

Oppressing our Neighbors Less

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Interfaith Forum

February 15, 2015

As a cradle Episcopalian, I am one of the least likely people to stand up and talk about my faith. We Episcopalians will talk any topic to death, but usually with each other. [An Evangelical Episcopalian is an oxymoron.] But that is one message I hope some of you take home today—we must speak out to save God’s Creation. The squeaky wheel gets the grease, so let’s squeak.

I grew up in a Virginia Beach where I could ride my bike to the Narrows to crab and down the boardwalk to work as a waitress. And we could walk to the beach, which I really love. I attended the local Episcopal Church, but have no outstanding memories of that community. I guess I acquired some faith there subconsciously. My middle school was on the waterfront, and our biology teacher, Mrs. Parker, would hold some of our classes walking along the tideline. It was very hard to leave the shore to go to college in Richmond. After studying biology, oceanography, and stream ecology, I settled into work as an environmental microbiologist, working on projects to detect bioagents in soil and water.

After an absence from church, I returned in 1990. Luckily, the first one I tried was St. Bartholomew’s Episcopal Church, 3 blocks from where I lived at the time, in Hunting Ridge on the west side of Baltimore. I found a caring community that helped me grow spiritually and that took good care of my son as he grew up. I was always perplexed by comments that scientists couldn’t have faith—I certainly don’t cook as precisely as I run an experiment—no where near! I saw a quote by Neil deGrasse Tyson: “The good thing about science is that it’s true, whether or not you believe in it.” This parallels my belief that God loves me even when I can’t believe in God. Science and faith have run side by side for me, and they agree on every topic I can think of.

A turning point for me came during one of the presentations at the 2009 Baltimore Ecosystem Study Annual Meeting. The speaker showed data on the differences in microbes among soils in the city proper, in Leakin Park, and in the Loch Raven reservoir forests. I went home and did a literature search of the microbial flora in soils near different plant species—I read that there are specific, measurable differences in species composition around different plant species. So I could be changing the way rainwater that infiltrates into the ground is altered by the soil microbes when I grow plants not native to the mid-Atlantic region, and thereby affect (even in a small way) the chemistry of the Chesapeake Bay. Multiply this by all the expanses of lawn, pachysandra, aucuba, and other nonnative plants throughout the Baltimore Metropolitan area and the effect might become measurable. This consideration has been eclipsed by the growing body of information, much from Dr. Tallamy at the University of Delaware, on the need for native plants to feed the beautiful butterflies that feed the beautiful birds. So if I want a scarlet tanager to nest in my yard, I need to plant food for the insects—which runs counter to much of the advice from the Nursery Industry.

I started gardening organically, composting, and recycling back in graduate school. I joined Co-op America (now renamed Green America), whose motto was “Shopping for a Better World,” because a more sensible economy will help protect our clean air and water. I evaluate purchases and sources (as many as possible) for treatment of workers, waste management, and recyclability, and I’m very skeptical of Madison Avenue hype. I check personal care products on the Environmental Working

Group website for toxicity to myself and to the environment and to the beach I love. I am still learning how to choose purchases—this can make me crazy if I do too much at once, and many decisions are complicated (laptop—does the paper it replaces balance the energy and materials that went into it?). But thinking about my purchases also slows my purchasing, which I believe is a good thing. I love the motto of the nonprofit, New American Dream: *More fun, less stuff.*

One part of my present spiritual path I call “How can I oppress my neighbors less?” The more I can reduce my footprint (C, N, water, energy), the less I hurt my neighbors. For example, by walking, biking, carpooling, using mass transit, and combining errands when I drive, I lessen the amount of CO₂-producing fuel I use, so the fewer particulates are emitted, and fewer asthma attacks are triggered. By shopping at the Waverly Farmers’ Market in Baltimore (open year-round, huzzah!), I get fresher food, some organic/biodynamic, that travels fewer miles and that supports my local economy. By increasing the density of native plants in my yard, I am not only providing homes for beneficial insects that help **restore balance in my landscape** and create a reservoir of insect pollinators for our farms, but I am also starving fewer baby birds. I hope they like mosquitos!

I have served on several committees at St. Bartholomew’s Church—Worship, Stewardship, Landscaping, Green Team—as well as on vestry. We have upgraded some of our lighting, thanks to help from a Hopkins study on sustainability and rebates from BGE. We have a new, campus-wide landscape plan to transition to more native plants. Our Altar Guild found Ecopalms to use at Easter; these are sustainably harvested and treat the workers fairly. I feel that there is not yet a critical mass at StB’s to look at our church lifestyle, to see where our habits and conveniences oppress our neighbors more than needed. Many conversations seem to start at the “Can we afford it?” stage, not at the “What is right?” stage. One change at St. B’s I am very proud of is putting 100% of our Endowment Fund into Impact/SRI investments. We invest in companies that promote environmental stewardship, consumer protection, human rights, and diversity. Often the biggest change we can make is one between our ears—when we change the way we think. I look forward to this attitude spreading to the rest of our church lifestyle, and I know Interfaith Partners for the Chesapeake will have the tools to help our changes. I hope to use this upcoming season of Lent to reflect on my self-indulgences and break some of my bad habits and/or conveniences that our society or economy has helped me fall into.

My feeling that humans have no right to eliminate other species, as we do so well, crystallized when I read one of Richard Rohr’s meditations entitled “Nature as First Bible.” The idea that Creation is the first incarnation of God makes sense of my desire to preserve it. I believe our species needs to understand that when we hurt Creation, we hurt ourselves, both spiritually and physically. I have come to believe that good stewardship of Creation is not only my duty to God but is a selfish act. The dirtier our world, the less beauty there is in it, the sicker my child can become, and the smaller the area we can live in. The more we pave over Creation with roads, warehouses, landfills, brownfields, and waste, the less room in which we can live. Can we speak up to select good leaders and ask them for good stewardship? How can we control our populations, and how quickly? Can we individually be good stewards and be the squeaky wheels that show our neighbors how good stewardship will benefit us all?

I’d like all my neighbors to be able to visit that uncrowded beach I grew up near, to have clean air and water, good jobs, and a strong community. I’d like to thank all my neighbors who care for Creation and help me have clean air and water, and who teach me the ins and outs of oppressing my neighbors less.

