

Paths and Passages: Earth is Self-Governing

By Christine Loughlin, OP

The pathways through the open meadow into the woodland are covered with two feet of February's elegant crystallized precipitation. After several years of limited snowfall, we graciously receive the generosity of this season's abundance. One takes comfort in imaging the dark moisture seeping into hollowed crevices of bedrock where, in time, the water will be drawn from the well to quench the August thirst of our gardens. Each year we mark October 1st with a simple ritual to acknowledge the first day of the new year of our region's water cycle.

To walk in the woods one must follow an inner sensing of the pathways for the landscape is altered and the trails are buried. Sculptured drifts arch along the lichen-covered stone walls. Tops of field-stones left by a scouring glacier appear at intervals where the 40° temperature is heating the rock. The Eastern White Pines are heavy laden and the few scattered birch bend under the weight of winter's burden. Red cedars sprinkled across the open meadow provide a welcome shelter for chickadee and titmouse, cardinal and jay. Even in winter the elements of a transitional woodland are evident.

To walk the pathways of the upland at Crystal Spring becomes a lesson in reading the cultural and natural passages that are the history of this place. At this juncture in American dreaming, it is imperative that we become *Earth literate*, that our sensitivities awaken to the story of the natural world in order to grasp with new understanding the cultural story of which we are a part. Why is it important? Because we have entered into our cultural story from ecosystems that awakened us; now all ecosystems are affected by our cultural participation in their organizing life force.

A walk in the woods reveals nature's passage and our cultural pathway. The fieldstone, sandy soil, and scattered erratic boulders witness the receding ice age. The transitional woodland of oak and pine, understory of sassafras and wild blueberry mark the modern move from agriculture to industrialization. One writer speaks of the 1/40th of a second of Earth time, if we place Earth in the frame of one year, in which that latter period has altered the natural and cultural history irrevocably.

Our cultural history demands attention. We acknowledge that our home planet is in what biologists call the sixth greatest extinction. We bear witness to the dying and the passing of life forms. We experience the depletion and destruction of the primary elements that sustain all living matter. The generosity of the water cycle that replenishes the living waters that support us surrenders into an industrial culture of chemical runoff and human waste.

In southeastern Massachusetts our land base with the plant and animal life that it supports surrenders to suburban sprawl. Malls and concrete recreation centers identify our consumer culture spurred on by an industrial age with the capacity to convert the very Earth itself into products. From stone walls to concrete malls we read the cultural history of this place.

Walking the paths is a religious experience and a history lesson if one notices the story being told by every stone and stem. The Earth is telling its own story if we but learn to read with soul sensitivity. The boulders speak of a time long before the original forest, before a christian story, before national boundaries, before agriculture came. The maples and cedars and low bush huckleberry announce the abandonment of an agriculture short lived on shallow soils. And the songbirds and tracks so clear in the deep snow—deer, fox, coyote, smaller prints, maybe opossum or skunk—divulge the community coming home to re-inhabit the land. Their return

stirs our human soul to grasp the revelatory moment that is upon us. *Earth in its abundant expressions is the primary revelation of the divine. We are derivative of the Earth.*

How does the work of Crystal Spring fold into the very self-governing mode of Earth itself? What stirs here that directs our human efforts, if at times awkward and unclear?

The Religious Lands Conservancy project is an exciting new partnership between Crystal Spring and the Massachusetts Land Trust Coalition. Over the past decades, Communities have explored the insights of the contemporary story of our unfolding universe to reassess our mission. These insights have provided a compelling framework for determining the roots of our present cultural crisis and provide new directions for responding to them. We feel a growing responsibility to initiate a new relationship with our land and to rethink traditional ways of relating to our commonly held lands. We sense they may hold an essential key to the recovery of our human selves and the healing of the deep alienation in our culture.

On the first Saturday of each month, a group of 45 women strong gather in chorus to participate in a creative arts recording project called O Beautiful Gaia. We of Atlantic New England are joined in this project by the women of Atlantic Canada and the Great Lakes Basin. Each group has heard the call of Earth through water and wind, forest and farmland, inviting us to become one again with all that lives. Everywhere, and here too, gradually, the idea is taking form that Earth is common ground and that land must be held in safekeeping for the generations to come. Support grows for a land ethic that recognizes our *common ground* from mountaintop to meadow, river to rocky coast. As an integral part of the project, we will hold true the notion that 'four acres' are needed for the safe passing of each of us to nurture body and sustain soul. Our collective creativity will design the action to bring that notion to bear fruit.

As the women sing the love spun deep within the cosmos, Earth's dream erupts from volcanic depths and reshapes our cultural story to resonate, restored within the Universe Story.

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*I make my home within this land,
a sweep of sand in cold seawater
where wind and tide know a thousand seasons~
my home one home among the many*

*With ancient crab and hump-back whale,
the bloom of shad and old sea turtle
and all the ones our Earth is losing
from this their home ~ a home of many*

-Carolyn McDade