

Chapel Talk, Earth Day
Earth Day—April 22, 2009
Alix Ross

Sustaining Life

I can't recall a specific moment when I decided to embark on this journey—a journey in my mind not to become more “green,” but to find solace and connection. Through life's ups and downs, I have found renewal and redemption in looking outside of myself and into the wide natural world. And what I found there is profound: beautiful and complicated and true. In my quest to live simply and to find fulfillment, I have found an endless source of wonderment, relief and inspiration.

Really, I think this all may have started when I landed my first job out of college that barely paid the rent and my car payment, and it launched me into unintentional sustainability. When Dr. Guthrie and I got married, we survived on tuna casseroles, cream of wheat and keeping the heat set at 62 degrees in our drafty apartment. We had twenty dollars a week of “fun money.” That was it. We learned how to live, quite happily, with a lot less. This got me thinking about priorities and how I defined success. While I certainly appreciate the greater financial security we have attained, the act of continuing to live a simple life, and not really changing much—except perhaps to move in a more sustainable direction intentionally—has kept us happy, healthy and focused on what is good and right in life.

There has always been something unsettling to me about materialism and wastefulness. To me, a huge part of environmentalism involves not becoming a victim of the relentless marketing consumerist machine. It is always churning, trying to convince us that we need more, that we need upgrades, that we need new things. Humanity in America has been reduced to keeping up with the Joneses. Meanwhile, the incredible exploitation of resources, animals and human labor is startling and appalling.

I started reading just about everything I could get my hands on when I wanted to make good choices for our little family, even back in the days when we had next to nothing. I wanted to buy organic, because that was supposed to be better for you, but then when I looked into the products on the store shelves, I found some owned by the very companies I was trying to avoid. I found that some organic foods had traveled thousands of miles to get to me. That seemed counterintuitive.

And forget beauty products, all of the conventional products were either tested on animals or contained ingredients I was not comfortable with. Though most of what I found out in my “research” was disheartening, I felt empowered as a consumer with choice and knowledge.

For the first time I was exposed to 4-H and state fairs and auctions while living in Ohio. When I would go to the butcher in Mount Vernon the picture of the butcher’s sons and daughters with their animals and their ribbons were hanging right above the case of meat. Different from what I was used to, yes. But there was something about knowing that the lamb I was about to buy and eat was well cared for and appreciated that made me want to continue to support local farmers. There is an art, a skill to farming and to food production. I wanted to honor that, and so I started seeking out people and supporting hand-made items, community supported agriculture, and hand-raised food. For the most part, I avoid shrink-wrapped packages. I have saved money doing this, and I feel really good about it because more than just the health benefits, I have made incredible connections with people: people who love this earth and their animals; people with a deep respect for the land and resources; people who are making the difficult choice to do what they know is right, rather than succumb to the commodification of the basic rights of life. And in so doing, I have found friendship and community. There is something powerful about shaking the hand of the man who raised the chicken I am going to eat for dinner. And something important about not degrading life by ignoring it, letting it suffer until I can consume it in an inexpensive, convenient microwave meal.

I think we must strive for balance, and I think in large part that involves reevaluating and reprioritizing. What do we really need? This doesn’t mean we can’t have things we want, or things we feel sentimentally attachment to, but it is about reconciling convenience and instant gratification with our values.

I know I’m not the only one in this chapel trying to live more consciously, trying to do a part to better the world. Individual commitment to return to simplicity and living sustainably is so important, but I think the fight needs to be broadened as well—and that’s where you come in. You are the new hope. There is much research and investment needed in green technology, and sustainable land usage, better food, architecture, education, medicine; much to be done for human and animal rights. I advocate not for stagnation, or for a return to a bygone era, rather, for

innovation and progress. By simplifying and reprioritizing, we may indeed come to a more productive, more fulfilling, healthier and happier lifestyle.

Ralph Waldo Emerson writes:

In the woods, we return to reason and faith. There I feel that nothing can befall me in life—no disgrace, no calamity... which nature cannot repair. Standing on the bare ground—my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God.

As Emerson did, I feel connected to a greater universe, a greater understanding when I immerse myself in the natural world. I am just starting to learn how powerful nature is. How majestic. I am learning to cede control (a bit) and live in the present. I have learned that there are larger forces at work than I can even imagine. I realize how precious life is, and how connected we are to the animals and plants that surround us. My daily prayer—my meditation—is feeding my chickens, walking my dogs in the fields, harvesting lettuce I grow, listening to the wind against the branches of the forsythia outside my window, or the rumble of thunder across the sky. These things sustain me.

Ever returning to the beauty of the written word, I'd like to end with a poem by one of my favorite poets:

Today
by Billy Collins

*If ever there were a spring day so perfect,
so uplifted by a warm intermittent breeze*

*that it made you want to throw
open all the windows in the house*

*and unlatch the door to the canary's cage,
indeed, rip the little door from its jamb,*

*a day when the cool brick paths
and the garden bursting with peonies*

*seemed so etched in sunlight
that you felt like taking*

*a hammer to the glass paperweight
on the living room end table,*

*releasing the inhabitants
from their snow-covered cottage*

*so they could walk out,
holding hands and squinting*

*into this larger dome of blue and white,
well, today is just that kind of day.*

Happy Earth Day.