

Home for the Holidays

By Christine Loughlin, OP

There's a flurry of activity in every means of transport terminal across our nation. Folks are traveling home for the holidays. In winter, the human heart longs for the familial. Lighted candles in the front windows proclaim that even in the darkest times there is light within. Friends and families tell their favorite stories and dare to dream together a new year's promise.

Yet, even amid such hustle and bustle a different murmur begins to be heard across our land. An awareness emerges that our mobile ways bear a great cost to the larger family that nurtures us. Two amazing stories demonstrate a new embracing of family. The first was told in [Yes, A Publication of Positive Futures](#). A young college student in an environmental studies class had learned the formula for just how much CO each of us is allowed to emit into the atmosphere in any given year. One or two plane trips will upset the equation quickly. The young woman went to school on the east coast; her grandmother lived on the west coast. In this student's heightened sense of family, lineage and progeny folded into a marvelous embrace of 'other kin.' Since she had already flown across country once that calendar year, she made a choice to celebrate her grandmother's birthday by staying put and holding her *grandmother* in the light of the greater mothering through which all life forms come.

EarthLinks is a newsletter that arrives from the South Platte Bioregion and reports on the way a small Earth-learning center reaches out to the economically poor to broaden their experience of community. In July, David Schaller, a board member, was married. David and his partner, Joy, were concerned over the amount of greenhouse gases created in transporting guests to their wedding events. They decided to "offset" or neutralize the carbon dioxide with an investment in wind energy for EarthLinks. Using data from climate groups, they calculated the carbon produced by planes and cars getting guests to the events and then determined the cost to offset that carbon in the current world carbon market. The donation allowed EarthLinks to switch to WindSource for the center's electricity, no longer acquiring power from the coal-fired local utility.

Along with our annual homecoming a more blessed return is blossoming in our human soul. A realization dawns that Gaia, our magical blue-green planet, dancing in the outer sweep of a not so flamboyant galaxy, is the only place at this point in time where we can say, for sure, "life" exists. And such abundant life! Five billion years from boiling rock to flowing rivers, and right here in our backyard the white pine and white faced wasp, garter snakes and grouse, spotted salamanders and screech owls. Five billion says it took a long time to dream what welcomed our European ancestors here. As Carl Sagan said, "If you compress that Gaian age into a one year period, the Industrial Revolution started 1/40 of a second ago." The dogma for our present ways of celebrating and relating is the product of this era.

Habitats became highways, winding rivers paved roads, marshes disappeared and returned as malls, while forest and farms succumbed to consumer fantasies. In the longer story, the change from self-sustaining, ever-renewing cycles to depletion of the commons happened in the blink of an eye. But in that 'blink', we have entered into a period of destruction and loss that defines a transition now more profound than our seasonal relinquishment and rebirth. The vibrant systems of Gaia that brought forth the millions of years of flowering and flourishing have been altered. Our living Planet has entered her sixth great extinction.

We do not know what lies before us. We do know with empirical assurance that the previous transitions, though never before experienced with the same sentient terror, transformed Life into greater awesome expression. The power of this terror awakens our love, a comprehensive love acting its way into the world through the heart of a young student and a newly wed couple.

This comprehensive love abounds in distant cities and local neighborhoods transforming our human ways from industrial addicts to locally-living earthlings.

Before her untimely death from a virus, Donella Meadows, director of the Sustainable Institute and adjunct professor at Dartmouth College, wrote a bi-weekly column for her local newspaper. In an article entitled, *A Neighborhood Plans Its Own Development*, she wrote about a neighborhood party that happened in Lyme, NH during Christmas week. Family by family they put their names to twenty different documents, amendments to their deeds, limiting forever the number of lots that could be subdivided and houses that could be constructed on their land. Together the easements protected about 400 acres of farmland, forest, stream beds, and scenic views along two miles of road. When I read that article more than a decade ago, I was drawn into the story, a community celebrating gift-giving in a manner that does not take from nature but affirms the whole 'neighborhood.'

At the heart of our 'home for the holidays' are the religious stories that have guided our families and shaped our values. All traditions are rich in myth. Whether the story is true or not is not the point but rather our capacity to relate to the story. Myths are our human way of connecting the finite and the infinite. To this point our religious sentiment welcomed an incarnating presence in human existence. A marvelous epiphany ushers in a fuller measure of that incarnating Dream as we bear witness to its manifestation in all forms of being.

Amid the ruins of the Industrial Age when so much has been lost by our narrow understanding of our religious story, we must awaken to our greater homecoming, full partnership in the Earth community. We must commit ourselves to the joys and hardships as they present themselves and not seek after utopia elsewhere. The darkness upon us will linger far longer than a seasonal turn, but in the fullness of time a new reality will appear. Her spirit is already present among wedding guests, birthday 'presence', neighborhood land protection parties.

Together in community and common projects we will be able to sustain the work of creating new symbols...*water flowing ~ birds migrating ~ hillsides blooming ~ crops greening ~ children playing ~ farmers hoeing ~ strangers embracing*. If we do not create the new symbols, we revert to the old in times of crisis. The *great work* calls us forth as Spirit guides Gaia's rebirth.

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