

Wednesday July 11, 2012

Only worth something if it makes money?

By Jim Taylor

What is it about wild land that alienates us?

I've just come back from a walk in the woods, on the ridge that rises above our house. When we first moved here, almost 20 years ago, one thing that I particularly loved about this area – especially since we had just moved from the concrete suburbs of Toronto – was the walking trails along this untouched, unimproved, undeveloped ridge.

But that pristine environment has been whittled away, lot by lot.

One favoured trail got literally blasted out of existence – dynamited and leveled for a house. Another owner strung fences across a walking path used by generations, to contain his horses. On today's walk I passed a property where the owner had bulldozed every single tree.

I don't question the owners' legal right to do what they want with their property. If I owned that land, I would want that same right -- although I probably would not do what they did.

I do question the apparently unchallenged assumption that land has value only when it is cleared, farmed, paved, or covered with buildings.

Wild is worthless

I've yet to hear of a municipality that assigns any value to wild land in calculating its assets. Wild land is seen only as a potential site for houses, golf courses, or industrial parks. It has no value as a habitat for owls and squirrels, as a sponge for retaining rain, as a sanctuary where diversity can flower...

In urban planners' eyes, a paved parking lot that grows nothing has economic value. An endless ocean of flat warehouse roofs has value. Even a landfill site that will remain toxic for centuries has value.

But untouched woods are worth nothing.

Nature, as friend and former minister Bob Thompson observes, shows an amazing ability to heal its wounds. Healing, he argues, is the underlying principle of existence. Over time, polluted streams clean themselves. New seedlings green the blackened ruins of a forest fire.

Granted, nature itself can do enormous damage.

Barely 400 years ago, a volcano devastated the Nass River valley in northern B.C. White-hot lava flows seared the valley bottom, sealing it in solid rock. Ash smothered upstream benches.

But nature started its healing process immediately. Lichens and mosses muted the harsh lava. Seeds found crevices to root in. All that ash made soils incredibly fertile.

Festering sores

As far as I know, nature's efforts to recover have never made things worse. Nature seems to have no autoimmune diseases, no necrotizing fasciitis that consumes its host.

Except us. Aside from rats and cockroaches, nature has been so thoroughly expurgated from the festering cores of Mexico City, Manila, or Mumbai, or from the concrete canyons of Toronto or New York, that healing would now require excising humans from the equation.

Of course those are extreme examples. But they're a direct extension of the mindset that land has value only when developed for human use.

If we view land as worthless until humans exploit it, then we ultimately make Manila's garbage piles our Holy Grail.

Sometimes I'm almost glad I'm growing old. With any luck, I won't be around long enough to see "my" wooded ridge stripped bare and paved over.

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YOUR TURN

Several of you chastised me (mildly) after last week's column on the relationship of language and mysticism. (Although, interestingly, no one leapt to the defence of Robbie Burns.)

"I would suggest your education in mysticism has been somewhat deficient," Art Gans wrote. "All you have to do is look at pre-Augustinian Christianity in the British Isles. Columba, Columcille, Patrick, et al all had profoundly mystical tendencies. Look at the Celtic poets for mystical imagery. I have several books of Celtic prayers that I will stand up against any of the western mystics you care to name."

I still contend that they did not practise their mysticism in English, but in some variant of Gaelic.

But then Bob Wild sent a list of mystics who did work with English. "There are a great many writers of mystical treatises in English, though not many are read today. Here are only a few I know about:

14th century -- Anonymous: "The Cloud of Unknowing", "The Study of Wisdom"

Walter Hilton: "The Ladder of Perfection"

Richard Rolle - mystical treatises

16-17th century - John Donne, poetry

Thomas Traherne: "Meditations"

19th century - Emma Herman - 6 major works

Evelyn Underhill - "Mysticism", "The Golden Sequence", and many other books

20th century - Thomas Kelly (Quaker) - "A Testament of Devotion"

Douglas Steere - several writings

Will Quinlan - "The Temple of God's Wounds"

"We have done much better than you think!" Bob concluded.

Clare Neufeld asked, "I take it you have strict rules about who is a real mystic vs a mere 'wannabe'? Perhaps the definition of what constitutes a mystic is what gets in the way? The Freemasons hold that they have mystics within their ancient (even current) ranks."

Clare drew my attention to a Scottish mystic, Lucy Menzies, whose story can be found at <http://www.allsaints-standrews.org.uk/History/MenziesMystic.html>

Judyth Mermelstein suggested, "You must see mysticism as a rather limited subset of what I'd mean by the term. Chanting is only one possible method of attaining oneness with the infinite, and even there sibilants aren't an obstacle--there are plenty of them in Sanskrit."

Judyth amplified with some insights into ancient Hebrew: "The languages of Judaism--ancient Hebrew and Aramaic--were written without vowel signs but nonetheless spoken with vowels. There is some divergence on how many sibilants are included: the letter tet is a 't' for some and an 's' for others (e.g., tallit/tallis)...

She also had some interesting comments related to Bill Peterson's worship service of "The Nameless": "You seemed to find his description surprising. My first thought: it's clearly an offshoot of Judaism!"

“The true name of God has not been spoken since Roman times, since it could only be said once a year by the High Priest in the tabernacle of the Temple of Jerusalem [destroyed in AD 70, JT]. The usual ‘Adonai’ means ‘our lord’ and elohim’ is literally a plural ‘gods’--in the sense of ‘Thou shalt have no other gods before me.’ In everyday speech, the usual reference to God is ‘ha shem’--literally, ‘the Name.’

‘A practicing Orthodox Jew says literally hundreds of lines of prayer every day. They are almost all ‘blessings’--thanks for food, wine, water, rainbows, being born male, etc.--rather than requests for favours. The exception: asking for mercy and forgiveness. An observer watching an Orthodox synagogue service might well class cantorial singing and the high-speed muttered Hebrew of multiple individuals each in their own key and at their own pace as ‘wordless ululation.’ The Nameless prayer is a little more explicit and abject than everyday Jewish ones -- more like those for Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement.”

The final note comes from Christa Bedwin: “You didn't mention singing the Koran in this column but that kind of fits.”

Christa also sent along a link to the chanting of Deva Premal, worth listening to:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GH76rp9vR20&feature=related>

PSALM PARAPHRASES

Psalm 24, the recommended reading for this coming Sunday, July 15, is a ringing affirmation of divine lordship. Like all the psalms, it presumes a belief in God. My paraphrase tries to capitalize on our modern vision of earth from space, a vision not available to earlier writers.

- 1 Turning and turning, our pale blue globe
burns bright in the blackness of eternity.
The Earth is the Lord's, and all that is in it --
All life embodied in the only home we know.
- 2 God created life in the oceans,
and nourishes it with nutrients from the mountains.
- 3 Trace the course of a river to its source;
Stand among the mountains and marvel.
Who would dare defile this paradise?
- 4 God sees through deceit and pretence;
We cannot claim innocence with dirty hands.
We can only approach God with clean hands and pure hearts;
- 5 Then we will see a smile on the face of God,
Then will God's creative wisdom be evident in the world.
- 6 So seek the Lord in high and holy places;
- 7 Let the vast valleys throw open their arms;
Let the summits stand tall in pride,
For this is the home of the Lord!
- 8 With all the glory of the universe to choose from,
With all of creation quivering in expectation,
The Lord of life picked this planet as home.
- 9 So throw open your valleys, O earth!
Spread wide your plains to welcome the Lord!
- 10 For the Lord of all creation lives here.

For other paraphrases from *Everyday Psalms*, you can order the book through Wood Lake Publications, info@woodlake.com or 1-800-663-2775. And in case you don't know it already, I highly recommend James Manley's hymn/song based on Psalm 24, "Take Off Your Shoes." He wrote it in 1977, and it is just as current today as it was then.

YOU SCRATCH MY BACK...

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For other web links worth pursuing, try

- David Keating's "SeemslkeGod" page, www.seemslkegod.org;
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, isabel@traditionaliconoclast.com
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap," write reynoldsrap@shaw.ca
- Wayne Irwin's "Churchweb Canada," an inexpensive service for any congregation wanting to develop a web presence, with free consultation. <http://www.churchwebcanada.ca>
- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write alvawood@gmail.com to get onto her mailing list.

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