

Sanctuary in Nature

*Love all Creation. The whole and every grain of sand in it.
 Love every leaf, and every ray of light.
 Love the plants. Love the animals. Love everything.
 If you love everything you will perceive the Divine Mystery in all things.
 Once you perceive it you will comprehend it better every day.
 And you will come, at last, to love the whole world with an all-embracing love.*
Dostoyevsky, Brothers Karamazov

One of my fondest memories as a child is lying on my bed in the late afternoon watching the rustle of limbs and leaves through the amber glow of the bedroom window. Their delicate swaying soothed me as my mind gradually flowed away from schoolboy thoughts. An indefinable type of peace embraced me, gradually rocking me to sleep.

Many years later, during a troubling season early in Tricia's and my relationship, I used to lie in front of an upstairs window, basking in the afternoon sunlight like a worn out cat. There was a tall maple tree a few houses down the block, its brightly colored, sugar-filled leaves celebrating Fall. I conducted this ritual for a few weeks, watching the leaves gradually let go to swirl to the street. Finally, only one leaf hung on at the very topmost branch, sometimes still, other times shuddering or buffeted by a bullying wind. This leaf became my refuge, allowing me to reflect upon my own life: hanging on to emotions longer than necessary, like resentment, anger, fear, feelings of abandonment, indifferently watching them rise and fall in intensity. Each day I looked forward to this personal sort of contemplation. And I felt a type of hope rise up during the day when I was in another part of town: would that leaf still be there when I returned home? One brisk windy day I felt a special sense of anticipation that this leaf was finally going to let go. This all seemed to mirror my own inner anticipation of releasing tired, worn out forms of behavior. Was I ready as well? After an hour or so, it happened, so effortlessly, a complete act of surrender. I caught my own breath and, feeling a momentary loss, watched the crimson icon swoop gracefully to the ground landing amongst its peers like a deflated yet triumphant red balloon. And something too fell away inside me, opening up much needed emotional healing.

I described in *The Sanctuary Garden* how my first memory of what I now call sanctuary was as a little girl picking fragrant Lilies of the Valley from our large yard in Illinois for sale to local florists. I remember frequently burying my nose in the bouquets as I picked them. It seemed as if I just couldn't get enough of that primal scent. I could lose myself in it for hours, which made me one of the best flower pickers among my parents and seven siblings. That was the beginning of my passion for flowers, and not surprisingly, it has continued to thrive to this day.

Every Thursday afternoon for the past couple years, I and my dear friend Bhakti get together to create flower arrangements for our church. We both have a great love of flowers, and we feel that to consciously create these very special bouquets for a sacred purpose is a tremendous blessing and privilege. We try to work with an attitude of harmony and reverence, opening ourselves to let intuitive creative energy flow in. Most of the flowers we use come from a local florist, and are selected by Bhakti and brought to the chapel in large buckets. Once the week's varieties are assembled in the kitchen, we

become like little children in a candy store, oohing and ahhhing over all the beautiful combinations that are created. Neither one of us is a professional florist, and yet the resulting arrangements are often breathtaking and bring great pleasure to the members of the congregation when they come to Thursday or Sunday services or mid-week meetings.

It's difficult to describe the personal joy this simple task gives us on the soul level. Some Thursdays, one of us arrives feeling stressed out for one reason or another. Recently, for example, Bhakti had been in a car accident with her brand new car the day before our flower day, and another time, I had a back injury. But there is always something that we're processing. We are very supportive of each other, but beyond this, it is as if the flowers become our counselors, without uttering a sound! We let the awe and wonder of Nature's beauty fill us up, and before long we're smiling and laughing without a care in the world. I never want to miss flower day because it has become a wonderful celebration of the senses and therapy for the mind and heart. In addition, I take the week-old flowers from the discarded arrangements and bring them home, rearranging them for our various home altars. There's no reason to waste them, even if they have only a few days of life remaining. These flowers are thus twice blessed, as I see it, and so am I! This form of honoring is basic to my soul, and it fits in well with Forrest's and my philosophy of reverence for all aspects of Nature.

Preparing for this essay, Tricia and I took a sunset walk through the deep woods surrounding our home. We pretended we were deer grazing at the edge of the meadow; curiously observing the amber lit abode nestled among the trees. I thought for a moment that we were not unlike our aboriginal ancestors who one day eons ago created culture on the edge of the forest and savannah. The words of my favorite mystic-scientist, Loren Eiseley, came to mind: "Having been the unthinking and proud creator of the second world of Culture, how is man going to revivify and restore the first world of Nature which cherished and brought him into being?" Our special way to answer this question has been to find sanctuary in Nature.

It is possible, when finding sanctuary in Nature, to experience tremendous *wonder*, *healing*, and *celebration* for the soul. We may find this in the great cathedral-like drama of a mountain, forest, ocean, or desert. We may draw Nature closer to home, as in our yard, garden, porch, balcony, or nearby outdoor settings. We may invite Nature into our living spaces, adorning our walls, rooms, floors, or simply by keeping us company, as with a favorite bird, fish, or other pet. And finally, we may invite Nature into our imagination as memories, dreams, reverie, and admiration stimulated by art, music, good conversation, fine literature, or quite simply a favorite chair in front of a window or a warm fire. In each instance we have the opportunity to reaffirm the sacredness of the world and our place of sacredness within it. We have the privilege to revivify our primordial relationship to Nature.

When we take sanctuary in Nature, we are attempting to balance the scale of our soul — coming home awhile to a Sacred Hearth and putting the world of culture on the back burner of our attention. In proper balance with Nature, we discover that we can *receive sanctuary in Nature* and we can *give sanctuary to Nature*. And this can happen in multitudinous ways.

We are the first to admit that our particular lifestyle may not accurately mirror the condition of most people, even though we live very simply in a small house. We are especially sensitive to those who are not able to live amidst the drama of Nature or have limited daily connection because of work, disability, age, or lack of proximity. Our lifestyle would in fact seem somewhat jaded if it weren't for our deep desire to stay connected to the world by assisting others to find daily sanctuary. This has been the wonderful gift of our Cortesia Sanctuary Project: the opportunity to listen to thousands of inspired people find *their* particular intimate relationship with Nature on terms befitting their lifestyle, interest, or

capability. The letters, email, and phone calls we have received over the years have repeatedly affirmed that Nature is a true daily sanctuary as near as our heart's desire.

One of the first letters we ever received was from a young woman named Joyce, in Cheyenne, Wyoming. She described her little Nature sanctuary affectionately named *The Lady's Napkin*: "Mine is a miniscule side yard at my condominium, perhaps only twenty-four square feet, just below my second story bedroom window. This summer it had a place to sit in the sun, a tree, and one well-behaved bee and several butterflies. Here I can grow friendly plants and thoughts after fifteen years in a basement apartment." An elderly woman, seventy-seven year old Helen, wrote that she stewards a miniature jungle of plants on her apartment balcony where the vegetation attracts birds and curious passersby. She finds daily solace there and invites friends over for tea and cookies. She calls her setting *Nature's Teapot*.

I am especially fond of a story told to us by a volunteer in a hospice facility. A disoriented elderly woman named Beatrice had withdrawn from all communication with staff and family members. Janice arrived one day and cheerfully opened the curtains, lit a candle, played some soothing sanctuary music, and began showing the woman an album of Nature scenes she had cut out of magazines. Beatrice remained generally unresponsive. Then it happened: Janice turned the page to reveal a beautiful picture of an ocean beach. Beatrice's eyes opened wide with rediscovery and she moved her hand over the picture. Breaking her long silence, she looked straight into Janice's eyes, clasped one hand to her heart, and said: "The ocean is so beautiful, please make sure they do not harm it." In the following few words, Beatrice described her great love for the ocean as a young girl. She died soon after.

We know that such stories can inspire your search for daily sanctuary. But we also want to encourage you to find an accompanying belief system that deepens your search for peace through Nature. Such beliefs can become your sanctuary cloak accompanying your journey to and from your daily cultural activities. Your cloak of sanctuary will protect your love and respect for all Creation, wherever you may be. For, like a vulnerable candle flame held close to your breast, you will shelter your sacred beliefs from harm.

NATURE: A SACRED TOUCHSTONE

One of the first things we do in our Sanctuary workshops is to ask participants to share how they sought their particularly unique forms of "retreat from the world" as children. We have been deeply touched and delighted with the lovely stories that have been forthcoming. Most of us possessed an intuitive wisdom about Nature and a connectedness to her secret haunts. We knew where to find refuge from the world and we generally weren't shy about doing it, even if we had to sneak away or disappear for hours without telling anyone. I can recall a few participants who said they lived in a city or apartment building with virtually no access to Nature, but the vast majority have shared that, no matter where they lived, they had no problem finding a little spot outdoors to lose themselves in timeless communion that mandated no rules, restrictions, or judgments.

Many of us, as children, were made to feel unworthy, useless, or beneath the importance of the adults in our life. Additionally, youth in our culture are often not honored and protected, and thus many of us have suffered significant abuse. At a minimum, children are fragile creatures who desperately need a feeling of safety and belonging in a world that forces us to grow up much too soon. Is it any wonder then, that it is so natural for children to seek and find sanctuary in Nature and for this relationship to become a sort of sacred bond that may well last a lifetime?

Many people have described to us a special tree that they sought out, climbing it or sitting beneath it nearly every day, perhaps for years. Forrest has recounted such an experience, sitting under the birch tree in his back yard. I loved a certain ponderosa pine growing at 9,000 feet near our family cabin in the Colorado Rockies. I climbed that tree with abandon, often covering my clothes and hands with its sweetly fragrant pitch. Such a tree becomes a sort of Mother figure that comforts one through all the

heartbreaks of young life, enfolding one in a leafy green world of healing and wonder, far removed from the inevitable fears and disappointments of being human.

Other workshop participants have described their relationship with a lake, river, or stream, where they would explore, swim, search for special rocks, or simply sit on the shore and read or daydream. Still others created forts or hideouts underneath shrubbery or along weed-ridden or overgrown fence lines, well away from the prying eyes of adults or older siblings. Here they would create rich fantasy worlds where they were kings or queens of their realm, doing and eating and thinking whatever they pleased. Or perhaps they took pride in cultivating a tiny flowerbed or a patch of vegetables that they planted, nurtured and harvested all by themselves.

Gary Snyder, in his book *The Practice of the Wild*, speaks about “the childhood landscape” which is learned on foot. He says all of us carry within ourselves the picture of the terrain that was learned roughly between the ages of six and nine, whether we lived in an urban neighborhood or in a more rural setting. We can recall in great detail the places we walked, biked, swam, and played. “Re-visualizing that place with its smells and textures,” he says, “walking through it again in your imagination, has a grounding and settling effect.”

Where did you claim sanctuary as a child? More importantly, have you maintained the skill you may have once had in getting away from it all, and regenerating your spirit?

Shayne, now in his mid twenties and the son of a retired couple up the road, absolutely lit up when he was recounting recently how he and his brother once ran wild over these hills and valleys above Eugene. Dubbed by the neighbors, “the little kids”, they were often blamed for mischief that could not be explained: a fallen fence, a broken pot, a missing this or that. “We may have done it...” Shayne says, grinning, but they meant no harm. It was all part of the spirit of total exploration. Unlike many young people today, they were not only allowed but also encouraged to interact with wild Nature and to learn deeply from that constant interaction. Consequently, the three sons, as adults today, are quintessential Nature lovers (as are their parents!). The family garden is mounded on and around rocks that were brought back from literally hundreds of different adventures, not just ordinary rocks, but special rocks, “touch rocks” they call them — ones with character, faces, a history, and now a new story of being magically “rediscovered”. Among these piles of rocks grow a tangle of ground covers, grass, flowers and shrubs, with weeds being given free rein until they overcrowd the other plants. Garden art is also abundant, whether made from recycled materials, cast from home made molds into concrete, or cut from sheet metal into fantastic shapes for wind chimes, whimsical figures, birdbaths or birdfeeders. In fact, both parents, Bob and Aleen, and all three sons are self-taught artists, inspired by their lifelong relationship with Nature

I share all this because the early experiences one has of bonding with Nature, whatever the form they take, are clearly foundational. These experiences build intuition, insight, and inspiration that, while it may recede with the busyness of adult years, never entirely vanishes.

“Within the bosom of the woods,” wrote Susan Fenimore Cooper in 1887, “the mind readily lays aside its daily littleness, and opens to higher thoughts, in silent consciousness that it stands alone with the works of God.” Where is the forest that, when you walk there, welcomes you back to yourself?

Reach into the pocket of your childhood memories and see if you can’t rediscover some forgotten treasure and resurrect and/or replicate its value to you in your current life. Hold in your adult hands (that probably spend far too many hours typing at a computer, turning a steering wheel, or otherwise “being productive”) the sacred touchstone of an age old, primal love for the natural world and a childlike devotion to discovering everything that can be known and felt therein. This isn’t an intellectual exercise, this is sanctuary work performed by the soul *through* the vehicle of Nature. We have all done this work somewhere, sometime, and we must reclaim the wisdom it has gifted to us.

One of the reasons that I spend hours “wandering” through the garden on a given day is because I have intuitively adopted a sort of stream of consciousness approach. I *meander* through the garden, like a boat floating on a quiet lake, attracted by this or that, and not with the intent of following a specific

agenda or list of tasks. Even if I am supposedly “working” in the garden, I want to feel a sense of freedom there, of “holy freedom,” if you will. I want to engage in activities that inherently elicit curiosity, awe and wonder, and the appreciation of the whimsical or the unexpected. Hence, I never know where I will be led from one moment to the next, because Nature is never linear. To wander amongst the folds of her swirling skirts is, I feel, one of the greatest opportunities in life. To hold such a talisman in the palm of my hand and feel its shape and texture speaking of the ancient wisdom, is for me an unequalled privilege. At the same time it heralds a return to innocence, to a childlike understanding that need not be put into words. For Nature holds in her great breadth the truths of eons, and she wishes no doubt to make these truths accessible to us humans in modern times even as of old. I want full access to this knowledge because I cannot imagine anymore living without it. A touchstone, after all, no matter how small, is simply a doorway to the Infinite.

Tricia’s passionate stories above reacquaint me with that part of myself, the little boy inside, who still holds on to that wonder-filled relationship with Nature: most of my life I have kept a sacred right front pocket in my pants to hold a touchstone or two. When I dip into my left front pocket, I touch part of the cultural world created by humans — icons such as keys, money, and a “to do” list that depict adulthood responsibility. But dip into my right pocket, and I am transported back into timeless moments wandering a beach in search of agates, or strolling in a deep forest at sunrise when the ground mist is exhaling that unmistakable musk. My left pocket connects me to streets, cars, homes, markets, daily employment, bills, and relationships with objects and other people. My right pocket exudes a simpler life, connecting me to the cosmos, reminding me that the pebble I rub with my fingers contains the very same minerals that are in my body, the same formula for creating the universe.

Recently our family spent Easter weekend at a funky old cabin overlooking a protected cove at the ocean. One afternoon I wandered alone along the bluff. I came to an overlook and peered down to another isolated cove. I was surprised to see the other family members sprawled out on the pebbly beach, not on their backs but on their stomachs! Each was absorbed in the miniature world of sand and multi-colored pebbles, scavenging like little children for treasures. Hours later they arrived back at the cabin, as if on a successful Easter egg hunt, their eyes wide with wonder. Each gleefully showed their agates, smooth stones, and polished bits of glass, all far more precious than the Easter eggs typically hidden and found at this time.

When we connect with Nature in even small ways, we touch an unspoken sacredness. Re-awakening to the divine qualities of Nature allows us to live wide-eyed again in the wonder and celebration of a miracle. Vietnamese spiritual teacher, Thich Nhat Hanh, beautifully and poetically reminds us: “Our true home is in the present moment. The miracle is not to walk on water. The miracle is to walk on the green earth in the present moment.” Or to lie on one’s belly on a beach poking at the sand, as it were.

When we connect our need for sanctuary to Nature we become shrouded in a present moment miracle, because, whether we are aware of it or not, we are connected to something much larger than ourselves. Just by touching my pocket touchstones, or reveling in those beach prizes of my family, I reaffirm Thich Nhat Hanh’s assertion that we can touch the cosmos by our awareness of all other beings and their interconnected origins. He purports: *“One thing is made up of all other things. One thing contains the whole cosmos . . . A piece of bread contains sunshine . . . Without a cloud, the wheat cannot grow. So when you eat the piece of bread, you eat the cloud, you eat the sunshine, you eat the minerals, time, space, everything.”*

I know exactly what Thich Nhat Hanh means! About forty-five years ago I began a love affair with the guitar. It came at a time in my young life when I needed much healing from the woundedness I felt in our family. I used to find refuge with my guitar beneath a birch tree in our backyard. I developed a style of playing inspired by Nature: the arpeggiated rustling of leaves in the wind, the gentle ballad of a

nearby birdsong, the lyricism of flowing water, the lament of shadows, the raga of fresh morning light or the purple mood of almost darkness. Nature became my connection to heart, including both pain and joy. But there was a deeper connection. This exquisitely crafted guitar was wood elevated to soul status. In playing my guitar, even to this day, I touch and am one with the Mother Spruce Tree of its creation — over a hundred years of full moons, fierce storms, settling fog, glorious summers, soaking rains; the woodpecker at dawn, the evening owl, the scampering squirrel; ferns and spruce off springs at the base, the moss in upper limbs; filtered sunlight, moonbeams, the distant sound of a stream. I am also one with the eyes and hands of the master luthier who sees in the wood beautiful grain, like fine grooves on an old 78-rpm record that holds fantastic music. I breathe in his Mexican village, his life-sustaining food and heritage, his craftsmanship, his gift back to the Mother Tree, the breath of his art and devotion. When I play my guitar I become one with both humanity and Nature's history. My songs are devotions, little miracles and marriages of present moments strung together seeking emotional enchantment within sanctuary. The guitar — its wood, strings, song, and creator — is truly my most sacred touchstone, my closest human link to God.

Consider for the moment that Earth/Nature is your sacred talisman, a symbol of a universal subconscious need to touch, embrace, hold, feel, and relate to the Source of your existence. Consider that you pass through Nature's hands in your daily journey for understanding in this life but, more than that, Earth/Nature passes through your own human hands, like a touchstone, seeking to pass its magical knowing. There is a reciprocal relationship here, like a dance. Do you wish to receive such wonder and wisdom? Whenever I see the bumper sticker "Have you hugged your child today?", I also imagine reading one that says "Have you touched Nature today?" That's how necessary it is to deepen your enchantment with the natural world.

As a child I had a tremendous fascination with the wind. To feel the wind in my face gave me great comfort. My fascination naturally led to my breath, in a sense the wind of my own body. Today, a key point of my meditation is to focus on this incoming and outgoing breath, to breathe peace in and to exhale it into the world. Whenever I feel a breeze I take sanctuary in this special bond between my own breathing and the breath of Nature. Almost everyday, upon awakening or when enjoying an afternoon respite, I lay watching the movement of limbs in the nearby towering firs. From my writing desk, I scan much of the garden engaged in a samba-like movement with the north wind. The long blades of a lovely copse of crocosmia outside my window never fail to sweep me away in their special style of jitterbug. These are wayside moments of grace so close at hand that one should be embarrassed to believe that taking sanctuary in Nature must be a huge stage production of time, effort, driving, and planning.

By taking sanctuary in Nature, we enter Her with a different need than mere utilitarian value. We have an opportunity to be here now in the present moment of peace, comfort, awe and wonder, appreciation and gratitude. This is a mind at rest from the world and uninterested in treating and exploiting Nature as a commodity solely for human gain. Some would call it a mind absorbed in a *natural spirituality*, a religious sensibility rooted in Nature. I resonate with this view of life, that Nature is possibly the beginning of spiritual wisdom and the irreplaceable matrix of the soul. In Nature we can access the innocent child within as well as the aspiring sage, but we can also reach out to gently touch the hand of God. Marvel at a butterfly, a splendid shaft of sunlight through the pantry window, the intimate adagio of a brook, the texture of a piece of wood. This is like falling in love, if you are in the right mood.

Within every human is both a pragmatist and mystic, one who sees the world both empirically and from that view which takes into account that sense of awe and marvel that is part of our primitive heritage. The scientist James Lovelock, creator of the view that Earth (called Gaia) is a self-regulating organism, believes that one interacts individually in a spiritual manner with Gaia through a sense of wonder about the natural world and from feeling a part of it. In a beautiful sentiment he observes: "When that great and good man Pope John Paul travels around the world, he, in an act of great humility and respect for the Mother or Father Land, bends down and kisses the airport tarmac. I sometimes

imagine him walking those few steps beyond the dead concrete to kiss the living grass: part of our true Mother and of ourselves.”

To sit in the sanctuary of Nature is to love ourselves anew. It is to allow us to be *one with, aware of,* and *witness to* Creation that *is* an act of love. We learn that it is not necessary to act upon Creation to receive this love, there is no need for judgments, opinions, fears, anxiety. The Indian poet Ghalib poignantly captures this thought: “This earth, burnished by hearing the Name, is so certain of Love/That the sky bends unceasingly down, to greet its own light.”

Step away from your desk. Step slightly off the concrete path. It’s not necessary to become a “nature tramp” like the great naturalist John Muir. Reach out in small ways to greet the light of Creation. Perhaps it’s just a houseplant on a windowsill that inspires your stewardship for years. Maybe it’s catching, instead of swatting, a fly banging against the windowpane and releasing it outdoors. Or maybe it’s nurturing a patch of garden into a special place of refuge. These are small acts of consciousness that make us more a practicing naturalist, allowing the inner child and sage to walk the sanctuary path together.

How difficult is it to embrace Nature as a potential isle of grace? Most people are daily reminded that our cities and places of employment appear much more overpowering than we have the will or courage to respond to. Our chosen lifestyle, often harried and hurried, seems to pick away at our will, character, dignity, and ability to handle stress. But by taking quiet time with Nature, it is possible to surrender our human will on an isle of wonder, healing, and celebration. Unfortunately, many of us miss this opportunity, as the following story reveals.

Years ago, at the west entrance to Yosemite, a frantic young woman arrived having speedily driven the two hours from San Francisco. She asked at the booth: “I only have half an hour to visit, where should I go?” Carl Sharsmith, the esteemed elder ranger who greeted her, humbly responded, “Well, Mam, if I drove all that distance and gave myself only a half hour to see one of the most beautiful creations on Earth, I’d park myself on that bench right over there and have myself a good cry!”

Part of our desire for sanctuary comes out of a sense of woundedness or plain fatigue at the hands of human culture. Sometimes we have to simply give ourselves permission to sit on a lone bench and have a good cry. We must accept that part of our perceived sense of alienation may come from too much profanity or worldliness and not enough sacredness in our daily life. In leaving childhood behind, we leave a little too much of Nature as well. It’s almost as if we turned our back on some great cathedral to grab a hotdog, and never looked back — a stark contrast of intent, a sure way to get lost.

Most religions aim at too high a moral level for people’s ability. Meister Eckhart once said, “You must look for God precisely where you lost Him.” I am of the conviction that God recedes the most in our life when we step away from our wondrous relationship with Nature. To move our soul back into a sacred connection with Creation takes more than just personal will. We often need a guiding light, if not a few inspiring words. Tricia and I believe that what is most needed is to discover and practice a life philosophy that honors Creation. It is this life philosophy that becomes the path between the world and sanctuary, between an eternal God and our little mortal self. We believe this life philosophy is best described by the word, *reverence*.

A COVENANT OF REVERENCE

Years ago we were inspired by a wonderful book titled *The Compassionate Universe*, by the Indian sage Eknath Easwaran. In fact, his heartfelt words beautifully crystallized our own process in finding a deep, spiritual relationship to gardening. Just one sentence did it: “We need people with the artistry to live in simplicity as the hummingbird does, enjoying the nectar without bruising the flower.” This lovely thought transformed us from being mere gardeners. We became Keepers of Nature, inspired to honor that single living Spirit dwelling in all, and to do so with deep respect. We sought to listen to that still, small voice whispering to us in the depths of our consciousness: “I want an Earth that is healthy, a world

at peace, and a heart filled with love. I want my life and every life to count. How can I serve toward this end?" In one small way we *have* been of service, by conceptualizing a new form of garden design called The Sanctuary Garden, that has transformed and deepened thousands of peoples' relationship with Nature just outside their back door.

Our deeper commitment to upholding a sacred relationship with Nature comes not from religious zeal but from a profound perennial philosophy based on *Reverence for Life*. We believe that the beginning, for each of us, of our spiritual reconstruction is a reverential treatment of life. Reverence, in and of itself, emerges as a deeper understanding of the ecology and specialness of place, of Earth, of ourselves, and of God. It is not only a principle of *understanding and receiving* the beauty of the world. It is a principle of appropriate *behavior* in a universe conceived as sanctuary. Reverence for life means re-enchantment with the world and celebration of the miracle of its creation. As any good dictionary defines it, reverence is based on gestures of deep respect, honor, love, and awe that uphold a sacred relationship. It could be said that reverence is sacred stewardship, transforming us into Keepers of Beauty, Hope, Peace, Joy, and Kindness.

The great awakening of our time is that we are inseparable from each other and the world. To practice *Reverence for Life* is to learn new ways to *touch the sacredness of life*, and thus, to quench a deep hunger for meaning. Reverence, indeed, is how *you* can *sustain* the sacred. It is your path to and from sanctuary.

As a couple, we have devoted our life to walking the path of reverence, testing our every human belief, value, and actions against its backdrop. In fact, we knew it would be impossible, moreover hypocritical, to take our message of sanctuary to the world if we had not so thoroughly understood and tested the application of reverence in our marriage, family, friendships, business, and bond with Nature on our land. We have learned that merely to *try* to live an attitude of reverence in itself creates the stepping-stones of consciousness that eventually become the path. But it requires sustained effort, if not repeated failure. In a sense, this book is our testimony to the work we have done to embrace reverence in all aspects of our life. It describes both our triumphs and failures.

Simply stated, our path of reverence is supported by our philosophical view of the world. In the early 1980's, we discovered the ancient French word, *cortese*, from which the word "courtesy" is derived. It was used sparingly in the cultures of northern Italy and southern France about the time of St. Francis. The original use of the word *cortese* was to describe nobility of character and conduct, that is, the recognition of rights, duties, gifts, and privileges as they exist in a reciprocal relationship filled with generosity and respect. Ancient French dictionaries simply associated *cortesìa* with reverence.

We encourage you to search inward for that essential *feeling, philosophy, or belief system* that can drive your life and give it meaning. Such a philosophy cannot be purchased in the marketplace, and it is not available with a job promotion or a change in mate. It is most easily accessed through mentors or exemplars, present or past, who can support your world view. We have found, for example, both Gandhi and St. Francis to be guiding lights for reverence. But it was St. Francis who opened the door for us.

Enthralled by the beauty and mystery of Creation, Francis believed and showed that love of God, love of humanity, and love of Nature were not only compatible with one another but the natural, divinely purposed state of human existence. The well-known biographer of St. Francis, Romano Guardini, describes Francis's noble behavior toward humans, animals, and Nature as a "deep, inner sweetness, giving it a bell-like character of clarity and beauty." The *cortesian philosophy* had a profound effect on Francis, and he acted as one who regarded "La cortesìa è una delle proprietà di Dio" — "Courtesy is one of the properties of God," Francis proclaimed, "who of His courtesy, gives His sun and rain to the just and the unjust: and courtesy is the sister of charity by which hatred is extinguished and love is cherished."

Theologian and philosopher, Thomas Berry, perhaps best summarizes the need to consider a view of life that Cortesian Reverence offers: "We have lost our sense of courtesy toward the earth and its

inhabitants, our sense of gratitude, our willingness to recognize the sacred character of habitat, our capacity for the awesome, for the numinous quality of every earthly reality.”

And hereby, we believe, is the potential for you to establish a covenant with life based upon a deep and personal sense of integrity and reciprocity between your relationship with Nature and other humans. *Cortesian Reverence* embraces something deeply perennial in its philosophy and deeply personal in its practice: heartfelt feeling and a mental attitude of deep respect, courtesy, honor, love, compassion, humility, gratitude, charity, and awe and wonder.

Do you have a sense of enchantment with the world, a feeling that life is so special that it simply cannot be squandered, neither your own or another's? Or do you feel you have been dealt an unfair hand, that life seems to be filled with struggle and disappointment?

The everyday experience of sanctuary attempts to elevate your view towards life. It strives to open up your heart and throat so that the voice of the world pours out of you. Yes, pours out of *you*. If you are content to see life in a diminished way, you will be forever thirsty for peace of mind. You will be unable to drink in the power of your own sacredness that exists as a compassionate fount for the world.

Reverence, by its sheer nature, embraces many of the positive qualities and values about life that people aspire to in their heart of hearts. You cannot ask the question, “How can I live on Earth today so that my life and all other life is served well?”, without calling into play reverence. A recognition of the sacredness of life demands reverent behavior, a *Covenant of Reverence*. It suggests that the solution to your search for meaning lies within yourself, and at best in your relationship to God.

What better place to look for your deepest soul qualities than in occasional sanctuary, especially with Nature. Such sanctuary is where peace sculpts a reverent outlook and turns an apparently insensitive, chaotic world into one that holds hope. It takes time and perception, involvement and love to be part of a place and to draw sustenance from being an integral part of its specialness. This same commitment is what deepens relationships, be it with the small critters in your garden, dear friends, or a total stranger. Reverence, you will find, is the chalice that holds the nourishment of your wonder, healing, and celebration of life. It is, to repeat, the path to and from the world into sanctuary.

By embracing Nature as a place of refuge — by seeing your own being as a sacred sanctuary — you have the opportunity to create a compassionate sense of self that sees life anew. These devotions mirror the reverential revelations of most native cultures: Seeing each human, flower, tree, rock, insect, animal, sunrise, or drop of water as though it were being seen for the first time, and showing courtesy, respect, and honor through overt expressions of artistry, ritual, ceremony, and kindness.

Falling in love with Nature anew awakens us to the fact that we are not human apart from Nature, but we *are* Nature, a part of which is human. In Nature, we have the opportunity *to be one with, aware of, and witness to* Nature that is humanized for our soulful pleasure, and our own human self that is naturalized for the pleasure of Nature. In our relationship with Nature we may prove it to be true, as one sage suggests, that “there is a Buddha in every blade of grass.”

How do you become a Keeper of Nature? It has something to do with nurturing peace within and without, with fostering a relationship in a special natural setting, or inviting Nature within your abode. The purity of your devotion and intention especially matters, not what other people think. When you practice reverence for life, non-judgment, and compassion, you are giving of yourself to bring more joy, beauty, hope, and peace into the world. By embracing your sacredness you are prepared to embrace the sacredness of the world. Do these things and you become the Keeper of Nature and the Keeper of your Soul.

PRACTICING THE PRESENCE OF NATURE IN DAILY SANCTUARY

“Just looking at that modest sweep of green, that sanctuary, soothed something inside me, suffered and relaxed so many tensions stored up: as when you, or someone else, places their hands or fingertips

over your face, drawing out all the worry lines. That's what it felt like, over my heart, and I felt happiness."

Rick Bass, *The Book of Yaak*

How many of us have had an epiphany or deep experience in Nature, perhaps years ago, that lives in us to this day? We may, in fact relive it almost daily, in the same way we turn on the heat to warm ourselves or drink a cup of coffee or tea to give us a little mental boost. By consciously practicing the presence of Nature within our moments of sanctuary each day, we can choose to connect ourselves to a vast and varied reservoir of rejuvenation. But this type of sanctuary is by no means limited to the grandiose in Nature; it is equally available to us in the midst of experiencing the microcosmic aspects of Nature.

In my writing studio are many small reminders of wild Nature: dried flowers, shells, collections of beach pebbles, plants, and feathers in a tiny vase. Not the least of these is my tabletop water fountain capable of transporting me to an indescribably beautiful island of grace. It can remind me of the tropical beaches of Hawaii I love so well, or a cool mountain lake in the Colorado Rocky Mountains, or a mossy woodland stream discovered on a walk in the deep forest. Water is a perfect symbol of the soothing presence of Nature.

On a visit to the urban studio apartment of our friend, Alex, a doctoral student in music who maintains a mind-boggling, non-stop pace, I was pleased to see that he had recently added a small water fountain to his collection of nature artifacts. Its pleasant song seemed to easily override the traffic sounds coming from the nearby street. Robert, on the other hand, a dedicated fisherman, places reminders of his passion for fishing both in his office at home and in his office at work. Paintings, a favorite book or two on the subject, and various fishing memorabilia all serve to inspire him in the midst of his heavy responsibilities as vice president of a recording company, transporting him in an instant to some secret sanctuary on the water where the fish are jumping and he is at peace.

When we lived in the city years ago, Forrest and I delighted in taking evening walks around our neighborhood. Not only did we search out all the lovely little gardens that would emerge from banished patches of lawn and alongside driveways and walkways, but we were also looking for the unique ways that city dwellers choose to create their personal refuge in the midst of "the crowd", so to speak. It was easy to see that some people did not relate to their yard much at all, but perhaps they would have a funky, yet comfortable couch or an overstuffed chair or two on their front porch, where they would sit in the evening. Sometimes we would hear the gentle sound of wind chimes floating on the evening breeze from someone's back yard or the eaves of their roof. Or we would observe an elderly person tenderly watering their little flower pots or a single hanging flower basket near the front door. In certain homes, we also observed many house plants crowded around the windows or a bird feeder carefully positioned in the yard so its hungry visitors could be quietly observed from inside the house.

Hannah is a very special friend who lives near Tokyo, Japan most of the year and then in Eugene for a couple months each summer. She is the painter who beautifully illustrated our book, *The Sanctuary Garden*. Tokyo is crowded and noisy, yet Hannah, a consummate Nature lover, contents herself with astute observation of even the most subtle aspects of Nature, rendering them in delicate detail in her oil paintings and watercolors. A lone pot of tulips against a backdrop of buildings, a windsock blowing in the breeze, a shaft of sunlight transforming a room, her little dog Abel, cuddled in her wicker carrying basket as Hannah paints somewhere "on site". She successfully seeks out the sublime gifts of escaped Nature even in the most industrialized areas, in much the same way as Forrest and I have attuned ourselves to finding the little "crevice gardens" that magically grow in the cracks of sidewalks, stone walls, and old brick facades neglected by civilization.

What simple beauty and great courage, for a flower or a knotty shrub not only to learn to adapt but to thrive amongst the concretized hostility of urban life. We humans are not unlike these crevice gardens, offering the flowers of our kindnesses, the fragrance of our yearnings and musings to those who

come spontaneously to partake. For once we have learned to receive a bit of peace from even the tiniest wisp of Nature glimpsed “on the fly”, we may well become skilled at giving out these same serendipitous bits of peace to those who have need of respite from their own tedious struggles. About bringing wild flowers back from Mount Tamalpais, near San Francisco, and how the derelicts begged for them, John Muir once said, “No matter into what depths of degradation humanity may sink, I will never despair while the lowest love the pure and the beautiful and know it when they see it.”

Sharon and Steve delight in having a parakeet that flies freely around their living room, singing vociferously and perching where she will, even on Steve’s shoulder as he moves about. Their own sense of inner freedom, limited somewhat in recent years by the challenges of work, is nevertheless linked in some way to allowing this normally caged creature to roam unfettered.

Indigo, now in her sixties, remembers all too well the sense of entrapment she came to feel in the highly social and often shallow life she led in Hollywood in her younger years. Finally she escaped, and after years of wandering in South America, she landed, literally, on 1200 acres in a remote valley in southern Oregon. We recently visited her land, now registered with our Cortesia Sanctuary Project, and were amazed to see all the ways in which the concept of sanctuary has become an everyday reality in her life. Living totally off the grid, without electricity, Indigo has temporarily diverted a creek near her house to create a good-sized pond where she likes to canoe and swim. Over the years, she has also created a large garden that she waters with a gravity flow system from the creek. Earth altars, garden art, a labyrinth, pyramidal trellises and archways — all are expressions of her exuberance in living in tune with the Divine. But though most of us will never choose a hermit’s life for ourselves, we should consider how we, in *our* unique way, find and express the joy with which Indigo overflows.

Her home is no less an expression of her deep attunement with Nature than her garden. Inside, her large, abstract paintings of flowers dance with vibrant color and aliveness. Her cabinets and chairs are similarly decorated, and a jungle of plants winds its way around every window, all the way up to the high ceiling. She embroiders and appliqués pillows and coats and hats, and makes soulful portraits of her friends against imaginary backgrounds of their favorite flowers and places in Nature.

Let’s make a promise to each other. Let’s agree that we won’t rationalize that we are not as talented as Indigo, and thus we can’t live the exuberant life that she lives. This is simply not true. She works far harder than most of us would ever dream of — hauling water, chopping firewood, growing most of her food, just surviving at 4,000 feet on her own! But she lives a life of balance, serving her family, neighbors, and even strangers like us, with a totally open and generous heart. May we each bravely find within us, and continuously cultivate, the skills and insights wherein we can feel connected to the beauty and joy in the world around us. It may not exist everywhere we look, but this beauty and joy is never far away, even as Nature in some aspect is ever close at hand, asking us to be present with her. We can practice this presence no matter where we are.

Gary Snyder, in his essay entitled “The Etiquette of Freedom”, puts it this way: “The lessons we learn from the wild become the etiquette of freedom. We can enjoy our humanity with its flashy brains and sexual buzz, its social cravings and stubborn tantrums, and take ourselves as no more and no less than any other being in the Big Watershed. We can accept each other all as barefoot equals sleeping on the same ground. We can give up hoping to be eternal and quit fighting dirt. We can chase off mosquitoes and fence out varmints without hating them. No expectations, alert and sufficient, grateful and careful, generous and direct. A calm and clarity attend us in the moment we are wiping the grease off our hands between tasks and glancing up at the passing clouds. Another joy is sitting down to coffee with a good friend. The wild requires that we learn the terrain, nod to all the plants and animals, ford the streams and cross the ridges, and tell a good story when we get back home.”

Yet, if we don’t pay attention, if we don’t look up, or at least out the window, in between our endless tasks, we will have no stories to tell, and Nature in all Her glory will be but an illusion to us, seemingly far away and inaccessible, a stranger to Her own children, we whom She has loved so well.

In summary, we offer five key principles that can support you in deepening your own connection to Nature, wherever you may live:

- **Take full advantage of small amounts of time to consciously reconnect in some way with Nature.**

Even if you just stick your head out the window for a few minutes on your coffee break, or watch the rain falling without cursing it, or pick up a leaf, any leaf, to spend a moment admiring its perfection. Any simple gesture will do. Just increase your awareness, and therein your appreciation, of the tremendous importance Nature holds in our lives, whether or not we think of it as often as we could.

Make room in your schedule, no matter how busy it seems, to walk and work outdoors, to breathe deeply, to feel the wind or rain on your skin, to take in the earthy fragrances that are everywhere present, even in the city. Form a long-term relationship with some special outdoor setting, visiting it at different times of the day and through all the seasons.

- **Give Nature a face.**

Learn to see everything as being consciously alive and thus worthy of your respect: rocks, trees, birds, insects, flowers, a favorite pet, everything. Don't try to rationalize your way out of this one. The anthropomorphic way of seeing the universe, with humans as the dominant species, simply does not work any more. The more you feel called to enter into silent conversation and communion with the micro elements of Creation, seeing each as your friend, the more you will feel nurtured by the Earth as a whole.

- **Don't feel that you have to fully understand or dissect Nature to be able to deeply appreciate her profound beauty and wonder.**

Give up control. Be willing to be an innocent child again, awed by the great mysteries of life — the unfolding seasons, the ever-changing weather (Do you know of *anyone* who can accurately predict it?), the phenomena of plant pollination, the power of a seed. Don't even try to figure it all out, just allow yourself to be one with it. Sounds cosmic? Far safer to explore oneness with the rhythms of wild nature than with the crazy, industrialized, compartmentalized, utterly incomprehensible human creation we call culture.

“We view mystery,” author Rick Bass insightfully writes, “as the enemy of knowledge, and in trying to find knowledge we end up attempting to harm the sheath of mystery which encases that knowledge — cutting or attacking that mystery, in either fear or anger — and in so doing, harming altering the knowledge that lies beneath the mystery.” Rick's observation is deepened by writer, David Leveson: “We must each develop our own dream of the earth and find a way to it — mystically, empirically, through revelation or evolution — and share our findings with each other. If we don't, then it may be that neither we nor the Earth will speak anymore.”

Ann Zwinger, in *Run, River, Run*, puts it more viscerally. “As long as I can stand, ankle deep (in the river), without civilization, without defense, going back to self, so long as possible I stand here, submerged physically only to the ankles, psychologically to the base of my being.”

Go ahead, submerge yourself in that which you do not yet know. And when you come up for air, tell your story to anyone who will listen.

- **Strive to bring some form of Nature into your home and work environments so you are reminded about what is out there beyond the man-made walls that often enclose you.**

We offer numerous suggestions in our boxout, “*Fifty Ways to Access the Sanctuary of Nature*”, but suffice it to say that the old adage all too often holds true: “out of sight, out of mind.” Without the inspiration of Nature in close proximity to the environments where you spend most of your time, you run the risk of becoming accustomed to a certain man-made barrenness. With plants, Nature photos, indoor water features, and other special reminders around you, you will feel better supported and strengthened in doing whatever you do, and you won’t so easily forget that Nature in the larger context exists for you as well, ready to soothe away your troubles at a moment’s notice.

- **Decide to play an active role, in some way or another, in championing and protecting Nature.** While Forrest and I do not consider ourselves to be environmental activists, per se, we nevertheless have long been involved in our own forms of activism. For years we have been developing low-cost educational materials and teaching others about natural, reverential gardening and the importance of earth-friendly composting and recycling. More recently, we have come to believe that if anyone can discover and maintain a deep sense of sanctuary — in their relationship to Nature and home, and in their own heart — they will be far less likely to abuse and exploit Nature for their own selfish ends. This is simply another way to approach the problem of widespread environmental degradation, as well as human disillusionment. Find your own way to make a difference in this world, to help stem the tide of rampant and unsustainable exploitation of our natural resources, on a worldwide scale. Use your God-given, creative intelligence and whatever physical strength you have to be a part of the renewal of this Earth and her fragile ecosystems, and teach your children to do the same.

CONCLUSION

It has been said that the last thing a fish discovers is water. Similarly, we often relegate Nature to some backdrop upon which we play out our human drama. But the fact is, and as our Cortesia Sanctuary Project has demonstrated, most people seek sanctuary in Nature — in their gardens and yards, and in many other outdoor places. Sometimes we need to be re-inspired by knowing that great religious figures regularly found sanctuary and necessary communion with God in Nature. And perhaps this is an effective way to conclude this chapter.

Of course, we would be remiss in not mentioning once again St. Francis. So great was his love of Nature that in the 1970’s the Pope declared Francis “the patron saint of ecology.” Francis was gifted with numerous retreats situated in awe-inspiring settings from mountains to islands. He especially loved a small island on Lake Trasimene named Isola Maggiore, where he survived the forty days of Lent in 1211 on a single loaf of bread. The cliffs of La Verna (where he received his stigmata), with their spectacular trees, rocks, and views, were also among the most revered by Francis. Here he often chose to pray in a forbidding gallery roofed by a ledge, the Sasso Spicco, jutting out from the cliff.

During his last two years, in the constant convalescent care by his closest and most devoted companions, Francis called upon his beloved Clare at San Damiano to say goodbye. Clare immediately set up a lean-to of rushes in the garden. For months Francis sought solace there from his illnesses, especially the inflammation of his eyes. Not wanting to give way to self-pity, he concentrated harder on his prayers. One day he told his companions that it was necessary “to compose a song praising God and thanking him for all his creatures on earth, because we cannot live without them and we daily offend him by our lack of gratitude for them.” The result was one of the most beautiful tributes to Creation ever conceived, *The Canticle of Brother Sun*.

I am of the opinion that gardens are one of our most important links to the Divine and Creation. A garden that is well-conceived and well-kept draws us away from the world, deeper into Spirit. I am sure the throngs of visitors who visit the Meditation Garden at Elvis Presley’s Grace Mansion don’t just

experience Nature abloom. In their visit, they ponder the state of their soul and only secondarily connect Nature to the spirit of a rock star.

If gardens deepen our spiritual inquiry, then we should necessarily draw inspiration from Jesus's last visit at the Garden of Gethemene. Jesus was a frequent visitor of gardens, and spent many hours in the Garden of Gethemene when he visited Jerusalem for the Passover. He was known to take himself away awhile to pray and to be still. It is significant to know that Gethemene, in Hebrew, means "oil press." This was an olive-growing region, and that might explain the physical relationship. But it is the metaphysical importance that has deep significance for sanctuary. Here in the garden, Jesus spent his last free hours on Earth before his crucifixion engaged in agony, knowing the suffering the soul goes through in giving up cherished idols or in letting go of human consciousness.

It was in the Garden Of Gethemene that Jesus mirrored what true sanctuary can give to any person — the opportunity to "press out" the vagaries and impurities of the world and elevate the soul to a new level or relationship with God. Sanctuary in a natural setting more easily allows us to extract the old from the new, to let go of our attachment to the outer world and to sculpt and nurture a secret garden within. Our success can be measured by the extent to which we feel we have moved from the outer to the inner sanctuary, from that illusive pursuit of peace in the world to its attainment within the hermitage or garden of our soul.

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