

Grassroots Ministry: Presence to Earth

Michael Gross (Americas)

When I agreed to participate in this initiative many months ago, I had no idea how I would address this topic. What does presence of Earth and to Earth mean? I'm a scientist – my mind does not deal with ideas like this. And in those cold dark days of December, there were not too many Earth creatures moving about to inspire me.

But then the pandemic happened, bringing that part of the Earth known as SARS-CoV-2 much more present into our lives than we would have liked, raising our awareness of the many inequities among the many humans on Earth – some have better access to healthcare, some have jobs forcing them to be around other people who may be infected with an invisible deadly disease, some are in societies where there is no safety net when a pandemic-induced shutdown deprives them of their livelihood. At my GPS coordinates on Earth, we went into confinement in the middle of March. A wonderfully exciting time for a biologist, specifically a plant ecologist like me, who needs to be outside. At 40 degrees North Latitude and 75 degrees West Longitude, Earth “creatures” are re-awakening and new lives are emerging at an ever-increasing rate each day. Those of us who were trained to observe the world around us can't bear to be inside, away from our DNA kin.

I was thankful to be designated “essential” so I could come to work each day and water the plants in the university's greenhouse. Thankful that I work on a 150-acre mostly “green” campus, a university sponsored by the Sisters of Mercy, with an arboretum, water bodies, gardens, forests....all teeming with life. And then, like many others, I began to realize the unexpected beneficial consequences of how my world had just changed. What new things was I going to be able to do? What new opportunities would I have, given a shift in my responsibilities and how I worked and lived? What new ways would I find to use the precious gift of time? How will I be challenged by these new circumstances and how will I respond?

As I reflect back on the last several months, I realize that I have been more present to Earth and to other Earth creatures, and Earth and its creatures have been more present to me. And it is not just the creatures – why just the creatures? – what about the water, air, soil, rocks? I am reminded of these excerpts from the poem “Do Stones Feel?” by Mary Oliver:

“Do stones feel?
Do they love their life?
Or does their patience drown out everything else?

Is the tree as it rises delighted with its many branches,

each one like a poem?

Are the clouds glad to unburden their bundles of rain?

Most of the world says no, no, it's not possible.

I refuse to think to such a conclusion.

Too terrible it would be, to be wrong."

This poem reminds me of the interconnectedness of everything in the cosmos. Everything is composed of the same chemical elements, and they have been recycled continuously for billions of years. The oxygen atoms that make up much of my body were in the body of a plant, animal, fungus or bacterium that I ate yesterday, and may very well have been part of Jesus, Mary, Moses, Catherine McAuley, or soil and water in the centuries in between. So, presence of Earth and to Earth for humans and all Earth? Yes, I say, yes....we are all one, we are all part of the same evolving creation story. How will each of us choose to shape this story?

The scope of Mercy Global Presence is indeed global, and contributors are invited to infuse their contribution with their own cultures and geography. I have enjoyed the global images of others over the last several months. And so I want to share with you some images from my part of Earth (in the part of the world known by humans as New Jersey, USA, planet Earth, Milky Way galaxy) that I would not have except that the pandemic gave me the chance to be "present" to Earth in ways that I would not have otherwise experienced, and for those parts of the Earth to be "present" to me. In pandemic times, there were fewer people out and about. There were fewer people noises and people interruptions, so I heard more from the rest of Earth and saw more of the rest of Earth. I was outside more. I went to more parks and other natural places. I shared more of my atoms directly with "Earth" around me, and it shared its atoms with me. I breathed with the deer, the frog, the mockingbird eggs, the cardinal flower, and the green stink bug. I was present in a more immediate way to Earth, and Earth to me. Has this happened to you too? What does it mean? How has it changed me? How has it changed you? How has it changed "Earth"? I invite readers to think about how Earth has been present to them, and they to Earth, and how they can have more mutually beneficial experiences with "Earth".



Eastern bluebird positioned close to its nest to dive-bomb passers-by like me.



Ground nesting bees use the soil for their nests.



Seabeach amaranth, one of a few federally threatened plants in New Jersey. It disappeared from the state between 1913 and 2000, and is now being protected by humans through changes in beach management.



Eastern painted turtle optimistically laying eggs in the soil for the next generation of turtles.



Mockingbird eggs in their perfectly constructed nest, designed to withstand this summer's hurricane Isaias.



Federally threatened swamp pink.



Green stink bug.



Cardinal flower waiting to share its nectar with the ruby-throated hummingbird that visits it daily.



White-tailed deer, surprised to see a human during the pandemic-induced confinement.



Spatulate-leaved sundew, a carnivorous plant whose sticky tentacles trap curious insects.

When I saw this frog on a hot summer day, I thought of Mary Oliver's poem, "Almost a Conversation", which I have adapted here:



I have not really talked with frog about its life.
Frog has no words, still what it tells me about its life is clear.
It does not own a “smart” phone with a camera like the one I am aiming at it right now.
It imagines its pond will last forever.
It does not envy the dry house I live in.
It does not wonder who or what it is that I worship.
It wonders, that the pond is so cold and fresh and alive, and still I don’t jump in.

In “Long Life”, Mary Oliver wrote:

“What does it mean that the earth is so beautiful? And what shall I do about it? What is the gift that I should bring to the world? What is the life that I should live?”

These words call me, and I think each one of us, to think about our responsibility to the Earth. How we are present globally. What does our presence mean to the Earth? What does the Earth’s presence mean to us?