

Coming to Sense

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In the summer of 1982, I found myself bouncing along the path beside a hayfield in the back of a blue Ford short-bed pickup. My cousins and I were headed for a dip in the St. Croix River. I was laughing and clinging for dear life to the side of the truck, my head thrown back to meet the wind. The air hummed with crickets, the July sun blazed down from a clear blue sky and every time I inhaled, I breathed the sharp tang of sun-warmed grass. What is it about scent that has the power to bypass thought? Rattling along in the truck, I looked out over 40 acres of field and breathed. I was seduced by scent, invited by each breath into communion with clover. Nature was giving itself to me and for once I said: Yes. I came to my senses in that field.

I grew up in the city, so what did I know about the spell of the natural world? What I knew best was the manmade, built environment. To me nature had no particular existence, much less value, of its own; it was just a scenic backdrop to the drama that really mattered: the drama of human relationships – our own ever-lasting quarrels and ambitions, our own struggles and desires. It wasn't just the city that cut me off from nature – it was addiction. My father was alcoholic, and I developed my own addiction to food. If you've ever been gripped by addiction or been close to an addict, then you know that addiction disconnects a person from awareness of the body. It's not that I was innocently unaware of the natural world or just insensitive to the ways it beckoned me. I openly defied it. Was it nighttime and was my body hungry for sleep? I didn't care; I'd stay up late, make a tour of the all-night grocery store and eat until my stomach ached. After a bout of bingeing I'd get up the next morning and go out for a seven-mile run, maybe begin another fast or stringent diet. Pummel and punish the body – that was my motto. Clear-cut the forest and move on.

The self-destructive machinery of willfulness, greed and rage collapsed in April 1982. I was 30 years old and it was either make peace with the body or die. With the support of therapy and the 12-step program, I began to practice the difficult but essential art of listening to my body and living within its limits. Sometimes it's no small piece of work just learning to live within one's skin. The first bit of nature with which we've been entrusted is our own bodies, and in my case, at least, saving the earth began with inhabiting my own flesh.

Three months later, at a family reunion in Minnesota, I took that ride along a field and was startled by how passionately my body greeted the grass. For the first time I sensed how delicious it could be to have a conscious and sustained relationship with the living world around me. I began to discover the God who loves, redeems, and sustains all creation and who, in every Eucharist, meets us in the simple, earthly elements of bread and wine.

Like others in the religious environmental movement, I feel a deepening call to live closer to the earth and to speak up for it. Our family drives a hybrid Prius; we're replacing regular light bulbs with compact fluorescent; we're reducing our use of fossil fuels (gas, oil, coal) and we buy "green" electricity. As for public witness, I've spoken at a public hearing on our national energy plan, picked up a bullhorn at a protest rally and preached about global warming at an interfaith prayer vigil inside the Massachusetts State House. I was arrested in Washington, D.C., for praying in front of the Department of Energy against new drilling in the Arctic. On Nov. 12, five years after the signing of the Kyoto Protocol that the U.S. government now rejects, I will join other members of Religious Witness for the Earth in a service of repentance and renewal at the United Nations in New York City.

The earth is crying out for our care. A commitment to environmental justice and stewardship affects every aspect of our lives – how we preach and how we pray, how we run our buildings, what we buy and what we refuse to buy, what we drive and what we refuse to drive, how we vote and when we participate in public protest.

Maybe that's a gift hidden in addiction: recovery forces us to claim our connection with the earth, to recognize ourselves as creatures. Only when I began to heal the split between mind and flesh did I begin to notice – and to love – the buzzing, blooming, bellowing, whirling, flapping, squirming life that surrounds us on every side. My engagement in environmental activism goes back to that summer afternoon more than 20 years ago when I breathed in clover and breathed out joy. My long benumbed soul was stirring awake in that hayfield and I could hear it sing.



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