

A Flash of Green - Homily for Earth Day 2012

A flash of green was what I saw. I was spending the summer in Nicaragua, the land of many volcanos, volunteering with a service and development group from North Carolina doing work in the community around Managua. Going to different locations in the community, we would frequently get into the group's rather well-kept pickup truck (with me driving, by the way), driving down sometimes marginally paved roads, and dodging the cows that also liked the road. I marveled at the many new things to see, like the active volcanos we would pass that would actually be expelling smoke some days, and the different feel of the plants and animals. Now, you know how when you'll see a small flock of birds start for some reason, first all sitting together in a tree or group of trees, and then all take off in a loose cloud at the same time? I'd bet that like me, when you see them in your mind, they might be black or dark in color. But when I saw them in Nicaragua's countryside, they weren't. When I saw a flock of birds start into flight, and they were green. They were parrots! A bunch of brilliant green birds, with some flashes of red, blue, and orange mixed in. They were wild parrots! It was the coolest thing in the world! A flock of wild parrots flying around!!

I can hardly begin to describe the joy and pleasure from this experience of unexpected beauty. Unexpected because it defied the ruts in my mind that imagined birds only in a certain way. And totally beautiful in their color and their special place in the beauty of the world. I felt connected with the birds, the Nicaraguan trees & plants, and even the crazy volcanos. As I was having my one of my many happy fits from seeing one of these flocks of parrots, Pat, one of the long-term volunteers from our community said in this absolutely flat voice, "yeah, I got used to it years ago - I don't even see them anymore."

I felt crushed and totally sad for her. Not that she had to feel what I felt, but for her loss. She had been just as excited when she had first seen them but now had lost that entirely. The beauty of those marvelous green birds was gone for her now.

I wonder what beauty and mystery I have lost, that I once saw but no longer seem to notice. Joy and beauty that have been gone for so long that I've forgotten them entirely.

What gets in the way of remembering, what gets in the way of experiencing the beauty and wonder of the natural world or really of anything. The way human brains are wired probably doesn't help - our brains tend to better remember things that are first, and last. So after the newness of an experience, like my parrots, wears off, and new experiences crowd in, the brain just doesn't remember it as well. ...But it's more. I can get so busy and distracted that I forget things that aren't right in front of me just don't grab my attention the same. Yeah, yeah, yeah, the parrots are cool, but we've gotta get going on this project.

And then there is the metaphorical fog, like the light pollution that keeps the naked eye from seeing the stars the same way near a big city as one is able to farther away. Or even the car windows or train windows between our eyes and the world, or the surface of a television screen through which experience may be happening. Are these making our experiences less real, connecting them less with our hearts and dreams? Impacting us less on a deeper level because they're dimmer or farther away?

And the impact is huge. This is something that I grieve every day, seeing the constant repercussions of humanity's decreased attention and connection with the earth. When I spend all day breathing recirculating air inside a huge concrete hospital, I forget about the pollutants diminishing our air. As I interact with trees and plants less, spending most of my time inside a building and then watching the road when driving, it doesn't feel the same way to think about their being cut down. And these impacts and repercussions play out at so many levels in our physical world and in the policies and practices that govern it.

My FEAR is that it's not only forgetting, but becomes complacency. Not seeing, not remembering, not even trying to see. And complacency isn't done intentionally - it just creeps in. The parrots just are – I'm used to them – and I guess they're just not exciting or joyful anymore. This is a deeply spiritual issue. Complacency eats away at our souls like a fog made of acid - not a very strong acid, but acid nonetheless. It just gradually eats away at us. Complacency takes away the joy and vitality that the experience of ENJOYING the parrots could bring.

But I don't WANT to be complacent! And I don't want the rest of the world to be either!

Sometimes I wish for a Remembrall from Harry Potter's world, a device that reminds me when I've forgotten about something. Maybe that could remind me when I'm losing something, when complacency is creeping in and I need to remember to see something and be joyful instead. Or curious. Or hopeful. But the catch with the Remembrall is that the ONLY thing it does is let you know that you've forgotten something, but it doesn't tell you what you've forgotten. That part is up to you.

Seeing and remembering are up to us. Seeing beauty in our world, experiencing its mysteries, feeling both the joy and connections. Countering complacency, first in our own lives, and then through our own living, impacting the world around us. May it be so, during this Earth Day season and year-round as well. Blessed be.