hearing the story. In other words, though they seem to be of little or no use to human beings, they are certainly cared for by God. It is clear to Job that the created world belongs to God and not to Job.

God’s questioning moves Job out of the realm of human concerns and carries him in the broader world of creation. And the remarkable result of this is Job’s own change of heart. He seems to be content to leave his own fate in the hands of the God in whose hands is the rest of creation: “I have dealt with great things that I do not understand; things too wonderful for me, which I cannot know” (Job 42:3). Consideration of the created world may not have answered Job’s questions, but it seems to have resolved his dilemma.

Psalm 104

This psalm, which is a nature hymn recalling the Genesis story of creation, is certainly one of the most beautiful psalms in the entire Psalter. It begins with a self-summons to sing the praises of God. It is clear that the psalmist is overwhelmed by the splendor of the universe and is brimming with praise for the creator of such grandeur. In fact, this awesome experience of creation is itself a revelation of God. The brilliance of nature is God’s glorious robe. To behold creation is to encounter God. This concept is not unlike the idea found in the Book of Job where God spoke to Job from within the whirlwind. The natural world reveals God.

Of all the creation motifs present in



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nent is water. The earth itself was established amidst cosmic water and then covered with protective ocean water as with a garment. Hearty spring waters refresh the earth and the animals that find their home both on the land or in the sky. Water brings vegetation to life on the earth, making it a steady source of food. Although it was initially chaotic and threatening, through God's gracious act of creation, water has become the indispensable source of life for all living creatures.

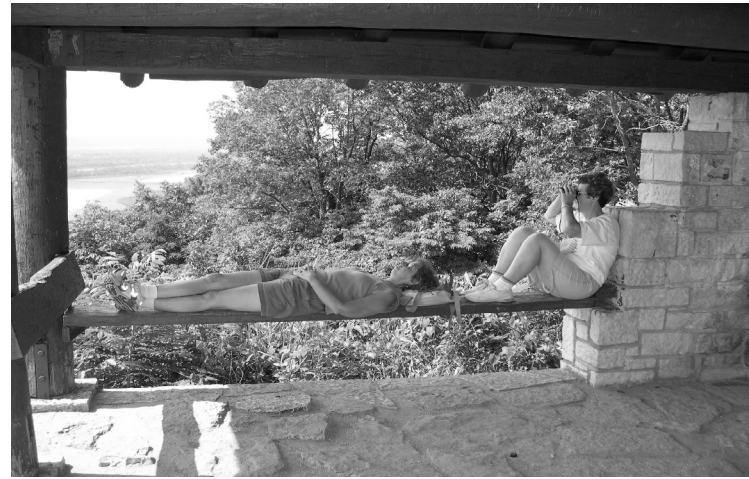
The creation narrative and this psalm response both underscore the fact of God's activity. None of this nurturing happens haphazardly, nor is there any struggle between God and the forces of nature. All of nature serves the designs of God. In fact, in the psalm it is God who acts through nature; God sends the springs and raises the grass. God has created these marvels and then works through them for the benefit of all. No wonder the psalmist is inspired by creation to sing the praises of the creator.

Creation Mysticism

Creation itself is a never-ending source of knowledge. As we learn more and more about the wonders of this world, we discover certain laws or patterns, laws or patterns that govern our life as well. We so often take for granted the variety of life forms with which our earth is blessed. A moment spent in a garden where color and aroma invade the senses or in a woods clothed with radiant autumn foliage will quickly remind us of its lavish adornment. Animals too are so different. The same area can be home for two- and four-legged creatures, birds and insects as well as fish. Amidst such diversity, some mysterious balance seems to have been achieved in nature. The life force that pulses within one form is restrained by the life force within another, and everything contributes to the vitality of the whole. This harmony and interdependence is a marvel to behold.

All of our experiments and probings and studies seem to lead us to the same question: what is the source of all of this regularity, this interdependence, this harmony, this balance? It is no wonder that our ancestors worshiped nature, not merely because of its beauty or because of its power, but because of its mystery. They frequently referred to this mystery as wisdom, and cried out in wonder, "Where shall wisdom be found? And where is the place of understanding?" Search as they may, search as we may, this wisdom is beyond the grasp of human comprehension. We stand dumfounded before the questions of nature, the questions from the whirlwind:

How were the foundations of the earth laid?
How were its measurements determined?
How are the seas kept in place?
Where does the animal get its instinct?
How did the horse get its strength?
What makes the hawk soar?



Whether we respond to the questions with myth or with science, the answer is the same—God! We may be able to chart the progress that the world has made, but we cannot thereby uncover its secret. It came from some numinous reality, it is sustained in mystery, and it seems to tend toward something we cannot perceive. We are governed by this same mystery, not merely by the laws of nature but by the mystery in which these laws are grounded. We have but to follow the example of the rest of creation and surrender ourselves to it. There is no need to fear, for it is this mystery that has brought us into being and continues to carry us tenderly next to its heart. It calls to us gently but constantly through the beauty and the challenge of the world, if we will only listen.

This presence of God, this stirring of God in the world, cannot be localized as can be the episodes in the story of salvation. It is too rudimentary, too elusive, and more like a constant dynamic than a historical event. Nor does it lend itself to human-like conceptions such as trailblazer, warrior, judge or savior. The language we use to speak of this divine manifestation may sound impersonal—creator, origin, source. But what does one call the thriving, burning, intoxicating mystery within reality?

Who can even begin to imagine the mystery that is God? We need no tradition to tell us that God is ineffable; we can come to that realization by ourselves by contemplating the wonders of the natural world of which we are a part. The numinous within creation, regulating and balancing, and the hidden stream of righteousness that flows beneath the surface of human community are not the only manifestations of the mystery that we call God. All we need do is ponder and consider.

What is it in life that we invariably turn toward as the leaf turns toward the sun? What is the compelling attraction that seems ever-present yet out of reach? What is it that dips into the center of our beings and draws us out into—into what? Into itself? It is the light that brings everything into focus, but cannot itself be seen. It is the silence that carries every sound. It is until we come to know.



“The whole multiple and varied universe manifests the divine goodness more perfectly than any single creature could do.”

--Thomas Aquinas (1225 - 1274)

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What is it toward which all of our yearnings tend? What is the final goal of our striving? Wherein do we find our peace? Our rest? Why have we. . . you and I... even been brought into this constant flow of becoming, and disclosure, and pressing forward? Why?—Because! We. . . you and I. . . have been called by, attracted to, and loved by, God. And why?—Simply because!

We strain forward toward that which is already within and within which we are. We search for what we already possess and what possesses us. We seek to fill ourselves with what can only empty us, to contain within ourselves that which is boundless. We are finite beings with an inclination toward the infinite. We yearn for God.

We are overwhelmed by the radiance of the universe, its symmetry, its power,—but it is not enough. We are speechless before human creations, music and art, structure and form, imagery and thought—but it is not enough. Behind all of this, within all of this, is something else, something that we know but we cannot comprehend. It is the reason why; it is the explanation of how. It is the place from which and to which; it is now. It is!

And so we continue to turn toward it, to be compelled by it, to search for it, because that is all we can do. We continue to ask questions, the answers of which we already know, because that is all we can do. We believe and trust, and believe further and trust

more deeply, because that is all we can do. We immerse ourselves in the mystery in which we are already immersed, and we will know that this is God. ☯

Dianne Bergant, CSA is a Professor of Biblical Studies at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago. She was President of the Catholic Biblical Association of America (2000-1) and has been an active member of the Chicago Catholic/Jewish Scholars Dialogue for the past eighteen years. She is the Old Testament book reviewer of *The Bible Today*, having been a member of the editorial board for twenty-five years. Five of these years she served as the magazine's general editor. She is now on



the editorial boards of *Biblical Theology Bulletin*, and *Preach*. She writes the weekly column *The Word for America* magazine. She is currently working in the areas of biblical interpretation and biblical theology, particularly issues of peace, ecology and feminism.

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