SHALOM!
A JOURNAL FOR THE PRACTICE OF RECONCILIATION
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# Caring for Creation

**IN THE EARLY** days of the COVID-19 pandemic when we couldn't go about all of our normal routines, my husband and I started going for walks in local parks, searching for spring wildflowers as they burst out after the cold of winter. My husband's retirement hobby is nature photography, so when I go with him, I always take my own little point-and-shoot camera to give me something to do when we inevitably stop for long periods of time while he snaps photo after photo. I started photographing the wildflowers I saw, and then it became sort of an obsession to find a new one every time we went out. I even downloaded an app to my phone that helped me identify what I was seeing.

Through spring, summer, and fall, I eventually photographed more than 175 difference species of wildflowers (including flowering trees and bushes). Quite a few of my photographs are close-ups that show the intricate and delicate beauty of even the tiniest flowers. The natural world is amazing!

This year, I also read the 2019 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *The Overstory,* by Richard Powers. The plot is complex, with a variety of human characters over time who are connected to a scheme to save old-growth forests in the Pacific Northwest from further development. Trees (collectively and individually) also function as major characters. Amazon's summary describes the novel as "a stunning evocation of—and paean to—the natural world. . . . There is a world alongside ours—vast, slow, interconnected, resourceful, magnificently inventive, and almost invisible to us." So much of the description of trees and how they communicate with each other was new to me, and like with all the wildflowers I really noticed for the first time this year, I marvelled at the intricacy and interdependence of the natural world. I kept wondering, why wouldn't we want to do all we can to protect flowers and trees and everything else in it?

But that's when it starts to get controversial. Taking care of flowers and trees is one thing, but when it gets linked to questions about whether we humans are responsible for the degradation of the earth on a larger scale (temperature changes, increasingly destructive natural disasters, drought, etc.), not everyone is on the same page. The concept of "climate change" has become extremely polarizing, with Christians lining up on one side or the other of whether it even exists, and if it does, how serious it really is and what if anything we can and should do about it.

This edition of *Shalom!* doesn't do much try to convince you that climate change exists (although that's admittedly the assumption of many writers); instead, it seeks to describe the complexity of creation and our part in it as stewards of the earth. Writers describe their own love affairs with the natural world, how what is happening with that world has motivated them to pursue further study, and what they are trying to do, and encouraging us to do, to care for God's good created world.

**Harriet S. Bicksler, editor**

## THIS ISSUE OF *SHALOM!*

# A Creation Testimony

*By David Perry*

**HAVE YOU EVER** been moved by something so beautiful, that the only rational (yet, irrational and subconscious) response was to simply . . . cry? Last year, in the little South Pacific island nation of New Zealand, I had exactly that experience. And even if it was an experience that transcends rational explanation, at least the irrational attempt of explaining it begins to convey why my relationship with Creation, the Earth, the Land has become so important to me.

I am an outdoors enthusiast. As a corn-fed boy from the Midwest, I had never encountered real mountains until I moved to Los Angeles in 2011. My time in the San Gabriel Mountains of Southern California changed me, and I've never looked back. I am addicted to the frightening beauty, solitude, and adventure of the mountains. When I'm not making music or planning liturgies for church, you can most often find me immersed in the liturgy of the wilderness: the call to worship led by the singing of the whippoorwill, the sermon proclaimed by the gusting of the winds over the mountain peaks, and the order of service led by the incessant winding of the Appalachian Trail.

So when I decided to visit a friend in New Zealand in the Spring of 2019, I expected far more than just an "unexpected journey" to see some hobbit holes and Mount Doom. Although I did see those places, what I really expected was nothing less than a spiritual pilgrimage of sorts.

The pinnacle of the trip occurred after backpacking several days through the wind, rain, and snow of the Southern Alps in Fiordland National Park. After completing this epic hike (or "walk," as Kiwis call it), we boarded a small ship to cruise through the famous Milford Sound, which is essentially a mountain bay that opens up into the Pacific Ocean. This is not hyperbole: on this boat ride, dolphins came up to our boat and waterfalls cascaded off the mountains all around us, fueled by the recent rains. Rainbows permeated the cool, misty air. And after days of not seeing the sun, crisp blue skies gave way to the most majestic sunset I've ever seen.

I cried.

Why? In the months that followed, I spent a lot of time asking myself that question. And here's what I've concluded: I think I witnessed the most beautiful thing my human eyes have ever seen. In some mystical way, as soon as I experienced that beauty, I innately knew that I was home. Creation, nature, mountains, the woods—those aren't places we go to get away from it all, to escape. These are places we go to get closer to true reality, true beauty, true home. When we meaningfully connect with God's creation, we are more at home than we could possibly imagine. You see, we are not separate from God's creation, we don't just live in creation—we are God's creation, we are a part of it. We are designed to be fully dependent, embodied, and interconnected with the world around us.

In that moment, in the middle of a mountain bay in New Zealand, I was overwhelmed with the unity and oneness of all of God's creation. Heaven and earth merged together. I felt my connection to the land, to the sea, to the sunset. In that moment, creation wasn't just an object to be consumed, dominated, or entertained by, in the name of capitalism. Creation felt deeply personal and relational.

There is so much beauty in the world. It is all around us, it includes us, and it's not as difficult to find as one might think. And when one is able to truly connect with the transcendent beauty of God embedded in all of creation, all the ups and downs of life might just mysteriously merge and blend together. There are some truly horrific things in this world—unspeakable ugliness and pain. Life is hard. But all I can tell you is this. When I gazed on that sunset in New Zealand, I was simply grateful to have the opportunity to experience it all: the pain, the beauty, the opportunity to live and be a participant in this mystery that we call life. To quote the musical artist Sleeping at Last: "how rare and beautiful it is, to even exist."

Have you ever been moved by something so beautiful, that the only response was to simply . . . cry? To cry at the ugliness, the pain, the oneness, and the beauty of it all?

***David Perry** is worship arts pastor at the Grantham Brethren in Christ Church, Mechanicsburg, PA. He gave this testimony during a special sermon series on Creation Care in January 2020.*

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# Sacred Art, Sacred Earth

*By Corinne Jones Chau*

**THE 2017 SALE** of a 500-year-old painting by Italian artist Leonardo da Vinci set the record for the world's most expensive painting. Salvator Mundi was purchased for $450.3 million (USD). It is a Renaissance depiction of Jesus as he makes the sign of the cross with his right hand and holds a nonrefracting crystal orb in his left, which identified his role as the Salvator Mundi (Latin for "Saviour of the World").

For centuries, humans have gone to great lengths to admire, study, collect, and preserve the works of great artists. Consider the $450.3 million cost to purchase just one small oil painting, to say nothing of its restoration process and continued preservation. How much more are we willing to give to conserve, protect, and restore the masterpiece crafted by the very hands of God?

Imagine God in his artist's studio before the beginning, with Jesus, the Word, ready to leap from his mouth with creation poetry, and the Spirit hovering over the watery abyss waiting to act with power and precision. Sense the glorious anticipation of the Trinity as they begin to craft a universe that will be the home of love. Feel the exhilaration as God brings into being all the elements of a world: shimmering sky, solid land, vibrant plants, and playful animals, all carefully arranged to receive the finishing touch; beings moulded from the dust of the ground and filled with the very breath of God. The perfect ecosystem of mutual give-receive relationships between earth, humanity, and the divine causes God to look around and proclaim, "It is good" (Genesis 1:31).

I believe we must remember where we come from to change the trajectory of where we are headed. In a conversation about creation care, it doesn't take long to become overwhelmed by the results of the take-take relationship we've had with this generous earth for such a long time. How can we explain our ingratitude for the masterpiece Creator God gifted to us (to say nothing of the gift we were designed to be in return)? The Great Pacific Garbage Patch looms in the ocean, forests are decimated to make way for progress, and oil leaks like blood into vulnerable places. The earth suffers under the weight of our taking. I'm not an expert, but I don't think weekly curbside recycling is going to fix the problem.

Ninety-seven percent of climate scientists agree we're all tethered to a near-certain future where life can no longer be sustained—not just life as we know it, but life at all. The extinction of species is already underway. We're on a warming planet that's crying out for the image-bearers of God to stand up and act justly.

Canada, where I live, is rich in natural resources. We have seven percent of earth's renewable freshwater and nine percent of the earth's forest area. The effects of climate change are visible from coast to coast, and the impact on every region shows up in unique ways. The coasts are experiencing rising sea levels, higher risks of flooding, and shoreline erosion; the prairies face extended periods of drought; Quebec and Ontario face more frequent and severe storms; and the Arctic is losing permafrost and sea ice. From 1970-2014, WWF Canada estimated that mammal population dropped 43 percent, bird species dropped 54 percent, and fish dropped 20 percent due to the effects of climate change and habitat loss. Plus, our obsession with perfectly manicured green monoculture yards at the expense of habitats for dwindling pollinator insects continues to baffle me!

Still, it's easy to be complacent and say, "Well, there's lots of nature left over." Canada is failing our greenhouse gas emission protocols, accords, and agreements, and Canadians are either too polite or too distracted to tell politicians that the earth is worth more than aggressive economic growth. Didn't someone once say that the love of money is the root of all evil?

In our economic pursuits, did we forget that the wellbeing of the people is tethered to the wellbeing of the land? According to the Public Health Agency of Canada, "Climate change impacts on health will disproportionately affect vulnerable populations, including the poor, elderly, and the young and those who are chronically ill. Also included are the socially disadvantaged and people living in vulnerable geographical areas [such as the] North."

Those who are first to notice land degradation and who are the loudest to protest are usually Indigenous people—in Canada, the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples. If white Canadians would assume a posture of humility, a willingness to listen, learn, and unlearn, there might be room for all kinds of reconciliation to grow from the ground up. In the listening, I think we will re-learn the divine lesson that land is sacred. Melina Laboucan-Massimo, who is Lubicon Cree from Northern Alberta and host of the TV show "Power to the People," founder of Sacred Earth Solar, and Campaigns Director at Indigenous Climate Action, says, "A lot of people see church [buildings] as a place of prayer. For us, we see the land as a place of prayer. So, when you destroy the land, you're destroying the places where we practice ceremony, all of the things that revolve around our culture."

In a recent podcast about climate emergency and sacred duty, Dr. Gail Bradbrook, British environmental activist and co-founder of the environmental social movement, Extinction Rebellion, explains that change is not driven merely by intellect, helpful as it may be to understand and strategize. Change has to be rooted in the heart. Indigenous peoples in Canada have been keepers of this knowledge.

As we consider da Vinci's Salvator Mundi, we would do well to remember that the Saviour of the World came to reconcile to himself all things under heaven. "God so loved the world" doesn't mean only the humans who walk upon it, but the whole groaning creation itself.

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# Architects of Hope

*By Brandon Hoover*

**THINK ABOUT THE** last time you were in traffic. It makes us late and it impacts our health. It sucks to be stuck "in traffic." But think about it another way. What if we started to say, "we are traffic"? What if, instead of traffic happening to us, we recognized our presence was contributing to it? We'd have more empathy for other people who were also traffic, and we'd start to think about ways to solve the problem. We often think of things happening to us instead of happening to the world. When we flip the script, we orient ourselves toward empathy, problem solving, and altruism. When we see ourselves as actors in the world, we become architects of the world instead of passive actors. What if we did this with climate change?

Many call it the problem of the twenty-first century. Climatic changes are occurring and are well-documented by climate scientists—more frequent and stronger storms, an ever earlier wildfire season, increasing rainfall in some areas less in others.[1] According to the National Climate Assessment, a bi-partisan report required by law every four years, the only explanation for these changes is human activity adding carbon dioxide and methane into the atmosphere at higher rates than ever before. We are just scratching the surface of the long-term effects unless we act with the time we have left.

I hear the scoffs. "Act? What action can I possibly take when the climate is so large and I am one person?" In teaching and working to mitigate climate change, this is the question I get most often. I used to list the actions we can take: LED light bulbs, hybrid cars, home insulation, investment in renewable energy, vote, eat lower on the food chain, or bike or walk to work. While all of these are great steps, I recently realized that the issue is not that people are unsure of the solutions. While there are nuances, many of us know that America's lifestyle contributes to the highest global per capita greenhouse gas emissions. The reality is that people feel hopeless that their actions will make an impact. We know we've fouled our own nest, but we don't think we can clean it up.

We are hopeless because we've been too focused on ourselves. We've bought a version of individualism that mistakes personal gain for personal strength. We think that our actions, no matter their merit or deprivation, don't truly matter. We've traded our social connections and positive leisure for personalized screens, insatiable consumption, and thinking that we are right and others are wrong. By questioning an individual's action to solve climate change, we forget that our individual actions collectively degraded the atmosphere. The most fascinating thing about our hyper-individualized selves is that we've forgotten the truth of what truly makes us happy—altruism, hope, and our common identity.

Happiness is challenging to understand, and while we hold the pursuit of it to be self-evident, we don't always get that pursuit right. However hard it is to quantify, scholars have begun to understand more fully what happiness in a modern society looks like. In the *World Happiness Report*, researchers discovered that the things that contribute most to human wellbeing are environmental quality, security, and social connections.[2] Not surprisingly, theopposite of these things are among the leading causes of a country's lower happiness ranking, and a commitment to altruism is woven through all major happiness scores. This shouldn't surprise the community of faith. Paul reminds the church, "Do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others." This biblical reminder is one that our ancestors remembered during times of crisis.

During World War II, when the fear of German aggression on American shores was at its height, households and businesses on both coasts turned off their lights and closed their shops early to limit visible targets for German aircraft. In the midst of the current global pandemic, people faithfully wearing masks share meals with those in need and support frontline workers. Even the natural world, which we misunderstand as exclusively survival of the fittest, operates with altruism. Trees are known to cooperate and take collective action when experiencing the stress of storms, pests, and disease. Forests do not survive hundreds of years by solely competing with each other. These times of great crisis lead to great collective action and hope.[3]

Collective action is needed to stave off the worst challenges of climate change—food insecurity, rising sea levels, more dangerous storms, etc. The solutions to these problems are certainly dependent on technology and policy, but the collective action we must do as a society is work of the heart. We must recognize our hopelessness and lack of altruism as the traffic jam for work that must happen. I am hopeful about our ability to address climate change because we have great examples and great teachings that show us we can respond to crisis. I am also hopeful because of how collective action has already started. Most of us agree about the solutions to climate change more than we think (increased renewables, electric vehicle infrastructure, keeping our air and water clean).[4] But to enact these changes, we must remember the words of Paul, the altruistic work of nature, and those architects of hope during crises. I am hopeful because when we see ourselves as architects of the world we want, we empower ourselves and each other to actually create that world.

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**Notes:**

[1]Katherine Hayhoe, et al., 2018: "Our Changing Climate," in *Impacts, Risks, and Adaptation in the United States: Fourth National Climate Assessment,* Vol. II. (Washington, DC: US Global Change Research Program), 72–144.

[2] R. Kaplan, *The Nature of the View from Home: Psychological Benefits. Environment and Behavior,* 33, no. 4 (2001): 507–542; John F. Helliwell, et al., eds. *World Happiness Report 2020* (New York: Sustainable Development Solutions Network, 2020).

[3]P. Wohlleben, *The Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel, How They communicate—Discoveries from a secret world* (Vancouver, BC: Greystone Books, 2016).

[4]The Yale Climate Communications project shows that Americans agree on climate solutions more than they disagree about the reality of climate change: climatecommunication.yale.edu/visualizations-data/ycom-us/.

# Lessons from Observing Wildfires

*By Rosemary Valencia*

**MY PARENTS INSTILLED** in me a love of gardening. This influenced my desire to study permaculture, which seeks to integrate human activity with natural surroundings to create highly efficient self-sustaining ecosystems. Permaculture works with nature, not against it. I find it makes caring for the earth less complex when I look for the answers to simple gardening questions or complex environmental dilemmas in creation itself.

Recently, wildfires ravaged California, burning more than four million acres. I can attest to the emotions of fear and loss wildfires can cause. When evacuation orders are lifted, as a community, we collectively express gratitude to the firefighters who saved our homes. We also share in mourning for the charred moonscape the fire leaves behind. Our camp has been evacuated more times than I would like to remember. However, with each incident, Isaiah 61:3 becomes clearer to me. I can see that God gives, "beauty for ashes. The oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness; That they may be called trees of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, that he may be glorified."

In the wake of a wildfire, the forest is a perfect place to see the Lord glorified. If you think a wildfire consumes the entire acreage represented on a fire map, you will be surprised to know that the map merely defines the perimeter of a burned area; it does not represent what occurs within the containment lines.

Observing the aftermath firsthand tells a different story of just how a fire travels through the varied mountain terrain. Instead of total destruction, you will find pockets of unscathed trees encircled by burnt ones. Days with strong winds drive the fire intensely down gullies or run up slopes. Within minutes, everything in its path is devoured, leaving only thick ash at the feet of branchless trees. Without prevailing winds, the low intensity fire dies down at night, slowly creeping over a multitude of days, burning only the understory. Old fire scars and rocky streams can bring the flames to a halt or change its direction. Humidity, precipitation, firestorms, and other factors make their visible marks on the landscape. These differences occur within the same fire, no matter its name.

A fire regime has purpose in God's design and is important to the natural patterns of life in grassland and forest ecosystems. The degree of heat intensity heals the burnt areas in distinctly different ways. The greatly misunderstood snag forest (standing dead trees), created by devastating high-intensity heat, powerfully displays God's awesome power. Against all logic, dead trees are perfectly suited to bring life and healing to the forest. While the area is still smoldering, swarms of woodboring beetles detect heat from over 50 miles away. Rapidly they flock to colonize the freshly burned trees, ideal places in which to breed their larvae. Their role as decomposers will manage the forest's decay.

Following right behind, black-backed woodpeckers attracted to the pheromones emitted by the beetles move in. It is no coincidence that their staple diet consists primarily of beetles. Perfectly designed, the woodpecker camouflages well in the blackened surroundings. He promptly gets to work with his highly specialized skull, fully absorbing the shock during the forceful pounding necessary to excavate a cavity in the hard sapwood. Each year a pair of woodpeckers drills a fresh nest, leaving the previous one for the birds and small mammals incapable of making a nest of their own. Production of such cavities provides sawdust for ants to process. Spiders and worms eat the ants, and the food web rapidly develops.

Raptors with unobstructed views feed abundantly in this place. Spotted owls not only survive but thrive in severely burned areas. They roost with their young along the old growth and snag forest edges. Fire is their natural habitat creator, while fire suppression and snag logging are the greatest threat sfor these endangered species. Small birds and critters scatter seeds of edible plants that will ultimately feed deer, bear, and other large mammals. Animal droppings, ash, and organic matter nourish and fertilize the soil web. Rich soil is the required component to support the vast array of native wildflowers, grasses, ferns, and trees. Cones and the dormant seeds that need heat to germinate join the new dense growth, which in turn attracts pollinators, while providing shelter to beneficial insects and reptiles.

The effects of fire seem harsh at first glance; however, the ecological value of the biodiversity it creates clearly points back to God's perfect design and his loving care for everything he has created. Who else could bring such beauty from the ashes?

Christians should be passionate about the divine assignment to care for the earth and should lead the way. What keeps us from becoming stewards of the earth God so loves? Shouldn't Christ followers do better? I think so; after all, we know the Creator. Believers are the ones who are especially moved by God's creation and awestruck with his intricate design. God's purpose is to reveal himself through creation. If God called us to care for the earth and will hold us accountable, then certainty he will not let us labor in vain.

This realization changed the way Paul Gautschi, author of *Growing Food God's Way*, approached his farm. After failed attempts at farming, a dry well, and hard soil, he took a walk in the forest and cried out to the Lord to help him. God instructed him to "observe creation." He noticed there was no irrigation system, no weeding or tilling, no added chemicals, and the soil was not naked but covered in plant litter. He began mimicking what he saw, beginning with planting numerous plant species. He allowed animals, birds, and insects to interact with his garden, eliminating the need for insecticides. He covered the dirt with thick layers of tree mulch to conserve water. The mulch worked so well that soon the rains alone watered the farm. The dead soil was restored, not with artificial fertilizers, but with minerals from the decomposing mulch. Earthworms and other beneficial insects began to work the ground, eliminating the need to till and destroy the

delicate invisible microorganism system beneath. His farm became a productive biodiverse system. He copied God's design. If he had lived in the desert, he would have studied and used that climate's system with equal success.

Observing wildfires has settled some of my questions about the purpose of fires and changed the way I think about gardening. I encourage you to take a hike and see the miracle of a snag forest unfold before your eyes. Get out there and observe creation! Ask God to reveal answers to your questions. Answer your call to steward the earth and mimic God's perfect design even if it is only in your personal garden.

***Rosemary Valencia*** *is associate director of Mile High Pines Camp in southern California, a ministry of the Pacific Conference. She holds a certificate from the Permaculture Research Institute of Australia. She is married to Gabe and the mother of five children and 16 grandchildren.*

# Creation Care in the Time of Wildfires

*By Drew Strayer*

**IN SEPTEMBER, SOME** friends were evacuated due to the approaching Beachie Creek wildfire in Oregon. They are storing some of our belongings until we own a home. Early morning the day after Labor Day, they called us and we raced 20 miles to their house to retrieve photo albums and a few other things and prayed with them before leaving at 9:30 a.m. under a pitch black sky. Later, a strange red-orange glow filled the sky from ground level upward in all directions.

That red-orange sky remained for a few days before turning grey-yellow as air quality grew worse. We awoke each morning with itchy eyes, runny noses, and sore throats. The thing that turned this little "hotspot" into the epic fire it became was a Labor Day windstorm pushing it down a canyon. As the fire grew hotter, it created weather and wind systems of its own, sucking up the oxygen and pumping carbon and gases into the air. A week later, our friends still weren't home due to the dangerous air quality even though the fire stayed eight miles away. Meanwhile, we barely left our home in Salem for 10 days.

### Trees and shalom

God created the universe and everything in it to thrive in healthy interdependence. Sometimes humans ignore interdependence and reap the whirlwind. Some have experienced the whirlwinds of our changing climate as the earth and our atmosphere warm. Based on poor stewardship of this beautiful earth, one of the curses we face is wildfires in the typically lush Pacific Northwest and elsewhere. But, before we descend into the wildfire maelstrom, let's dwell with the trees for a moment and see them as God created them to thrive in shalom.

Tree roots use their symbiotic relationship with fungi (mycorrhizal networks) to communicate with the trees around them. Yes, you heard that right: trees communicate with other trees—via fungi. In addition, trees respond to stimuli. I want to be clear that they are not writing epic poems or even haiku, but when we read that the trees of the field clap their hands (Isa. 55:12), it's kind of like that! Here's an example of communication as a response to stimuli: Acacia trees release a gas when grazed on by giraffes; trees downwind "notice" the gas in the air and push tannins out to all the leaves which can sicken giraffes. Giraffes avoid the tannin-filled leaves. Interestingly, giraffes typically graze on trees while moving upwind—to unwarned trees.

Here's another example of communication to transfer nutrients between trees: fungal filaments link between tree roots (miles and miles of which can be present in a single teaspoon of soil). They begin at the ends of roots of the "father" or "mother" trees and can detect smaller trees' relational connection and need for sugars. When larger trees produce sugars from the photosynthesis happening in their crowns, they send some down through their roots to trees in the shade below them. Smaller trees take up sugars through their roots enabling them to grow and thrive even though they can't yet reach enough sunlight. These sugars passing through tree roots and soil to each other strengthen the fungal network that alerts large trees to the condition and "kinship" of trees around them.

Lest we think this resource sharing only happens between related trees (parents to offspring), these networks also favor different trees that function well together in a grove or forest as canopy and understory. One resource sharing network connects cedars (canopy) and maples (understory), and another links Douglas firs (canopy) and hemlocks (understory), supporting a diverse forest ecosystem. Stewardship of the earth supports similar biodiversity and health.

### Forests out of balance

Diverse tree networks have been terribly manipulated into close-packed monoculture (single tree types) in my part of the country, and it has led to some of the awful experiences many have had. It makes logging easy, but crushes forest health. This year was a wakeup call if we haven't heard any yet! This year, 6.7 million acres burned in the western United States. In Oregon, we lost one million acres of these oxygen producing life-givers. This was double the acres burned in an average year. In California, five of the top 20 largest wildfires in state history burned in 2020.

### Living in the ways of peace

We can learn lessons from the trees and from the Creator's designs and methods of networked forest interdependence and biodiversity. First, we must talk to neighbors to know how they are doing and how to thrive together. Second, our good is linked to the good of neighbors. Remember that age-old concept of "the common good"? We must steward the common good and share resources so all neighbors thrive. Third, biodiversity is key to forest health just as other forms of collaborative diversity are key to the health of a region. And fourth, shalom is not complete without care for the earth. Steward

your local patch of earth in your community and use fewer natural resources as you are able. The Brethren in Christ affirm living simply as one path of obedience. Reusing products or choosing ones that intentionally cause less waste of wood and plastic are two good ways of walking that path.

Take a moment today to listen to the trees clap their hands in praise to God.

***Drew and Millyellen Strayer*** *live and work in Salem, OR, where they are planting the Peace City Brethren in Christ Church. You can follow their blog at https://strayerfamily.wixsite.com/strayer-family.*

# A Congregational Creation Care Team

*By Lynette Weber with Rick Wukasch*

**I HAVE DEEPLY** loved God's creation since childhood. My first memories include watching birds through a window, being fascinated by flowing water, and feeling soothed by the movement of tree branches. God continues to speak most clearly to me through the natural world, including and especially during my conversion process and many times in the years since when I've needed solace or reassurance of God's loving presence. Although my Mennonite background rooted me in faith, I was not a Christ-follower from my early teens through my late 30s, and when I look at my journey back to faith the defining moment is in the woods, my "cross in the trees" moment. But that's another story. The point here is that in order to truly care for creation, I believe that we need to feel spiritually connected to creation.

This deep, life-long connection to creation was the impetus for beginning the Creation Care ministry at The Meeting House Oakville (TMH). Part of this connection is understanding the need for followers of Jesus to participate in the redemption of creation, to care for humanity by working to restore the natural world upon which we depend for life itself, and to work for justice by advocating for a clean and sustainable environment for all people, especially those who have been marginalized by the endless consumption and waste of contemporary society.

I had been interested in forming a TMH Creation Care Group for years, but last fall, things really started to come together. Katharine Hayhoe, a hero of mine, had been invited to speak on climate change at our church, and I felt compelled to have the group established and active before that Sunday. We had our first meeting in November 2019, on a Sunday after services and have been meeting and acting together ever since.

The TMH Oakville Creation Care group has three overarching goals: 1) to learn about the biblical basis for creation care at this pivotal point in human history; 2) to explore ways that we can take action to foster environmental awareness and sustainability in our own lives, in the lives of those we influence, in the church, and in the world; and 3) to spend time together in God's beautiful Creation and invite others to join us. Over the past year, we have been blessed to make significant progress in all three areas!

The first step in the learning journey of our first goal was to go through the excellent curriculum "Every Creature Singing" by Mennonite Creation Care Network. This inspired study is freely available for any congregation that wishes to use it (see sidebar on page 7). About 20 people met together biweekly after Sunday service to go through each of the 12 lessons. The discussion and prayer that came out of those sessions was rich, inspirational, and fruitful. I highly recommend this material to any group interested in pursuing creation care together. We are now planning to go through the course again, virtually, for those who were not able to participate the first time, as well as embark on further learning through book studies and virtual screenings of films related to creation care. Staying grounded in and expanding our awareness of how creation care is not only "environmentalism" in a secular sense, but an integral component of our Christian discipleship and obedience is just as vital as taking practical action to be responsible stewards of creation.

Our second goal of taking practical action has been subdivided into four action teams: 1) Oakville Site Grounds Greening Action Team, 2) Oakville Site Indoor Facility Sustainability Team, 3) Events and Outreach Team, 4) Education, Advocacy and Discipleship Team. When COVID-19 hit, the progress of some of these teams was slowed, but the Grounds Greening Team has been able to move ahead in a big way.

This past spring, in the face of food security considerations within the COVID pandemic, Andrea Rowe, one of our team who also leads community gardens projects throughout our region, encouraged us to do a practical start-up project—a food garden. Rick Wukasch, a veteran gardener who had previous experience raising food for food banks with several TMH home churches, agreed to coordinate the project. Without a budget, we relied on generous donations of time, expertise, and materials from our team, local environmental organizations, and several community businesses. A local timber mill donated timbers salvaged from a historic distillery, and with the help of a TMH contractor, our construction crew repurposed them into six raised beds filled with soil and compost donated by a TMH landscaper.

Twenty dedicated volunteers teamed to grow transplants, plant, maintain, harvest, and deliver organically grown vegetables to six local food banks and a homeless shelter kitchen. Over our first summer, the garden

yielded 235 bags of fresh vegetables—tomatoes, green peppers, cucumbers, zucchini, beets, kale, Swiss chard, spinach, and beet greens. Recipients appreciated getting recipes developed by two nutritionists on the team for some of the less familiar crops like kale, chard, and beet greens.

Whether first time or veteran gardeners, we enjoyed getting outdoors, safely working together, and loving our community with nourishing fresh food during this difficult time of isolation and economic uncertainty. We are planning to expand our garden next year and take other steps towards restoring our local environment. The industrial building and grounds which now is home to the TMH Oakville production site presents other opportunities for creation care. This fall, a wetland corner of the property overgrown by invasive weeds and poison ivy was cleaned up of accumulated debris, and hopefully will be transformed into a beautiful, interpretive, naturalized place of prayer, reflection, and learning in the coming years. We envision one part of that reclamation to become a pollinator/butterfly habitat for native flora and fauna amidst the asphalt and industrial environment. Being creative stewards within the footprint our amazing Creator has provided is our growing passion.

Our third goal, to spend time outdoors together, has begun simply with several group hikes on some of the beautiful trails in our region. We are blessed to be able to gather together, safely distanced and masked as necessary, and connect with creation and each other on our outdoor adventures. My hope is that we will continue hiking and snowshoeing through the winter, and to add paddling and camping events in 2021.

I continue to be amazed at what God has done with our Creation Care group so far, and I look forward with anticipation to what he is developing for the future. I would encourage anyone who is considering creation care action to prayerfully step out in faith and just begin. Be assured that our Creator will be with you on the journey.

***Lynette Weber*** *is a teacher and grandmother with a background in environmental studies and theology. She is the volunteer lead for the Creation Care group at The Meeting House, Oakville. Contact Lynette at creationcare@themeetinghouse.com.*

***Rick Wukasch*** *transitioned from a career in environmental/agricultural biology into pastoral ministry in midlife. Now retired, he is active as a spiritual director, healing caregiver, and grandpa. He and his wife, Doris, are repurposing their suburban footprint into a natural and food producing garden for family, community, pollinators, and birds. Rick volunteers to train and work alongside teams in The Meeting House Oakville's Creation Care Food Garden, and can be reached at rtwukasch@gmail.com*

## "Every Creature Singing" Curriculum

The Mennonite Creation Care Network's "Every Creature Singing" curriculum delves into fundamental questions such as: How does our faith heritage speak to issues like climate change and environmental justice? here in our sphere of influence is creation struggling and what can we do about it? What spiritual practices might help us care for the earth? The curriculum is divided into three units: Biblical and Theological Foundations, Pursuing Peace and Justice, and Choosing a Simple Lifestyle. Each unit consists of four lessons, and contains rich supplementary resources and references. Every Creature Singing" is available at https://mennocreationcare.org/every-creature-singing/ to any church or group.

# Teaching "Laudato Si"

*By Zach Spidel*


**FOR THE LAST** three years I have had the privilege of teaching an introductory level course on religious studies and theology to undergraduates at the University of Dayton (a Catholic institution). While the university affords instructors a wide degree of latitude in arranging the content of REL 103, there are five short readings the class must cover at some point each semester. It might surprise you to learn that the most popular of these readings among the 18-year-olds I teach is not the story of Dorothy Day nor the conversion narrative of Augustine, but a papal encyclical titled *Laudato Si* (Praise to You).

No one—including Catholics!—thinks of the papal encyclical as a particularly compelling genre of literature. Yet, each semester, my students are animated by their engagement with this recent example of that genre by Pope Francis. Following an ancient tradition, its title is simply the opening (Latin) words of the encyclical. In this case those two opening words are a quotation from the pope's namesake, Francis of Assisi. More specifically, they are from the twenfth century Francis's "Canticle of the Sun":

> *Praise to you, my Lord, through all your creatures,*
> *Especially sir brother sun,*
> *Who brings the day and through whom you give us light.*
> *He is beautiful and radiant with great splendor.*
> *Of you, Most High, he bears the likeness.*
> *Praise to you, my Lord, through sister moon and the stars.*
> *In the heavens you have made them bright, precious, and fair.*
> *Praise to you, my Lord, through brothers wind and air,*
> *And fair and stormy, all weather's moods,*
> *By which you cherish all that you have made. . . .*

The twelfth century Francis goes on to render praise to God through many other brothers and sisters in the natural world around him. At times he addresses these siblings directly, calling on them to praise God with him—sister water, brother fire, sister (and mother) earth, even sister death who bring us, at last, from this life into the pres-

ence of God. It is a strikingly beautiful hymn of praise to God which, simultaneously and vividly, renders human life within that larger web of fellow-creatures which God has woven and for whom he holds us responsible.

Pope Francis's encyclical is a lengthy document, but it has one central argument, one with which I agree, and my students resonate with. It's an argument that I think has the whiff of biblical wisdom about it, and I can't do much better in this space than to share that argument with my fellow Brethren in Christ, especially since we're normally rather unlikely to come across things from this wing of the wider Christian family. The argument goes something like this:

Humanity has been operating in the modern world in an idolatrous manner. We have made gods of progress, technology, science, and economic growth—which is to say we treat ourselves as the true gods of this world. We assume that more technological power in our hands is always better, higher GDP figures are the proper goal for economic development, the route to solving every problem is via the aggregation of data and the application of technological power and governmental policies. Those who make those policies and wield that power tend to interact with the world via spreadsheets. Economists model and think they can predict the behavior of societies full of "rational consumers." Human bodies are reduced to machines, human minds to mere computers. Wisdom is reduced to data. The inheritance of the past vanishes as we proclaim ourselves enlightened above those who came before us. The earth is a collection of quantifiable resources; that mountain over there is really just so many metric tons of material, some of which may make economic sense to extract.

Pope Francis calls this the "technocratic paradigm." It is a paradigm that believes in inevitable progress, unlimited human power, in a relationship of control over the earth, and it gives a materialist and reductionistic account of human life. I think he's right that this is how the modern world functions and that this paradigm has led us to the precipice of an ecological disaster. I also think he's right about where we need to turn to avoid that disaster.

If we think that the right technologies and the right policies can fix what has gone wrong, we will be doubling down on what has led us to this point. What is needed is not more data, more powerful technologies, the right policies imposed from on high. What's needed is a spiritual conversion. We need a conversion of the imagination away from the reductionisms of the technocratic paradigm to the God-centered holism of Francis's twelfth century canticle. Could a person who truly recognized a mountaintop in West Virginia as an ancient brother, molded by the same divine hand that molded him, order it dynamited? Could a woman who addressed that mountain by name, calling upon it to worship God with her, flatten its top in an explosion? Could she send slag into nearby sister-creek all to extract some coal to goose the profits of a mining outfit which pays its CEO a hundred of times more than it does those who risk their lives to do the extracting? If we Christians shared with others a view of the world not as a collection of numerically quantified resources for use in the modern machine economy but as the home created by God for a wild and wonderful family of creatures, might we not naturally land at better and more sustainable policies?

Might not the political and economic dimensions of the current ecological crisis, which at present seem so intractable, dissolve if people's hearts and habits are transformed by a more biblical portrait of the world as creation? I think they might. I find my own perspective transformed to a remarkable degree when I take a moment and say "good morning" to brother maple tree who stands in my front yard and whose leaves I can now not help but see shuddering in praise of our common Creator whenever sister wind comes blowing by.

***Zach Spidel*** *is pastor of The Shepherd's Table, Dayton, OH.*

# Food Security and Climate Change

*By Janet Lewis, interviewed by Jon Stanton*

**WHAT FIRST LED you to pursue agricultural science as a career?**

Early in my college experience, I made a humanitarian aid trip to Guatemala. Growing up in a middle class American home, I always had enough to eat. During the trip, I was struck by the poverty and subsistence living. A local nun told me, "The people live for the corn. Even if they have something else to eat that day, if they don't have corn, they feel like they haven't eaten." I felt a spiritual stirring because I had been asking God what to do with my life, and I saw a possibility to make a difference. God was opening my eyes to how I could have a role in addressing hunger and food needs around the globe.

I returned to college and decided to change my major to botany. After graduating, I visited Michigan State University (MSU) to consider graduate work. While talking with the university's wheat breeder, I mentioned that I was particularly interested in China. (I had recently read the book *Who Will Feed China?* and felt that God might be calling me to help the Chinese people improve their wheat production to help feed their massive population.) Once again, I felt that God was at work when the wheat breeder revealed a map of China on the wall behind him. He had spent the previous seven years focused on China. I ended up completing my degree in Plant Breeding and Genetics at MSU in 2004.

**What ultimately led you to working on the issue of climate change more directly?**

I hadn't thought much about climate change during the years I was working on my doctorate or subsequent years in Michigan. I recall discussing the topic with my colleagues and because they didn't seem to be alarmed or concerned, I figured there were other agricultural scientists and climatologists that were better equipped to prepare the world's food producers, or perhaps the issue

wasn't that bad.

When we moved to Florida in 2017 and had to run away from Hurricane Irma the day after we bought our condo, I really became concerned about natural disasters and food production. Irma caused more than a billion dollars of losses to Florida's agricultural industry. Shortly after Irma, Hurricane Maria hit Puerto Rico, and I saw devastating images showing the island had been scraped clean of vegetation, including its crops. A close former colleague lived in Puerto Rico. When I was finally able to reach him months later, I was relieved to hear his family was safe, but our discussion also focused on how it would likely take years for Puerto Rico's food production to recover from the hurricane.

I realized that most of us are used to walking into a grocery store and seeing everything we need or want available for those who can afford to buy it. The hurricane's devastation wasn't the only thing on my mind. I had a new realization that although I could physically get out of the way of a natural disaster, plants can't run from a fire, water themselves in a drought, or swim in a flood. Our global food system was (and still is) in peril, and I felt compelled to do something about it. As I began looking at the research, I learned how changing climate patterns are a major factor behind natural disasters, and extreme weather events are increasing in intensity and frequency.

**How does your faith play a role in your work to address climate change, and what suggestions do you have for people of faith who are concerned about this issue?**

My faith has always been the foundation of my motivation to do my part to help people have enough to eat. Beyond food, I also think it's important for people of faith, and especially those from a peace church background, to realize that lack of food and natural disasters are significant contributors to migration and conflict. This has been the case throughout documented human history. For example, in modern times, drought and lack of food have both been key factors in the war in Syria and the surge of refugees at our border fleeing drought conditions in Latin America's Dry Corridor.

Norman Borlaug, who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1970 for his work to improve crop yields, said "You can't build a peaceful world on empty stomachs and human misery." I agree with him. Why wouldn't I expect that people desperate to feed their children will resort to desperate methods?

I've also felt a connection to the story of Joseph in the Bible. When Joseph interpreted Pharaoh's dream, he was put in charge of preparations. Seeing and recognizing pending catastrophes and losses resulted in taking action and planning reserves. We need to be doing the same thing, on a global scale, to address the challenges of a changing climate.

One person's efforts to address climate change won't be enough. But millions of individuals each taking steps to address their impact on climate will have profound effects. Food is a "system." We need each other and we need to be able to rely on each other. For people who are not food producers, take a moment to cultivate a moment of gratitude for the food you have, and pray for those who don't have what they need.

God has given us a beautiful world; it's our job, as caretakers, to set aside our differences and work together to ensure its beauty and ability to produce food remain intact for generations to come.

***Janet M. Lewis, PhD,*** *is a consortium developer with Heat and Drought Wheat Improvement Consortium and vice president of the Borlaug Training Foundation. She and her husband Jon Stanton, are members of Carland-Zion Brethren in Christ Church, Owoss, MI. Jon is a member of the* Shalom! *editorial committee.*

# Environmental Responses by the Church in Zimbabwe

*By Sibonokuhle Ncube*

**THE CHURCHES AND** secular civil society organizations in Zimbabwe have recognized that environmental issues are concomitant with human habitation of lands. Zimbabwe faces a plethora of environmental challenges affecting land, water, and the air. However, land and water issues have become more prominent as the country has experienced protracted socio-economic decline, inefficiencies caused by land reform, and increasing poverty, unemployment, and inequality. These factors have intersected sharply with the impact of back-to-back seasonal droughts and rainfall variability, and consequent low agricultural productivity. Both rural and urban dwellers have seen communities exerting more pressure on land resources, with flora and fauna diversity dwindling. The resulting imbalance has been a vicious spiral.

In the last 15 years, this spiral has elicited a multi-level, multi-pronged, multi-stakeholder response to mitigate the water-energy-food deficit while positioning communities for recovery and adaptation to the changing climate. In this article, I'm reflecting on environmental responses by the Brethren in Christ Compassionate and Development Services (CDS)—the relief, development, and peacebuilding social ministry of the Brethren in Christ Church in Zimbabwe.

To succor communities affected by deficits and disasters, humanitarian relief, recovery and development programs, and the advocacy required for policy and structural transformation have been central. Considerable attention has also been given to local economic development and peacebuilding. Churches including the Brethren in Christ in Zimbabwe have responded through strategic re-organization for compassionate social justice and by leveraging both local capacities and resources from transnational friendships like Mennonite Central Committee, Mennonite World Conference, Canadian Food Grains Bank, and Brethren in Christ World Missions. As a consultant working among faith-based agencies, I have been glad to contribute to national and global policy discourse on environmental issues and climate

change.

According to the World Bank and the Zimbabwe Vulnerability Assessment Report, close to 70 percent of the population is rural and forest dependent for firewood, food, and water resources. These figures are in keeping with estimates from the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization which recognizes the African continent as "home to the largest proportion of forest-dependent subsistence households in the world." Farmers are mostly female, with women and girls also bearing a disproportionately higher burden to close the water-energy-food deficit. Sadly, as the population increases, the poorest households are forced to press into woodlands and marginal lands that have scarcely been able to recover from deforestation, overgrazing, rampant artisanal mining, soil and veld degradation caused by poor land management systems, overgrazing, and the shifting climate. This has happened despite existing legislation and traditional by-laws instituted to ensure good land management, and protection of wildlife, fisheries, commons, and forested areas.

The churches' witness has understood the countervailing factors militating against sustainable livelihoods, including the tragedy of the commons in overcrowded rural Zimbabwe. The Brethren in Christ CDS has been working for about a decade in communities in semi-arid lands in the western region of the country that continue to be hard hit by drought and intermittent floods. CDS strategically identified six key thematic areas for producing resilience and sustainable pathways to respond to water-energy-food insecurities and adapt to the shifting climate whilst mitigating risks. Gender transformation, attention to disabilities, protection of vulnerable and formerly marginalized persons, and creation care are key cross-cutting concerns within each thematic area. Thus, the Brethren in Christ Church has addressed community aspirations for survival and sustainability.

From a contributary theory of change, climate resilient agricultural programs embody a creation care principle of stewardship. While food and water security is an obvious response to felt need, both male and female farmers are invited to volunteer in order to stabilize local food production systems. There has also been keen interest in attracting young persons to small-scale farming. Healing relationships through peace education at local schools and within communal farmer groups has been essential to building thicker social bonds.

I believe that the compassionate and ecological response of the Brethren in Christ in Zimbabwe has had a good start. It has had an anthropocentric bias with a penchant for human wellness. However, more theological and balancing work still needs to be done. Local Christian witness generally needs to inculcate an eco-theology that captures the essence of God's shalom—a multi-faceted witness from a shared understanding of the need for harmonious relationship between humans and God, including right and just interpersonal and intergroup relationships that steward the earth's resources conscientiously and compassionately. The capacity needs to be optimal for current needs while at the same time be sustainable for the long term. This heightened emphasis on shalom as a value can release local communities to do more good. Creation care can become part of a reconciling peace theology that is proclaimed from the pulpit to the pew, the field, and the market place.

***Sibonokuhle Ncube*** *is a member of the Brethren in Christ Church in Zimbabwe, where she has worked with Compassionate and Development Services. She is currently studying theology and peace at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Elkhart, IN.*

# Editor's Notes

**Subscription renewals and contributions:** 2020 has been a year to remember, not always for the best reasons. It has been a year filled with the economic and other challenges of a global pandemic, and still many of you responded with your usual faithfulness to our call for subscription renewals and contributions. All of these contributions are essential to the survival of *Shalom!* If you haven't yet renewed for 2020, or if you'd like to give an extra gift, we welcome your response. The basic subscription rate is $20 per year. Send a check payable to Brethren in Christ Church US to the editor at the address on page 2. You can also subscribe and/or contribute online at bicus.org/resources/publications/shalom.

**Topics for 2021:** Potential topics for 2021 are economic justice, and criminal justice reform (including mass incarceration). No final decisions about topics have been made yet, so I encourage you to let me know if you have any topics ideas or other comments about *Shalom!* Contact Harriet Bicksler at bickhouse@aol.com with your comments and suggestions.

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burg. We are fortunate to live a block away from the Greenbelt with its growth of mature trees. I enjoy watching these woods from my patio, my office window, and walking the paths underneath them. Forest bathing is a new and fitting name for spending time with trees.

How have trees impacted you? List the trees in your life and you will most likely find some pleasant and life-giving memories. Then consider planting some new trees near your home or in some other tree-hungry part of the world. Check out Dr. Matthew Sleeth's organization and website to see how you can support trees and care for nature: Blessed Earth at www.blessedearth.org

And with J. R. R. Tolkien may we say, "In all my works I take the part of trees against all their enemies."

***Lois Saylor*** *attends the Harrisburg (PA) Brethren in Christ Church and serves on the* Shalom! *editorial committee.*

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# BOOK REVIEW
## Restoring Trees: Creation, Scripture, and Service

*By Lois Saylor*

**A FRIEND ONCE** told me, "You really like trees. You write about them a lot." Then this winter as part of my pandemic survival tactics I reread Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. As I was traversing Middle Earth once more, I realized that since high school, my favorite places and characters always included trees: the golden woods of Lothlorien; those guardians of trees, the Ents; the woodlands of Ithilien; Bilbo's party tree; and the Mallorn tree that replaced it. Apparently, I do like trees. So, I was very interested to see a book that combined two of my favorite things: trees and studying scripture. And the book began with a quote from Tolkien: "Every tree has its enemy, few have an advocate."

*Reforesting Faith: What Trees Teach Us About the Nature of God and His Love for Us,* by Matthew Sleeth, MD, was not as in-depth a study of scripture as I had hoped, but it does provide a roadmap to trees in the Bible and the vital contributions of trees to our world and our very lives.

Sleeth frames the biblical narrative of beginning, middle, and end with trees: the trees of Eden, the tree of Calvary, and the tree of life in the new Jerusalem. He reminds us that nature-care was one of the commands and privileges God entrusted to us in the very beginning of human history. He scours the Old and New Testaments looking for other trees, tree-like plants (bushes and vines), the produce of trees (figs, olives, almonds), and the products of trees (wood for shelters, lintels, staffs and rods, and the cross). In all of these areas he marvels at the role trees play literally and symbolically in God's interaction in human history. He also enjoys the beauty, rest, and the art that trees provide to nurture our souls. He is quite taken with violins and the music these wonderfully crafted wooden instruments can create.

Having trained as a medical doctor, and a person schooled in the sciences, Sleeth also looks at trees and their vital role in the ecosystem of the planet. He states forcibly that without trees we would not be alive. Trees create oxygen, ensure better water quality, produce cleaner air, prevent erosion, and create habitats for other plant and animal life in our interdependent existence. As such he advocates planting trees to ensure a healthy planet and as a way to love and serve our neighbors. For example, Sleeth promotes the urban garden movement. He claims planting trees will lower energy costs, increase property values, reduce crime rates, provide shade, and create beauty as well as bettering air and water quality. As we help in this movement, we are serving our neighbors currently and in generations to come. God takes the long view of life and so do his trees. By planting trees, we participate in, show faith in, and plant hope in the future of God's will.

The author also talks about specific trees that have been a part of his life and I began to get a little jealous. So, I started listing my tree experiences. I recalled the mulberry tree in a neighbor's yard that turned our bare feet and hands purple as we picked and ate the sweet little bumpy berries. Or the two tall trees in my childhood backyard with a tree swing hung from a high, unreachable branch. I thought of the trees of the mountains surrounding our rustic cabin along the river, and the ones marked with white paint swaths that led us, like secret clues, to the blueberry field. There were pear trees my father planted that fed more bees than humans, but perhaps he was ahead of his time in supporting our bee friends. We've planted Christmas trees and shade trees and currently care for oak, hockenberry, birch trees, and hedges of woody Rose of Sharon bushes in our small yard three blocks outside the city of Har

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