

Recovering Our Sense of Place

By Christine Loughlin, OP

The waters of the melting snow run down the slopes of the woodland and across the meadow. A small pond, a huge puddle really, has formed at the base of the path that leads up the hill into the meadow. We're startled to think this is exactly where the permaculture design suggested a pond. Even though the waters from Crystal Spring flow on the southeast side of the property, on the west side of the house is a micro watershed.

The waters from the springs, on the other hand, are diverted off the property. They trickle down through the old orchard into a culvert, cross the road and flow into Mill Brook that empties into Turnpike Lake—the landmark given to folks who travel here to turn left at the lake and come down to Crystal Spring.

It is this diversion of energy and natural resource that has captured our attention this Spring season. We look at the symbolic meaning of the drain of natural resource from a place. Our task is to bring the waters back onto the property in a visible and audible way and allow this life force to become integral to our gardens, our plant and animal life, and the beauty of this place.

Over the winter months the number of signs —*commercial or residential land for sale*— has increased. They dot the highway along Route 1, the original turnpike between Boston and Providence, before the interstate was built. At the end of our street, a half mile down the road, the pines have been cut back to make the “8.3 Acres for Sale” sign more visible.

As we seek to name our purpose and work, we are more and more struck by the need to respond to American culture. If culture is the thought patterns of a people in a place, we give evidence here of what has become American cultural patterning. That which is most precious can be drained off, diverted, lost. The challenge is to recognize what is happening, to be earth literate, and to commit ourselves with others to participate in the great recovery.

We are located in the suburbs. Not so many years ago our 40 acres was surrounded by rural land. After the second World War, Route 128 was built around the outskirts of Boston's neighboring towns. Then the local Route 128 connected into Interstate 95. The area grew, more and more industry to advance the technology pouring forth from the city's universities. A new interstate, 495, was constructed deeper into Massachusetts' rural life and farm land. We are 1.5 miles from the intersection of those two interstates. Each widening arc of super highway eliminated our local food sources.

Our state's most productive, precious farm lands have become suburban back yards. Those back yards are most often lawns that require energy, labor, herbicides and pesticides. They become sterile, even poisonous to the things we hold most dear. One of the simple acts in our common recovery is the planting of family gardens so that once again we are connected with our food source. In the words of Robert Rodale, of the Rodale Institute and Farm in Emmaus, PA, “The farm of the future will be a large garden.”

What is the spiritual energy that will sustain us all as we work together to recreate culture, our way of being in a place, with new insight into our common story? The programs at Crystal Spring address that question. The permaculture course offered in late May opens the participants to “read” earth's story as it is told in one's own back yard. The program helps us notice the natural resources of a place and instructs us in integrating our human needs in Nature's design. “Nourishing Our Hunger” in mid-July invites us to see and contemplate Earth itself as self-healing and self-nourishing. The American adventure has taken us far and wide, now come home to place, and “know it for the first time.”

Harvest in Spring

The return of the light and the lengthening day of these northeastern days turn us, curiously back to earth. Seedlings, bird calls and warm healthy soil enrich our dreams. It is time to harvest our worm compost. What a treat it is to give thanks for this full-bodied nutrient, a gift from the worms who have feasted all winter on our egg shell, carrot peels, apple cores and vegetable scraps. By eating the dying, these busy critters, at the heart of a fascinating eco-system in a box, create the possibility for new life.

Hardly a visitor comes who is not awed by the work and life system in the worm box. But the children are the ones who really crouch down, get close, smell, touch, ooh and ah. Their wonder is wise and uninhibited, full of questions without judgment. They are a celebration of the “ever-new” in all of us, young and old alike. In the solarium with the worm box, children and adults of both species mutually reveal the creative Earth dynamic, ever ancient and ever new, awaiting within the originating fireball light 15 billion years ago.

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