

THE IMPORTANCE OF OPEN SPACE TO ONE'S SPIRITUAL WELLBEING AND PERSONAL
RELATIONSHIP TO GOD

BY GEORGIA GOJMERAC-LEINER

FOR

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WITH

PROFESSOR WESLEY WILDMAN



Skunk Cabbage

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Lady's Showy Slipper

Preamble

The fences of Birkenau stretch before me. I do not get close enough to get shot but I stand there staring out at the open spaces of my homeland.¹

The lines above are spoken by Rena, a survivor of the Nazi concentration camp at Birkenau. She did not literally see the open spaces of her homeland but imagined them, deeply imbedded in her memory. Her memories and promises gave her the will to live. She longed for the open space of her home where her mama waited with a lit lantern. Her words are symbolic of all of our longings for home, which we associate with a place of safety, love and freedom. Whether it is the words of a hymn “No longer stranger or a guest but like a child at home,”² Paul Simon singing “Home is where I long to be”³ or the place where “that banner yet wave in the land of the free and the home of the brave,”⁴ the ground on which we live is important to us. Moses tells us in the Book of Deuteronomy, which I will engage in my theological reflection, that land is a gift from God. We must not defile it, must not worship idols, nor disobey God. There are many ways to “defile” a land, and one is to build on it without a regard for the terrain

¹ Gelissen Rena Kornreich. With Heather Dune Macadam. *Rena's Promise*. Boston: Beacon Press 1995. p.163

² Isaac Watts. “My Shepherd will supply my need,” hymn paraphrasing *Psalms* 23, 1674.

³ Simon, Paul. “Homeward Bound,” song released in 1966

⁴ Key, Francis Scott. “Star Spangled Banner,” USA National Anthem, 1814

or your neighbor. An idol of worship could be a material possession, and acting without regard for the land is disobeying God.

The Assignment

The assignment of this paper is to reflect theologically on a critical concern. My concern is access to “open space” in my community, and in the world. I think open space is vital to all of our spiritual sense of well-being and our relationship with God. It is our duty to be good stewards of the earth, educated by science and experience, so that our children will have a place to live in good health, social stability and spiritual freedom.

Even city dwellers need open space. Central Park in New York City is one of the best examples of how this need is satisfied. But it is the survival of people under the most extreme of conditions that illustrates for us most movingly, most effectively, the role of open space and nature in our connection to that which gives us life:

This tree is the only friend I have in my loneliness.” Through that window she could see just one branch of a chestnut tree and on the branch were two blossoms. ”I often talk to this tree,” she said to me. I was startled and didn’t quite know how to take her words. Was she delirious? Did she have occasional hallucinations? Anxiously I asked her if the tree ever replied. “Yes.” What did it say to her? She answered, “It said to me, ‘I am here—I am here—I am life, eternal life’.”⁵

We take for granted, or on faith, the surroundings in which we live but sometimes our trust can be undercut by acts of others. One morning my household woke up to the sound of construction equipment clearing the hillside below the edge of our back yard. In truth we knew it was coming but we could not do anything to prevent it from happening. The developer put into his design affordable housing units. They are mandated by law 40B, enacted in 1969 to remedy the shortage of housing for lower income families. But it seems that the law is used as a pretext for making profit from selling of, or renting, the other units, or constructing buildings with a footprint too large for the site. Thus the traffic, and therefore pollution, increase; the sense of community is altered; and the sunlight and views are obstructed and changed.

In the quotes from *Rena’s Promise* and *Man’s Search for Meaning*, we have extreme examples of impingement on one’s human freedom, but even the freedom and quality of our “mundane” lives can be affected in subtly disturbing ways, which cause us to find new means of coping, adapting and compensating. This, in turn, affects our spirits and our sense of hope and trust. When our view was altered by the clearing of the trees, I immediately began to use my imagination to look for a redeeming quality of our new view, just as Rena and the anonymous woman in Viktor Frankl’s account had done. I stared at the series of houses stacked up against each other, capped by their gabled roofs, from Union to Grant to Washington Streets, up to the steeple of a former church; now a private residence, and came up with the thought that the scene looked artistic: like something Edward Hopper might have painted. But this is only temporary. When the apartment building is actually up this view too will be changed. We remain ambivalent whether to stay or move; the move would uproot our family life which took decades to establish. And life is getting shorter as the years increase. The new place too, would undoubtedly have its own problems.

⁵ Frankl, Viktor E. *Man’s Search for Meaning*. New York: A Touchstone Book, 1984. p.78. This was an exchange between Frankl, a survivor of Auschwitz, and a fellow inmate.

Theological Reflection

As I look back on my theological studies, I recall my professor of Foundations of Theology, Colleen Griffith at Boston College, saying that theology was “human constructs of God” and “any human effort to understand God.” And then she noted that the Vatican II puts forth the belief that “earthly matters and the concerns of faith are from the same good.” She then enumerated approaches to theology, *human constructs of God*, in terms of our responsibility as human beings to the rest of the creation. Two approaches she cited that are relevant to this assignment are, 1) *stewardship*: knowledgeable human beings in the administrative role of the land, and 2) *creaturehood*: animals and things in nature are taken together with people; their distinctive forms distinguish them from one another; what they engage in distinguishes them from one another but we exist in the ground of creation, such as is described in the Book of Deuteronomy. If we look for the ground of creation in Deuteronomy rather than in Genesis, we find a different concept of how people are to view and use the land and its creatures. In Genesis God said to the human creatures, “Be fertile and multiply; fill the earth and 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.”⁶ But in Deuteronomy the land does not belong to the Israelites. The land is

Yahweh’s land, or Yahweh’s heritage. This concept was supremely important for the life and worship of Israel. It could never look upon the land as totally its possession... To keep the land holy Israel had to be particularly careful to avoid defilement by sins characteristic of the Canaanites.⁷

The message to the Israelites throughout Deuteronomy, and very pointedly in Chapters 8, 9, 10 and 11, was that the land God gave them is *holy* land and that as long as they are obedient to God, and do not defile the land, God will reward them. My modern understanding of “obedience” and “defilement” are as follows. Obedience is not blind or slave-like but knowledgeable. Indeed God reminds the Israelites through Moses that they should know from experience what life was like when they were slaves in Egypt. So should we also learn from experience and be grateful for our land. In addition, we should profit from a wide range of scientific knowledge, including environmental sciences. The examples of how we have defiled our creation are too numerous. Birds died from DDT, apples were tainted by Alar, waters were polluted by paper mills, fabric mills, paints and tanning factories; mercury has poisoned all of the bodies of water; landfills have leached toxins into the soil and streams; overbuilding and deforestation has caused ghettos and erosion. Just recently the former United States Vice President, Al Gore, won an academy award for his film, “An Inconvenient Truth,” warning us about the effect of global warming on our planet. Our “obedience” must be to what we know. We must learn from our mistakes. We have made ourselves physically sick by polluting, and emotionally and spiritually sick by crowding ourselves in, not leaving open spaces for trees which can process a certain amount of pollution, and even the air we exhale. In our consumerist way, when we eliminate our local places of beauty we go elsewhere and do the same.

The lesson about prosperity comes to us from Moses as well in the warning to the Israelites. Moses states that there is a danger in our thinking that we’ve achieved what we have

⁶ *Book of Genesis, 1:28, NAB*

⁷ Flanders, Henry Jackson; Crapps, Robert Wilson and Smith, David Anthony. *People of the Covenant*, 4th ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996 p. 242-3

by ourselves. Rather, we as descendents of God's people must keep God and God's bigger picture in mind. Even when we have everything, we must remember God in our prayers, give God gratitude. Moses says, "Otherwise, you might say to yourselves, 'It is my own power and the strength of my hand that has obtained for me this wealth.' If you forget the Lord your God and follow other Gods [or idols such as one's own self] serving and worshiping them, I forewarn you that you will perish utterly."⁸ The Greek myth gives us a lesson as well, in Narcissus, who fell in love with his own image reflected in the water and drowned. Truly, we can perish by our doing as we contribute to the global warming through our own seemingly small acts. When we realize the magnitude of damage that these small acts, replicated all over the earth can cause, we grasp the importance of protecting our local open space in fractions of acres, our local environment and our spiritual life, or personal relationship with God by being able to walk in the small havens of woods and wetlands.

In summary of my theological reflection, I note that since the beginning of time, according to the Judeo-Christian tradition, land, open space has played a crucial role in our ancestors' relationship with their God. The marvel of creation is well described in the *Psalms 104*, the psalm praising the creator. Whether God's creation was a desert place, fertile fields, mountains or plains, or rocky geological terrain, God created it all, interspersed with bodies of water, both sweet and salty, running and still, and declared it "good." The earth and its resources have been under the dominion of the human creature since "creation," but it is only recently that we have been coming to realize that the earth and its resources are not necessarily renewable and must be under our protection and stewardship, rather than falling victim to our *subduing*, our consumerist way of life. We must save the holy land, **the only land** we have, through scientific knowledge, even if not for the sake of our obedience to God. But God does not want us to be obedient to God for God's sake but for our own sake. The psalmist in *Psalms 8* marvels at how respectful God is of human beings: "What is man that [God] should be mindful of him, or the son of man that you should care for him? You have made him little less than the angels."⁹

My poem below, "After the Rain," inspired in the wooded wetland area of the Natick Walks Trails, is about a personal experience of God and prayer in nature. The excitement I feel is both outside of me as well inside. I can feel the weight dropping from the leaves when the raindrops roll off. And I can feel the drop of rain become one with the pool where it drops, almost without disturbing the surface, but I can see the ripples! The chance of the sun being in just the right spot at the right time for me to see all this, and to have my eyes dazzled, inspires gratitude within me. It is what God wants from me, to give gratitude, and here is my opportunity to do so. And everything is so beautiful to me that I don't know what to do what to focus on. Suddenly the frog sound comes from the vernal pool and I feel it is the Holy Spirit surprising me. Since this happened last year around the time of Pentecost it had to be the Holy Spirit confirming the mystery of being for me and at the same time I am not able to express it.

After the rain
the trees release the droplets
collected on the leaves
onto the mirror-surface
of a vernal pool:
liquid crystals dissolve

⁸ *Book Of Deuteronomy 8:17-19*, NAB

⁹ *Psalms 8:5-6a*, NAB

forming widening ripples
where the sun chooses to reflect its
gloss on the water,
dazzling the soul
beyond the eyes.
Feeling blended
within the scene,
soul's eyes search,
restless with beauty,
for the thing to focus on
among the flora,
but everything is special—
breathy and breathless,
calm and excited—
what can happen?
A frog strums
a bass sound from the pond;
it is the Holy Spirit groaning
the things we have no words for.
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Elm Bank

Natick, Massachusetts

Although certain parts of our United States still have vast open spaces, though they may be deserts remain undeveloped, the crowded northeast has seen rapid loss of open space, and some pockets of New England, especially the area around Boston where Natick is located, have become dotted with residential, retail and industrial developments. They have been designed without valuing open space. Ironically, they bear the names of what once was there, like Arrow Path, Bear Hill and Fox Run. Roadways, in turn, have had to be built for the traffic and concrete poured for the parking lots. As Joni Mitchell sang in the 1970s, “They paved paradise/and put up a parking lot...”¹⁰

New housing has become necessary, of course, with the increase of population, but why did the development, both residential and commercial, not happen by intelligent design of community planners, environmentalists and architects? To ask a question such as this is to attempt to outline how the town government works, to identify which of its boards and politics had a role in approving the developer’s building plans. Were there means available by which to bargain for open space? In other words, it is to open a Pandora’s Box.

By now, most of the towns in Massachusetts have a Conservation Commission or a Trust in place to oversee protection of open space, wetlands and agricultural areas. Conservation Commissions were invented in Massachusetts in the 1950s in response to development. The brochure of the Massachusetts Association of Conservation Commissions states,

Your [Conversation] Commission was formed under the Conservation Commission Act of 1957 (G.L. Ch. 40 sec. 8C) which gives the Commission responsibility for open space and other natural resources protection in your community. Thus you will identify key parcels that should be protected, work for acquisition by your city/town or other forms of protection, and manage local lands dedicated to conservation and passive recreation.¹¹

This, almost Biblical language assures some due process in new development. The Natick Open Space Advisory Committees (NOSAC) was created as an offshoot of the Conservation Commission. NOSAC includes members from the planning board and from the Conservation Commission. The members meet to discuss what development is being considered in the community and how to identify areas where the public could have access to open space such as trails. The members also are charged with producing the process for open space, or the *Open Space and Recreation Plan*. This plan provides a detailed description of all of the natural resources the community has, from acreage to soil types, from the height of hills to chemical make up of the bodies of water. It provides “Environmental Inventory and Analysis” and the “Inventory of Lands of Conservation and Recreation Interest.”¹²

Natick is a name of the local Native American Indian tribe and language, and “was first established as the Natick Plantation in 1651 along the Charles River by the first and largest Praying Indian colony which became a model for others in Massachusetts. Reverend John Eliot,

¹⁰ Mitchell, Joni, “Big Yellow Taxi,” song released in 1970.

¹¹ Massachusetts Association of Conservation Commissions in Collaboration with UMass Extension’s Natural Resources and Environmental Conservation Program the Local Capacity Building Partnership and the Metropolitan Area Planning Council, with partial funding from the Department of Housing and Community Development. February, 2002.

¹² Town of Natick. *Open Space and Recreation Plan 2002*. Prepared by the Natick Open Space Advisory

the great missionary, converted them to Christianity.”¹³ *Natick* means a high rocky place. Its main hills are Pleasant, Carver, Drury, Broad, Pegan, Train, and Coolidge Hills. The highest point is Pegan Hill at 410 feet. Charles River flows through South Natick, and the town has many streams, lakes and ponds. Natick was once a place of destination, a natural refuge, for the dwellers of the City of Boston, who traveled there by trolley.

Natick grew from residents in the hundreds to thousand to tens of thousands. From 1940 to 1960 its population more than doubled, from 13, 851 to 28,831 residents. According to the year 2000 census the population stood at 32,170. There were once shoe, baseball, and truck factories, surrounded by orchards, farms and fields, whereas now technologies and malls are its tenants and employers, with only two small working farms left. The most recent Town of Natick *Open Space and Recreation Plan*, compiled and published in 2002, states that

In the past decade close to 100 acres of land per year have been developed, primarily for new housing. The town’s remaining unprotected open areas, both public and private, are facing intense development.... There is a growing interest by Natick’s residents and a desire to be educated in the value of open space: as active and passive recreational amenity; as a positive factor in the community’s character; as wildlife habitat; and for trails and transportation.... As the town approaches full build-out this Plan [*Open Space and Recreation Plan*] will provide guidelines for its boards and commissions in making these critical decisions.¹⁴

Losing one hundred acres of land per year is tragic and critical. The people noticed the loss and gained “a desire to be educated in the value of open space.” They saw open space “as a positive factor in the community’s character.” In a sense their land had been defiled, which is what Deuteronomy says Moses warned his people against. They now had a desire to protect wild habitat and have trails to hike. Implicit in the above statement of concern, purpose and plan, is the idea of spiritual connection to the natural environment, to God’s creation. Implicit also is the idea of freedom of a human person to have a place to play, ride a bicycle or a horse, trails to walk on and reflect; so to have room to roam and views to see. There is a desire to leave the land alone. Let it stay as it is. There is a tension between development and conservation as there has been between the action and contemplation model of Christian life. We are looking for a balance, for the sense of balancing the civilized with the “wild,” and for me the spiritual. Henry David Thoreau’s essay “Walking,” has this to say in defense of Nature:

I wish to speak a word for Nature, for absolute freedom and wildness, as contrasted with a freedom and culture merely civil—to regard man as an inhabitant, or a part and parcel of Nature, rather than a member of society. I wish to make an extreme statement, if so I may make an empathic one, for there are enough champions of civilization: the minister and the school committee and every one of you will take care of that.¹⁵

¹³ *Open Space and Recreation Plan 2002*, p.7

¹⁴ *Open Space and Recreation Plan, 2002*. p.1

¹⁵ Thoreau, Henry David. *Walking*. “Project Gutenberg Association / Carnegie Mellon University. An Online Document from: Gutenberg.org/dirs/etext97/wlknng10.txt p.5

Little did Thoreau know that the contractors would come along and “pave paradise.” Certainly the mandate for preservation of open space did not come out of a religious community, though surely at least some of the people serving on the town boards are religious people. The Church, any church, in any case cannot pass secular laws, while for the Israelites laws supposedly came from God. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops has put out a little known and little used document, “Let the Earth Bless the Lord: God’s Creation and Our Responsibility,” as a parish resource kit to be a part of a special program on environmental justice.¹⁶ This document has suggestions for education about the environment, provides legislative group names and suggests ways of organizing environmental justice committees. It includes a sample homily and a prayer service for the Blessing of the Fields and Gardens. It talks about status of ecology among the South American nations and in Europe, and points to the needs of the “Environmental Refugees: a New Chapter in a Family Story.” Once we had refugees for political and economic reasons but now we have environmental refugees. Many of these refugees are from sub-Saharan Africa where environmental degradation has occurred “due to drought, soil erosion, desertification, or other environmental problems that prevent them from gaining a secure livelihood in their home country.”¹⁷ In the language of Deuteronomy the land has been defiled. The writers of “Let the Earth Bless the Lord” state that the land degradation has been caused by water contamination and deforestation, and discusses what can be done. The pamphlet reports that in 1979 that Pope John Paul II proclaimed St. Francis of Assisi as the patron of those who promote ecology, and St. Francis’s Canticle of the Sun is used as the accompanying prayer.

While we must be concerned for our far away brothers and sisters, we must also stay awake at home where we live. Serving on an Open Space Advisory Committee may seem small and inconsequential, but replication of committees across the states, countries the world, can have a huge effect just as in the opposite direction seemingly insignificant acts of land destruction can take a heavy toll on the whole planet when taken collectively.

Where does the “defiling” of the land and the narrowing of open-space access leave the role of God? Is it God who destroys us or is it we who destroy ourselves and God? God is us and as we go so goes God. That is the bleak view but a view glimpsed by Rena in *Rena’s Promise* and the woman in the *Man’s Search for Meaning*. Perhaps they are prophets showing us what we as a civilized people are capable of doing to ourselves when we show no regard for one another and our land, which in this time of globalization has consequences for the entire planet.

Meanwhile, there are open spaces in Natick, Massachusetts and skunk cabbage is abundant. It is an amazing plant but it could not survive without the wetlands protection act. It comes out in the early spring while the snow is still on the ground. It has a way of producing its own heat which melts the snow around it. Even in the skunk cabbage flower there is great beauty and mystery as can be seen in this photo below.

¹⁶ United States Catholic Conference. *Let the Earth Bless the Lord. God’s Creation and Our Responsibility; a Catholic approach to the Environment*. Washington, D.C. 1996.

¹⁷ *Let the Earth Bless the Lord*, p.23



Skunk cabbage along the seasonal stream on the Hospital Trail, Natick, MA

There is still more open space to be preserved in Natick and someone has to be vigilantly on the lookout for its being set aside, maintained and protected. As Jesus is to have said to His apostles, ““Come by yourselves to an out-of-the-way place and rest a little,” People were coming and going in great numbers making it impossible for them to so much as eat.””¹⁸ So must we have a place to which to retreat from the demands of the world. The open space trails are used for enjoying the wild flowers and mushrooms, besides the trees and their peace and song of the leaves. They are used for walking, biking, skiing, and horse back riding. Some use them “illegally” for campfires and smoke breaks. I use them for keeping physically and mentally healthy, for walking meditation and for prayer, for respite and inspiration at the end of my work days. I use them for slow walking, running, observing, listening, cultivating my relationship with God. There is a particular spot in the woods where I heard God call me on a particularly spirit-depleting day some years ago. It continues to attract me more than an other place every time I come by. This is a sacred spot for me. As an “afterglow” of my experience I had an urge to build a chapel on the spot. My imagination is triggered there to see images of God. A recent journal entry notes,

I spent some time at my sacred spot, the God-place. I saw a little black spider come out and go back under the shelter of a small, weathered leaf. As I sat on the broken bench I asked God, or prayed, about my upcoming week. I felt that

¹⁸ NAB, *Mark 6:31*

God embraced me, placed God's hand across my back and shoulder. God comforted me. I shared my week's activities and God was right there, parallel thinking. With God things are easier. It is like having two seasoned horses in good form working as a team pulling a wagon instead of just a single horse alone, tired and nervous. With God as my companion I can be assured, strong, happy. "Happy" is how I left the trail this evening; so satisfied. Thank you, dear God. I made a sort of covenant with God that I would become conscious of God's presence in time of need throughout the week.

The more time I spend in the deep quiet of the woods the more intimate I become with God. Sometimes I feel God in the wind that caresses my face and sometimes in the light that warms my back; sometimes I see God in the dozen spiders acting as if someone were juggling them as they spin-dance multiple webs at once from the tips of pine needles to the shrubs nearby. The silk threads glisten but are only visible from a certain spot. This is God at play. Outside of the forest trail, everywhere in the world, God is present too, but is too busy to play.



Broads Hill, Natick, MA

A Synthesis

This assignment of theological thinking for everyday life gave me an opportunity to make a synthesis of some of the class readings and lectures with my own lived experience and knowledge. It gave me an opportunity to articulate the importance of nature to my experience of and relationship with God, and the recognition that I took a small step toward protecting open space by serving on its committee. I learned by researching my topic and re-reading the Book of Deuteronomy. I had an opportunity to reflect further on my experience of God. The playful image of God arose out of this reflection process.



Hospital Trail

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