

Spiritual Growth and the Environment



The important connections between the environment and poverty are well documented. The Society of the Sacred Heart formally recognizes this linkage and is on record as committed to environmental initiatives all over the world.

In the following essays, Melanie Guste, RSCJ, and Suzanne Rogers, RSCJ, reflect on the effect of the environment on their spiritual lives. The essays are based on talks that Sisters Guste and Rogers gave under the heading: “Interactions Between My Spirituality and the Environment,” at the Provincial Assembly/Chapter, U.S. Province, Society of the Sacred Heart, this past July at Loyola University in Chicago.

FINDING GOD — AND HOPE — IN THE RAVAGED BAYOUS OF LOUISIANA

God is here – in his stripped and naked self – hung out and up on a tree

BY MELANIE GUSTE, RSCJ



Melanie Guste, RSCJ

After Hurricanes Katrina and Rita hit the southern coasts of Louisiana, the state launched a massive marketing campaign that highlighted famous local celebrities like Emeril Lagasse and Paul Goodman inviting folks back to our state. They all say with open arms, “Come ...Come and fall in love with Louisiana – all over again.”

All of these ads show images of our state – images that most of us have seen – majestic tepees of cypress trees rising out of swamps, a blue heron in flight at sunset over the wetlands, bayou shacks with indigenous people pulling up crab nets and all of “us locals” feasting over trays of crawfish on papered tables out back somewhere. It is home – my home – Louisiana.

I was struck recently with Thomas Merton’s book, *When the Trees Stop Talking* (Merton, 2003). I opened that book because whenever I make this trip down to New Orleans to work with nonprofit organizations struggling since the storms, I turn onto a raised part of the interstate that is close to a place that I used to play for many years as a child. In that marshy wet wilderness, I woke up to the greatness and grandeur of God – to seeing the pulsating beauty of God’s being in all natural places and to discover, as Brian Swimme says, the “divine depths of matter” (Swimme, 2007b).

But what a difference today! Today, that same wilderness is lost to interstates, spillways and levees all around. We have tried in every way to control nature’s flow, tried to fix and determine its course. The tragic consequence is this: What I see before me on that stretch of interstate is an unmeasured expanse of barren stripped poles of dead cypress standing in almost condemnatory testimony to the neglect and ravenous abuse of this generation’s collective choice. It’s a painful sight.

continued



Threatened wilderness. Human encroachment is never far from the pristine Louisiana delta bayou country.



The New Orleans *Times-Picayune* recently reported that it “...took the Mississippi River over 6,000 years to build the Louisiana Gulf Coast.” It adds that it has taken “...only seventy-five years to wash it away.” (Marshall, 2007)

This tragedy represents the heartbreaking loss of an entire ecosystem and a living culture. It is what grieves so many of those living in Louisiana after the storms. Katrina and Rita ripped the lid off a reality that nailed us – that’s hard to bear – and even harder to look at, but too hard to deny.

I love something that Pedro Arrupe, S.J., said: “Fall in love, stay in love – it will change everything.” And it does. And it has for me. When I make that trip across the spillway several times a week now and see how entire neighborhoods that once housed a culture are now torn and barren, I cannot help hearing the spirits of those who left and who have never found the road home.

That’s another thing about the destruction of the natural wilderness. It doesn’t discriminate in at least one way: Where you see a ravaged environment, you also tend to see poverty – raw, naked, exposed poverty in all its twisted and horrible expressions. We have it in Louisiana – you saw it in the media – the clear connection between poverty and an abusive disregard for the environment.

In my state – the land of my first love – our country and its corporations have so extensively over-drilled the floor of the Gulf to fuel our national oil consumption that the entire coastline is eroding and literally disappearing. That’s 430 square miles of coastland – the mass extinction of not only entire species, but an indigenous living culture – a way of being for an entire group of human beings. It’s a culture that’s mine, and all of ours and, I believe, not only a precious gift but a revelation of God – a manifestation of God’s own self and God’s being in our world.

I don’t know – some people say “let it go.” Some say it is hopeless and are resigned to the specter of an entire way of life for an indigenous people disappearing into the annals of history, perhaps like the dinosaurs. But, I don’t see it that way. In my spirit, I feel the anguish of God in the immediacy of this tragic ethos.

I see it as the disfigurement of the Body of Christ. Truthfully, it’s agonizingly sad because I learned to love out of that wilderness. I learned something more about God’s love and being out there under the sweltering sun and in the arms of that water. At home, where I am, I sense the abandonment of Christ’s broken cry on the cross and the pouring out of blood and water from his torn side. Sometimes, I ask, “Where is God – really – in this sad, suffering situation?”

Passing that cathedral of dead cypress standing as monuments in the marshy wilderness, I pray. I breathe: breathe...and wait. I know that God is here – in his stripped and naked self – hung out and up on a tree. Waiting – slowly it comes – the awakening of some mysterious hope and reasons to just believe.

That moment is my gateway – my personal communion in the Body of Christ, and my bridge to whatever I happen to be doing in New Orleans that day.

Merton also observed that: “You don’t save what you don’t love.” (Merton, 2003) That strikes me as a beautiful truth about humans and God.

Reaching out from that cross is the tender love of God for those standing around it – me, his Mother and friends.

Experts say that what is happening in Louisiana is not irreversible. We have, they say, ten years – and no MORE than ten years – to make different choices and to turn it around (www.nola.com/speced/lastchance). The future is not on a fixed course there. We have an elegant window of

opportunity, and the universe – it waits for our decision there with open stretched out arms. I wonder about that: if we ignore this reality, allow for the extinction that is occurring. Will we accept it? Will we simply rationalize it? I think we will find our destiny as a people in our answer (Swimme, 2007a).

With Merton, I hear those trees speaking – all the way through time – from the cross in Jerusalem to the cypress tree graveyard on interstate I-10. I hear God speaking and God’s invitations to do as God did – love enough to save it and to care for those left behind: friends and family.

I think of that every day now. How am I doing that for my twenty-nine nieces and nephews and eight grand nieces and nephews? Will I leave behind for them the possibilities of hot humid days of crawfishing in the wetlands of Louisiana? Will I leave behind for them the chance of discovering God’s grandeur in a sunrise over Barataria Swamp? My childhood wonder has turned into the wonder of an adult – the adult who asks: “Are my daily choices a canticle of creation, or a death march? Am I a faithful steward of the divine universe in my lifestyle choices?”

Driving into New Orleans, I know again that “wood hath hope” and Saint Madeleine Sophie’s words come to me: “...give your heart once and for all to trust and love.”

“...Walk trustingly,” she says. This becomes my prayer. ✚

Loyola University, Chicago
July 5, 2007

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EXPERIENCING GOD IN ALL OUR TIES TO THE NATURAL WORLD

We are connected in powerful ways that we cannot see, most of the time cannot experience, sometimes even struggle to believe.

BY SUZANNE ROGERS, RSCJ

The renewed awareness of our connection to the Earth has reinforced a lifelong characteristic of my own spirituality.

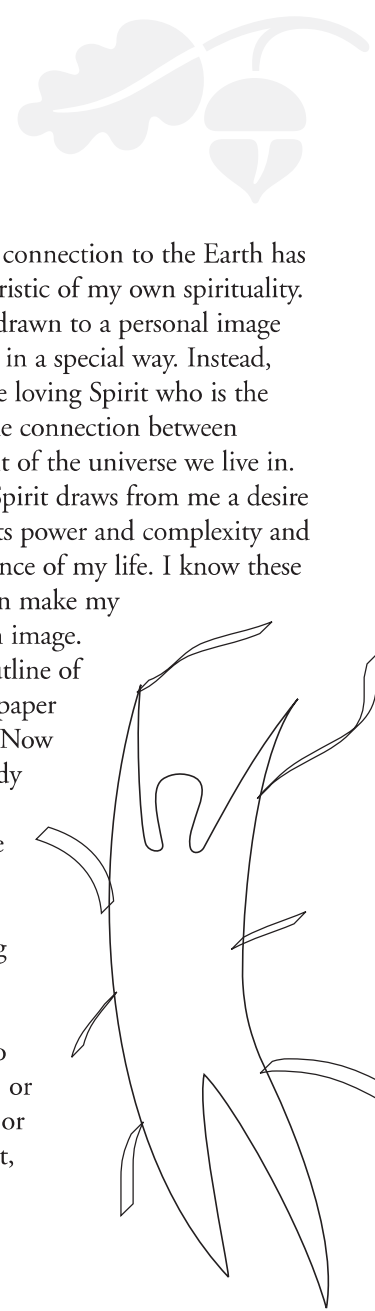
I have never been particularly drawn to a personal image of God as one who directs my life in a special way. Instead, my understanding of God is as the loving Spirit who is the creative and powerful energy in the connection between people and each and every element of the universe we live in.

The actual experience of that Spirit draws from me a desire to worship and a sense of awe at its power and complexity and its loving kindness in each experience of my life. I know these are pretty abstract words. But I can make my experiences more concrete with an image.

Imagine, for a moment, the outline of your body. Think of yourself as a paper cutout in the shape of your body. Now imagine that the edges of your body have stretchy ribbons attached to them. And the other ends of those ribbons, like rubber bands, are attached to every person around you, as well as to every other thing that is part of the natural world.

Some ribbons are wide and colorful – maybe those attached to your friends or parents or siblings, or those attached to a beautiful lake, or the soil in your garden, or your cat, or watching a magnificent sunset.

continued



Some ribbons are narrow and dark – maybe those attached to people you don't like, or snakes, or murky water or humiliating experiences. But whatever the color or the width, the elastic ribbons attach you to everything and everyone in the world around you.

Being connected to those rubber-band-like ribbons means that every time you move, so do all the rest. This silly image of a universe connected by stretchy ribbons is really not very far from reality. We are connected in powerful ways that we cannot see, most of the time cannot experience, sometimes even struggle to believe.

The global renewed awareness of the interdependence of all things help me celebrate what I have long believed to be the ultimate truth of our relationship to God.

But it is nonetheless true that each move we make, each breath we take, each of our decisions, affects and effects the relationships that connect us to every other person and element in the world around us.

Because we can't see the connections, because our minds strain to even accept them, it is a lot easier to forget about them than to honor them.

But these connections, for me, are one of the most basic truths of life. Because it is in the connections that I experience the Spirit of God.

Sometimes I am very aware of the connections – usually when I am experiencing something positive with another person; or when, for example, I take strength or healing from the soil, or when I experience something that I recognize as convergence. On reflection, that awareness prompts me to worship the Spirit of God, who is the connection and the oneness.

It is much more difficult for me to pay attention to the connections through negative experiences. I don't like the narrow dark bands that attach me to people I don't want to respect, or to experiences I regret having. I would rather not acknowledge those connections and am certainly unwilling to foster or strengthen them. But reflecting on those negative connections, sometimes – usually much later – I can accept

that the Spirit of God is free to express oneness however the Spirit chooses.

I think the ancient Sanskrit greeting—*Namaste*—summarizes this aspect of my spirituality. If I can paraphrase, *Namaste* means: “The Spirit within me greets the Spirit within you. I honor the place in you of love, of creativity, of peace; and when you are in that place in you, and I am in that place in me – there is only one of us.”

Namaste also names the struggle to be ever more accepting of my responsibility to recognize and co-create this complex world that I experience just one moment at a time.

The global renewed awareness of the environment and the interdependence of all things help me celebrate what I have long believed to be the ultimate truth of our relationship to God.

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Suzanne Rogers, RSCJ, lives in Plymouth, Indiana. She currently serves as director at Earthworks at Plymouth, where she is responsible for implementing its mission at an environmental education center sponsored by the Poor Handmaids of Jesus Christ. Duties include day-to-day administration, preparation of programs, and representation to the local community. Sister Rogers holds a master's degree from Manhattanville College, Purchase, New York, and also is a certified emergency medical technician.



Suzanne Rogers, RSCJ



The sun rises among pilings in the pristine Irish Bayou, New Orleans, after Hurricane Katrina. The nurturing aspects of this kind of scene are noted in a pair of essays on **Spiritual Growth and the Environment**.



Final moment. Drue Kataoka, Sacred Heart Prep alumna, places her *Han* – artistic signature stamp – on a New Orleans scroll, her final gesture in **A Brush with Success**.



Janel Bakker knows the food for the needy will keep on coming, because **Young CEDC Staffers Live the Gospel on the Streets of Washington, D.C.**

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