EARTH CHURCH Jim Blackburn & Isabelle Scurry Chapman

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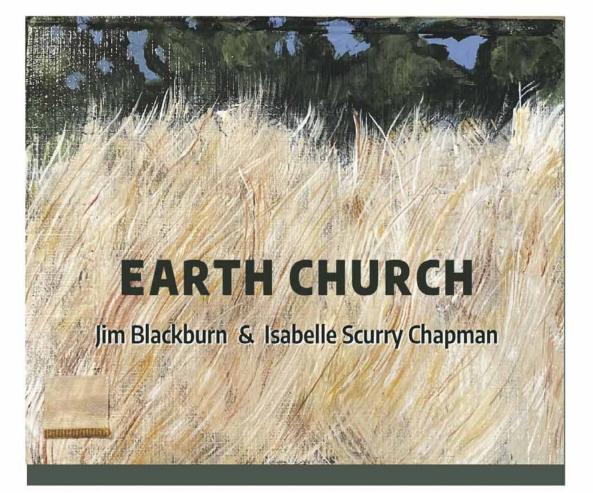
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This book is dedicated to our spouses, Garland Kerr and John Chapman, whom we love dearly, and who have supported us throughout these efforts. Additionally, this book is dedicated to the 700+ "connected" souls who journeyed with us through the Virus Vigil. From March 22, 2020, to March 21, 2021, our lives were richer for our spiritual connectuality through the daily infusion of paintings, poems, and rambling discourse. And finally, we want to dedicate this book to Charles Tate, an old friend whose support made the publication of this book possible.

Foreward

Earth Church (the book), is derived from a 365-day correspondence/blog called the Virus Vigil. The origin of the vigil and of Earth Church is discussed in Chapters 1 and 2. We thought it might be interesting to the reader to know a bit about the painting process of the artist Isabelle Scurry Chapman and the writing process of the poet/narrator Jim Blackburn before you begin.

Isabelle and I have been mixing art and poetry for almost two decades now. One day I walked into her studio and saw several bird paintings on her wall, and I quipped that I could write poems to go with those paintings, and she said do it, and I did. Over the years, we have produced two books of poems and paintings, one called *Birds: A Collection of Verse and Vision*, published in 2009; and another called *Hill Country Birds and Waters: Art and Poems*, published in 2019. But nothing we had ever done will be similar to the year-long Virus Vigil.

Many people who were part of the vigil and others who have heard of us speak of the vigil want to know more about process and about Isabelle's art. The vigil required a poem to go with a painting as well as narrative commenting about most anything to be sent out every day. However, it was always focused on the virus in one way or another. The vigil began and was sustained by bird paintings, but as we got further into the year-long effort, Isabelle became more far-ranging with her efforts, capturing more and more elements of her spirituality and freedom of thought and expression.

For my part, I was always responding to the art, writing poems, and wrapping a narrative around the newly arrived painting in my email that was received a day or a week earlier. Perhaps more than is usually the case, at least in my experience, the art is integral to the storytelling in this book about Earth Church and to the daily content of the vigil. As such, Isabelle is listed as co-author rather than an illustrator.

As to the art itself, Isabelle's style is somewhat like folk art, clearly infused with an animistic base with spiritual overtones throughout. *Earth Church* is a book about spiritual connections between, among and within living things. Isabelle's art is a defining element of that spirituality. The paintings in this book are on two types of background – discarded cigar box covers, and the covers of discarded books. Isabelle paints with acrylics, and her paintings are generally small so that they can fit within her rib cage, close to her heart. Awareness, being present and connections are Isabelle's tools for discovery. Lonnie Holly, a folk artist, once said, "just let it [your ideas] leak from your heart and soul through your eyes and hands and then it is art." Isabelle and I both agree.

Earth Church, at its core, is Earth-based spirituality. We sincerely hope you enjoy reading this book as much as we enjoyed making it. If you would like to learn more, contact either of us through Verse and Vision Publishing, <u>verseandvisionbooks@gmail.com</u>.

Jim Blackburn and Isabelle Scurry Chapman August 28, 2021

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ONE

Covid, Connectuality and Earth Church

n February 2020, a realization began to spread across the United States and the world. A SARS-type outbreak had been detected in late 2019 in Wuhan, China, and had begun to spread around the world. My wife Garland Kerr and our friends, John and Isabelle Chapman and Al and Shelly Kaufman, departed on February 24, 2020, for a tour of Egypt to see the wonderful sites and antiquities. Before we departed, we began to hear a bit about the spread of this Covid virus, and we did purchase some of the last woodworking masks available at Home Depot before boarding the plane for Cairo. Little did we know.

In retrospect, we were horribly uninformed and had no understanding of what was to come. When we changed planes in Istanbul, I recall noting that flights to Tehran were marked as cancelled on the flight status screen. We knew travel to China was restricted but I remember thinking that the cancellation of flights to Iran might be Covid-based as well. We later discovered that they were.

Upon arrival in Cairo and subsequent transport to Aswan to begin our Nile adventure, there was no indication of major problems. It seemed business as usual. After a couple of days at Aswan, we boarded our Nile boat which contained only our tour group from the Museum of Natural Sciences in Houston. We settled into our cabins and then went to the top deck to bid goodbye to Aswan.

About four hours into our trip, I connected to the boat's Wi-Fi and checked-in with my department chair in the Civil and Environmental Engineering Department at Rice University in Houston where I teach. When he found out I was in Egypt, he immediately sent a reply email saying "Get out – get out. It's not safe over there." It turns out that a researcher in our department had informed the department that she had just returned from a Nile River boat tour where she had been exposed to Covid and soon thereafter was diagnosed as one of the first cases in Houston.

What a way to begin a trip. This mysterious disease is linked to a Nile boat tour, and we had just begun a Nile boat tour. And there was no way out anytime soon. One can't do much in such a situation. Some things you can control. Others you can't.

So when I realized that I was stuck on this Nile barge named Esmeralda heading north with the flowing river, I turned to poetry and nature, initially focusing upon a bird found both on the Texas coast and on the Nile.

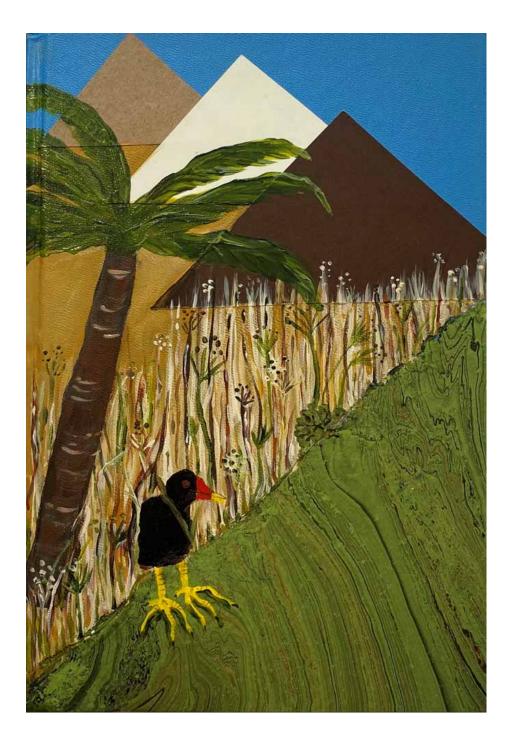
the MOORHEN 5

I look out over the historic Nile, I've come to the top deck to think awhile, This virus is new and freaking me out, Up here on the deck – I'm allowed to shout.

This is a new virus we don't understand, I'm boating down the Nile in a foreign land, No frame of reference, no good advice, I feel a bit trapped – I'm caught in a vise.

The current takes us near a water meadow, The wetland plants gently moved by the flow, When stressed I look to the natural world, Which is my source, my gem, my pearl.

The marsh is a cathedral in the church of the Earth, Revered by the ancients who knew their worth, When lost and stressed the Earth comforts me, Helping me find a state of reverie.



From the top deck I see a common moorhen, Swimming out to greet me, asking how I've been? Listening quietly as I pour out my grief, Expressing his desire to provide some relief.

After reflecting the moorhen smiles up at me, And says that the solution is elementary, You have to be smart as you live with your fate, And for the duration you must acclimate.

Patience has never been a virtue of mine, It's a goal, it's a trial, it's a notion sublime, The moorhen's right – I must stay the course, And try to avoid this viral force.

The moorhen helped me find peace of mind, The Earth once again helping me in a bind, This encounter the beginning of a challenging year, And connectuality would help assuage the fear.

So welcome to Earth church, Pull yourself up a pew, Here the moorhen speaks, To help acclimate you.

I clearly remember this moment when nature intervened, and I became philosophical and introspective about this situation. I have always found solace in nature. Over the last three decades, I had developed a spiritual relationship with nature – a relationship with the Earth – and I have come to refer to this place of refuge as Earth Church. When faced with difficult times, I learned to turn to nature which for me is a comforting, spiritual place. I call that experience attending Earth Church, and that was what I did on this Nile River cruise.

After this initial adjustment period, the trip proceeded nicely. We were generally fortunate to be able to enter important sites early and depart before the large crowds assembled, a major benefit of being on a tour with the Museum. We were able to enjoy most of the important sites. And the time was not without some humor. Garland's sister Lizzie Lou contacted us, also freaked out about the virus, and advising us to avoid groups from countries with known outbreaks. By that time, an outbreak had begun in Italy, and we wrote asking somewhat tongue-in-cheek how we were expected to identify groups of Italians to which she responded – "Look at their shoes. They'll be wearing nice looking, glossy leather ones

with pointed toes." Such was the high level of advice that we received from friends and family. It certainly made us smile, and that was, remained and is today important.

My spiritual relationship with nature found a real connection with the ancient Egyptian culture. The animistic imagery was great – the ibis lawyer, the jackal-headed human figure, the human head on the body of a cat, the falcon god. And we saw it all through the eyes of our artist friend Isabelle who paints animistic as well as more realistic images to which I often write poems. And of these various Gods and images, her favorite was Nut, the goddess of the sky and the heavens, who swallowed the sun in evening and birthed the moon, reversing the process to start the day, a wonderful image that she painted after our return as an animistic black-crowned night heron, one of my favorite birds.

NUT AND the NIGHT HERON

The goddess Nut is evident tonight, She's just swallowed the sun's light, Ending the longest day of the year, And I am waiting for the night heron to appear.

I sit in my kayak near the rookery, Birds starting to move cloaked in mystery, Shadow-like movement amongst the trees, Accompanied by a light ocean breeze.

From the water I see Nut giving birth, The stars and moon are coming forth, Into the dark left behind by the sun, And the night heron parade has just begun.

Slow paddling and thinking, time for the brain, There's power in the moment – I feel no pain, The stars sending lumens from light years away, Evidence of what was that I see today.



These stars certainly lived a million years ago, The light just arrived – so fast yet so slow, Stars once alive, powered by fire, That may be no more, did the fire expire?

A darker shade of dark moves in the night, A shape is revealed before flickering lights, Helping me see that which is real, A truth, a moment, a body chill.

I know that I am – I'm in the now, With a night heron goddess in my show, She and I together in space and time, What a lovely night – I'm feeling fine.

This Earth Church service is one for the ages, A gift from Egypt that came in stages, A construct pieced together within the mind, What a lovely gift to wake up and find. *So welcome to Earth Church, Pull yourself up a pew, Here the night-heron Nut Will make magic for you.*

I have to admit that by the time we arrived back in Cairo and were preparing to board our plane, I was ready to depart. In fact, I had been ready for several days, but the cost and hassle to depart a day earlier were just too much. So here we were, departing at last, and then changing planes in Istanbul where we were checked out thoroughly. Garland had picked up a cold in Egypt, and we were worried that she would be stopped, but we were fortunate and were able to make our connection and leave for the United States, a moment of gratitude, a moment of connection, a moment of overwhelming relief.

I have heard some people talk about kissing the ground on arrival at some place, but those words never had much meaning to me until we cleared customs in Houston and stepped outside of the airport. I must admit to being overwhelmed with the notion of kissing the ground, of being so happy to be back in the USA, back to my home ground. For no reason other than a profound sense of place, I became patriotic, a sentiment that I carried with me with growing affirmation as we moved deeper and deeper into our Covid isolation. Red, white and blue had never meant so much to me.

KISS THE GROUND

Red, white and blue are symbols it's true, My country 'tis of thee and me and you, So happy to be here, so glad to be free, A red, white, and blue epiphany.



Just back from Egypt and I'm overwhelmed, Nowhere to go, but I feel compelled To act in some way to address this horror That has cast us all into social disorder.

My country's under siege by an enemy virus, A virus that's real and conspires against us, We've all been advised to go indoors, Shut the windows and don't open the doors.

I don't know what to do but I'm glad to be home, The trauma's real – isolated and alone, What can I do to help in this mess? I know that there are many in distress.

Our friends and my family are all safe for now, But we're all alone – I wish I knew how To do something positive in this tough time, Perhaps there's a role for art and rhyme.

Two weeks after return the vigil is launched To create connectivity, a wound staunched, A way to reach out and say hi to a friend, A way to endure until this virus does end. This country has always been good to me, As have so many who've been friends with me, I'll reach out to Isabelle and ask her to help, She'll provide the art and I'll write and not yelp.

We'll connect with birds and art and rhyme, Helping friends survive through space and time, So, on March 22 the virus vigil began, With no end date and no real plan.

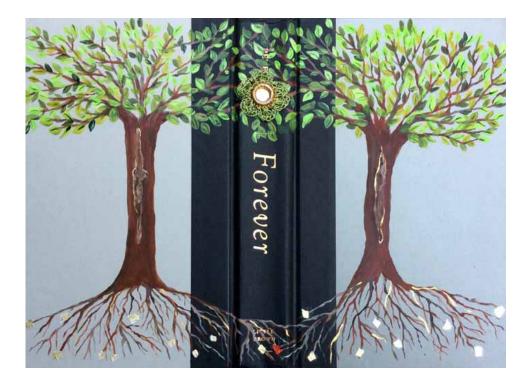
So welcome to Earth Church, Pull yourself up a pew, Here we act with no plan Except connecting with you.

Connections are so important, and here we were, back safe but like everyone else – under Covid house arrest. We went to our doctor's office to get Garland checked out, and we both were among the first at their office to be tested for Covid. They had set up an outside entrance from the parking garage and had a special room set aside for just Covid testing. Our results came back negative, and the relief poured off of us, but the fear was real and pervasive. How to get food? What to do about my classes? Learning Zoom. Eating our own cooking. So many new experiences.

On March 22, about two weeks after returning, Isabelle and I launched the virus vigil. She and I had partnered on two books of poetry and art about coastal and Texas Hill Country birds, and it seemed reasonable that we could reach out and connect with so many friends and acquaintances that were no longer able to get out and connect with others. There was literally no plan other than to reach out and communicate, and each morning about 7 a.m., I would send out an email with a poem and a piece of bird art and a rambling discussion of whatever was on my mind. We had no idea that this would last a year.

There were three key topics that pervaded this virus vigil. One of these was keeping us connected. Another was the virus itself. And a third was Earth Church and a continuing discussion of nature-based spirituality in the midst of the virus crisis. Earth church is about our connections with nature, which is another aspect of connectuality, of being. And over time, this virus vigil became a part of life and living for 365 continuous days.

As we got further into the vigil, connectuality became more and more metaphysical. We were open to ideas not often shared. We were open to thoughts not often entertained. It was at once chaos and opportunity, fear and response, but most of all it was about a change in norm and our needs.



CONNECTUALITY

Connectuality is an important state of being, It's an essence of life, just like seeing, Pursuing connectuality is my current reality, I feel it's becoming my personal marquee.

My primary connections these days are electronic, Although a friendly hug is my personal tonic, But I'm working to expand with the help of my brain To connect to the wireless on another plane.

I'm musing today about the roots in the forest, I smile thinking of them talking up a torrent, But what do the trees say one to the other? Do they talk of the weather and nearby thunder? Or comment on the weight of the Eagle's nest? Or about how the drought has them stressed? Do they chuckle watching us birders pursue The ever-moving warblers passing through?

I want to participate in the tree conversation, But how do we link up to this communication, And what would I say to an old live oak tree? Well, I might as well thank it for assisting me.

Now a live oak takes carbon out of the sky, And over its lifetime I can certify That over ten tons are stored in each oak, And a call to action that should evoke.

So, I tap out my message to the root telegraph, And convey sincere thanks on humanity's behalf, For connectuality is more than just reaching out, It's about love and friendship and shouting it out.

So here's to my friends that live in the forest, I'm hereby transmitting my honest promise, I will do what I can to value what you are, And spread the word both near and far.

So welcome to Earth Church, Pull yourself up a pew, And a state of connectuality Will join us with you.

Connections became essential in this time of the virus – connections with each other. Connections with nature. We were isolated and had to find new directions, new methods, new ideas to keep us sane. Never had we experienced such a thing as Covid – a virus that cleared the streets of Houston of daily traffic, a power beyond any that I had previously encountered. We humans who have such hubris about our importance were faced with being shut down by a microscopic thing that we had trouble grasping – a thing that eluded our leaders who fumbled over addressing what came to be known as the Pandemic.

And what was this thing – this virus – that shut us down? Is it alive? Is it not? Over the early months of the pandemic, we learned that we should wear masks, wash our hands, use alcohol-containing hand wipes if you could find them in the stores whose shelves were being picked over for items as diverse as toilet paper and brown rice not to mention alcohol and all types of caustic cleansers.

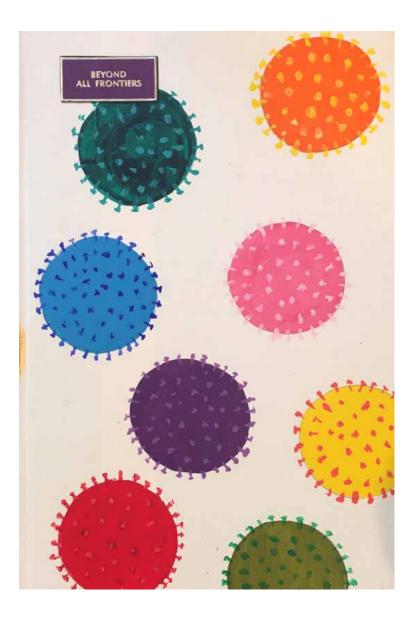
About six months into the virus, I asked Isabelle to paint the virus. We had been talking about it and discussing it for 150 days, but we had not directly addressed it. A poem was required, and Isabelle's painting was done in multiple colors because she did not want any particular color connected with this negative force that had come into our world.

It is important to note that by this time in the vigil, we were in mid-August and the Presidential elections and politics were turning a dark situation darker. Controversy had arisen almost from the beginning about the approach of the Trump Administration to virus control. The economic impacts of the shutdown for the Pandemic were reverberating across the country. We had absorbed an initial pulse or two of virus-related deaths, but the summer brought change and the pressure to open things up economically. Not wearing masks became a political statement. Differences in the approaches of the political parties were becoming very apparent. Covid had transformed the United States in so many ways, and it was all challenging and at times frightening.

the VIRUS

Please allow me to introduce myself, I'm a charlatan who can morph itself, I'm what you're all concerned about, That you should fear me – have no doubt.

I'm the nasty little virus that's crippled a nation, And I also set off a global conflagration, I'm the economy's worst nightmare and yours as well, If I were alive, I'd be going to hell.



But I'm told that I'm not technically alive, I'm not sure that I care – I seem to survive, I've an RNA genome but have no cells, I use yours to reproduce and ring all the bells.

I'm susceptible to my body being dissolved, So your attempts to stop me must be evolved, Vodka won't work for there's not enough alcohol, But a 60% solution will answer the call.

Now soap's the real killer so to speak, It causes my body to spring a leak, The soap takes the fat and peels it away, The longer the contact the more I pay.

I love those folks who despise the mask, That makes my transmission an easier task, Your desire to mingle is my ticket to ride, On your statements of choice, I will glide.

I love the leaders who don't take me seriously, And adopt a style of acting imperiously, I relish the disdain of knowledge and science, My success depends upon the people's defiance.

I'm a self-centered virus yet feeling disrespected, This poem's not at all what I expected, Rather than celebrating me and my skills, This poem's about your people and their ills.

So welcome to Earth Church, Pull yourself up a pew, We're all about science here, And you should be too.

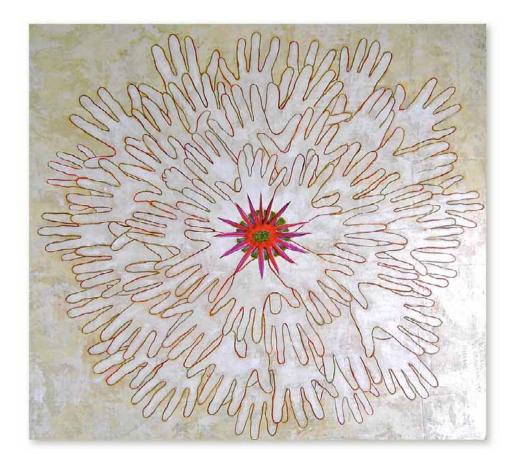
Covid created the need to connect with each other. As time went on, this need for connection – for connectuality – became more and more important. And as we continued on, I thought back to the origination of my interest in connectuality – when the phrase was actually coined, which was when I was watching three grackles outside the window at my office, and how in watching them I became convinced that we humans are connected to all living things in ways both obscure and profound, about how these connections are not appreciated to any real extent at all, about how these connections are and were essential to both living through Covid and more generally, just in living.

The longer the virus vigil continued, the more philosophical I became about life, about living, about what it means to be alive on a living planet. We would not exist but for the Earth, but we don't really seem to get this amazing fact. I like to reflect upon the philosopher Descartes, who said that one should doubt all things to find truth. However, he did say that he could not doubt that he thought and therefore he was. I paraphrase that as "I am, therefore, I am," to which I would add, "the Earth is, therefore I am."

CONNECTUALITY REVISITED

This vigil sought a way to open a door, And over the months it's become something more, It's a reach 'cross the chasm that came with the virus, A new way of thinking – a search for the soul of us.

My spirit's intertwined across space and time With all of you through lines that rhyme, And I discovered from writing of the birds An energy's transmitted to me from my words.



I figure I must have touched something ethereal, Just energy in thought with no added material, A message to me from me through you, I'm paddling along a metaphysical bayou.

The flower in the painting speaks on that level, The joining of hands becoming the petals, Our artist's hand has such a spiritual touch, The flower expressing our sharing and such.

Connectuality was an early concept generated From an encounter with a grackle that seemed fated For he walked right into the stoop of my soul, Telling me we must talk before we're too old.

The grackle empowered me to make this connection, And walk into your life with great affection, It's nice to do something open and vulnerable, I'm living an experience that's simply incomparable.

There's spirit at play in the poems and the art, And love being sent straight from the heart, As you're sipping your coffee and reading these words, Think kindly of we two and you and the birds.

Take a deep breath – let positivity come, Let's make our connected spirits hum, Know that you're part of a connected whole, Accepting back love vibes is your day's goal.

So welcome to Earth Church Pull yourself up a pew May the love in the universe Find a home in you. Throughout the virus vigil, Earth Church was ever present. Earth Church – my spiritual center – my sacred space here on Earth. As I see it, all of the Earth is a church – a place to enjoy life – a place to connect with life – a place to breathe in air and let nature touch deep into our lungs, letting the oxygen that comes from the trees filter into our lungs and through our bodies, bringing respiration, supporting life being lived by me. Earth Church – a place of birds, a place of mammals, a place of plants, a place of insects, a place of humans like me, a place for all beings who live life on this beautiful, wonderful planet called Earth. And this book is all about the fabulous church of the Earth.



TWO

The Genesis of Earth Church

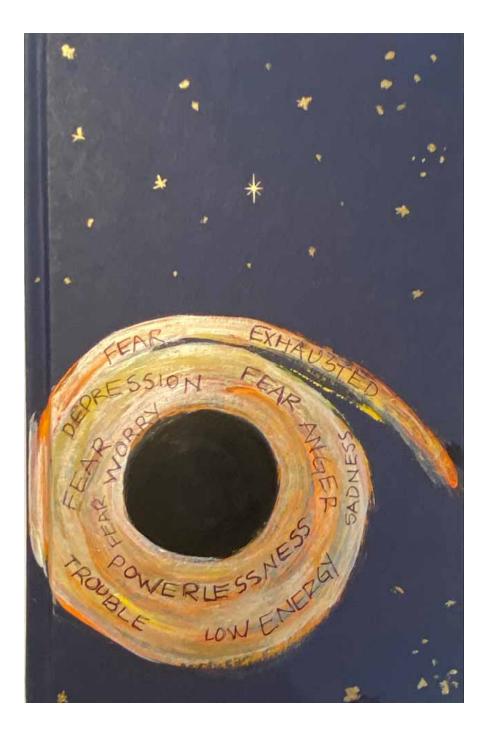
arth Church emerged as a beacon when I was in a very dark place over thirty-five years ago, and it still lights my path and might yours as well. I discovered Earth Church as I was coming to grips with the fact that I was an alcoholic and that if I did not change my ways, I would lose my wife and likely my life as well. I was going full speed toward a collision; I needed to change.

Addressing something like alcoholism is not easy. One makes promises, both to themselves and others, and then fails to keep them. "I will not do that again," becomes "why did I do that again"? And again? And again? It is a bad downward spiral that hurtles you faster and faster toward a bottom. Some are lucky like me and hit a high bottom, a stopping point before all is lost – before horrible deeds are done that cannot be undone.

the BLACK HOLE 2

There's a pressure I feel pulling me down, My feet can't find purchase on firm ground, I think I have control, but that thought is false, It seems I keep doing the same old waltz.

The sucking I perceive is very real, Something has my foot, pulling my heel, I hold out my arms to find a handhold, I can't seem to see with this blindfold.



This giant whirling mass pulls me forward, Walls are closing in – I'm feeling cornered, I'm herded toward this large sucking sound, If only I could find some good firm ground. And now I'm swirling counterclockwise, Being pulled along by some very strong ties, I have no free will – I'm in limbo, It's looking bad for good ole Jimbo.

Exhaustion, fear and downright depression, This life I'm leading is a tiring oppression, I try to escape but the hole keeps sucking, I feel like a victim of a nasty street mugging.

I realize that I'm angry – full of fears, I've been living like this for too many years, It's time to commit and spit out my concerns, Roll'em up, light a match, and watch'em burn.

I've decided to act, but the hole's still there, Its grip is waning – I can breathe some air, I never thought it would come to this, I must act now or fall into the abyss.

It feels a bit like walking the plank, I set ego aside – this is not a prank, I must take responsibility for my decisions, To realize my dreams, my hopes, my visions.

So welcome to Earth Church, Pull yourself up a pew, The first step is the hardest, You must convince you.

To stop my fall, I checked into a rehab center, which was the beginning of my pathway to Earth Church. This was no glossy happy farm – no cute clinic. This was the fourth floor of the Sharpstown Hospital in Southwest Houston – gritty, grimy and deadly serious. And when I walked in the door, I knew that something important had just happened.

the KILLDEER 2

The rehab center was a reality check, I came here rightly – I was a wreck, The doors were locked after I came in, A place to reflect upon where I'd been.

But could this dog learn a new trick? I had lost my way – I was really sick, I began to climb back out of the hole, By realizing over alcohol, I had no control.

My self-image by now was not very strong, I knew that my thinking had been all wrong, But one event happened that made it clear, That I was living with a load of fear.

The event occurred in the rehab art class, A breakthrough moment – an end to impasse, I drew myself as a wounded bird, One wing hanging low, my vision blurred.

In some ways I was like a killdeer pretending To be injured – a ruse – potentially upending, Luring predators away with an easy prey, But my wing was broken – I'm here to stay.

And as I reflect upon that wounded bird, I only find humble and grateful words, I found a path that was once only weeds, By asking for help, I addressed my needs.

This wounded bird kept trying to fly, Getting stronger as each long day went on by, And another breakthrough gradually occurred, Faint chimes of a church began to be heard. But this was not the church of my youth, But one of the Earth that spoke the truth, I now understand the how and the why, I found a good path – I do not lie.

So welcome to Earth Church, Pull yourself up a pew, Here we try to speak Only truth to you.



This man with the broken wing trying to become whole again found himself on the fourth floor with a group of many young and a few older people with drug and alcohol dependencies of varying types. One of the requirements of rehab was attending groups for alcoholics, learning the serenity prayer and working the 12 steps. Inherent in this program was the acceptance of a higher power, something that caused me great personal angst. I was raised as a Southern Baptist and had left that faith tradition far in the past. For many, rediscovered religion was their answer to the need for a higher power. However, that was not going to work for me.

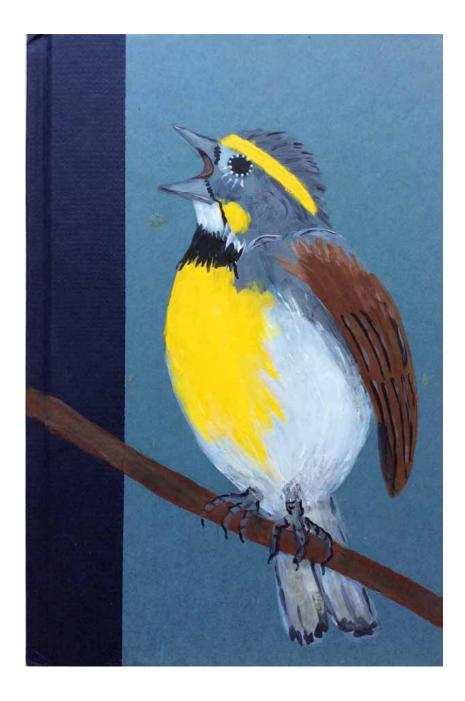
It seemed that I was stymied, foiled, stopped in my search for this new path. Yet as I searched, I found comfort in birds. The bird with the wounded wing (me) became a painter of bird sculptures in the art therapy class, taking a blank form of a songbird and gazing upon it, trying to decide what it would become, what it would be, what I would be. And as I looked through the bird book, I found the dickcissel, a bird of the prairies, a singing bird, a beautiful bird, a free and flying bird, and I decided to bring the blank form to life as a dickcissel.

the DICKCISSEL 2

The blank bird molding sat before me, Asking for paint to create identity, Much like myself – vacant and empty, Ready to transform – potential aplenty.

Transformation is a most interesting event, We both needed help from others sent, The stroke of the brush, a barrier removed, Step by step, our situations improved.

The Dickcissel was there where the book opened, It seemed a good choice – what I was hoping? A shaman emerging – is this higher power? What wonderful company for an entire hour.



A prairie bird of soft browns and some yellow, And a black bandana – what a lovely fellow, A bird that migrates through the Texas coast, Part of a river upon which to float.

This migratory river was different than me, A cracked mud ditch drained spiritually, A river whose flow was restored by the rain That fell from brushstrokes applying the stain.

Working with the mold to create a whole, A voice spoke to me strong and bold, "These birds and the Earth are a key for you, This may be a vision for you to pursue."

Sitting on the fourth floor locked away, This was my signal – this was my way, The river of birds – my spiritual connection, I could feel it coming – my resurrection.

When signals come, we must pay attention, And put all aside and simply listen, The river sings a song flowing on by, Setting you free for your soul to fly.

So welcome to Earth Church, Pull yourself up a pew, Here we help you paint A transformed you.

With the painting of this wonderful singing bird, my rehabilitation seemed more possible, more real. Never had I felt so sure of a connection, but the issue of higher power was still troubling. I was on the edge of a breakthrough – I could hear the river flowing nearby – but could not find the current that would take me.

Higher power – God? Jesus? Buddha? Mohammed? One of the more important decisions of my life, at least to my mother, was my failure to continue as a Southern Baptist. I simply refused to return to where I had been, to the place that I had left behind for many reasons that seemed good at the time and continued to feel right. Did becoming sober require capitulation – a giving up of long-held beliefs gained in a pivotal youthful moment? Must I return to the past? This higher power issue was indeed becoming a great barrier. A great impediment. And in my stubbornness, I gave this issue great power over my transformation.

And then one day I went to a meeting with a younger group of men and women – some truly still boys and girls. And as was part of my routine – part of my instruction – I listened at these meetings. And while there is a lot of repetition and self-serving statements as one finds in many human interactions, there were also golden nuggets here and there.

On this day while I was still in rehab, they had let us out to attend a meeting for a few hours, and I heard a scruffy young man speak. He was disheveled, unshaven, hard. He stood and cocked his head sideways and started talking about "this higher power stuff" – talking about how he initially hated the concept of the higher power, about how his was not about God. He then quoted the definition of higher power – "a power greater than myself" – and said he had adopted a Metro bus as his higher power because it was certainly a power greater than he, and he could not control it. And while that may sound really stupid to some, for me it was a revelation, a concept that broke the dam and let the river flow again. If this young man could have a bus as a higher power, my alternatives were unlimited. Hallelujah.

the HIGHER POWER

I'm told I must find a higher power, But all I see is an ivory tower, An edifice for priests with alabaster trim, Where two-faced people sing their hymn.

But now a young man has opened my eyes, Letting in light – burning away guise, A higher power is what I let it be, And I depart religious hegemony.

A metro bus is an interesting choice, A honking horn must be its voice, It rambles along on the city streets, It's bigger and badder than all it meets.



But what do I do with this choice of mine? Is my higher power a force or sublime? I feel I glimpsed it in the recent past, A wonderful encounter, but it did not last.

It's linked to the birds with whom I relate, We're tied together – I'm afraid it's our fate, It's wonderful to be tied to a feathered friend, I sense something imminent waiting to begin.

Thank you, young prophet from the throng, You gave good advice – you were not wrong, We should break out from the limiting frame, And refuse to be tied down by a chain.

I am in charge of who I am, I have a say, and I give a damn, To emerge as a whole, I have to fight, I feel like now I'm gonna get it right. So let the water come and flow my soul, And pull me together, make me whole, The higher power that I sought to evade, Has found a way my soul to pervade.

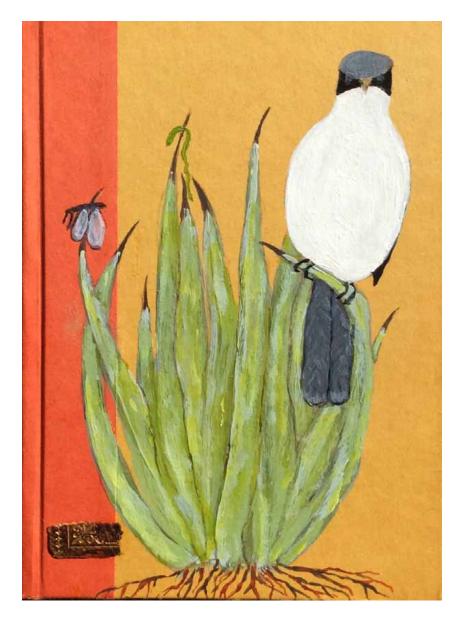
So welcome to Earth Church, Pull yourself up a pew, Pray that life's flowing river Flows right through you.

That was the beginning of Earth Church, but I really did not know it yet. I knew there was a germ of something when I was in that lonely, locked, safe space called rehab, and I kept returning to nature. Nature was my anchor, my rod and my staff. To be sure, I was fragile. I remember going on a "pass" from rehab with Garland to see a movie. It was Top Gun with Tom Cruise, and I had to leave because I could not handle the intensity of the action. The music – too loud. The action – too fast. I needed gentle. I needed nurture.

I had always been active outdoors. I grew up hunting and fishing, and some of my best times with my dad was us together in the Rio Grande Valley of South Texas, setting out goose decoys or the two of us trying to get the motor to work as the wind came up when we were fishing on Falcon Lake or driving together in the countryside, looking out over the landscape. When I spent time in Louisiana, my uncles were much the same – Uncle Bun taking me fly-fishing on Spring Creek, Uncle L.E. taking me camping in the rain on the Calcasieu River, calling out to Hercules not to cry, that Atlas was coming back. Nature was a part of me, but a part I had not paid sufficient attention to – a part I now found, a life vest in a storm.

the LOGGERHEAD SHRIKE 4

The fields flow before me, brown and ripe, It's what you imagine, an archetype, Cotton blooming in the hot, July day, The adjacent grasslands busy making hay.



The loggerhead shrike sits on the wire, Black mask clearly visible for me to admire, The so-called butcher bird searching for prey, The bugs of the field, the choice today.

The shrike and mesquite work well together, The thorn the holder of the shrike's pleasure, For tasty morsels are thereon impaled, To be later collected and inhaled. This masked bird brings back a simpler time, Of riding with my father in the dusty grime, The two of us off on an afternoon's outing, That we care for each other never doubting.

Driving down farm roads and across open fields, Seeking the adventures that this day yields, Discovering insects impaled on barbed wire, The masked shrike watching from a bit higher.

"That's a butcherbird, J-Bo" my dad said to me, "That bird is shrouded in mystery, I've never seen it impale a victim, Yet many bugs don't survive those symptoms."

So whenever I see masked butcher birds, I smile, thinking back on my dad's words, Times when he shared his view of the world, Times when philosophy he would hurl.

He talked of respect for other living things, A view that has stuck, that today rings, A view that includes an Earth for all of us A magical place that's worth some fuss.

So welcome to Earth church Pull yourself up a pew My dad's a deacon He'll gladly seat you.

When I came out of the hospital, life was a bit daunting. I had the love of my wonderful wife who stayed by me throughout. I had largely managed to go in and out of the hospital without much fanfare. My caseload as an environmental lawyer had been managed. At that time, I really had no employees; Mary Carter, my partner for many subsequent years, was only just beginning to work with me and we had no staff. This was the summer and my teaching at Rice would not resume until the fall. Work had been addressed.

But it was up to me to find a new path – to change my pattern, to grow different spots. Old haunts and old patterns were to be avoided, for there was a great sucking presence always nearby, threatening to pull me back down into the dark void. Life in these early days was an exercise in staying away from the edge, reducing the chance of relapse. And to aid those chances, there was the continuing presence of meetings – the need to be among others with a similar struggle, the need to focus on something other than wanting a drink.

But there was the continuing issue of the higher power, this niggling concern that there was a critical piece missing. And I kept coming back to the Metro bus, and the concept of something more powerful than myself. And one day I was drawn down to Galveston Bay, a place where I had some environmental law cases, a place where I fished, a place I enjoyed.

It was on the banks of Galveston Bay that the concept of higher power began to become clearer. It was here on Galveston Bay that Earth Church was born for me.

the LAUGHING GULL 5

The city is daunting, confusing me, I need to find peace and serenity, Meditation is great but alone not enough, I need relief for the going is tough.

I drive to the shore of Galveston Bay, To sit and watch the laughing gulls play, I'm drawn to the water to take a breath, I came to the water for mental health.

The bay is flat, the tide is slack, The laughing gulls loafing, laying back, The wind a light pressure on my face I feel the tension begin to erase.

No sound comes from the laughing gulls, Sitting on the pilings extending like hulls, The only remains of the piers that once claimed, Galveston Bay was a human domain.



Today there's no sense – really no clue, Of what the big storms can do to you, The battering, smashing force that attacks, And smashes down our glorified shacks.

Storms that today we name and fear, Storms with messages for the human ear, Carla, Ike and the big one in Galveston All have the power to make locals run.

Sitting with the gulls it comes to me, The bay's my higher power, my destiny, Forces reside here that I can't control And here in Earth Church I did enroll.

The bay's my higher power – I shall not want, Relieved I have ended metaphysical détente, This essence is now mine to study and discover, As my mind and body seek to recover.

So welcome to Earth Church, Pull yourself up a pew, Here nature's the power For serenity in you.

Earth Church came as a revelation. After claiming Galveston Bay as a higher power, my outlook evolved. I needed meetings less and less. I needed interaction with the bay – with birds – with nature – with the Earth – more and more. Over time, the Earth rather than the bay became my higher power, and I celebrate my higher power in Earth church. It is my fountain and my sustenance. It is my key to life and living.

But don't be mistaken. This is not the church of my parents. This is a natural open system that welcomes all – that in fact is the source of us all.

In this vein, I began to explore, to seek, to discover this wonderful place called Earth church, trying to better understand what it is, what it might become, for our future is tied into the long-term health of this higher power. I am because of the Earth. Without the Earth, I am not. So in this way, Earth Church was born.

I'm grateful for the Earth birthing us, It's the real deal, an absolute plus, I am 'cause the Earth was here for me, Without the Earth, I would not be.

Now think about that for just a minute, It's a big deal and let's not forget it, But for the Earth we would not be, That's all I know with certainty.

Given Earth's importance, I remain amazed, Why my spiritual self is not more engaged? All should consider our Earth as sacred, It's very clear – it's not complicated.

So, I consider the Earth as my church, A place of worship, a place of great worth, A place where I go and sit by the shore, And the Earth comes in through my spirit door.

By linking the Earth and the spiritual me, I'm living my life in synchrony, The physical and metaphysical both aligned, And I must prevent Earth from being maligned.

The Earth and my spirit are now united, It makes me happy – I am delighted, But what does this mean, the implications? I must dive in headfirst – no hesitations.

I now see the tree in a different way, Metaphysical change is now underway, The bees and butterflies and I are one, I think that my life has only just begun.



For I have just entered a new reality, I'm living my life linked with spirituality, My Earth Church is real and alive, And it's going to help me to survive.

So welcome to Earth Church, Pull yourself up a pew, Here we align life and spirit To restore the whole in you.



THREE Earth Church Beliefs

s I began to discover and understand the Earth as a higher power, various aspects began to emerge as central – aspects that could not be ignored – aspects that embraced and captivated me as I became more and more committed to the Earth as a higher power.

There is no doubt that Earth Church is responsible for me being here today, and for that I am grateful. But what exactly is Earth Church?

The full story of Earth Church perhaps cannot be written because much of it was perhaps not known or fully understood by me as I emerged out of the dark place where I landed. There are pieces, however, that hang together like a spiritual tapestry, and that tapestry is a banner, a declaration, a comfort. So, let's consider some of the basic concepts that are inherent in this thing called "Earth Church" as we delve a bit deeper into this thing called Earth.

1. It's about the Earth

Earth Church is about the Earth. That is where we begin. The Earth is the only planet that we know that supports life as we know it. The Earth is a home for living things; it is our source, it is our beginning. It's the place of our birth; it's a place of life.

The one thing that all humans share is a common heritage in the Earth. The Earth is fundamental to all humans. All 8 billion of us have this in common. The Earth enabled us to be born and allows us to live and breathe, to think and argue, to cry and to experience great pleasure and pain. Without the Earth, we would not be. Period.

For such a fundamental truth, it is amazing that we do not appreciate the Earth in our western spiritual thinking to any substantial degree. Most practicing Christians and Muslims give little deference or time to the Earth. For the most part, the focus of these religions is upon an afterlife that promises rewards of various types in some sort of heaven which is not on Earth. Historically, little focus has been upon the Earth, although some of the more recent theological writings offer some hope of a broader incorporation of the Earth (see chapter 7).

By contrast, Earth Church is about the here and now – the only thing we know with assuredness. Earth Church is about the Earth – the only place we know. It is about life on Earth. It is about the role of the Earth in our life. It is about the absolute requirement that the Earth must exist more or less in its current state for us to exist. Every other aspect of Earth Church originates in this basic understanding that is both profound and simple. The need for the Earth to exist more or less in its current state is a fundamental truth of our existence. Amen.

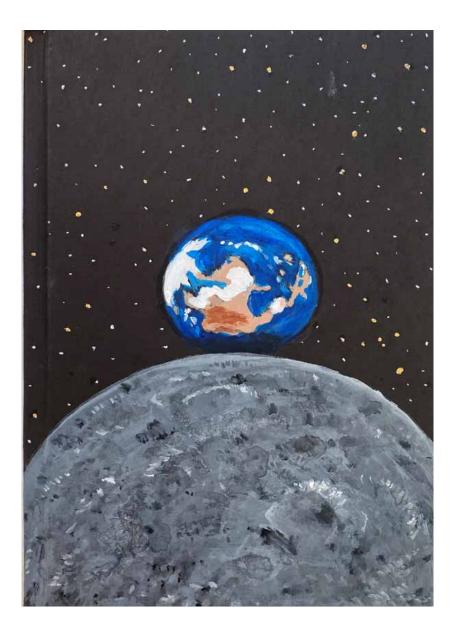
the EARTH

The Earth is beautiful seen from space, It is my home, it is my place, I think I am, therefore, I am, And because of Earth, therefore, I am.

The Earth is my church, and here I pray, It is my anchor – don't take it away, It is mine by right of inheritance, I must protect it from happenstance.

Buckminster Fuller said Earth is a spaceship, We must keep it going – we're on a long trip, We must learn to keep all systems working, We all have a duty – there'll be no shirking.

Earth-keeping's a calling of this religion, But such a call could result in a collision, Between making jobs in the name of economy, And fighting for life in the name of ecology.



That conflict is false, I hereby proclaim, Economy and ecology should be one and the same, But we must rethink and recalibrate, We must act swiftly and not hesitate.

This rhyme is a call to Earth devotees, Who amongst you is willing to change their ways? Will you act to implement this new thinking? Will you send a message without blinking?

Implementing this thinking requires force of will, We all have a duty that we must fulfill, Our practices must change from a century ago, It's gonna be hard, but old ways have to go.

The Earth is our voyager, our spacecraft, our home, And we can't make this trip by ourselves, alone, We must bring the whole of the Earth along, We must live and think in practice and song.

So rise past the moon my beautiful Earth, And thanks for hosting me in this universe, Earth Church is here to celebrate your existence, And to pledge allegiance to your blue brilliance.

And welcome to Earth Church, Pull yourself up a pew, Here we honor our spaceship, And protect it for you.

2. Being

A key aspect of the Earth and its church is life, that magical state of being. Now consider those words for a minute – a magical state of being. I am, therefore I am means that I be. And all things that live also be. We are collectively beings. Our existence is a state of being. We be of the Earth. We are Earth beings.

So what exactly is a being? Humans have for a long time thought solely in terms of human beings, meaning to most that only humans be. But at Earth Church, we take a different view of being. Here on Earth, the issue is life – living things, living beings. Consciousness of the human kind is not the defining difference between beings and non-beings. Instead, life is the defining issue in a being – being alive – breathing, bleeding, flying, swimming, reproducing, responding chemically to another living thing, communicating in ways not known to humans.

The Earth is a planet of beings, a planet of life, a planet of trees and grasses that grow and reproduce and communicate, a planet of micro-

organisms that scurry about in the soil, conducting commerce within the soil. Being alive is what defines a being, and one might even look to Earth itself as a breathing, respiring organism that actually lives in a profound, perhaps not fully understood, way.

Being is defined as the state of existence. To live is to be. But do we continue to be upon death – now that is THE question – one currently beyond proof, but clues exist. We see life come and then come again – beings be again and again, be anew. When we remove consciousness as a criterion of being, well – the potential is quite large. So as we explore Earth Church, remember being as a centerpiece of the Earth, of you, of me, of we, and all other things that "be."

BEING

I am a cicada sitting high in the tree, As alive today as I will ever be, I'm shaking my tymbal and making my song, Enjoying my time though it be not long.

I am a bee pollinating a flower, Harvesting from anthers hour after hour, Gathering pollen for the stigma over there, Then home to the hive – floating on air.

I am a vulture soaring up on high, Looking for food from a clear blue sky, My nose is searching for flesh to recycle, Flying up here with Archangel Michael.

I am a tadpole swimming in the pond, Brought to this Earth by the fairy's wand, I sit on the bottom and bask in the sun, This being-alive stuff is really great fun.



I am a tree with strong roots interconnected, Talking to my neighbors – not disconnected, Breathing CO2 and blowing out O2, My being is good for both me and you.

I'm a white shrimp maturing in the marsh, Hiding from predators that can be very harsh, Preparing to move with the phase of the moon, I love being here, but my time here ends soon.

I'm a parrot-headed human who loves Jimmy Buffet, Acting all crazy like a television Muppet, But I have an important point to make, This being-alive stuff makes my world shake. "Being is what all life has in common, It's a key understanding" I was told by the Brahmin, "It's more than just knowing about one's own life, Things are linked in the now and the afterlife."

Being is magical – it's a shared characteristic, It's a key to the puzzle of thinking holistic, It's the common thread that binds the Earth, Life's revolving door of death and rebirth.

So welcome to Earth Church, Pull yourself up a pew, Say a prayer that being Will awaken in you

3. Awakening to Life

It is one thing to intellectually conceive of the Earth as the source – to conceive of living things "being" – and it is another to experience life and living. My understanding of life and living was like an explosion, something akin to not being able to taste and then having a full sense of taste, or hearing or seeing after being without – a literal explosion into my psyche of appreciation of life and other living things.

For me, experiencing nature on the Texas coast was a transcendent experience, one that continued to move me along a continuum of lifechanging realizations and experiences. Today the smell of the bay and the marsh evokes memories of me connecting with the daily rhythms of life being lived – rhythms that I experienced from my kayak paddling deeper and deeper into a form of understanding that I had never before experienced, and it changed me.

Once my eyes were open to life and living, the Earth around me changed. Today when I look out into our garden, I perceive the flowers, the trees, the bees, the butterflies, the chattering blue jays and the visiting night heron as living things with whom I share the Earth. That appreciation – that connection that I call connectuality – is a very different psychological perspective than from earlier in my life. Being connected with life and other living things is a gateway to a different appreciation of Earth, and Earth

Church is about this appreciation and the practice of it – the practice and enjoyment of connectuality and all that goes with it.

Earth Church transformed me from one who crosses a landscape into one that is integrated into that landscape, connected to it and all of those elements that comprise it. I no longer perceive myself as a being apart but rather one submerged deep within life and living things. This changed perception was transformational, and I have not been the same since I adopted the bay and subsequently the Earth as a higher power.

the WHITE IBIS

In the marsh On the West End of Galveston Island In a remote cove in my kayak.

The tide is high, The Spartina grass green-gold, The sky clear blue.

As I paddle down a marsh channel, A white shrimp hops out of the water. Beside me, a school of finger mullet skitters into the marsh-grass stalks, Causing a blue crab to shuffle aside, Orange claws pointed up, Jagged daggers warning me to stay away.

The white ibis raises her head From the grassy edge of the marsh pond, Making eye contact with me, Determining I am no threat and returning To ramming her scythe-like beak Into the soft mud deposited by rainwater, Runoff of storms long past.



I hear the whoosh and then see The flight of blue-wing teal flaring up, Startled by my lime green boat, Then darting back down, Setting their wings, settling-in to feed.

Kayak thoughts fly through my head. I'm paddling within a living system, Experiencing other living things.

This is life. I'm perceiving it – I'm getting it in every cell of my body. Primal. Forceful. Clear. The ibis lifts up her head, The reddish orange bill rising from the Green-gold marsh grass, Eyes smiling knowingly at me, Asking what took me so long.

4. Connectuality

Once the concepts of life and being and experiencing a living system became established, I began to pay much more attention to connections – the threads that bind us together – the strings that create pathways, the strings that pervade life and living. I think of these connections a bit like a spider's webs, sometimes hard to see unless the sun angle is right, perhaps needing a bit of dew to reveal the fabric. For what is the Earth if not a magical web of connections?

Out of this interest in connections came the concept of connectuality – the state of being connected. Connectuality is not actually found in the dictionary. It is a created word, dreamed up as the right word to express something of which I had not previously been aware. And make no mistake – awareness is the key. As the connections merge into your consciousness, the Earth changes. It becomes different. It comes alive for you.

To some extent, connectuality defines the functionality of the planet which is comprised of ecosystems – various assemblages of plants and animals and climate and soil that function as a cohesive whole – a connected whole – a whole that is balanced – a whole that has defined boundaries that are shared with similar systems that are slightly or greatly different because something fundamental has changed. The soil, the water system, the underlying geologic foundation are differences that allow the evolution of different systems based upon myriad connections. That is how the Earth functions. That is how it lives.

We humans are within that system, related to and amongst every other living thing. We are not above it. We are in it, connected to the web within. I can remember when the concept of connectuality became real to me, when it gained meaning. I was in my office looking at three grackles. Well – why don't I just tell the story in a poem.

the GREAT-TAILED GRACKLE

Outside my office window is a sight to see Three male grackles with iridescent glee, Green-black-purple feathers all puffed out, Tails spread, heads up, prancing about.

They're vying for the attention of the lady nearby, Watching them prance – there'll be no tie, They are serious suitors full of inflamed ardor, Trying to impress, working to win her.

The blue morning sky provides a background, For the green pecan leaves that spread around, Eating up carbon in the morning the sun, The photosynthetic magic just begun.

I walk outside and feel the sun's rays, Affirming I'm alive and not in a daze, Reminding me I'm among living things, And connected to all as if by strings.

We argue about whether created by God, Or if the Big Bang formed this pod, And miss the point of what we are, Connected to beings near and far.

The grackles fly up to the sweet gum tree, And continue their courting right above me, Moving with agility from limb to limb, Now and then yodeling the grackle hymn.

Peace gently enters the stoop of my soul, Making me calm, making me whole, Peace that comes from a real connection To a purple-black bird wanting affection.



The grackle and I are much the same, We are living life – that's the game, We are both alive and feel emotion, This living stuff is a powerful potion. *So welcome to Earth church, Pull yourself up a pew, Let the grackle in To connect with you.*

5. Balance

Balance is a hard topic in life, in politics, in relationships. It is a process of give and take, of yin and yang. Mental balance is to the psyche what yoga is to the physical – hard, yet with great worth achieved from the effort. But then again, yoga is mental as well.

Balance is fundamental, yet oftentimes not valued. We often are attracted to the edges, to the extremes. We often hold those high who are the least balanced, those that tip the scales totally one way rather than toward balance. For much of the middle portion of my life, I lived at the edge, and I learned much from that point of view. That knowledge eventually led to the Earth as my higher power which has transformed my view of life, and balance was at the core of this change within me.

Balance also is an essential element of the Earth's success. The Earth is patchwork quilt of ecosystems, and ecology is a great topic, one that was not really well understood until Aldo Leopold wrote *A Sand County Almanac* in the late 1940s, Rachel Carson wrote *Silent Spring* in the early '60s and then Eugene Odom wrote *Principles of Ecology* which I studied when I came to Rice to get a Master's in Environmental Science. Ultimately, ecology – the basic science of Earth Systems – is about balance, about the ability of a community of plants and animals to withstand drought and floods, about certain plants and animals performing certain functions while others perform different functions, all working within the same space. Ecology is about community, about the pieces working together for the whole.

Balance in humans requires restraint, and restraint is fueled by gratitude and humility. The celebration of ego comes with a price to society, to the Earth. One of the quests of Earth Church is to find satisfaction in balance, in cooperation, rather than in dominance, and that will be a continuing battle.

BALANCE

What's worth more, pelican or tree? Who is better – you or me? Who's more important – doctor or lawyer? Where do I fall in the pecking order?



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What is better – bear or flower? Do you or I have more power? You have to pick – is it otter or snake? How much money do you make?

What is a winner and what is a loser? Better a pacifist or a bruiser? Are you vegan or do you prefer meat? Are you the same to all you greet?

Balance is essential to the plan of the Earth, All life has value, all life has worth, Ecology is built around weathering extremes, One species' problem is another's dreams.

We should strive for balance on many levels, And the pathway is obstructed by various devils, We must harmonize ecology and economy, And implement concepts of social equality.

Humans seem obsessed with the other guy, Who they are – what they can buy, We never ever seem to have enough, Particularly if you have more stuff.

Balance is ultimately within, not without, It must be developed, of that have no doubt, Humility and gratitude are essential to start, And good intentions straight from the heart.

Earth Church strives to make room for all, No critter left behind, none out in the hall, We value diversity, we like our differences, We believe in equity, making no inferences.

So welcome to Earth Church, Pull yourself up a pew, Here balance and equity Become natural to you.

6. Climate Change

Unfortunately, the Earth is out of balance right now. Although humans have been changing the Earth in many ways for centuries, until the 20th century we lacked the ability to transform the Earth in ways that challenged its ability to continue to function to support living things. That situation unfortunately has changed.

As a child growing up in the 1950s, we lived with the reality of nuclear annihilation. I can remember the drill of crawling under my desk and placing my hands behind my neck to stave off radiation. I remember the later realization that we could destroy life as we know it on the Earth with our weapons of war. More recently, however, we have been confronted with proof that our current economic model is changing the climate of the Earth. If you consider the Earth a spaceship, we are changing the basic structure of the device that is carrying us through space and time.

It is much more difficult to address change caused by economy than change caused by methods of warfare. It is simply difficult to conceive that our way of life could be a fundamental threat to ourselves and other living things, but it has been, is and will continue to be unless we change it.

The fact that our climate is changing clearly places before us the issue of making our own changes – changes necessary to keep the current climate situation from getting worse, changes in our economic structure, changes in our personal belief structure. This is where Earth Church comes in. The spiritual is an essential element of finding the strength to change, and if we do not value the Earth and hold it sacred in some form or another, we will not succeed in making these needed changes.

CLIMATE CHANGE

The temperature's rising – storms are forming, We're in the midst of global warming, What have we done to the atmosphere? How did this happen? How'd we get here?

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CO2 and methane and other greenhouse gases, Build up in the atmosphere where sunlight passes, Hitting the Earth – reflecting back into space, Carbon dioxide makes a greenhouse place.



Since 1900 our temperature's been rising, Up one degree centigrade – I'm not lying, And that temperature will go way on up, If we don't control our emissions blow-up.

Concentration going up – a chemical reshape, All reflected heat not allowed to escape, If we don't reduce these greenhouse gases, This warming will kick our collective asses.

When the atmosphere heats up, so does the sea, Increasing the fuel for hurricane intensity, More heat, more fuel and stronger circulation, Inexorably increasing the threat to habitation.

And then there's the problem of the ice, For as it melts, we'll pay the price, If Greenland and Antarctica have ice-melt spasms, It will plunge our coastlines into flooding chasms.

And think of the currents around the Earth, The jet stream is one that has great worth, These currents get changed by temperature differences, And then they wobble causing bad occurrences.

The threats are real but so are solutions, They involve evolution and not revolution, There is no need for ill will or histrionics, We can manage this change with new economics.

At Earth Church we want to stop global warming, And protect the habitat that it is harming, We are hurting the source of our very being, Let's stop this nonsense and get on with winning.

So welcome to Earth Church, Pull yourself up a pew, Here we fight global warming, And will win for you.

7. Enough

Along with change, consider the concept of enough – the hardest word in English or any other language for that matter. Do you have enough money? Do you have enough land? Do you have enough houses? Do you have enough things?

On the other hand, do you have enough food? Do you have enough water? Do you have enough of the essentials that are basic to life?

One of the most interesting pieces of information that I have encountered in studying our economy was a quote from a Wall Streeter who in describing the Great Depression said "We ran out of consumers." Since that time, western and perhaps global economic theory has been focused on creating and maintaining consumers, and part of that effort is to continually attempt to convince consumers that they do not have "enough." Balance and the health of the Earth now require that we discover the concept of enough.

We have a social structure that is based on consumption. We revel in it. We find personal value in what we can buy, and we lose sight of the plight of others in the process. Our history is full of tales of those who amass power and wealth. Some might argue it is an element of our basic genetic structure, a view that I challenge.

So much of what we do and think is based upon the stories that we inherit, stories that we hear. We need new stories – stories that celebrate balance and help us find our way to enough. These are stories of personal satisfaction coming from something higher than self, and for me, the Earth is that stimulus, that prod, that point.

This is not to say that I have taken up a vow of poverty or that such is required or even desirable. Enough simply means that accumulating things as a way of life should be questioned. If we purchase things, we should ask: "Why am I buying this"? What is the impact of that product on the Earth? Will buying this minimize disruptive impacts to the Earth? Are we thinking before we buy, before we consume?

Change comes hard, and we are at a point where if we are to protect the Earth, we must change.

the CURLEW

The curlew, the caracara, and the shrimp Live within their limits, And watch with dismay another day Of consumption by human dimwits.

What can I say – what can I do – To change our way of living? To alter ultimately our self-view Our basis of believing?

The curlew's beak beckons me To pick up the heavy load, To keep the quest and try to see Where the prairie grasses mark the road.



I search for ways to convince my type That a concept exists called enough, To be content with a fair amount, But it's gonna be pretty tough.

I tell myself again and again To think about my needs, About what it is I think I want, And what desire it feeds.

Does it give me food and cover? Or does it address my pain? Or is it merely ornamental, A statement that I am vain? It's not that I cease to participate In a normal healthy life, It's just that I see in a different way, And cut out the excess with my knife.

I use enough, I have enough And for that I am grateful. I do not need to further expand I am content with what I am.

I beckon my curve-billed wading friend To help me in this quest, So, I can say on the day I die I damn sure tried my best.

So welcome to Earth Church Pull yourself up a pew Say a prayer that enough Becomes known to you.

8. Honesty

Among the key aspects of Earth Church is honesty. Truth is important. Facts are important. Science is important. Knowledge is important. Tell me the truth, and we will be okay.

I find it interesting that this is something that needs to be said, yet we live in a time when established facts are disputed, when things that you saw and experienced are spun in a way that distorts and misrepresents the truth of the matter. Somehow, we have gotten way off track. We seem to believe that if we represent something in a particular way, it will be that way.

In many respects, this distortion may be in response to the need to change. No issue defines this search for truth – this loss of truth – more than climate change. The science has been clear for decades, yet the denial persisted. In some circles, our changing climate is still not accepted, although most of the major emitters are now reconciled to the fact that they can no longer deny that which is evident, obvious, happening. When the stakes of

an issue are incredibly high, truth seems more distant, and facts become belief structures.

One of my favorite climate scientists is Dr. Katherine Hayhoe who has been known to start presentations by saying she does not believe in climate change. As she continues, she points out that climate change is a fact, not a belief like her Christian faith. It is a very elegant and startling way to be confronted with the issue of fact and science and honesty.

Climate change is not the only issue where we have problems finding truth. We often deny our personal problems such as alcohol as I can attest. These days I value truth. I want to know the truth of whatever situation I am addressing. I don't want to see a rosy picture when it is a bit darker. I want to see the darkness so I know where to search for the light, and when to be grateful. Such is the nature of truth – such is the nature of life – such is the nature of Earth Church.

the CHESTNUT-SIDED WARBLER

On South Padre Island during the migration In the Spring of 2018, it's a real celebration. The island's full of all types of warblers, There's wonderful diversity – many travelers.

These warblers often look one like the other, Like multiple children from the same mother, But then my eyes found a chestnut slash, As if the breast had a chestnut moustache.

The chestnut side inspired some deep thinking About the ability to believe what you're seeing, For the bird's name literally jumps off its breast, Clearly distinguishing this warbler from the rest.

Now honesty and integrity are often found missing In forked-tongued humans who seem to be hissing Words that are said but with no conviction – It seems that for many lying's an addiction. As I've gotten older I value truth To a much greater extent than in my youth, It's the center of whom I hope to be, It's a key aspect of my spirituality.

As I watch this virus tragedy unfold, I seek the truth and urge leaders to be bold, Sycophants abound that sing the false song, And many of us just go right along.



Returning to services of the Church of the Earth, I reach out and applaud the warbler with worth, For the chestnut slash gave my faith a boost, And my internal anxiety has been reduced.

It's nice when nature sends me a sign That affirms my belief in a grand design Of a church that connects me in ways mystical Beyond my training in ways Biblical.

So welcome to Earth Church, Pull yourself up a pew, Pray that nature sends a message That comforts you.

9. Love Rather Than Hate

There is a warmth that comes from my relationship with the Earth, a warmth based in love, in affection, in gratitude, in humility. Now make no mistake. I love my wife, and her love for me was as instrumental as any Earth connection in helping me find my way. But there is a different type of love that connects me to other living things, like a current or a stream, something basic, something primal and it's wonderful.

Over the decades since his death, I have come to appreciate John Lennon more and more. His eternal gift, apart from his wonderful songs, was his continuing insistence on the power of love. With love, all else comes. Without is empty. With is the defining aspect of human existence. As he once said, "Love is all you need."

This concept of love is in direct contrast to hate which seems to be pervasive in today's society. Hate destroys those who hate as well as those who are the subject of the hate. Hatred works against life energy, which is positive, which is about keeping things in existence, alive. Hatred comes from the dark places of envy, of jealousy, of competition for things and possessions.

Hatred has become systemic in the U.S. political process. It is a defining characteristic of a we-versus-them society rather than a society where we all rise and fall together, one where we function like the ecological systems of the Earth, and it cannot be based on hate. Hatred is a destructive force. Love is an enabling force. And for the challenges of today and tomorrow, we need love.

the RED PASSION FLOWER

I travel with passion through space and time, I'm living a journey that is so sublime, Enjoying and protecting that not destroyed, Passion guides me as hate I avoid.



My relationship with the Earth is based in love, Passion for my birds and the stars up above, Earth Church celebrates and holds life dear, The role of love here is crystal clear.

There's good in the world – of that be sure, I wish it were enough to provide a cure, Young folks volunteering and saving sea turtles, Love compelling action to overcome hurdles.

Passion can be both yin and yang, Releasing our love – revealing the fang, Let's banish hate – I don't need rancor, I have the Earth – it's my life's anchor.

Hate must be outed from the highest rafter, No reward to be claimed in the hereafter For those who screw the Earth and its people, Even though attending a church with a steeple.

The time has come to shout out bad faith, Don't abet the crime by enabling hate, No reason exists for good people to get screwed No need for a game rigged for most to lose.

I come back to Earth Church – it's based on love, My passion led me to a treasure trove, Passion I channel to light my own way, It's a signal of love – it's a beacon today,

So welcome to Earth Church, Pull yourself up a pew, Here love is our passion, And we purge hate out too.

10. Place

The concept of ecosystem and love for other living things leads to the concept of place. Place is where you are in time and space. It is your immediate surrounding. And my place is the Texas coast most of the time and the Texas Hill country the other part of the time. And both are wonderful.

Place is about knowing and appreciating your surroundings. It is about understanding how the various seasons change your surroundings, bringing in new plants and animals, ushering others out. Place is about walking outside at your home and recognizing the red bird as the cardinal, the tree as a live oak that blossoms and sheds in the spring, the brownish bird with the spotted breast as the wood thrush moving through on migration. Place is about understanding nature, understanding the Earth, in the place where you live and breathe.

The more we understand and appreciate place, the more we will care about place, and caring for place will lead to protection of place, for we will act to protect what we know and care for. Here on the Texas coast, many of us have spent a lot of time and effort protecting these sanctuaries of Earth Church from destruction by various human devices, and the same is true in the Hill Country and all other areas where humans live.

Until our values and ethics change, until our economic system moves to a circular economy more in tune with our Earth cycles, humans will be in continuing conflict with the Earth systems needed to support humans and other life. It is this self-destructive, Earth-destructive tendency that has to change, and the concept of place is a key thought to take us down that road.

the BLUE GROSBEAK

On Galveston Island the flowers grow On a high oak motte where gulf winds blow, A place the natives once called home, A place where it's nice to be all alone.

And one spring day I sat and watched As a show unfolded at no cost, For within the matrix of pinks and yellows Were a happy bunch of bright blue fellows.

They popped up and down on the sandy soil Searching for seeds, all work and toil, As pretty a painting as you'll ever see, A wonderful moment of shared legacy.



The blue grosbeak sharing time and space, Here on the coast, my special place, That comes alive with the spring migration, A movement continued by each generation.

The birds in the spring flow like a river, And for me great pleasure they always deliver, Moving through my place on Earth twice a year, A wonderful event that I always cheer.

What a wonderful thing, to be a part, Of something akin to Noah's ark, But rather than loading and floating the zoo, This flying ark brings the birds to you. Some will stay but most will continue, Going north or south to another venue, To Lake Erie, Canada, Costa Rica or Brazil, They have a life mission to fulfill.

This river was formed from the need to survive, And within its flow the grosbeaks thrive, A wonderful river not known to most humans, A great example of Earth-wise solutions.

My place lies within this magical river That flows with life energy that it delivers To a deep eddy pool within my soul, A peaceful place that makes me whole.

So welcome to Earth Church, Pick a pew on the river, And enjoy your place, It has peace to deliver.

11. Community

Along with balance, love and connectuality comes the concept of community. Ecosystems are about diverse members working together, plants and animals, hydrology and geology coming together. One species cannot survive alone. There needs to be many to create a whole.

Similarly, within a species, there is not just one individual, but rather groups of individuals working for the common good. Bees working for the good of the hive is a prime example of community, of organization for the common good. But they are not alone. Birds flock together, keeping watch, finding food, working for the good of the flock. Animals graze together.

Now, predators can be a bit different. There is certainly more aloofness among predators than amongst prey, although wolves and coyotes hunt as a pack. The human members of Earth church are apex predators who have the ability to wipe out the entirety of the Earth, and we have the intelligence to find ways to restrain ourselves yet meet our needs if we can find the will. The human community can work for the good of the Earth or it can contribute to the destruction of the Earth. It is that simple. It is that clear. We not only have to be balanced as individuals or define enough as individuals, but we must attain those goals collectively, and that is not easy. In fact, to define community in the context of the principles of Earth Church may be the most difficult task of all, yet perhaps the most essential.

Difficult yes, but impossible? Absolutely not. The answer lies in our commitment to the Earth. If our ultimate goal is to protect our source, we will find a way, and this path to protect our source the Earth must be a communal one.

the CEDAR WAXWING 2

The sound comes from above the oaks, A soft yet pervasive whistling, A signal that comes from the Cedar Waxwings, They were here, but were you listening?

I search the treetops and then I see, The group of thirty or so small birds, Flying, landing and then feeding together, All looking alike, what a group of nerds.

The waxwing community attacks the berries, Each bird with a distinctive black eye mask, Signaling membership in this cohesive group – All working together to achieve the task.

A group where members look after each other – Warning of predators, helping find food, Working together to meet their needs, All looking out for the common good.

I see a group working for all its members, Finding safety and food within the oaks, Unlike we humans who expose our weak, Working for one rather than for all folks.



And as I see the cedar waxwings rise, And move back north together, I smile and think we humans need To talk about more than today's weather.

We need to get serious about those unprotected – About those uprooted by this virus disaster, Who also get nailed when our annual flood comes, They need our help – we need to move faster.

It's not un-American to help out each other, It's not un-Christian to help your brother, I don't know why we can't have a vision That includes us caring for one another.

So, I look to the waxwings flying away, And wish them well on their trip today, And thank them all for giving us a view, Of a system that's not about good for the few.

So welcome to Earth Church, Pull yourself up a pew, Here we work together For both me and you.

12. Gratitude

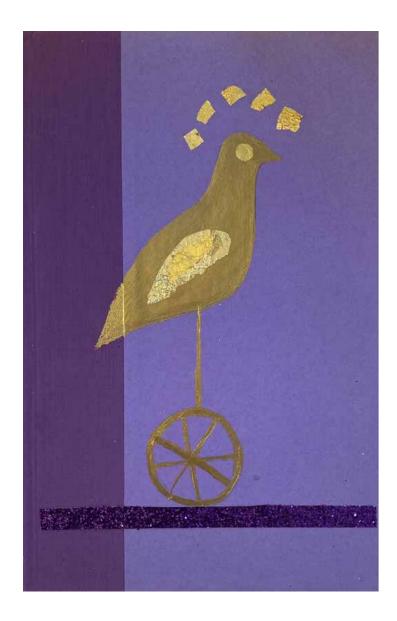
Gratitude is another foundation of Earth Church. Every day I try to remember to be thankful that I am here on Earth, alive, living life with other living things. I am appreciative of my relationship with Garland. I think about and enjoy my work. I like my "place." And for all these things, I am grateful.

Being conscious about gratitude becomes a gift. It fits with love. It fits with balance. It fits with living life. It is a core value of Earth church. We all have things to be grateful about. The key is finding them, digging them up and placing them before you and simply marveling at them. That is the kind of gratitude I'm talking about here. Not a pat-on-the-back grateful, but an embrace-that-pulls-you-in-and-surrounds-you type of gratitude. Farreaching. Powerful. Liberating.

ROLLING ALONG

I vary between the future and the now, I want to stay centered but it's not clear how, The path up ahead is dark and unclear, What's going to happen in the coming new year?

When the clouds darken and won't let me be, And it seems everyone wants a piece of me, When the birds are quiet, and there's no company, It's easy to curl up and embrace misery.



This is when it's important to have some faith That this misery is passing and can be erased, But it's more than just pumping up yourself, It's more than pulling self-help off the shelf.

First of all, it's about living one day at a time, It's a bit of a trick but oh so sublime, One can worry and fret about what is coming, And forget to enjoy the life you are living.

And next it's about focusing on gratitude, It's a proven way to lift a dark mood, You're here and still have a chance to survive, You're a honey bee still alive in the hive.

And now you are ready to take a walk, And maybe you'll see a passing hawk, Stir up your body – rack up the miles, Grateful that you are now mouthing smiles.

Ultimately it is all about your attitude, You don't have to be gruff or even rude, You have choice in how you respond to life, You have choice in how you respond to strife.

Gratitude keeps me rolling along, Life has a rhythm that you can prolong, With these easy steps a bad day will pass, And you might find a path to save your ass.

So welcome to Earth Church, Pull yourself up a pew, Here we benefit from grateful, And you might too.

You have now been introduced to Earth Church. So come on inside.



FOUR

The Ceremony of Earth Church

t is an absolute pleasure to attend Earth Church. You can join services any day at any time, but some venues are more dramatic than others. Earth Church is a state of mind achieved by being grateful for life, for living things, for connectuality, for being. And while there is no specific requirement for a service, one might imagine a combination of elements that will constitute an Earth Church service.

To start with, an Earth Church participant might mark their spot – their place – with the prayer flags of Earth church, borrowing from the Tibetan tradition that is more about relationships with the universe, with travelers through your space in your time. But rather than the traditional prayer flag colors, the flags of Earth church have added additional colors. Our prayer flags are pink, blue, red, green, yellow, white and orange, celebrating the colors of a flowering ecosystem, celebrating the Earth.

Prayer flags are interesting. Historically, prayer flags were used to transmit peace, compassion, strength, and wisdom. They are intended to benefit all, rather than any one person. They are statements of gratitude for being and extend good will to all. So, to begin our ceremony, imagine a set of Earth Church prayer flags hanging somewhere important to you and allow your and our good will to be distributed to the universe.

the PRAYER FLAGS of EARTH CHURCH

Prayer flags hanging are special to me, A message shouted out to eternity, The flags not really prayers to any God, But a statement I'm humble, that I'm awed.

Prayer flags are about life and sending good will, They're about compassion and combatting against ill, Prayer flags are intended to benefit all, They've been known to fly from mountains tall.

Prayers may be written on individual flags, Dispersed by the wind – individual tags, With the goal of reaching to the universe, Wonderful sentiments unleashed to disperse.

So, behold Earth Church's flags of prayer, Let's fly the colors – no line should be bare, Pink and blue followed by red and green, And yellow, white and orange complete the string.

The prayer flags of Earth Church are about being, About living life, about really perceiving, That we all are voyagers on the same spaceship, That we must keep it going – we cannot slip.

I hang my prayer flags from the balcony, And focus to summon powerful alchemy, I'll grind my powders and say special words, I'll pray to mammals, I'll sing to the birds.

I close my eyes and hum from the soul, I try to be one with the coherent whole, My mind is released and flies with the flags, And my soul's right there – it never lags.

The flags are about the Earth and its merit, About the bounty which is ours to inherit And when I come again to this planet of being, I'll be flying Earth Church colors, I'm foreseeing.

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So welcome to Earth Church, Prayer flags mark your pew, Here you'll become one with the universe, And we'll travel there with you.



The actual ceremony can occur anywhere at any time. Earth Church is about place – your place in the Earth system. When travel is limited, it can be just outside your door where you encounter the plants of your garden, the trees and shrubs of your yards, the birds that live and move through your neighborhood. Much of the virus vigil was devoted to revealing – to understanding – to exploring these nooks and crannies adjacent to us all.

However, there are truly special places that are perfect for an Earth Church ceremony – unique spaces that reveal the Earth in wonderful, special ways. Although all aspects of the Earth are part of the church, some places just bring the concepts of Earth church forward in a special way. I prefer to attend Earth church in my kayak, paddling into a living system full of living things.

This is how I first encountered Earth church, in my kayak. Lifting my paddle to erase the thoughts of a tough day, reaching back down into the water filled with shrimp and finger mullet and pushing myself forward,

easing along a bank of marsh grass, greeting the ibis and the great blue heron, the clapper rail and the boat-tailed grackle and the marsh wren, all living beings, all connected to me, but I usually begin my kayaking with an encounter with the willet.

the WILLET 2

I launch my kayak and paddle away, Heading out into Christmas Bay, The sun emerging from behind the Gulf, The light it produces just enough.

My kayak and I upon the water glide, It's all me-power for there is no tide, The glass-like water underlain by seagrass, I love that I'm moving without needing gas.

Coming back to the bay after being away, I can feel my brain-gears getting underway, I'm thinking of life, of beginnings, of origins, Of whereof we came and some such things,

I can see the milky way fading away, And I think of why there is night and day, And about the big bang that set in motion Events leading to me feeling emotion.

I'm excited to behold what that bang enabled, Culminating with life over geologic ages, From the single cell to organisms that can row, To evolving the birds I love getting to know.

The first bird today is the wonderful willet, The ubiquitous greeter, an engaging spirit, The ever-present, incessant, gray-brown wader, That always treats me as an invader.



It spreads its wings showing flashy white patches, There's no doubt it thinks that I am trespassing, Talking and fussing and sending me on, My it's nice to return to the place I call home.

I float on the water just enjoying being back, Watching the willet in peace from my kayak, Musing on the universe unfolding before me, Enjoying eternity within infinity.

So welcome to Earth Church, Pull yourself up a pew, Pray the universe reveals Itself to you.

In my kayak, I tune my senses to my surroundings. I breathe in the organic smell of the marsh. I taste the salt of the drips from my paddle. I feel the light breeze coming in from the Gulf just over the horizon from which the sun has emerged, filling the day with light.

I paddle across the shallow bay and scatter fish of various sorts before me – fish revealed only by the movement of the water, a ripple going against the wind, a splash as a startled mullet hurries out of the way of the intruder, the hundreds of small baitfish scattering to the side, the sea turtle watching from a distance.

It is calm today and I pull up to an oyster reef near the marsh and wait, listening. I am now in my pew. Services have begun.

the AMERICAN OYSTERCATCHER

The water is asleep. The tide has not yet begun To move through the pass To fill the bay.

The birds loll complacently On low exposed sand flats, Waiting, ever waiting, As am I in my kayak, Watching for the movement, Waiting for the moment.

The reef is above the water surface, The oysters grey-black and shiny, A squirt of liquid flying skyward, Proof of life within the shells.

A pair of oystercatchers sit together, Orange beaks like neon lights In the bright morning sunlight, Waiting, patiently waiting, For the tide that will open The shell that holds the meal.



And then it happens. Today's service has begun. A bell has rung that I Cannot hear.

Two snowy egrets glide before me, Extending black legs with yellow boots To claim their fishing spot on the shells. A great egret joins the reef fishers, Followed by two fussing willets, All coming to fish in pools Within the oyster lattice, Pools slowly, ever so slowly, Being filled.

Well after they do, I perceive it, The changing water line, The motion of the tidal current That the birds perceived In ways beyond me.

Humility and gratitude surround me, For my church never fails To help me find my center, That point where hubris is submerged, Where ego is subjugated, Where connection is established To this place where I become whole again.

There is a choir in the church of the Earth, the songs of the birds. Birdsong is a gift, a wonder, a reminder that we are not alone in our ability to sing. In town there is the mockingbird that sings from the highest branch, mimicking others or making up its own songs, but it matters not, for there is joy in the song. There is the cry of the blue jay, the chirp of the robin and the shriek of the kite hunting cicadas in the treetops.

In the Texas Hill Country, there are several members of this chorale society. The chickadee and the titmouse are ever-present, offering their chitter chatter that becomes the background. And then the cardinal comes in, a fine soloist that is echoed by another further away, only to be supplanted by the Bewicks wren that sings a song most beautiful, followed by the low tones of the yellow billed cuckoo advising that the clouds from the coast will bring rain.

On the coast, the sounds are different. The wading birds grunt and groan, and laughing gulls make their raucous cry. Many are silent like the terns and the pelicans sailing by – the only sound made by wind moving through their wings as they search to meet their daily needs. And then comes a most beautiful sound from the fresher part of the marsh, just over the embankment, a sound of pure joy, for Brother Redwing has stepped forward to kick our celebration into high gear.

the RED-WINGED BLACKBIRD

There is a choir In the church of the Earth, Led by Brother Redwing Who stands before us all, Singing glory to the sun.

Brother Redwing sings not Of the devil or evil But rather a song of celebration, A song of joy of another day Of life on Earth.

Like the old Baptist hymn Called "Dwelling in Beulah Land," Brother Redwing is feasting On the manna from a bountiful supply, Manna from the wetland that provides Food, water, shelter and cover.

Brother Redwing sings also of stewardship, Of the need for balance, Of the quest for limits, Of the need for all living things To adopt an ethic of life, A way for us all to live together.

At the benediction, Brother Redwing Sings of peace, of harmony, of salvation That will be yours If you dip your head Into a wetland you helped preserve And let the waters make you whole.



And then comes the sermon, led by the High Priest of Earth Church, the black vulture. Now why, you ask, would a vulture be the leader of Earth Church? And the answer is simple; the vulture does the important work of recycling the waste of the Earth system, transforming it, removing it, allowing it to be put back into mineral and chemical circulation, closing the cycle on the Earth's circular economy. The black vulture is an Earth superhero, and we should take note. There is wisdom in nature. This is a system that was formed over 4.5 billion years ago, and these billions of years have a wealth of ideas to offer. Starting about 3.5 billion years ago, life began to form, gradually growing and expanding, then imploding, only to grow yet again. About 500 million years ago, many of the life forms that we know today began to appear, and most were established by about 100 million years ago when primates first emerged. Humans only date back about 7 million years, but oh how we have made our presence felt.

The point here is that there is indeed wisdom in nature – in nature's systems, in nature's tools, in nature's recipes for success. We are here because the Earth exists, and the Earth exists in its present form because various tactics for survival – various techniques for living – have been etched out of failures, out of loss. We can succeed, at least in part, by learning from nature, by observing and mimicking Earth systems, by putting aside our hubris and assuming a role within rather than atop the Earth system.

So, hear the words of the Black Vulture.

the BLACK VULTURE

The High Priest of Earth Church hops atop the raccoon And begins recycling for he must act soon. While feasting at roadside the priest talks to me Of things that are needed to live sustainably.

"Thou shall not kill unless to consume, And not burn carbon beyond your fair share, Always leave behind a livable home, And let equity reign between human and hare.

Let each be a partner of the natural world, And seek to discover the least damaging way, While saving on energy and matter and things, And thinking of those who've not yet had their day.

Make societies equal near and far, While waging peace rather than war. Now take this message to lands afar And on the road home, don't get hit by a car."



So sayeth the vulture from the Texas roadside And from those ten commands you cannot hide. And I smile as I see it hopping aside, The priest has spoken, and all must abide.

I take a breath. I have communed with the black vulture. I have heard Brother Redwing and have become one with the oyster reef and have been greeted by the willet. I have reminded myself of what it means to be connected to life and other living things. And now out here in my kayak, floating along, it is time for a prayer.

I always thought that prayer was about asking for something, something specific to me, my immediate family, my friends. I was taught to pray for a tangible result like doing well in an examination, or in a sports event. I was taught to pray for loved ones, but not so much about things generally and certainly not about other living things.

I now find my prayers lead me more and more to intangible things, things related to Earth Church, things related to becoming whole. In many respects, my prayers today are the individual messages on the prayer flags – statements posted on the fabric and blown away by the wind to be received by someone or some being somewhere.

These days, prayer for me is a conversation with the universe, an exploration of hopes and dreams, an inquiry into who I am and what we are. These prayers are more about peace and compassion than personal requests for favor, for good result. It's not that I don't reach out to the universe for specific results. I do, but it is with the realization that prayer is more about me finding truth than result.

Ultimately, prayer is about life and living, about staying on the path, about gratitude and humility and finding new pathways, seeking and hopefully finding peace. It is an internal expression of my current understandings – understandings that change, vary, wane and strengthen – understandings that make me smile on a good day.

the BALTIMORE ORIOLE 5

Why do we pray? Is it to help us sleep? Is it to be thankful? Is it to ask for more? Or is it to seek retribution?

Why do we pray to a God? And how do we choose which one? Is it the one of our parents? Or the pretty one or the mean one? Or maybe the one that sends a sign?

I pray to the migrating songbirds Whose return restores my faith For another year. I cheer the orioles

And hail the tanagers, And applaud the warblers Whose hopeful journey reinforces My hopeful journey.



I see them flying across the water, Reaching the Texas coast, Falling to the Earth, Safe again, both of us.

I pray to them because it feels right. I ask them for courage to do what is right. I ask them for eyes to see what we are. I reach out for a connection That will make me one With other living things, With the energy that is life. And when my prayer is over, I feel better which is, after all, Why we pray.

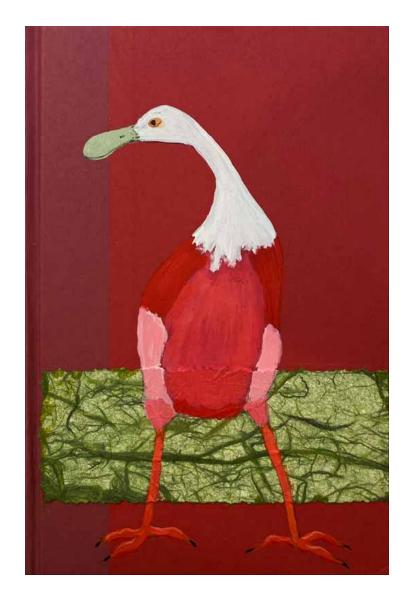
And then there is the benediction that ends the service, that moment of realization that the morning in church was well spent.

the ROSEATE SPOONBILL

I am in the church of the Earth And the pink bishop is in residence, Striding across the shallow flat, Head down, moving to and fro.

I come to Earth Church for services That renew my soul. The sunrise starts the service by allowing Me to see, A gift for which I am grateful. I listen to the chorus of the redwing blackbirds Greeting the sun, welcoming me.

The bishops rise, painting the blue sky With a pink ribbon of undulating life, Speaking to my very essence Of the nature of life On this rare and precious planet, Of the relationship between all living things, Of our duty as stewards, Of the responsibility that comes with being One of the living.



The congregation gathers in celebration, The ibis, the willet, the sandpipers, All chirping praise to the glorious day That I celebrate by enjoying it – By living it to the fullest.

The benediction is laid down by the Arrival of the caracara, My special keeper, Who comes to tell me that it is good That I came to church today, Asking me if I want to be a deacon? I leave church with a smile, Unlike many of my childhood visits To a church of another type, And I pray to the pink ones That I live to attend again.

the GODWIT AND the AVOCET

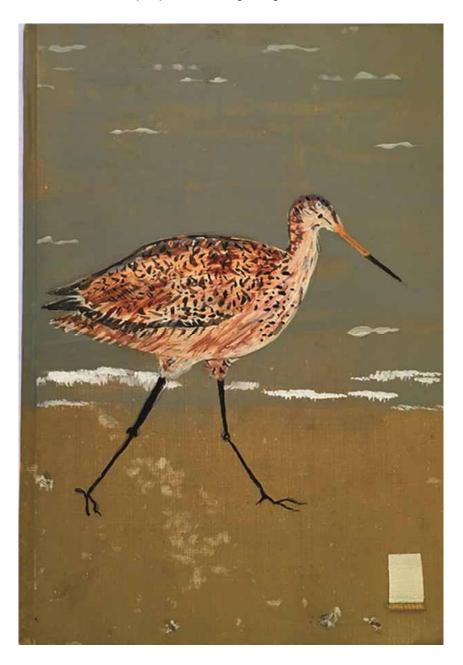
Paddling back after services, Muscles speaking their discomfort, Pulling up near the bank, Reclining on the kayak – floating, Looking up at the blue sky With the high, whirling white clouds, Kayak thoughts flying through my head – Thoughts of being sucked into a large immensity, Of being enraptured casually and completely, Without forethought, without planning.

I remember the avocets at eye level, The line of birds pulsating up and down, Upturned beaks in a line, Brown and black and white stunning.

I reflect on the marbled godwit Strolling on the mud flat, Standing tall and proud Amidst the plenty of the mud.

Bobbing in the bay, I knew I had found the elixir, The potion for aging happily – Drinking from nature, Letting it flow over my mouth, Staining my chest. Indelibly. Forever.

I came to the coast today to renew my soul – To find the spirit That I had misplaced within myself, lost, The avocets and the godwits Signaling me to take a deep breath, To breathe in good ole Texas marsh-life Being lived amidst the muddy flat Alive with peeps, with living things.



Driving back to Houston, calm and relaxed, Spirit reclaimed and restored, Smiling for I found peace at my church Where I was made whole again, Where I was made well, now ready.

And as I enter the hell that is driving in Houston, I greet the devil strengthened by The willet and the oystercatcher, The redwing and the black vulture The roseate and the avocet and the godwit Secured within my psyche, With peace in my heart And a smile on my face.

So welcome to Earth Church Pull yourself up a pew Come greet life and the universe A ceremony's waiting for you.



FIVE

Metaphysics and Earth Church

hat does it mean to be a living being here on Earth, the only outpost in the Universe with life as we know it? Where do we go when we die? Is it the black void in one direction or the bright light in the other? Or perhaps it simply means that we come again as a plant or an orangutan or a whooping crane?

Humans have been and remain constrained by the writings that came before us – writings that built the walls of our libraries, writings that created institutions, writings that put us in a box of thinking about this life and the next, about how all of us are wired together or not. In the sense of thinking out of the box, these writings are the box.

Dr. Henk Mooiweer, a friend with whom I do a lot of work on climate change and carbon dioxide removal by natural processes, often talks about our need to engage in frame breaking. According to Henk, we are all constrained by the frames that exist around us, either by our own construct or as constructed by others. These frames limit us. These frames restrict us. These frames keep us from developing the thinking necessary to support living on this planet in a manner that does not destroy it.

Most of the thinking about who and what we are comes from creation stories and faith-related writings. According to Genesis which was written about 3400 years ago based upon stories passed down orally, Adam and Eve were created 6000 years ago. Formal Hinduism goes back about 3500 years, although it is said that the origins go back to the start of humans. Buddha

predates Christ by about 300 years, with Buddhist writings being preserved starting about 100 years before Christ. The Christian New Testament writings date back to the first century of the current era (CE) although they have been rewritten a few times since. And Mohammed and the Quran date back about 1400 years.

Frame breaking – thinking "out of the box" about who and what we are – is an interesting topic when considered in terms of these eras of enlightenment, all of which are well over a thousand years in the past. Each of these faiths set up strictures about life and living. They set up rules that organized society then and now. These faiths were not conceived at a time when human activity could destroy the Earth. None of these explicitly include the Earth as a centerpiece of the faith, although more recently, there have been numerous efforts to rethink and reinterpret traditional faith principles in light of challenges to the Earth's future (See Chapter 7).

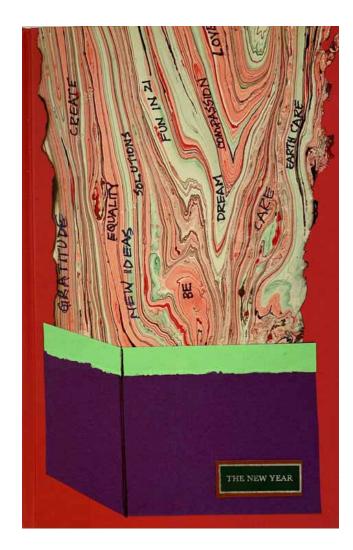
Interestingly, there has been almost no attention to developing a belief tradition about human-Earth connections regardless of where that thinking takes us, hence my fascination with Earth Church. We simply do not understand what it means to live with a life-connected philosophical base.

OUT OF the BOX IN 2021

The new year just blew the top off the box, A wonderful beginning to the year of the ox, It's an old-time gusher, a volcanic eruption, A great beginning, a raucous introduction.

The year 2020 will long be discussed, And let me add, it will also be cussed, There are many things better left behind, Hopefully out of sight if not out of mind.

The box is blown open, the year lies ahead, Let's weave best intentions together with thread, Intentions revisited on a dull, dreary day To ensure these hopes don't fritter away.



How about us making New Year's resolutions? I pledge to try to develop solutions, Enough of self-centered ego mumbling, Change is needed with no more stumbling.

And then there's just thinking out of the box, To be creative like the crafty sly fox, In 2021 that's where I want to be, Having fun while thinking creatively.

Earth Church will be a part of my routine, I need the serenity my church can bring, The birds are my friends, and I cherish them all, In particular the blue jay's raucous call.

And I commit to thinking about time and space About how this Earth is such a special place I want to probe into forbidden topics, And I'm not gonna worry about the optics.

So welcome 2021 with open arms, This eruption might set off a few alarms, As we work for thinking about Earth sanity, That will protect our planet for all humanity.

So welcome to Earth Church, Pull yourself up a pew, Leap with us from the box, It will liberate you.

One of the most fascinating aspects of the Earth is connections. As discussed earlier, the Earth is stitched together by ecosystems which are living systems defined by connections between the soil, the rainfall, the flow of water, the various types of plants and the organisms that live on the plants and each other. On another level, the virus vigil was started to create connections among humans during the pandemic – connections that were necessary because of our being plunged into isolation – connections necessary for sanity and needed by us all.

During this time of the virus, I really focused on connections and the concept of connectuality – the state of being connected. I have no doubt we are connected to other living things, both human and non-human, in ways that we neither appreciate nor perceive. I feel like we are missing two or three vital antennae that would pick up messages offering insight into who and what we are. Over this last year, I have enjoyed pursuing this concept of connectuality – this state of being connected in mystical, metaphysical ways.

A point of metaphysical departure is modern physics and string theory. I think the choice of the name – string – for a theory is on point for a connectuality discussion. There are those that think that string theory concepts of particle interaction and gravitational fields represent a unification theory of physics, a theory that explains everything about the universe, about planetary formation, black holes and the billions if not trillions of galaxies, an explanation of everything. Wow.

I cannot speak to the validity of that thinking, but I do like the concept of gravitational and other types of strings connecting all living things on the Earth – a string theory of connectuality for Earth Church.

STRING THEORY 3

Let's start with a string – the basic element, It links me to you with a bond like cement, Us all tied together is what I am seeing, Connectuality – fundamental to being,

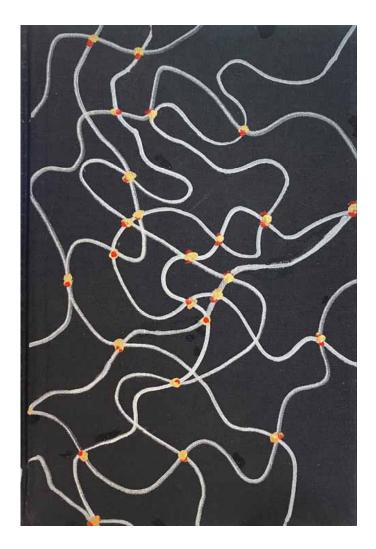
Another string theory comes from the Earth, The beginning, the basis, the source of our birth, All beings formed by message strings, Remember DNA's basic to all living things.

Now think about that for just a minute, A string endorsement however you spin it, DNA strings fundamental to life, Strings everywhere – strings are rife.

And now let's wade into theoretical physics, A place that offers interesting visits, String theory's realm is the very small, With string vibration at the base of it all.

These very small things create gravity, That provides cohesion – avoiding calamity, Creating the glue for all that you see A secret to life just revealed to me.

We are all bonded and linked by strings, Throughout the universe this truth rings, Linkages and connections to the Milky Way, Linkages and connections that allow us to play.



And play we must as we learn to live, On our living planet with so much to give For rather than worry about it all Let's relish life without withdrawal.

At Earth Church we try and understand science, But awe and knowledge are tied in alliance, We'll join any tour to the metaphysical, As we celebrate life – the basic miracle.

So welcome to Earth Church, Pull yourself up a pew, Here the theory of strings Ties us to you. Once we accept the concept of connections existing at many different levels, the Earth becomes revealed to us in all her glory. Africa connected to Asia across the Indian Ocean, Europe to the U.S. across the Atlantic, Chile to Australia across the Pacific, connected not just on a map but in reality, on several levels.

We are so used to thinking in terms of the pieces that comprise the Earth, the pieces that comprise an ecosystem, that we often fail to see the metaphorical forest for the trees. The Earth is a whole living entity that some call Gaia, and do not doubt that it is alive. It is the source. It is the whole, and our human minds want to dissect it and turn it into understandable, digestible pieces when the beauty, the awesome aspect of the Earth is the whole.

And the same is true of ecosystems, the building blocks of the Earth, the systems that give us life, the systems that support life, the systems that must remain coherent in the future. Life-giving connections of plants and animals and humans combined with elements of wind and rain, fire and soil to create differences that we should know and celebrate, for they are central to life.

Aldo Leopold wrote in *A Sand County Almanac* about the problems of science and scientists who study the pieces but miss the whole – scientists that dissect the instruments but cannot hear the symphony, and the same can be said about our philosophies about life and living. We often fail to appreciate the whole, and the whole is what must be maintained – whole ecosystems, a whole Earth. If we don't perceive the whole, if we don't appreciate the whole, we will not protect the whole, putting all at risk.

Similarly, there is wisdom to be learned from nature, from traditions developed over hundreds of millions of years, traditions born of connections that evolved and expanded, traditions that we should better understand and mimic, traditions that will reveal the path into the future.

Nature's traditions are about balance, about existing at scale over long expanses of time, rather than the much shorter traditions of humans. If we open our eyes and our minds, we can make adjustments but first we must listen to and hear the voices of the Earth speaking to us, and they will.

the CYPRESS TREE

I am known to some as the old man of the water, I've been here a long while but do not totter, I was here when Comanches came riding by On their painted ponies so swift and spry.

My feet are planted in the river's path, Anchored deep against the river's wrath, My knees are knobby, my leaves are thin, But I can stand up to a pretty strong wind.

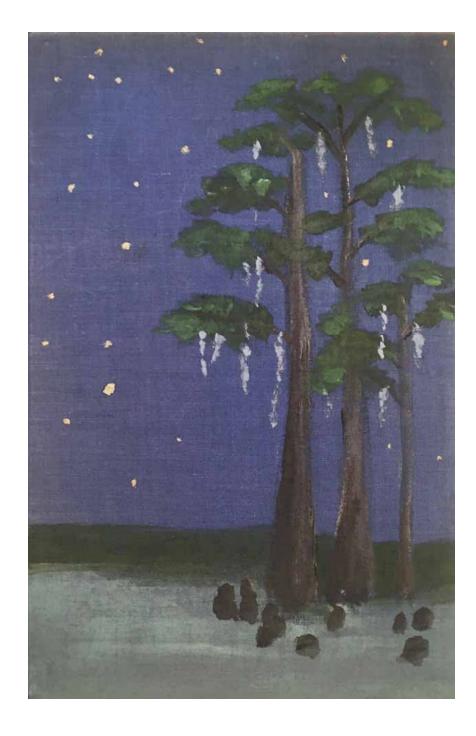
I've seen a lot in my many years, I've got things to say if you'll open your ears, I've watched this river for all of my time, We have truths to tell and stories sublime.

Aldo Leopold wrote of the scene before me, Of how the river plays a symphony, How science wants to examine each instrument, Missing the whole by studying the increment.

Science misses the river singing each night, And that we dream as one until light, That I sing along as the river plays Its song of truth with no clichés.

I sing of the gift of birds using my limbs, And of the fish that in my deep pocket swims, The river's symphony feeds upon my whims, And together we orchestrate river-tree hymns.

But my river must have an adequate flow, If I'm to become an old age hero, So we two depend upon your perception, That the two of us are a worthy conception.



So I'm asking you what you think it's worth To be able to listen to my river's concert, To see me and the wind singing the tunes, If you don't value us, we'll be entombed.

So welcome to Earth Church, Pull yourself up a pew, You'll hear truth in this temple, But you must do.

Now, nothing is more revealing about our absence of awareness and connectivity than is our relationship with trees. There are many who have called me a "treehugger" with disdain, but there are many reasons why we all should hug a tree. We tend to think of trees as different from animals in that we don't perceive them breathing, feeling, communicating, but they do all of these things and more.

Although there are shortcomings to scientific investigation, we are learning more and more about nature and trees by examining not an individual tree but the forest community, the way that the whole forest interacts. Our earlier scientific investigations were led by preconceptions based on practice rather than by observation, and we are now opening ourselves to learning more and more about trees and the forest community as we become open to what is, not what we suppose it to be.

We know that trees and plants breathe. They take in carbon dioxide and expel oxygen, just as we take in oxygen and expel carbon dioxide, making us a functional pairing. We do not seem to embrace the implications of that functional pairing – that we essentially give life each to the other. That alone should bind us, but it seems not to have created such a bond to any great extent so far.

So, let us start with our lungs and trees and plants, the forgotten symbiosis, the essential connection.

LUNGS AND TREES

A connection exists between trees and our lungs, It's a story most important, but generally unsung, A relationship that's essential in Covid time, We need understanding and a new paradigm.

The lungs bring us our body's fuel, We need oxygen from trees – that's the rule, Each day trees pump it out to us all, No money required, free to big and small.



Today our lungs seem more and more vulnerable, Some days I find it hard to be comfortable, For Covid is always hanging around, Trying to put me below the ground.

Contrast Mr. Covid with your friend the tree, Your partner in living, a good entity, It plays a key role in keeping you alive, Day after day, helping you survive.

We all are more fragile than we like to admit, And our lungs are a target for a direct hit, For they are wide open to the world outside, And that makes their role become amplified.

Earth church is about life and you and me, Our spiritual basics support hugging the tree, We should embrace what helps me and you, What we need is an appreciation breakthrough.

Just think for a moment about what we value, About what we desire, about what we pursue, And then think about your attention to a tree, It's clear we lack the right priority.

So I'm sending thanks from my lungs to the tree, For being an oxygen source for me, For keeping me breathing when others attack, I thank the tree for having my back.

So welcome to Earth Church, Pull yourself up a pew, Here we breathe oxygen in And tell the tree "thank you."

Not only do trees and plants support our lungs and our bodies, but they also have their own community and communicate with each other. Think of the roots interconnected beneath the soil, sending chemical messages from one root to another. Think about a physical vibration being transmitted through a forest. Think about all of those connections.

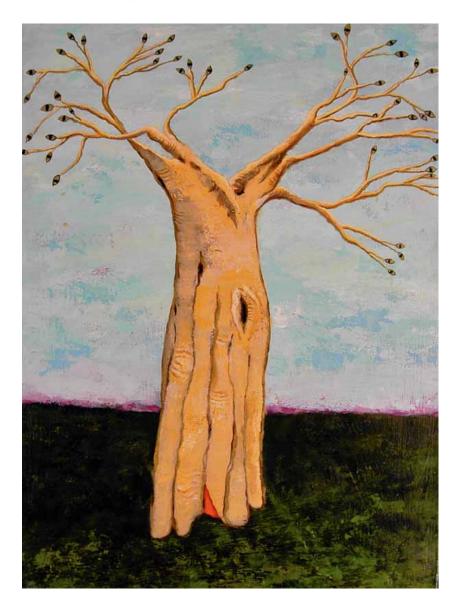
I wonder what it would be like to communicate with a tree, to actually talk to a tree. The Cypress we met earlier was speaking to us, but it was talking more abstractly about its relationship with the symphony of nature, about how it enjoyed playing songs with the river. What wisdom might a tree have? What would be useful to us.

As we get further along in this chapter, we'll explore quantum physics a bit, but it is interesting to note that we have now begun to understand that birds may use quantum thinking to navigate. Does the tree have a parallel reality that it understands, a linkage to a parallel world where it is mobile rather than static? Exploring these types of question are the stuff of Earth Church metaphysics, and while we do not profess great understanding of quantum physics and the parallel worlds beyond, we do enjoy visiting there with our minds.

Along these lines, let's drop in on the Baobab, that lovely, almost human-looking tree of Africa that is an absolutely distinct landmark across the savannahs.

the BAOBAB TREE

The Baobab is a tree in Africa, It has many qualities magical, It stands alone, proud and tall, It has presence – you can hear it call.



It wraps itself in worldly weariness, Hinting that it knows things mysterious, I want to visit inside its heart, Seeking its wisdom, getting smart.

A connection exists with all that's alive, Like we're all a part of a metaphysical hive, That's buzzing on different frequencies, Beyond understanding veiled in secrecies.

I want to discover what is right before us, So much to learn, so much to discuss, And in meeting the Baobab I discover, The queen of the hive, the Earth's mother.

For there is wisdom in that old tree, To which I'm attracted like a worker bee, Reasonable explanations for the pull don't exist, It's a magnetic force that I can't resist.

I'm drawn to the base of the Baobab, The gravity parting me from the mob, Conventional thinking flies out the door, I'm in a whirlwind – I'm on the floor.

I'm a satellite spinning around a star, The universe revealed both near and far, It's the ride of a lifetime, going fast, I'm not sure how much longer this will last.

I exit the Baobab, and I'm still alive, A heck of a visit – a real high dive, Into the realm of what we know not, I'm a living metaphysical astronaut.

So welcome to Earth church, Pull yourself up a pew, Pray the power of the universe, Will come spin you.

Quantum theory opens up metaphysical possibilities almost beyond the imagination. Particles in various states of vibration moving across dimensions, existing in more than one place at the same time, quantum physics exploring arenas that our traditional thinking does not fathom, at least here in 2021. Yet that change is upon us, and I welcome it. From chaos and mystery comes creativity.

That life could exist on many levels is a fascinating concept, one I am only beginning to explore, to feel, to grasp. What I do know is that I am fascinated by my shortfall of many types of knowledge – that I don't know how to explain everything. I love letting my mind wander, and I enjoy the journey to and from all different sort of destinations. On the one hand, we think of physical travel, of taking a rocket to Mars, or Jupiter, or beyond. But what if we are capable of making that trip without ever moving, a trip internal to ourselves if only we were able to enter the quantum world.

During our time of Covid retreat, I traveled to many places in my mind. I believe I did more creative thinking than at any time in my past. The virus vigil kept me searching for creative ideas, and the more I searched, the more I found, and the further I went off the path, out into the universe, the more interesting and comfortable the journey became to me.

STARS

I walk out at night and look to the sky, And the stars are winking as if saying hi, And there is a river called the Milky Way, Inviting me to ride – to come and play.

Oh my – I'm being sucked up into it, Leaving Earth – hold on – I'm getting into it, I'm flying away and up to the stars, I'm just underway and passing Mars.

It's quiet up here in this space – you hear, And the view's spectacular – so pure, so clear, I'm trying to fathom just what I'm seeing, I'll try to explain but you'll not be believing.

There's not just a thousand or a million or a billion But what I can see may approach a trillion Points of light coming from every direction, Spectacular eye candy – a delectable confection.



The Milky Way lies straight on ahead, It's spinning around – working on my head, There's a hundred billion stars in this galaxy, And the black hole at the center creates gravity.

I'm plunging headfirst into the big black hole, It's time to man-up for I need to be bold, The pucker factor has me in its grasp, Oh my – I'm accelerating – I'm moving fast.

And now I've entered the fabled hole of black, And it's dark in here, and I can't see back, To where I have been or where I am going, I have no navigation and no way of knowing.

But then Mother Earth suddenly appears, And as I pass by, she grabs my ears, And whisks me back to the church of the Earth And I'm laughing out loud, filled with mirth.

So welcome to Earth church, Pull yourself up a pew, Pray that Mother Nature Rescues you too.

I'm over here, whisked back to Earth, released from the parallel universe, saved by our Mother, and what a wonderful Mother she is. I am suddenly back to what I know to be true, that I am and that I am because of Earth, and that I am not alone on Earth, but am part of a large group of other living things, things that we tend to disregard as being less than we, some type of others not worthy.

Other living things are perhaps a form of a parallel universe. Life on Earth shares some intangible aspect, some spark that takes us out of the realm of the inert and into the realm of being. Yes, being – what a wonderful word that we visit once again. To be or not to be from Shakespeare should become I be, therefore, I be from Earth Church. There is no not to be. I be. We be. We all be. And we are beings, all of us. If something is alive, I would offer, it deserves some level of respect. We are all part of this great web of life connections that we certainly don't fully understand. We should respect the ecosystems that support these life connections of varying types. Would your view of life connections and protecting ecosystems change if you knew with certainty that you might return to Earth as an endangered species that would disappear but for humans protecting their habitat? I bet you would.

Our metaphysical beliefs define our ethical boundaries. Right and wrong. Good and bad. What I should do. What I should not do. So, we should embrace reincarnation. It only makes sense. Earth is the only known planet with life like us – in fact with life of any sort – although one has to think that with trillions of universe particles called suns and planets out there, the vibrations should lead to more types of life, yet we have no evidence, no knowledge, except within our own planet where we take life for granted and often discard it without thought, without need, without reason.

BEING BACK AGAIN

Parallel universes, parallel lives, Is this the destination when one dies? What do we really know of existence? Why do we push back with such resistance?

Why do we fret about what we can't know? If we don't agree, am I your foe? So much anxiety, so little knowledge, A topic for a course at a courageous college.

I love to float within the morning mist, Playing with ideas, totally adrift, Straying from my mooring, off and about, Loving the fact I'm surrounded by doubt.



Embracing doubt, now that's a thought That often leaves some souls distraught But I find my comfort in thinking holistic And planting my feet in concepts realistic.

I have no idea what awaits after death, But I know that now I have a breath, A characteristic shared with other beings, Indeed, we are because we are breathing.

I have choice about what I believe, And I find it very hard to conceive, That life simply ceases upon our death, Being is too magical for eternal rest.

Be it reincarnation or simply a life parallel, I'm pretty sure it's neither heaven nor hell, But rather a continuum from me to the bee, Here, on Earth, life be for eternity.

So welcome to Earth Church, Pull yourself up a pew, Here we hope your return, Will be fun for you.

During the virus vigil, we had a form of competition amongst the email recipients about what entity they would like to be reincarnated as and why. And it turned out to be a great fun exercise. You might ask yourself the same question – if I return, what being would I like to be?

The clear winner was the dolphin, followed closely by the hummingbird, the cardinal and the live oak. But what was really fun was the diversity of thinking about what to be and why –

what Type of Being?

I'm a German nightingale for a child in the park. I'm a red climbing rose with blossoms so sweet. I'm a mockingbird and don't have to play well with others. I'm an osprey and therefore a fishing machine. I'm a penguin wandering near the South Pole. I'm a cypress tree – the old man of the water. I'm a turtle and live long and have a hard shell. I'm a laughing gull hanging around with my friends. I'm the family dog and live like a king. I'm a great tailed grackle with a shiny black rump. I'm an elegant snow leopard moving after dark. I'm a leopard seal sliding off of the ice. I'm an old banyon tree with kids playing on me. I'm a catbird – self-contained, living life as I please. I'm a tree sloth eating leaves high above ground. I'm a snowy egret with slippers of yellow. I'm a whooper or an attwater prairie chicken. I'm a black cat just-a-prancing on top of the fence. I'm a big bluestem grass who sways in the wind. I'm a great spruce tree aging like mountain wine. I'm a great blue heron, an elegant svelte bird. I'm a brown pelican dining on fish every day. I'm a scissortail sorceress who catches the fly. I'm a whooping crane looking for a crab delight.

What fun, letting your mind go, letting it imagine coming back as another living being. From this Earth Church vantage point, there is no reason for you becoming one being or another. There is simply a queue to come back around again, and again and again, for life energy becomes recycled as with all of the other cycles of the Earth (See Chapter 6).

REINCARNATION

I've read many books by great philosophers, And read a large number of religious tomes, I've considered heaven in its different versions, And I've challenged my mind to think on its own.

I understand why we all want security, About what comes after we pass on, But what if the Earth where we live now Was the ultimate end? Our celestial home?



If you knew your spirit was coming back here, Would you do or think any differently? Would you pay more attention to how you acted? Would you live your life more sustainably?

My thinking has led me to the circles and cycles, They exemplify Earth – they form its foundation, Leading me to conclude some cycle must be spiritual, And all reasonable signs point to reincarnation.

So, what would you do if you knew that your spirit Was coming back around as a different life form? Would you change your thinking about habitat preservation? Would you be more willing to depart from our norm? I have found that self-interest is a strong motivator, And that leaves some to think their reward, Lies not on this Earth but in some far-away place, Sitting beside the throne of the Lord.

So, immerse your head in coming back again, And realize that you reap what you do, Consider the prospect that you might be a bee, Or a robin in Houston – a llama in Peru.

Think of the community that would gather together, Thinking that we were all part of the same Circular system connecting spirits and souls – I have no doubt it would reframe the game.

So welcome to Earth Church, Pull yourself up a pew, Sing a hymn of thanksgiving, For reincarnation becomes you.

And then there is the feeling that you have been somewhere before – somewhere that you really have not been in this current life – some place that strikes you deep in your soul – startles you – grabs you and shakes you a bit. A revelation you say, your mind suddenly able to conceive of something you have never experienced. Or is it that someone from that time period returns from some parallel universe and connects with you, a magical spirit just hanging around that space, vibrating back into this world when there is someone to approach?

I once was teaching in Vicksburg, Mississippi, when I was a much younger environmental lawyer, and I had some spare time and visited the Vicksburg battleground of civil war infamy. Here there were trenches facing each other, two sides aligned much closer than a gunshot away. And as I wandered through the maze of tunnels and battle lines, it felt like a hand came up and grabbed my heart and squeezed it. I knew I had been here. I knew I had fought here, much like I perceive I have been hung in another life.

Or perhaps I just have an active imagination. What I know is that I believe there is some type of mystical force out there that connects me to other living things, to other beings, in ways I cannot explain, and frankly, I

really like that part of life. And perhaps most importantly, it makes we want to protect the Earth and all forms of life because there may be much more there than I can perceive at this point in time.

Hubris is a great fault of humans. Gratitude and humility are worthy traits to pursue. I am, therefore, I am grateful – grateful for life, grateful for the Earth, grateful for all living things. And perhaps as much as anything, grateful that I don't know everything, that there is mystery about life that I don't understand, that there is much yet to be uncovered, and I pray that we are wise enough not to destroy it before it becomes known to us.

the BLACK PHOEBE

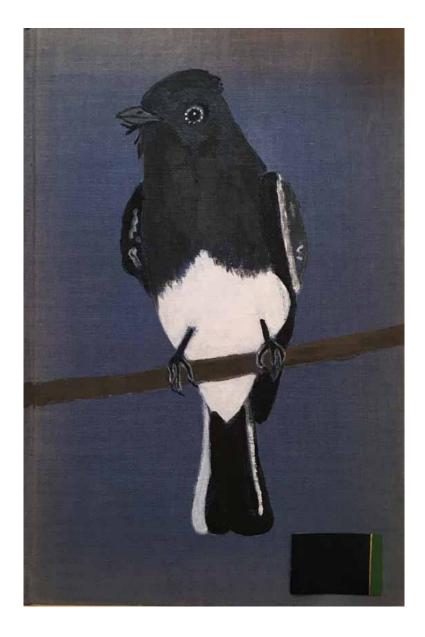
The black phoebe's a bird of the desert terrain, It hangs near water where there's not much rain, The first time was near my tent on the Pecos, Eating camp breakfast – tortillas and huevos.

The little flycatcher was working the willow, Out over the river flowing below, A black and white bird that made an impression, And reached out to me with a psychic connection.

A hike to the mesa opened a new vista, A place of rock carvings having powerful charisma, And a hush came across our group of pilgrims, For we felt a feeling that was worth millions.

We placed our fingers and traced the rock carvings, Some recognizable – some bizarre things, Minds trying to imagine what the natives would feel, Oh what an experience sublime and surreal.

I recall my mind traveling away from my body, It danced on the mesa –it had a party, My soul and theirs – twirling and mingling, A coming together that left my mind ringing.



Back at the camp the black phoebe returned, Asking me what if anything I'd learned? "Did your mind fly away to come back anew? Did it leave your worldview a little askew?"

I told her of the experience on the mesa top, A total delight – a fable from Aesop? But this was no fable for the feeling was real, A metaphysical event, the real deal.

This was not just some happenstance, It can't be dismissed as just coincidence, Did something quantum happen to me? Regardless, it made me feel exquisitely.

So welcome to Earth Church, Pull yourself up a pew, And a quantum event Might visit you too.

And then there is shamanism, which is some form of quantum metaphysical magic, a person or entity considered to be able to influence good or evil spirits. I don't know if shamanism works or not, but I enjoy engaging it a lot.

I once was involved in a legal case involving a nice woman who lived in the bottomland forests near the Texas coast and just wanted to be left alone, but the good old boys who ran the local drainage district simply would not leave her creeks along her property lines alone. She hired me to help her protect these creeks, and before I went to court, she consulted her bruja – a Mexican witch – that she knew from when she had lived in Mexico City. I was comforted going into court knowing that the bruja had predicted victory. She was right every time.

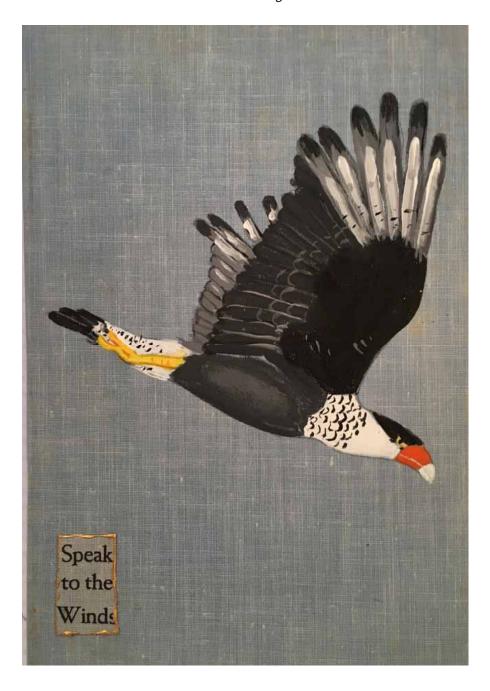
Somehow, along the way in life, I adopted the caracara as my shaman bird. I truly enjoy seeing this predator bird when I am driving around Texas. If I see it flying across the road in front of me or alongside the road, I know that the day will be good. A few other birds give me that feeling as well – the white-tailed hawk, Swainson's hawk and the scissortail flycatcher all come to mind – but none resonate like the caracara.

And I must say, it is nice having a shaman bird that greets you and assures you will have a good day. It perks up the day, but then again, many birds perk up my day for I truly enjoy them all – the loggerhead shrike and the meadowlark sitting on the fence near each other, the male grackle prancing before his lady, the flight of geese flying overhead, the trill of the sandhill cranes. But none reach me like the crested caracara.

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the CARACARA 14

Townes Van Zandt is singing "Flying Shoes" When I see the caracara that is my muse, My totem bird and shaman advisor, A bird that leaves me feeling wiser.



The Pandemic's oppressive but I'm free at last, Flying 'cross the fields, low and fast, Smilin' and drivin' and livin' life again, Lovin' that the bird is entering my brain.

Today the caracara wants to chant, Something smooth and not a rant, A way of connecting once again, Asking me to repeat after him.

"The Earth is, therefore, I be. The Earth is, therefore, we be. If the Earth is not, I am not. If the Earth is not, we are not.

We are of the Earth, that is true Simply a part of it, me and you, Neither of us better nor any worse, We simply are a part of the Earth."

And I pass them by and continue along, Feeling really good, feeling strong, My shaman has done it one more time, Leaving me connected, feeling sublime.

I return from my drive filled with gratitude, For a better outlook, a healthier attitude, One that helps me face another tomorrow, One totally connected to the Earth's flow.

So welcome to Earth Church, Pull yourself up a pew, Say a prayer that the shaman, Will connect with you.

Living life is such a gift, and it is so much richer since I have discovered Earth Church. I'm getting to be what I would have considered old a while back, yet I don't find it so these days, at least in part because these metaphysical thoughts comfort me, make life fun. The beauty of the metaphysical is that it may or may not be. The beauty of poetry is that it may or may not be what you think it to be. The beauty of art is that it also may or may not be. The beauty of quantum physics is we may or may not be. And then we get to come back and do it all again, except this time as a – well, you choose.

the BABY JACANA

Today is my birthday and I'm turning 73, I never thought much about what life would be For someone who's come to be 73 When the man who's that old is actually me.

In trying to understand who and what I am, I feel like I have passed a form of exam, But only to move to the next higher grades, Where much is painted in nuance and shades.

There is so much to learn and so much to do, I'm like a youngster with feathers askew, That's it – for my birthday I'm a baby Jacana, I'm one with Earth Church and singing hosanna.

I'm exploring the universe and seeing new things, They come flying by on silvered wings, And I'm walking on water from pad to pad, Focused on keeping from becoming ironclad.

It is difficult being both young and old, But the key ingredient is a spirit bold, And a mind that never ceases to question, And search for the answer, the destination.

But like a youngster, there is never clear thinking, The more I'm ending, the more I'm beginning, But that's the fun of being alive, And with the right attitude you can really thrive.



I'm atop the water, big feet padding away, Into the beginning of another day, Greeting the sun – saying goodbye to the moon, Grateful to be within the Earth Church commune.

Earth Church has been my rod and my staff, It helps me see clearly, it makes me laugh, So, my girl and I will act like young spirits, On my birthday, loving life, embracing metaphysics.

So welcome to Earth Church, Pull yourself up a pew, Pray that you can feel young When 73 finds you.



SIX

Earth Church Solutions

y now you should get the gist of Earth Church – that it is a spiritual hub dedicated to celebrating, understanding, praising, and enjoying the Earth. We are because of the Earth, and we must maintain the Earth for us to be.

During the course of the virus vigil, as I was writing daily about Earth Church and the virus and fear, it became clearer and clearer to me that there are certain solutions that become very obvious if you study the Earth and learn from it. A central thought from this experience and my prior work is that over the centuries, humans developed an economic system that was based on principles contrary to the basic principles that have supported life on Earth over several hundred million years.

Our current economy has been and is working against basic Earth rules, and that situation must change and that change is only now beginning. This change is consistent with the thinking of Earth Church. This is what we should support and demand.

Earth Church is devoted to the Earth, and the Earth is a closed system with the exception of energy coming in from the sun and some bouncing back. The Earth functions through cycles and circles that move materials from one form to another and back again. We humans have imposed our economic system on that structure and are beginning to cause such substantial harm that the entire functioning system becomes threatened in some very fundamental ways.

This is not to say that all is lost. However, it is to say that our human economic system must change, and I have no doubt that it will change.

The important point is that this change should, and I believe, will have a spiritual element because this change is needed for our survival which is, at its center, a concept that engages the spirit.

The key is understanding our cycles – the circular economy that is the Earth – the movements of carbon, the movement of water, the movement of species from one place to another and back again. This is the circular economy that is the model for our future economic system, and the old and new have begun to intersect.

1. The Solution is the Earth

Earth Church is about the Earth. That is where we begin. The Earth is the only planet that we know that supports life as we know it. The Earth is a home for living things; it is our source, it is our beginning. It's the place of our birth; it's a place of life.

The one thing that all humans share is a common heritage in the Earth. The Earth is fundamental to all humans. All 8 billion of us have this in common. The Earth enabled us to be born and allows us to live and breathe, to think and argue, to cry and to experience great pleasure and pain. Without the Earth, we would not be. Period.

For such a fundamental truth, it is amazing that we do not appreciate the Earth in our western spiritual thinking to any substantial degree. Most practicing Christians and Muslims give little deference or time to the Earth. For the most part, the focus of these religions is upon an afterlife that promises rewards of various types in heaven which is not on Earth. Historically, little focus has been upon the Earth, although some of the more recent theological writings offer some hope of a broader incorporation of the Earth (see Chapter 7).

By contrast, Earth Church is about the here and now – the only thing we know with assuredness. Earth Church is about the Earth. It is about life on Earth. It is about the role of the Earth in our life. It is about the absolute requirement that the Earth must exist for us to exist. Every other aspect of Earth Church originates in this basic understanding that is both profound and simple. The Earth's existence is the fundamental truth of our existence. Amen.

the CIRCLE OF LIFE

Day and night come from Earth spinning round, And the moon circles 'round with nary a sound, The four seasons come and cycle back, Summer's next up on that circular track.

The Earth sends up carbon which comes back around, Photosynthesis intervenes and puts it in the ground, Water falls from the sky as life-giving rain, And then flows to the ocean to do it again.

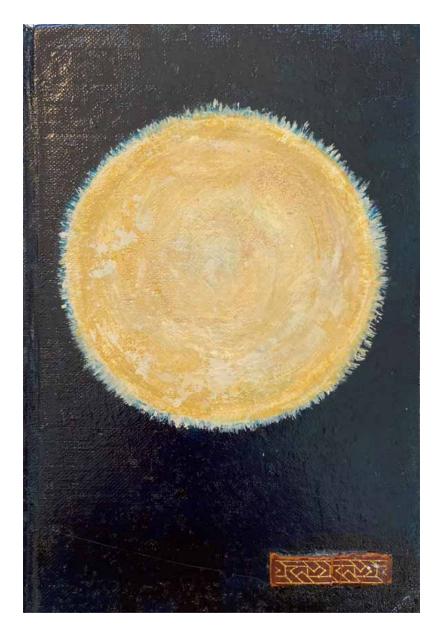
The birds that I love fly south in the fall, And come back to the north to delight us all, Marine species move from marsh to the bay, To spawn in the Gulf and come back the same way.

And then there's the movement of water in the oceans, Like the Gulf Stream whose cycle generates motion, And the jet stream circles 'round the magnetic pole, Pushing around air masses warm and cold.

If we think bigger – well, galaxies spin also, Looking like hurricanes painted by Picasso, There is something fundamental about circular motion, Perhaps one can see – some clue – some notion.

When so much of existence seems based on these patterns, We might seriously consider that this structure matters, Including our thinking about society and economy, And aligning them both with our circular ecology.

There's so much that we have yet to learn, We think we're so smart, yet do not discern, That existence is easier if we swim with the flow, But to do so, some old ways we must let go.



But love is a keeper we can never let go, It sits in the center – a red heart aglow, Love for all creatures, love for all beings, The karma of Earth Church keeps me believing.

So welcome to Earth Church, Pull yourself up a pew, Pray the circles of the universe, Work for you too. Now to the cycles. Let's take carbon first. Carbon dioxide is released by living organisms who breathe, and it is also released when plant and animal organic matter dies and decays. This CO2 goes to the atmosphere where it is added to the inventory and then is taken back in by plants where photosynthetic processes in the leaves transform it back into organic carbon.

That is the carbon cycle – captured by plants, liberated by respiration to again be captured by plants – plants that give us oxygen back to aid in our respiration, in our release of energy into our body – plants that give us new organic matter that feeds us, allowing us to respire – organic matter that drops to decay, keeping the cycle going.

This cycle has been going on for at least 500 million years. It works, and it is wonderful. It and the hydrologic cycle are central to life. However, in the last few centuries, we humans have inserted ourselves into this carbon cycle by mining organic carbon in the form of coal and oil and natural gas and have added much more carbon dioxide from burning these fossil fuels than used to be in circulation,

Since 1900, the carbon dioxide levels in the atmosphere have increased from less than 300 parts per million to almost 420 parts per million today. Yep, we humans have changed the chemical composition of the Earth's skin – our atmosphere – and have increased the heat of the planet by at least one degree centigrade so far by trapping the sun's energy in the greenhouse that we have made stronger – a greenhouse that now catches more of the sun's energy that would otherwise be reflected into the atmosphere.

According to the Paris Climate Agreement, we must stabilize our atmosphere and reach net zero carbon emissions by 2050. To do that, we need to begin right away to reduce our carbon emissions from our current economy. That will occur three ways: (1) we will substitute for fuel sources that do not emit carbon such as wind and solar; (2) we will become more efficient in our use of carbon emitting combustion; and (3) we will pull more carbon dioxide out of the atmosphere to keep concentrations from increasing and to eventually reduce atmospheric carbon dioxide levels.

If we reach this 2050 goal of net zero emissions, we will have made major strides in the evolution of a new economy. And one part of that new economy will involve valuing these natural cycles and systems that we have

been gifted by the Earth. Here, farms and ranches have a major role to play because grasslands can take carbon dioxide out of the atmosphere and store it in the soil as organic carbon, as can forests, marshlands and perhaps even oyster reefs and seagrass beds.

Nature can and should be a part of the solution to our carbon dioxide build-up in our atmosphere and nature can and should be a part of the new economy that we will develop as we move away from past, destructive systems to new ones designed to last – a design that nature perfected long ago.



the PRAIRIE FAIRY

The prairie fairy is real, you know, I'm a man of faith, and I know it's so, So come and walk down the trail with me, And I'll try to explain prairie reverie.

The fairy and I went to the prairie, And climbed down a flower the color of cherry, And the fairy told me that this was a door To a world of mystery and fanciful lore. And then she took me to the roots deep down To see the carbon being placed in the ground, And I met the microbes and other living things, Thriving on what the plants were manufacturing.

An earthworm I met said he doesn't work for a living, But simply lives off of what the plant is giving, "The carbon comes down and into my snout And then into the soil as I move about."

In the spring the fairy gave me a ring, Saying the time has come for me to bring, Buyers of carbon stored by prairie roots, She gave me a wink – we're in cahoots.

And once the money began to flow, The fair fairy reflected a golden glow, Money for prairies bodes well for her, And just like a cat, I can hear her purr.

The fairy and I need help with this vision, To pull humans forward on this critical decision, Carbon neutral requires creating a market, A billion tons of carbon stored is our target.

The time is upon us to become carbon neutral, We'll heal the Earth, and make ourselves useful, But we all must pay the farmer and rancher To plant more prairies – now that's the answer.

So welcome to Earth Church, Let the prairie be your pew, Become one with the fairy, And help remove carbon too.

Carbon is just one of several cycles that are out of sync. In many respects, our thinking about economy must be reconsidered to incorporate circles and cycles much more broadly into almost all aspects of our future existence. And no industry illustrates this more than does the chemical and

plastics industry – an industry built on use and disposal – an industry built upon an economic model based on a straight line rather than a circle.

Today, there is a movement afoot to reform this thinking – to move toward a circular economy, one that is based upon the concepts of reuse and recycle rather than mine, manufacture, use and dispose. These concepts are just beginning, but they portend major changes, particularly in the plastics industry which is under increasing pressure to increase the recycled content in their products, with a goal for most plastic products to have 25% recycled content by 2025 and with further increases over time.

Interestingly, this reformation of thinking about plastics is occurring at a time when our recycling systems have been turned upside down. For many years, China was accepting much of the world's recycled waste, including plastics. In July 2017 China decided to stop receiving this recycled waste, totally upsetting the flow of recycled materials around the world. In many areas of the United States, recycling efforts were abandoned, or waste collected in recycling programs was once again deposited in landfills because there were no buyers.

Today, plastics manufacturers are scrambling to locate dependable supplies of recycled plastic content in the midst of changing global demand but in the face of this failed global recycling system. Here, they have two choices. They can try to arrange for the recycled plastics to be collected and transported to them for melting into the various types of plastics or being returned to hydrocarbons through pyrolysis or they must contract with a company that is performing one or both of these functions.

For an up-to-the-moment report on the state of change in the plastics industry, we are checking in today with a lovely green heron that lives and feeds along the Gulf Intracoastal Waterway. Here, barges push chemicals up and down the Texas coast along this commercial highway seldom seem by the public, a waterway that goes from Texas across to Florida and up the East Coast, a waterway that connects with the Mississippi and the Ohio River systems, a waterway that in many respects represents this former system and could be the key to the future one.

the GREEN HERON 3

The green heron wades beside the waterway, That's the chemical industry's passageway, And sits on timbers that are often smashed By the chemical barges trying to pass.

The coat of the heron has many colors, It's obvious beauty admired by the others, A fabric of yellow and maroon and green, This smallest heron has the brightest sheen.

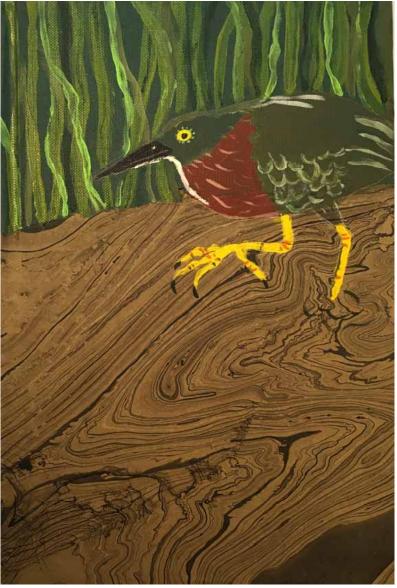
It makes its living off of nature's cycles, The proven pathway to survival, Just think if our economy followed this path, We might avoid the coming bloodbath.

An economy like nature makes common sense, Where waste is a product, a place to commence, We will make and use, recycle and reuse, Such a system a wise man would not refuse.

We're all tired of seeing plastics on the beach, It's a popular subject with the students I teach, We can all see the consequences of the old way, Let the sun's dawn reveal a new circular day.

So toss plastic refuse into the bin, It's the beginning step for a societal win, But the bin must be part of a reuse plan Connecting to the plants across the land.

This system is only now beginning to occur, The pieces are forming but are still a blur, But have no doubt that the pieces will fit, And we'll build this system bit by bit.



The green heron slashes its bill in the murk, And pulls up a silver fish with a jerk, And I smile on the circular point of view, It's good for me and it's good for you.

So welcome to Earth Church, Pull yourself up a pew, Here we're pushing for plastics To be recycled to you. There is more to nature's cycles than carbon and materials. There is also the hydrologic cycle which is both a giver and taker of life. Nothing matches the relief of soft, gentle rain coming and staying for a while in the midst of a drought that has desiccated the land. On the other hand, nothing matches the horror of ponds drying up and cattle dying or of a hurricane bearing down on our coast.

Our rainfall patterns are changing. We are getting more in shorter time periods, followed by longer periods without rain. Climate change means that we cannot depend on the past rainfall and storm records to predict the future because our climate is changing. Such a simple statement seems incredibly difficult for most of us to perceive. Our engineers continue to argue about it, to deny it while they continue to use outdated methodologies. Our politicians don't want it to be true.

Hurricane and then Tropical Storm Harvey dumped over 45 inches of rain on the Texas coast in four wet days in 2017. A recent analysis indicated that based on what we know today, a storm like Harvey might be expected to return every 35 to 70 years. That is a huge change from the recurrence interval quoted in the storm's aftermath of once every 40,000 years. And a recent article anticipated that by 2100, Harvey might return every five years if we don't get our carbon dioxide emissions under control.

Now try to wrap your head around the fact that in Harvey has gone from being a one in 40,000-year event to a one in 70-year event and in another few decades a storm of this size will be closer to a 5-year event. That is climate change. It is happening, and it is nasty.

So, the Earth's climate is changing. Nothing could be simpler, at least here in Earth Church. The water is hotter. Hot water fuels storms like hurricanes. Our air is hotter, and hotter air holds more water than cooler air. It is very predictable that with hotter air and water, the storms are getting bigger and badder. And may you not be caught in the middle of one.

So as a beginning, Earth Church takes note of this change and urges all to pay attention to how these changes may affect your life. Our way of living on the coast must and will change. We will evacuate more. We will move back, albeit slowly. The norms of the past simply no longer work. That is the big message. The following poem was written early in the hurricane season of 2020 about four months into the virus vigil and was rewritten to reflect the fact that the worst storm of that year came in August with Hurricane Laura, a storm that rapidly intensified from Category 1 to a strong Category 3 about 24 hours before landfall. Luckily for Houston, it swerved north, turning our good fortune into bad fortune for western Louisiana. However, rapid intensification is yet another of the changes that are more pronounced because of our changing climate – yet another issue to be understood and adapted to.

HURRICANE

I feel the tension that comes with the heat, When coastal waters play that hurricane beat, The water's warm and sea level's rising, Hurricane season is always surprising.

A high pressure sits over the Gulf for now, And massive evaporation it does not allow, But the high will move – we know it will, Then water in the Gulf will begin to distill.

Watch out for the storms we name and fear, It seems to worsen moving later in the year, So far this season we've already reached Kyle, It's early times yet and we've still got a while.

There's a whole list of names that we may use, There's Laura and Marco and Nana has a fuse, There's Omar, Paulette, Rene, and Sally, And Teddy and Vicky and then Wilfred will rally.

Which will become huge as the pressure lessens, Releasing the Gulf's bowels to flow to the heaven, Spinning angry clouds in a counterclockwise ring? Pain and suffering this storm will bring.



Which one will it be that evokes a deep sigh? Which name will history remember us by? Will we repeat the storm of 1900? Will it leave us feeling beat up and plundered?

I look at the weather and take a deep breath, The big one's not indicated as coming here yet, I cross my fingers and clutch what is sacred, And hope that salvation for this year is fated.

Truth is – there's not a whole lot to do, If the big one is bearing right down on you, Either hunker down or hit the road, Hoping you'll not be too much exposed.

So welcome to Earth Church, Pull yourself up a pew, Say thanks that Laura, Did not find you.

It is not just hurricanes that are of concern and coastal development. Almost any low-pressure system be it tropical or a passing front can generate inches and even feet of rain in a very short time. In the Houston region, we have endured both types of flooding, often two times in a year. And this brings up the most difficult subject – land development.

Texas and many areas of the United States are hesitant to regulate private property. We believe that a landowner has a right to do what they wish with their property, whether it is wise or not. The right of private property is held deeply, and seriously defended. But it can lead to collective disaster, particularly relative to flooding and our changing rainfall amounts.

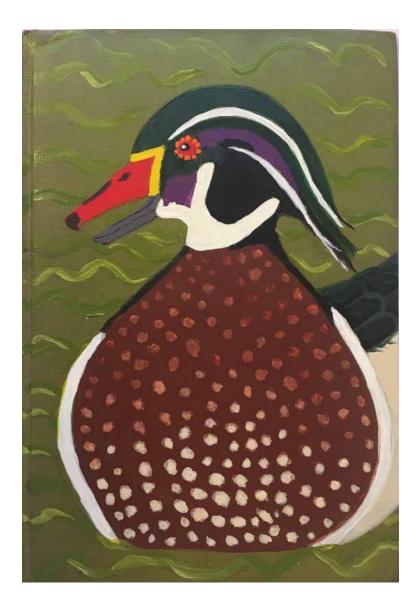
As a general proposition, we have tried to limit the amount of land claimed by natural systems such as rivers, creeks and bayous, particularly when they are flowing with floodwaters. In many respects, we have denied the basic nature of these water bodies, restricting their boundaries to the channels where water commonly flows rather than granting them the larger flood plains where they flow when larger rains come.

With climate change, whatever land we have set aside for water is too little. Sea level is rising and will claim coastal land. Hurricane surge flooding will increase and worsen with bigger storms. And rainstorms will demand more and more land for flowing water – water that will seek its own level – water that must be accommodated.

Ultimately, we will redesign every city in the world, making "room for the river" as the Dutch are fond of saying. Over time, perhaps our laws and our practices will redefine the true meaning of a river or of a stream as the area needed to pass a very large storm event, an area we will live near but not within, an area where we will recreate but not live. But be assured it will be land released to and devoted to the water cycle.

the WOOD DUCK 2

The wood duck lives in hardwood bottomlands Along rivers and creeks in flood-prone lands, And humans also like to be next to streams, They seem to build wherever anyone deems.



The wood duck's home is wet and green A comfortable place to nest and preen, And this bottomland perch is great for this duck But for human habitation, it's simply bad luck.

A human's place is on higher ground, Not where floodwaters are sure to be found, It will only get worse with the climate changing, A storm is coming, and it won't stop raining.

The wood duck asked as we shared a wood bench "Why is it that humans are so rigidly entrenched? Why do people ignore such bright, clear signals? This flood plain's just like a guided missile."

I tell old Woody that we humans don't see Reality that differs from what we want it to be, We often see life through rose-colored glasses, We close our eyes and act like dumbasses.

For some believe that we are bulletproof, As if they've been drinking one-hundred proof, And if we believe, then so it will be, And old Woody grinned up from his cypress knee.

He said "Willing blindness is foreign to me, My house is high up in that tupelo gum tree. And all I can say is that when the flood comes, I'll be dry way above where the water runs."

"For I have adapted – this home is for me, The flood plain is where I evolved to be, Now you humans better get it together The future will be full of nasty weather."

So welcome to Earth Church, Pull yourself up a pew, And make sure it can float To extricate you.

To some extent, these concepts are a bit abstract – using carbon and water cycles, making room for the river. So, let's bring it a bit closer to home – literally to our homes – and talk about the American yard, one of my favorite lecture topics at Rice, one that holds the attention of my students.

The American yard is a monoculture, usually of a non-native grass, an ecological foreign entity that does not fit ecologically with life in our region. And then we continually cut it, causing it to lose internal fluids and become open to pests, weakening it. To keep it alive, we pour nitrogen and

phosphorus and pesticides and herbicides upon it and water it constantly. We kill most organisms in the soil, wiping it clean of life.

At least in part, I think the American yard came from a desire of humans to dominate nature, to control it, and that is not part of Earth Church philosophy. Here, we try to understand the Earth and to work with it, not against it. We are about understanding how the Earth works and incorporating those aspects into our lives, into our social systems, into our communities, into our concept of life and living. So also should it be with our yard.

One time I offered my view of the American yard at a speech in southeast Texas, and after the talk, the mayor of Beaumont, Texas, came up to me and asked me if I was a communist. What an interesting question – am I communist because I dared to question our style of life – to question the cut, cultivated, herbicided, pesticided lifeless monoculture that defines so much about us. Communist indeed.

the YARD

I know it's a topic that hits some hard, But we need to talk frankly about the yard, It's not 'cause I hate the mowing machine, It's just that our yards are not very "green."

Just think of the grass that we cut and re-cut, Ecologically speaking, it's a bit of an insult, It's never allowed to reach an end point, Never to reach climax, never un-spoiled.

When cut, the bugs and disease race in, We spray with pesticide to cut it again, The grass needs water – the hose keeps flowing To again be cut – water keeps it regrowing.

The yard's not cool from an ecological perspective, The grass not from here, it's not interactive, We need to support local fauna and flora, That turf grass is a gift from the box of Pandora.



Why does someone have a lawn at their place? Do we really use all that carefully mowed space? I would argue that the yard is a social thing, Not something we need but rather like bling.

If the yard is just popular for its appearance, Creative ways exist to show ecological brilliance, Good design lets aesthetic goals be met, Make the transition gradual to avoid the fret. And the homeowner's association can be a pain, A property rights advocate might consider this refrain, It's my land and my right to do what I wish, If you don't like it, well, you know what to kiss.

At Earth Church we recommend a gentler approach, We work from love which is beyond reproach, Bottom line – eventually the yard must change, Over time our priorities we must rearrange.

So welcome to Earth Church, Pull yourself up a pew, Here we pray that the yard Becomes ecologically true.

Our ecological systems deserve some attention in this discussion of lessons for moving forward. I think that being a part of a living planet demands adopting solutions that respect life and other living things. As pointed out above, one of the biggest problems with the American yard is that it is a killing zone for other living things. So is our economic system and that must change.

Our living systems should support other living systems. Period. End of story, except in this case, it is the beginning of a new way of thinking, a new approach. Once we begin to think in terms of cycles and circles and reducing and then not making waste, we should also begin to think about how we are interacting within the circles and cycles of other living things and try to minimize our disruption of those cycles as well. Here, the focus should be on the scale of the linkage of ecosystems, the connections that living things need from one place to another. Just as we have rivers that flow with water, so do we also have rivers that flow with life. We no longer have the great migration of buffalo wandering across the prairies, but we do have the rivers of migratory birds that move from north to south and then back again, and we must incorporate these rivers into our maps, into our geography, into our concepts of development.

Just as there are areas that should not be developed because we must make room for the river, so also should we make room for migratory

birds and fish and other living things whose life cycle requires that they spend time in different ecological systems. And while some might consider this a restriction, it is also a powerful recognition of place, of how we humans interact with our ecological systems, with other living things. And in the process, we might learn something about living with each other.

the SCARLET TANAGER

It happened during the spring migration, During the annual birding conflagration, We were walking and looking into the trees, The morning air stirred by a light sea breeze.

Barbed wire hung slack from an old fence post, A property abandoned with no host, And past the post a wetland lay hidden, I continued on as it was not forbidden.

Beneath the hackberries, a palmetto spread, Onto the water like a lily pad, A dark green mat within shadowed space, A scene with style, a scene with grace.

Peering in, I was quickly rewarded to see, A red and black bird on the leaf before me, It could barely stand upon the frond, A weakened being that had found the pond.

The white sand was glued to its red breast, From an exhausted landing back on the beach, Testament to the ordeal just completed, Testament that it would not be defeated.

The wetland's a lifeline to the migrant, A weary traveler, a life aspirant, One of the millions that fly the river, So many birds it gives me a shiver.



By happenstance the wetland had remained here, A place of importance, a place to cheer, Without it the tanager would surely perish, But it was here – a sight to cherish.

The fate of these migrants is dependent upon us, Are we willing to fight, to make a fuss? To set land aside for these lovely creatures? To preserve a chapel with its life-giving features?

So welcome to Earth Church, Pull yourself up pew, Say a prayer for the wetland, And for yourself too. And then once you have the basic concepts, there is the issue of implementing them, of taking something that was developed under the old rules and making something new of it – something truly special.

Houston is a town that has never been mired in its history. It destroys the old to create the new. Up until this point in time, it has taken up new challenges and survived. It is a working-class town and a money town. It is a place of immigrants. It is a place of oil and gas and plastics. It is a place on a precipice.

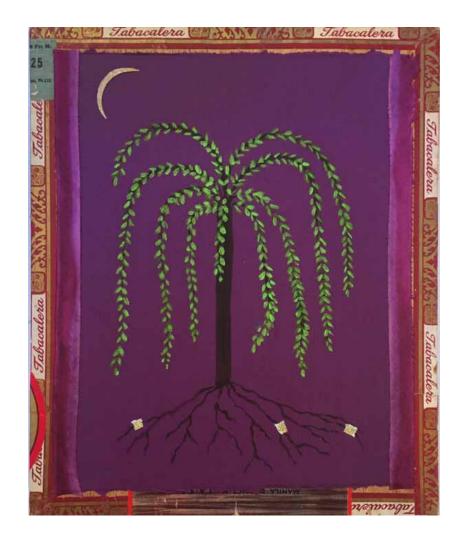
These forces of change – these challenges of the future – are potentially ominous for Houston and for many other cities along the Gulf coast of the United States. Addressing carbon dioxide has been fought for decades by oil and gas interests, many of whom are major Houston institutions. The changes to the plastics industry affect major employers through the Texas and Louisiana coast. The flooding will worsen as the climate changes.

On the other hand, in spite of neglect, the ecological system of the upper Texas coast is amazingly intact, resilient. There is certainly time to make the changes that are necessary. The chairman of our local business leadership institution recently suggested the heretical thought that Houston should become a thought and implementation leader – a hub for the transition to a low carbon future. From serious carbon emitter to low carbon in a decade. Can this cat really change its spots?

I believe it both can and will. The desire to survive is powerful. And interestingly, survival requires that we go with, rather than against, our Earth systems. The forces are converging in defense of Earth. Long may Houston live along with Buffalo Bayou, that amazing little brown waterway that in so many ways defines it.

the WEEPING WILLOW

I see a weeping willow on Buffalo Bayou, Old and wise – it has often been cried to, It's watched many things come and go, But such is life on Buffalo Bayou.



It watched Houston grow thru oil boom and bust, As towns further north formed the belt of rust, The Space City moniker reflected an era When Houston excelled, well-played, without error.

But now that the 21st Century has arrived, Houston will be challenged to economically survive, Our ticket to success must change with the times, We need to listen and look for the signs.

We need to pay attention when someone says, The oil and gas industry is facing new days, We need to get serious about our carbon footprint, And for that we need a carbon-neutral blueprint.

And the wise old willow leans over the flow, And basks in the sun, feeling its glow, Welcoming the heron to come sit on its branch, And with a willow smile, my concerns stanch.

The willow reflects thoughtfully, "It's all about place. Remember that Houston can compete in the race, As soon as we value ecology as we should, Houston will excel and be healthy and good."

And the willow grins as the wind has its way, And the boughs above Buffalo begin to sway, I sit by its trunk and connect with my friend, "It's circular," he says, "We end to begin."

So Houston now comes back around, A new path it seeks, a new one found, And we all should embrace our circular economy, And redesign Houston in tune with ecology.

So welcome to Earth Church Pull yourself up a pew And pray that the willow Has some wisdom for you.

These are only some of the ideas that come from the Earth. The lessons are many and the topics of continuing interest. And there many new ways to keep our families fed and the economy rolling. But we have to be creative and we have to have faith in what we are doing.

Earth Church is about faith in the Earth, in its ways, in its wisdom. Learn from it. Work with it. Be with it, with gratitude for life and being – with love.



SEVEN

The Earth and Christianity

his discussion of Earth Church inevitably raises the question of its relationship to Christianity and other religions. It should be clearly understood that Earth Church is a spiritual expression but not a religion which is defined as a system of faith and worship. There is no system *per se* to Earth Church, but simply experience and belief.

Having said that, there are certainly overlaps between Earth-based spirituality and more recent interpretations of the Old and New Testaments of the Bible. And while the building blocks are from the Old Testament, things get really creative in the interpretations of the New Testament, particularly the book of *Revelation*.

I got interested in Christian theology about the Earth a few years after I adopted Galveston Bay as my higher power. I was intrigued by how religion seemed to be missing from the environmental discussion, and I was hoping to find a common ground between some of my legal cases and the jurors, many of whom would be practicing Christians. And as it happened, the late 1980s was a fascinating time for the evolution of Christian theology as many of the denominations of Christianity responded to the thenupcoming Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 which was one of the most important international assemblages ever on behalf of the environment.

Some very important religious environmental writings were produced prior to this conference. I remember having a Rice student working with me over the summer who wrote every Christian denomination along with Jewish organizations and Hindus, Buddhists and Muslims looking for environmental

position papers. I still have the folder that we put together of the material that we collected.

Christian thinking about humans and the environment had been subjected to a major attack back in 1967 when Lynn White published an article in *Science* magazine titled "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis." In this article, Dr. White attacked Christianity and declared it must change from being so human-centered. Subsequent to that article, reinterpretation of Christian Scriptures, doctrine, and worship practices began to occur, first at the theological level and then at the organizational level.

The changes have been both subtle and important. The starting point has always been "care for creation." From Genesis it is known that God looked at the creation and said, "It is Good." And if God's creation is good, who are we to alter that creation. And when it comes to care for creation, St. Francis of Assisi comes forward.

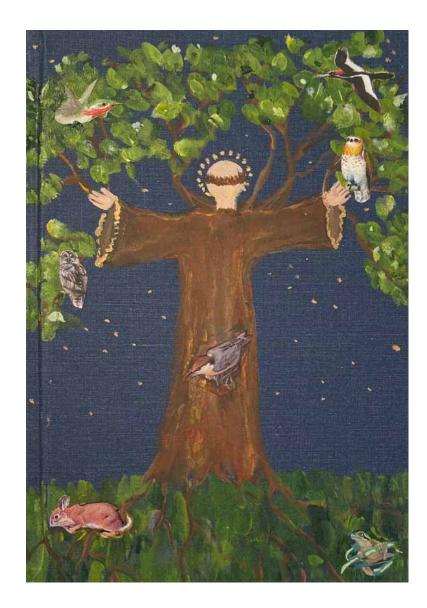
St. Francis lived in the 1200s and among other things was known for his love for creatures large and small. So, let's start this chapter with a poem to St. Francis who became the patron saint of ecologists by issuance of a papal bull by Pope John Paul II in 1979.

ST. FRANCIS and the BIRDS

St. Francis of Assisi was a holy man, And of nature, it is true, he was fan, The creation was good, and he was pure, And about its protection, he was sure.

St. Francis was about peace with creation, The birds they filled him with elation, He would gleefully join them in song, And they would not flee but sing along.

At another time, a town was in fear, A nasty wolf roamed the woods that were near, But St. Francis went and tamed the beast, Decrying its hunger, he said give it a feast.



St. Francis often praised Sir Brother Sun That brings us light when night is done, Chasing the stars and Sister Moon To bring us all a lovely afternoon.

And then he talks of brothers wind and air Are they bringing weather stormy or fair? And what of Sister Water and Brother fire? Do they get together and conspire?

But most of all he loves Mother Earth The best of the best, with great worth, For she has the greatest gift to give, For Mother Earth allows us all to live.

So St. Francis and I walk and talk to the birds, And work together to find the right words To let everyone join with us in praise Of God and creation – with us – always.

St. Francis is now my patron saint, I hope his reputation not to taint, As I engage in my spiritual wandering, Thoroughly enjoying metaphysical pondering.

So welcome to Earth Church, Pull yourself up a pew, St. Francis belongs here, And so do you.

Care for the Creation or Earth-keeping has emerged as a common starting point for the evolution of Christian thinking on the environment. However, Genesis 1:28 is a trouble spot in this journey of re-interpretation, particularly the phrase where God gave Adam and Eve dominion over nature.

Dominion is a strong word. Decades ago, I was presenting on this subject at Penn State University, and I was discussing how the word dominion was defined as control or rule over nature and how that had been re-interpreted as "keeping" the Garden, acting in a way more akin to New Testament stewardship. And this young woman comes up to me afterwards and asked if I had ever translated these words from Hebrew? I admitted I had not, and she informed me that the literal translation was to subdue – to put your foot on the neck and push. Harsh.

As it turns out, four Hebrew words are used to describe dominion – the central word being radah meaning rule, with the other three words – kabash (subdue), abad (till) and shamar (keep) – being modifiers explaining what is meant by rule. Earth-keeping is certainly within the concept of dominion, but it is not the only interpretation. So keeping the garden has come to be one view of dominion that is consistent with Biblical words and meaning. Carla Pryne, an episcopal priest, wrote to me of the theologian Sallie McFague who went a bit further, saying that if we were created in the image of God, then we are called upon to mirror God's love for all creatures. Love the world as the Creator loved the world and all within it. What a lovely concept. What a gentle concept – a concept of sustaining and maintaining nature, of spreading love for Creation, of keeping the garden – of keeping the Earth.

of BEES and BEINGS

She goes to the garden to live life today, Keeping the bees, massaging the clay, Working with that which she's been given, Ensuring it's kept in the best condition.

In the garden she encounters life on the wing, One of many gifts Mother Nature can bring, She sits back and reflects on creation wisdom, And perceives her life through a new prism.

She's grateful to be here on planet Earth, For here living life has great worth, This creation of Genesis is what she's seeing, It's the only game – the source of all being.

You see it's the Earth that keeps us alive, And also allows the hive to thrive, The bottom line is that Earth is essential, For bees and beings, it's totally spiritual.

I come to the garden to walk its path, I love this creation, this holy bath, An immersion of the soul, pure and clear, A sacred impression both real and sincere.

When I'm lost or adrift, I come to the garden, To seek solutions, to make a bargain, To find the pathway to the stoop of my soul, Here I come to be well, to be made whole.



So I keep the garden as best I can Working the mulch, adding some sand, Stopping to gaze upon the bees, Listening to the wind through the leaves. She and I are together as the sun passes away, Holding hands in the garden, relishing the day, Thankful that we have been given this place, We'll try and keep it a protected space.

So welcome to Earth Church, Pull yourself up a pew, Here keeping the creation, Should be spiritual to you.

Beyond dominion comes the strongest endorsement of Earth-keeping – Noah's ark. What a great image – all of the animals of the Earth two by two coming into the ark to be saved before the great flood. The humans laughed at Noah, but the animals came and were saved.

I have great sympathy with Noah's social condition. I am reminded a bit about some of the responses to our computer modeling at the Severe Storm Center at Rice. We talk about and analyze these big storms, and it seems at times to be met with derision. You can see the faces responding with an "are you serious" look on their faces. And some of these storms like Harvey and Imelda do seem to have rains of Biblical proportion. But I digress.

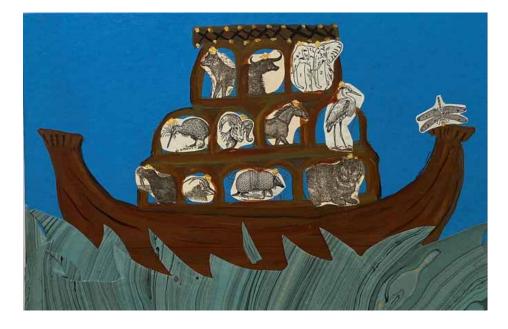
The thought that God saved the animals along with Noah and his family is a point that should be carefully considered in the context of endangered species protection. In fact, the Evangelical Environmental Network considers the Endangered Species Act to be the Noah's Ark of our times. That is a strong statement of support for an act that has been under recent political attack.

So come and float with me and Noah on the ark.

NOAH'S ARK

I'm a stowaway here on Noah's Ark, I'm next to a dog with a growly bark, The donkey is neighing, the pig squealing, It's a sense of adventure that I am feeling.

The thunder has just begun to roar, It shook the boards, it shook the floor, My cup runneth over from the leaks, The sides are swelling, this vessel creaks.



The rain's been coming now for over a day, I got a look outside – the river's a bay, There's water all over this man's Earth, Oh my what I'd give for home and hearth.

It's been three days now and it's getting rank, These lower levels are not very swank, The goats are crawling all over the place, The elephants are antsy – they lack enough space.

And now birds are flying everywhere, But the rain has stopped, are we getting near? To where I know not – no sense of direction, Noah's searching for land – no hesitation.

He sends out a dove to find some trees, She returns with naught on the evening breeze, The water is everywhere I can see, These conditions are conducive to misery. The seventh day's dove finds the olive branch, Which upon first sight our fears did stanch, Hope is emerging, the water's receding, We all are good, the plan's succeeding.

So Noah saved the animals of the creation, And the ark was a roaring successful sensation, And God gave a clear and expert statement, Protect all animals without resentment.

So welcome to Earth Church, Pull yourself up a pew, Here we protect all animals, To be here for you.

After Noah, we go to Psalms, where David writes about love, about beauty, about nature. Psalm 24:1 is very clear – the Earth is the Lord's. Period. This is God's Earth. Who are we to ruin it? Strong stuff from the poet, and there is more. Psalm 89 repeats that the Earth is the Lord's – he founded it, the rivers and sea; they are his.

Perhaps the best is Psalm 104, which seems to be saying, in a poetic manner, that the Earth is the manifestation of God. Light is the clothing of God, it surrounds him. The beams come to water, encompassing it. He rides the clouds like a chariot. His messengers and ministers are wind and fire. The Earth is God's foundation – a term used in the Bible to refer to a sacred, holy base. Reading this Psalm, there can be no doubt that the Earth is God's place if not God himself.

The Book of Psalms is full of expressions of the joy of the Earth, the sounds of water, the ripeness of the tree. Love for the Earth and its abundance overflows from the pages of the Psalms. The poet is pleased with God's Earth just as he believes God is pleased with his Earth. The words are fun. The joy is pure. The color is vivid. The wealth of the Earth amazing.

the PURPLE GALLINULE 2

On the Texas coast driving through the fog, We're next to the marsh, and I hear a bullfrog, Croaking out that it's happy to be alive, And we all settle in for a nice Earth drive.

The fog lies gently upon the flat landscape, We can just see the water body taking shape, The fog moves slowly as the breath of East Bay, The colors are muted – it's all sorta gray.

The droplets move just above dark fresh water, That's home to nutria, alligator and otter, Water caressed by plants on the surface, Where the purple bird walks without disturbance.

The smell. The sight. Aagh – it's all so real, The essence of life is mine to feel, Life like it was back at the beginning, I can see a future without ending.

I am sucked into the marsh's deep-rooted marrow, I am now departing from the straight and narrow, And I land in an interesting spiritual place, David's Psalms I now see and reach to embrace.

This so-called creation when considered wholly, Leads some to believe that the Earth is holy, That the spirit of God pervades Earth's entirety, And creates a concept of holy ecology.

The purple leaf walker raises its head, Then looks back down to the leaf ahead, And walks atop water and into the reeds, Getting on with meeting its daily needs.



I leave feeling cleansed by the dew of the air, I've been touched by something with a special flair, My connection to Earth has pumped up my spirit, I'm restored, unconstrained, a man with no limit.

So welcome to Earth Church, Pull yourself up a pew, Say a prayer that the Earth Will embrace you too.

As one moves from the Old Testament to the New, Jesus Christ becomes the central figure. One of Christ's key characteristics was his concern for the common person and reform of a corrupt system. One key thing that I remember from Christian reading other than the crucifixion and resurrection is Jesus chasing the money changers from the temple. It's not that changing money per se was wrong but that the way it was practiced – the location of the activity – interfered with access to the sacred space.

Jesus cared for the common person and acted to change that which was wrong, that which was not working. And, of course, he did it in the

times within which he lived. Like so many things in the Bible, it is not so much the exact facts of the situation but rather the example, the metaphor, the thinking behind the action, that is of importance.

Romans 8:22 talks of the creation groaning in the grip of childbirth. What an image – the Earth being born – a physical and social system living, failing, and then making the corrections needed to adjust from sinful ways. Here is expressed the hope of Creation being removed from its bondage to corruption. How apt. Removing corruption, cleaning up pollution, developing a new economic system all fall within the broad imagery of change set forth in the New Testament, change that is direly needed today.

Jesus was a reformer. Jesus was gentle and kind. Jesus cared for people and for the creation. And as is often the case, the status quo was hard to change, leading to his crucifixion by the Romans. There is much for us to find today in this imagery of change, imagery that has been used as a basis for the development of the Christian environmental movement, a movement that often lacks a voice locally where the local establishment may be a bit reluctant to "remove the money changers from the temple," so to speak.

the FALL PRAIRIE

Summer's flowers have come and gone, The stalks are standing, yet seem alone, The freezing touch of winter just arrived, Summer's success soon to be nullified.

Change is upon us, I feel it coming, The drums are loud, the strings strumming, The climate-changed winds more common now I must find the will to change somehow.

I think on Jesus coming into the temple, Where the money changers used to assemble, Changing a long, established practice, Acting to restore, correcting the axis.



So what today must we act to change? What should we alter and rearrange? It's not just to act without reason or rhyme, But learning to live in a challenging time.

We have to reduce our carbon footprint, We humans are leaving too much of an imprint, We need to support those who seek new ways, We must make up for our wasted days.

Prairie plants are committed – no retreat, Their course is set, they are not meek, And in early spring the green sprouts pop up, Spurred by the rain from the good Earth's cup.

Change does not happen at the time of the act, Society is vast – it takes time to react, Ripples sent out bounce back over time, Change happens in ways often sublime.

When I see the brown of the prairie in winter, I see a marathon runner, not a sprinter, For the brown grass today is an Earth strategy, As is changing our footprint our modern reality.

So welcome to Earth Church, Pull yourself up a pew, Say a prayer that your actions Will be revealed to you.

No concept of Christian environmental thinking is more clearly understood or celebrated than is stewardship. The steward is responsible for the care or the household and all that is within it, and the household has been interpreted very broadly to be the whole of creation. Interestingly, the root word for stewardship is oikos or oikonomia in Greek, which is also the root for ecology and economy. This is not coincidental as these concepts are related. The whole is the household.

Biblical stewardship has many components. The Earth is God's and has been entrusted to us. We are stewards of the Earth. We must be worthy of God's trust. And according to some, we will be called to account for how we managed God's assets, including specifically the Earth. And there is a reward for managing the accounts well. As stated in Mathew 25:21:

Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!

It is easy to translate these stewardship messages into management of money, of personal and business accounts, into responsible action. It is a bit more abstract to translate this concept into excellent management of the Earth's accounts – keeping the balance that nature has established, keeping all species, protecting habitats, preventing pollution. All of these activities fall within good stewardship, a great concept seldom celebrated for all its power in defense of the Earth, if celebrated at all.

the GOLDEN-FRONTED WOODPECKER 3

Walking down the road and the Hill Country's dry, I look up for hope, and there's not a cloud in the sky, The grass no longer green but turning yellow, And then I hear the call of a happy fellow.

Ratta tat tat – ratta tat tat – the sound is clear, The golden-fronted woodpecker is somewhere near, There he is – I see him – on the telephone pole, Head pecking away to reach his goal.

The woodpecker and I look at the ranch nearby, And the owner we hereby declare a good guy, For the land that he owns has been set aside, And a whole lot of money he let slide.

Those 2000 acres are conserved in perpetuity, And the owner was clear – there is no ambiguity, Profit foregone – some would say he's berserk, But his duty as a land steward he did not shirk.

Mr. Gold-front and I salute land protectors, Those amongst us who help address the specters, Of this chapel of the Earth being cut into pieces With the forests cleared and groundwater leases.

He and I think there's not enough recognition, Of the stewards amongst us who with cognition, Find a higher calling than making the most money, But instead reach out to the bird and the bunny.

Stewardship's a concept that comes from religion, But it's also an action that Texans can envision, Love of the land comes from deep in the heart, But long-term protection we need to kick start.



Mr. Gold-front and I conclude our conversation, And I continue my walk with love and celebration, Defense of the Earth by unselfish action, Knowing acts of stewardship will bring satisfaction.

So welcome to Earth Church, Pull yourself up a pew, And say a prayer for the steward For we appreciate you. One of the most impressive writings about Christian environmental thinking came from Pope Francis with the publication of his encyclical *Laudato Si'* which was written about care for our common home. In 2015 when it was published, Pope Francis was very concerned about climate change and particularly about the impact that it had on the poor, those least able to absorb these impacts, the Biblical "least of these."

I find this focus interesting in several regards. First, as I re-read Biblical passages in writing this piece, I am struck about Jesus as a man of the common person. He was not about privilege or money or currying favor with those in power. He was about feeding hungry people and reaching out to the common person. He was about love and taking care of brothers and sisters.

This translates into a wide environmental movement around environmental justice, about treating all fairly, about giving help to others, about putting out a helping hand. We are all busy these days. We often don't seem to have time for our family much less others, but others need help in many different ways.

Covid perhaps did more about reminding us of each other's needs than any single event I can imagine. But acting to protect others, to consider others in our choice of action, is right out of the New Testament. That was a primary message of Jesus, and one that often seems lost.

From an environmental standpoint, no issue is more important or more damaging to the poor and infirm than is climate change. By acting to address our part in climate change, we collectively can make a difference by lending our voice, by spending our money in certain ways, by acting in the long term to get our economic system back on a course that is good for us all.

After releasing *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis assembled a meeting of major oil and financial executives at the Vatican and spoke to them about climate, about their need to act. And not long after that in January 2020, the financial giant BlackRock indicated that it was changing its investment practices, and that announcement and subsequent policy changes have transformed the landscape for climate reform, culminating in demands for board membership change and carbon plans. And for that, we all owe the Pope a big thank you.

HELP 3

Help – I can't stand on my feet, Help – my voice is weak, Help – I have nothing to eat, Help – I'm feeling beat.

And then a hand comes out to me, A hand providing connectuality, That wonderful link between me and you, A connection to help me make it too.

We all need help whether we admit or not, Alone with despair is not a good spot, It is not weak to ask for assist, Don't live without help – it will be missed.

I open my Bible and look at the text, To try to see what I should do next, And I read of Jesus helping the poor, I vow to act, to become a doer.

I know climate change will most hurt those Who lack for food, who need better clothes, Those who have the least chance to change, Those most unable their lives to rearrange.

I know I can act – I'll change what I can, I know it's the right step for a faith-based man, One whose strength can be used by others, One who will help his sisters and brothers.

The Earth nurtures me – it gives me a lift, A link, a connection, the ultimate gift, I just walked out and looked at the sky, And kissed the sun as the clouds passed by.



Help is there if we just look and ask, It is not that hard, it's no great task, Pope Francis has set major change in motion, That help will come is more than a notion.

So go visit a Church, Pull yourself up a pew, May they read the scriptures And act on them too.

As I considered more deeply the evolving view of Earth-based Christian theology, I met and talked with many different people, and among those was a Lutheran minister who presided over a church near Rice University. Over lunch at the faculty club, we discussed theology, and I was pressing him on what he considered to be some of the most interesting evolving views of Christian environmental thinking.

After considering the question a moment, he responded that he thought some of the new thinking about the Christian Trinity might be his favorite. Here, he explained, the key is that there is God the father, God the son and God the Holy Spirit. It was the Holy Spirit that had captured his attention and his imagination. According to some, the Holy Spirit inhabits the Earth – the Earth is not just created by God but is a physical manifestation of the Holy Spirit. It is God.

Wow. That is a strong statement. God is everywhere – in the trees, the clouds, the rain, the mole, the slug, the bird that flies and sings, the bear that grunts, the human that stumbles along the path of life. I must admit that this image is wonderful. I consider the Earth sacred. I consider life to be sacred. It is special, unique to Earth. It makes sense that it would be God. But I never thought it was God, and certainly was never taught that it might be the manifestation of God.

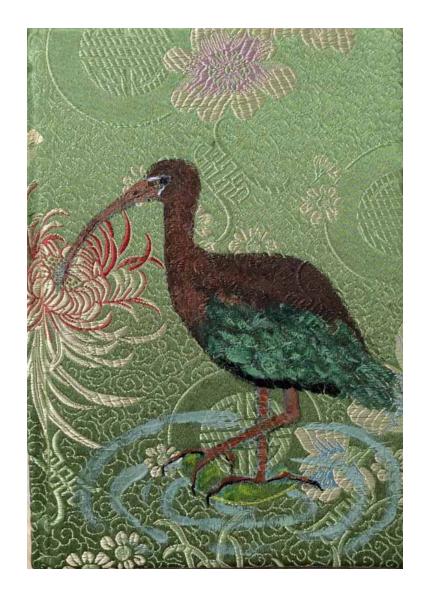
the WHITE-FACED GLOSSY IBIS 2

A cathedral lies behind the clay chenier, Here wetlands exist without a peer, Wetlands that glisten in the October sun, Inviting me to enjoy Earth spiritual fun.

Blue water is filled with grasses green, Here all types of waders can be seen, The roseate pink, the ibis white, The yellow footed snowy grabbing a bite.

But the ibis glossy is today's feature, Such a wonderful, gentle, graceful creature That flies in formation, landing with skill, To probe the mud with that lovely curved bill.

I've read that some believe the Earth Manifests God throughout its girth, A part of the concept of the Christian Trinity, This wetland a part of pervasive divinity.



It's the breath of what we irreverent youth, Called the Holy Ghost, albeit uncouth, God's essence spread amongst the reeds, God's essence sprouting from the seeds.

There are those who think the Earth a church, A sanctuary found after life-long search, A place to come for spiritual food, Fuel for the soul, and that is good.

This wetland lies a bit out of the way, And this is where I let my spirit play, And whether or not this wetland is God, My soul and spirit give it a nod.

The Earth is alive, and it must be sacred, It's my higher power, and it was fated, That the Earth and I become connected, Allowing me to experience spirituality perfected.

So welcome to Earth Church, Pull yourself up a pew, Here the wetland's a cathedral, That will welcome you.

And then, there is the last book in the Bible, the Book of *Revelation*, the playground of the evangelicals, the home of the apocalypse. But what is the apocalypse? Is it the end? Or is it just the beginning of another phase – a pulling back of the cloaks, of the curtains that conceal a better phase?

The word apocalypse means the revealing of divine mysteries, although anyone reading this book will be left with a cloak of mystery. Some interpret the Book of *Revelation* as an allegory of creation, fall, judgment, and redemption. That interpretation is certainly relevant to the current times and problems.

One can take a four-step view of climate change. We had an Earth with a climate suitable for humans with a carbon dioxide level just below 300 parts per million. Our fall is represented by the increase in carbon dioxide to almost 420 parts per million. Our judgment is coming today in the form of more intensive storms and droughts, flooding and sea level rise. And redemption lies before us.

So what is redemption? Redemption will involve the creation of a new economy to protect and restore our ecology, a realigning of our imbalance, the creation of a New Jerusalem as prophesied in *Revelations*. Out of this misery, these problems, will come an economy that is in sync with the circles and cycles of the Earth, a shape changer, a phoenix rising from the ashes, a realization of the Earth/human relationship that God had in mind.



the MONARCH LIFE CYCLE

The yellow and black caterpillar's work is done, The butterfly weed stripped, laid bare, undone, Surrounded by nutrition at their place of birth, Landing in a restaurant on arrival on Earth.

Consider the caterpillar, the plant and change, When denuding's completed, each must re-arrange, One to the chrysalis, to reincarnate, The other growing leaves back before it's too late.

One day I see it as I approach the door, The small, green container high above the floor, Hanging from the sill – a delight for my wife, We are there to observe as it comes to life.

The passenger's released, wings yet to dry, Waiting, wings moving, then meeting the sky, Achieving first flight, displaying its fitness, A new life launched that our eyes did witness.

In dreams I see the Texas coast below me, Our coastal landscape screaming a plea, A huge caterpillar's coming – eating and growing, Both entities doomed because they're unknowing.

To prevent the coast from going amiss, The caterpillar must learn to make a chrysalis, The tools are ecology, spirituality and resilience, And the sun will shine brightly on economic brilliance.

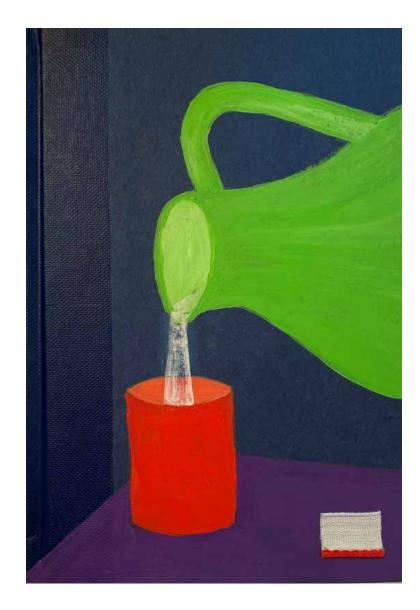
I look to the monarch to guide us, to inspire, Enabling our change to the circular spire, A place where disparate pieces reach synchrony, Nature and economy at peace, in harmony.

I look to the Earth to find the wisdom To help us create a nature-based kingdom, And I look to the monarch to show us the way, To change our shape and survive today.

So welcome to the new Church, Pull yourself up a pew, Pray that shape-changing enables A better future for you.

I have not experienced very many Christian services that exemplify Earth-based spirituality. Although the theology may be well established, the implementation of the theology – the practice of the theology – has not made it to many of our local churches who often worry about the response of the parishioners to a message a bit different than the norm.

There is, however, one service that I vividly remember which involved Carla Pryne, an Episcopal minister from Washington State, who made a presentation about water to a group of us assembled in the Rothko Chapel in Houston, a presentation that left us all spellbound, wanting to drink again and again from the pitcher that she wielded like a sword of environmental spiritual truth.



the WATER SERVICE

We gathered in Houston at the Rothko Chapel, Water was the subject we had come to tackle, Water that keeps us all alive, Water that allows economies to thrive.

Water we often take for granted, Water disputed, water demanded, Water that abates my body's thirst, Water that's gone if you are not first.

She takes a pitcher and holds it high, And releases the water with a sigh, A ribbon flowing from pitcher to glass, Appearing translucent, a ribbon of gas?

We in the room could hear the sound, Of water being contained, being bound, The glass filling up, the pitcher set down, Then the glass rising, the water drunk down.

And in this motion a truth was told, This water spirit will help me to become old, I am one with the source, a liquid connection, The Trinity exists, a form of resurrection.

And never again would I see water the same, This was no plaything, this was no game, Water is the essence of all our lives, The basis, the source by which one survives.

The minister brought us water that was holy, Not by a blessing but by a composition wholly And completely begun and ended in a circle, What a great feat, what a great hurdle.

And to this day I remember that pour, About how I seemed to float out the door, Touched by something nice and magical, Something that inspires me to be evangelical.

So welcome to Earth Church, Pull yourself up a pew, Fill your glass with water, And slake the thirst within you. So, let's celebrate the water, wind and sun, the moon and the stars, the birds and the butterflies and all in between and beyond, in the name of the father, the son and the Holy Spirit, which is amongst us, everywhere, Amen.



EIGHT The Politics of Earth Church

he virus vigil did not start off to be political. The audience for the vigil crossed all types of political lines, and Isabelle and I were reaching out to comfort people, to connect with people, and it seemed wrong to bring political views into the discussion. But it became more and more difficult to keep politics out of the vigil during the last year of Donald Trump's presidency.

To a person, the recipients of the virus vigil were concerned for their health. At the beginning, we wanted to know more and more about the virus, about how it spreads, about the science behind it. The more we sought answers, the more we experienced political theatre without fact, without information, guided by belief rather than science. When we wanted comfort through truth, we got rhetoric that drove us crazy.

This political theatre had been building for some time in subjects other than the virus. The Earth had never been a part of President Trump's agenda. Efforts to address climate change that took over a decade to pass were rendered meaningless. Laws to protect wetlands were altered as were rules in almost every area of environmental law. Band aids were ripped off. The old, marginal economy was supported rather than transitioned to the one required for the future success of the United States.

And then there was the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis on May 25, 2020, leading to riots and outrage and the Black Lives Matter movement. Once again, forces for change were exploding, and I believe it was largely because of the national political scene. As we got further into 2020, it became more and more clear that this situation was reminiscent of the

1960s, when civil rights, Vietnam and the environmental movement came together.

Vietnam was the worst political situation I have ever endured. To begin with, my life was at risk as I was prime draft material upon graduation from college. Additionally, and perhaps more importantly, my view of the country was challenged, and my views of politicians ultimately changed forever. My father and mother were patriots who believed in the government, in what the United States stood for, and I had to face the reality that my government in the mid to late 1960s was lying to me.

What was I – what were we – to do? Condone the lie? Offer our lives in support of the lie? It was the most uncomfortable situation I ever faced – one that challenged who I was and what I believed. It was gut-wrenching. I remember a photograph taken at the University of Texas by my friend Johnny Harrison showing President Johnson with the advisors that had kept him in the war just as they had advised President Kennedy to wage war in Vietnam. Shame on them all.

But back to today. By the 4th of July 2020 it had become apparent that politics and the people of the United States were heading for a horrible collision. It was on Day 105 of the Virus Vigil that politics moved front and center as a part of Earth Church. Here a central question emerged – what is a patriot in this day and time? What is a patriotic act? What political action should I as a person spiritually in tune with Earth Church follow? What party if any? Or should a new one be created?

PATRIOTIC BIRDS

It's the 4th of July amidst the Covid pandemic, A time of concern with an enemy pathogenic, So, what is patriotic in this time of distress? 'Cause patriotism gets tricky, I must confess.

I think back on Vietnam and not wanting to go, Of being told it's unpatriotic to be a no show, But a patriotic act in the midst of that fuss, Was calling out the government that lied to us.



So, I meet my advisors on red, white, and blue, The bunting, the cardinal and the ibis are true, And I seek their input on this 4th of July, And I want the truth – don't feed me no lie.

The bird in blue starts off shaking his head, And asks why the country wants its old people dead? Why were people gathering without masks? "Why weren't they protected," the bunting asks?

And then the ibis puts her beak in the air, "A patriot is a person who possesses care For the whole of society both rich and poor, But its hard work often lacking grandeur."

And then the cardinal raises his crown, And talks of the carbon to be stored in the ground, Saying "A spiritual center can help meet goals, And aids navigating treacherous shoals."

They all concur that a patriot confronts wrong, That challenging abuse fills the patriot's song, It means looking out for all parts of the nation, Including birds and bunnies – a real revelation.

In this time of Covid, the virus brings us together, We can and we must altogether do better, The red, white, and blue birds wrap their wings around us, And ask that we all chant the following chorus:

So welcome to Earth Church Pull yourself up a pew Sing the song of the patriot Wrapped in red, white, and blue.

There is no reason why those who support one party, or one person, are the only ones who can call themselves patriots. I am a patriotic citizen of the United States as are the members of Earth Church with whom I have spoken. We are liberal and conservative. We all love the land. All of us want to see this country succeed, and we believe it will succeed if certain points of view become the norm, but those points of view are not well incorporated into today's political system.

First and perhaps foremost, is the need for change. Earth Church is about change on many different levels. It is about respect for the Earth. It is about truth and honesty, about science. It is about fairness and equity among humans as well as with other living things. It is about action in the face of fear. It is about conviction. All of these imply change.

And of course, no issue required change to the extent that the coronavirus did. We became isolated. Most of us wore masks willingly but without glee. Businesses were closed. We worked from home. Jobs were lost. People were hurting. The virus was a change agent, both personally and politically. Change is interesting. Humans don't do it well. We all have routines. Certain patterns are comfortable. Those who are making money under the current economic system see no reason to adopt a different system. Those wanting the different system don't have the money to support the change in the political system. All of the weight of society and of politics is on maintaining the status quo, a weight that requires a spiritual voice in order to move it.

PULLING CHANGE 2

Change – does it instill fear? Change – does it generate a tear? Change – will it happen this year? Change – listen up now, you hear.

Change – why is it so hard? Change – will it leave me scarred? Change – will it lead to the graveyard? Change – buckle up – en garde.

Change – why do we do it? Change – can I just do a little bit? Change – must my ego submit? Change – just get on with it.

Would it help if I had a change puller? A fire for change that made my urge fuller? A figure to stoke me when my fire's weak? A figure to pull and help my tired feet?

When my feet tire, I reach out to the birds, And from them comes the energy to write the words That might help us address our changing climate And power my commitment into a blasting rocket.

So, I reach out to my friend the whooping crane, Who I recruit to help me stay sane, And pull my fire when it's too heavy for me, And along the way to keep me company.

So, pull, my friend, pull, Pull my fire for change, Stoke the fire of my imagination, And my priorities rearrange.



And when the day's done, And we've completed our run, Come and lay down beside me, And just let us be.

So welcome to Earth Church Pull yourself up a pew Here we spiritually push change And empower it in you.

Earth Church is not and should not be partisan. It should not be about being a Democrat or Republican. When the environmental movement first started in the 1960s, it was a bipartisan effort. That changed in the early 1980s when Republicans felt that the pendulum had swung too far, and that partisan position has extended as a force into the 21st century on platforms and action agendas.

Since that time, protecting the Earth has been a partisan issue, although truth be told, there have been times that the Democrats have not had much interest in pushing an environmental agenda for change – change that might affect union jobs – change that addresses climate and raises fears of depriving citizens of the artifacts of a 21st Century lifestyle lived by those featured in reality shows and advertising.

At Earth Church, we believe that all citizens, all parties, all patriots should be committed to the Earth and to Earth-related action. But make no mistake – we are about action. Given where we are now economically, politically – given the decaying state of the Earth's atmosphere – given our need for a new economy – we have to act.

So first and foremost, Earth Church supports the Earth and action in support of the Earth. Here, the activism envisioned is about being inclusive and focused on systemic change. We will certainly take on individual battles as needed but the focus is on large-scale change.

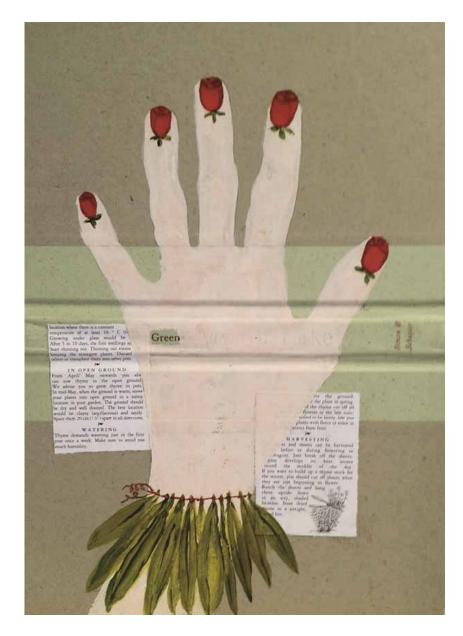
The politics of Earth Church are based in love and are about compassion for life and other living things, about humility rather than hubris, about appreciation and gratitude rather than arrogance and entitlement. I am because of the Earth. Without it, I am not.

TREEHUGGER

"Are you a tree hugger?" was hurled as an insult, Intended to offend, it was hurled by an adult, An effort to denigrate – to make me less, But I wear it with pride upon my vest.

My fingernails tell a story of my love, Affection for nature worn like a glove, I hold them up for the world to see, It is who I am – it's who I be.

I'm a tree hugging being – oh my lord yes, I'm bearing witness, I'm doing my best, I'm attending church by loving the Earth, Hugging leaves and bark for all I'm worth.



My bracelet says that I'm part of the clan That hugs the tree again and again, I pledge my allegiance to the state of nature, And I do it now and don't wait for later. We get all caught up in tribes and nations, About right and wrong in various situations, But the larger picture of the Earth and survival May get lost with noise and chaos's arrival.

That's why I hug trees – it's a clear vision, An act of love with intentional precision, It's not about me and not about you But protecting the Earth in all that we do.

We should have a day of national hugging Rather than continual political mugging, As the sun is setting, we walk to the park, And get up close to some neighborhood bark.

I'll take a magnolia, you take the live oak, And what wonderful energy this act evokes, Now isn't this fun to feel the connection, One with the Earth, a spiritual resurrection.

So call me a tree hugger and see if I care That you hate one who loves good, clean air, And I wish you love and hope that you see, That tree hugging is right for you and me.

So welcome to Earth Church Pull yourself up a pew Say a prayer that a tree hugger Will soon hug you too.

Earth Church is also about voting. If we don't vote, we cannot express our political views, and make no mistake about it, the Earth's future is tied up in politics. And politics can be tough.

I remember talking to a friend about whether he could publicly support a candidate by putting his name on a letter of support, and he said he agreed with the candidate, but could not do it because he got business from the State of Texas and this candidate was from a different party than those in charge of Texas. The point here is to simply emphasize that politics involve hard ball, and we ought to be playing hardball as well. We ought not to vote for any candidate – Republican, Democrat, whatever – who does not support the Earth. But the only way to do that is to make sure that we vote. And to this end, we should support everyone voting.

For the Earth to be protected, we must rally all and suppress none. We must find ways consistent with our philosophy of support for the Earth to be as open and encompassing as possible. And we have to keep a level of income and jobs that will take us from the past to the future. And we have to vote. We all have to participate in the political process in a serious way.

On day 119, I wrote to the "campers" attending "Camp Hideaway" (from the virus) about voting. This came after the realization that patriotism had been hijacked and that we had to take it back through the vote. On this day, my wife Garland and I had just arrived at our place in the Texas Hill Country, and I was reclining on the back porch, listening to my political advisers.

the TUFTED TITMOUSE 2

We're up in Wimberley and it's hot, hot, hot, I just drank some water, and it hit the spot, Watching and waiting after filling the feeder, Looking from the porch at the oaks and cedar.

The grey wisp is moving fast through the limbs, I think it's intelligent, but I guess it depends, Upon whether or not you want its opinion Of the state of the Earth, of its dominion.

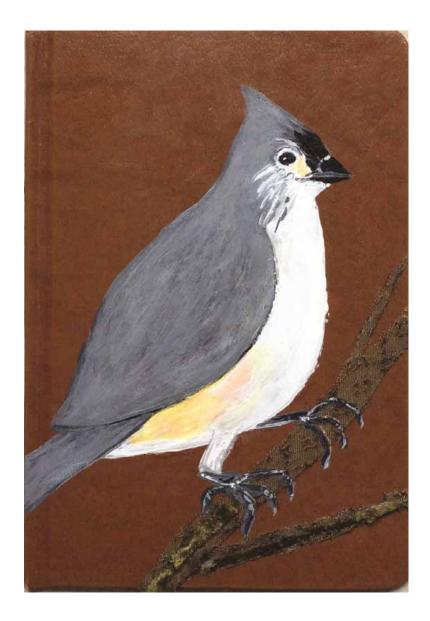
The titmouse looks imperial with the royal tuft, And claims a seed, beginning to be stuffed, Leading the cardinals, scrub jays, and chickadees, My advisors are convening, and I am pleased.

I recline in the chair and become at ease, My body enjoying the creek-cooled breeze, The views of the birds dance over tired eyes, I think I just snored, and I know I sighed.

CHAPTER 8 • THE POLITICS OF EARTH CHURCH 183

I hear the titmouse speaking from the limb, Asking me how things became so grim, Why we dummy humans allow chaos to reign? Asking if we truly have a big brain?

The titmouse, the cardinal and the jay, Come together before me and they say, "It's the election, dummy, and it's coming quick, You must show up – you can't call in sick."



I woke in a sweat and consulted the calendar, I was challenged for words and spoke the vernacular, "Hot damn, the bird's right" I yelled to the porch, "Let's take up the challenge. Let's carry the torch."

My advisors have tasked me to get in gear To pick up my weapons and go chunk a spear, So I'll start working today to get out the vote And find a way to keep Earth values afloat.

So welcome to Earth Church Pull yourself up a pew Pray the coming election Has a vote for you.

In the midst of all of this chaos a thought emerged that originated in a meeting I had in New Mexico about paying landowners to store carbon in the ground. In talking with a group called the Quivira Coalition, one of the participants mentioned a concept called the Radical Center, and the idea has intrigued me since that time.

The word radical connotes many images, often negative, although the official definition ties the word to the concept of change. Imagine that – you are a radical if you want change. There was no pejorative context to the definition of radical, a pejorative which has come from more recent usage and disdain of "radical" ideas. No – the word radical is about change.

So when I begin to probe into the concept of the radical center, it is about change occurring from the center of the political spectrum rather than from the right or the left. In the context of our New Mexico conversation, the center was defined by farmers and ranchers working together with climate activists concerned about better ways of agriculture, groups representing traditionally left and right perspectives, working toward a common goal. Radical indeed.

In the context of the New Mexico conversations, the radical center was about change in our approach to agriculture and climate exploding out of the center rather than from the right or the left. And there can be many similar partnerships such as between climate activists and those wanting to reduce their carbon footprint by creative means, those interested in protecting plants and animals working with those needing to put carbon away. Those wanting to recycle and those making plastics.

And the list goes on – we can see those working for equity in society working with those seeking to develop a carbon neutral economy, creating new jobs and working together to train the new workforce which will be needed. Jobs and equity and climate neutrality and the circular plastics economy and a new economy all exploding from the center of the political spectrum rather than from the edges.

In the radical center, there is no room for hate and for punitive thinking. We come together to move forward, perhaps the hardest task that any of us can achieve in our political process which seems based upon payback and retribution. We have too many important problems to solve such as saving Earth systems and functions to be hung up on a pound of flesh. So let's all move and make the radical center a reality.

the RADICAL CENTER

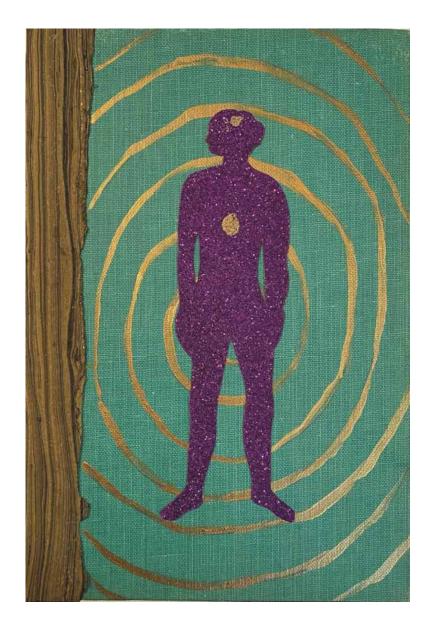
What if you didn't need to be red or blue But you're about action through and through? Is there somewhere else that you can turn? Is there a path out there for you to discern?

I've heard of a concept called the radical center, It's an interesting space that I'd like to enter, It's both red and blue – it's colored purple Intended for those in the center of the circle.

It's a system based on brain and heart, Passion and thought never far apart, But it's radical in changing the status quo, We can't continue like this anymore.

Let's start with protection of the Earth, It must be alive to provide us with worth, It's a self-serving view, but one that's true, The Earth is good for me and you.

Protecting the Earth used to be bipartisan, A skill to be restored by a trained artisan, Earth protection will be goal number one, We'll remove CO2 by the metric ton.



But we will not be vindictive about the past, We need a purple party designed to last, No blame needed for there's plenty to share, As a new beginning we seek to prepare. The economy must be rethought and redone, The need exists for a new web to be spun, An economy that includes all of us in its arms, An economy that protects us from pollution harms.

Ecology and economy create a radical bond, And I'd add care for all with a magic wand, We cannot have people hungry and sick, Food and health care for all does the trick.

This party's consistent with the church of the Earth, It recognizes that all beings have great worth, It's about a future where all can thrive, Vote radical center – it'll keep us alive.

So welcome to Earth church, Pull yourself up a pew, Here the radical center Is waiting for you.

And then there was the situation that arose on Day 204 which is October 11, 2020, regarding reports that the Postmaster General was removing mail drop-boxes and limiting mail service overtime in an effort to curtail the use of mail-in ballots. This was the first of a series of actions seemingly intended to limit participation in the popular vote.

On this day, I wrote to our email group who I labeled "campers" as we were all attending "Camp Hideaway (from the virus)." On this day I wrote "Our artist was concerned about the situation regarding the mail and mail-in ballots and sent me today's painting a while back – a fine image of the birds coming to our rescue – coming to save us from the political quagmire within which we are sinking and from which we are trying to pull ourselves. So, maybe the birds can send us a lifeline and shake us out of this funk. I always consider the birds to be my spiritual partners, and they are doing their part today by helping to deliver the mail. So here is the spiritual thought for the day – when you see a bird in the sky or in a tree, think of it as a connected soul that is trying to do their part for the survival of the Earth and for our

survival as well. We are all connected. They have their roles. We have ours. There is balance. There is synchrony."

I always consider the birds to be my spiritual partners, and they are doing their part today by helping to deliver the mail. But the point here is that our right to vote is inalienable. It is what our democracy is about. It is not about winning. It is about fair and honest participation. I hope that my belief structure prevails, but I have no right to deny another their right to vote, and my view may not prevail in a fair election.

As I write this ten months after this image and message, we are still fighting about access to the polls. The state of Texas tried to pass an incredibly restrictive statute that I believe to represent a major encroachment on our right to vote – a statute that was stopped only by a walk-out of the Democrats in the Texas House that led to the loss of quorum in the waning hours of the session. However, some version of that bill – hopefully better – will likely pass in the special session recently called by the Governor.

So, when you get a letter, think of my friends, the birds, that stand ready to deliver when our political parties fail us.

BIRD MAIL

The word is out that the Postmaster General Is attempting to block the votes more liberal, He's cutting funding, removing machines, Affecting the delivery of mail and dreams.

Someone's paycheck may be lost for weeks, And our payment of bills will be piled in heaps, And, of course, mail-in ballots will be slowed down, It's a nasty plan from my view from the ground.

I certainly don't blame my neighborhood carrier Who works really hard to overcome this barrier, These are people who care and are doing their best, Trying to make do, and they're really stressed. *So, what's the alternative? What can we do? Well, you can vote in person to prevent a coup, And there are times when an image may bring relief, To counteract bad acts and expose a thief.*

So, we called on Earth Church to lend us a hand To avoid the dictum from control and command, And the birds of the church have come up with plan, They'll deliver via air and not over land.

Like messenger pigeons of World War fame, The birds are volunteering for the mail wargame, They're practicing techniques for carrying letters, Thinking out of the box yet avoiding errors.



Earth Church is about service, not about winning, For we all will win with a new beginning, Our politics are failing – they're of no avail, And the new beginning starts with bird mail.

So next time you see a bird flying by, See if there are letters coming down from the sky, For the birds of Earth church are trying to assist, This is an election they don't want you to miss.

So welcome to Earth Church Pull yourself up a pew Pray for a fair election For me and you.

Day 227 of the vigil dawned as election day – a long hard day – one that I had been waiting for some time to see come and go. We were not yet coming out of the pandemic. The virus was still extremely dangerous, and we were facing the most contentious election day in memory.

At the time, I wrote that the U.S. was a nation in transition – an economy in transition – a morality in transition – with many of us lost, floundering, like fish out of water. And while most want to be tossed back in the water, we need to evolve the ability to breathe on land, like back when we emerged from the ocean, except I am talking economically rather than physically.

If we solve the economic issues, I think the others are easier. But with folks continuing to lose good jobs and blue-collar jobs becoming harder and harder to find, it is easy to blame others – to hate others. In fact, it is much easier to hate than to solve the problems facing us.

From a political perspective, hate has no place in Earth Church politics. I go to Earth Church to find peace, not hatred. Hatred is negative energy at a time when we dearly need the positive energy of problem-solving. Earth Church is about solutions, about peace, about continuing the Earth.

And when I think of banishing hate, I think of Gandhi, for non-violence seems the opposite of hate. It is not that you fail to participate, but that you participate in a different way. You act in a way consistent with principle, which is what Earth Church is about. Hatred is destructive and is simply not useful at a time when we must create and build a new economy.

for GANDHI

We came to the tomb in Delhi to see The resting place of Mahatma Gandhi, A man whose words were strong as steel, For passive resistance, he's the real deal.

This man took on the British empire, Without any violence, without gunfire, It takes great courage to look hate in its faces, Finding love and peace for all types and all races.

And today with our world getting hotter and hotter, With problems of too much and too little water, We have to find the will to change, And that is a matter for the spirit to arrange.

And where will that spiritual connection be found? Probably not in traditional ground, But rather in belief that is based on the Earth, The genesis, the beginning, the place of our birth.



The point here is that hate is not the way, It's a negative force that will take us away From the path to the future, from good for all, To arrive we must fight the haters call.

Hate is a partner to fear of change, And we need priorities to rearrange, We must paint the future full and clear, Providing a vision to diminish the fear.

We've done a poor job of painting the positive, We need a future with ideas provocative, That makes people hopeful rather than fearful, A future that's cheerful rather than tearful.

Earth Church – come guide us to find our way, Lead us and make Gandhiji proud today, We are modern explorers seeking our soul With the good Earth leading, we'll reach that goal.

So welcome to Earth church Pull yourself up a pew Pray that spiritual awakenings Remove hate from you.

And then there was the aftermath of the election, the lies about an election stolen, an attack on our democracy as sure as any shots fired by opposing forces, an attack on the system that has treated so many so well, an attack to maintain power and control.

You could feel it building for months, going back to before the election when President Trump was raising the specter of a stolen election. And then when the votes started being counted, and recounted, the result became clear. He had lost, fair and square. No fraud to any extent was discovered, yet the noise against the result continued.

And then the inevitable happened. The rhetoric became too much for some of the supporters of the President and they came to Washington D.C. in an organized protest that became one of the darkest moments in United States history, the moment when a sitting President urged followers to fight for him to remain in office.

Just as the virus shook us all to our roots, so did this day in January, 2021, as captured in both my musings and the poem from Day 292, January 7, 2020. Here are my words from the day after one of the saddest days for the United States in my lifetime.

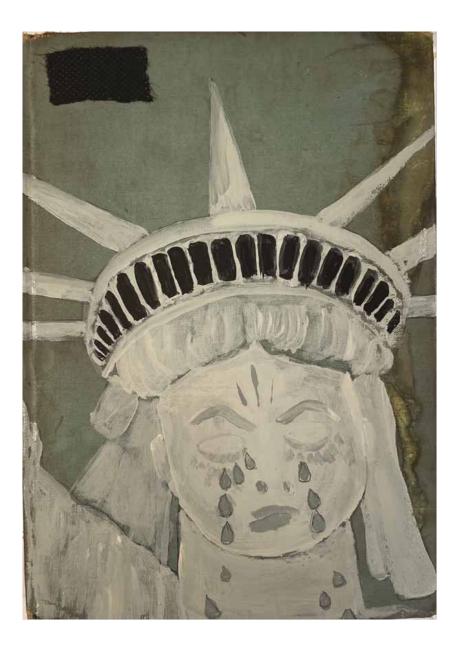
"I said things would be better in 2021 but we have a great big hair ball we have to cough up first. I've had it. What a mess. The most important thing I heard yesterday was President Elect Biden saying, 'Words matter.' They do. What you say matters. You are what you say. You own those words and what they represent, what they cause, what they cause others to do. You can't just throw things out there and then pretend that the actions of others incited by those words have nothing to do with you. You are responsible. In fact, it is just that – responsibility – that we have been so willing to excuse during President Trump's term. The safety and security of the United States are at risk. I could go on, but Isabelle's painting says it eloquently and I have tried to capture the many thoughts flying through my head in this poem."

LADY LIBERTY CRIED TODAY

Lady Liberty cried today, I don't know what else there is to say, My country tis of thee Just lived a day of infamy.

At a time like this, words come hard, The capital will be forever scarred, By the actions of an inflamed crowd, A bunch of fascists screaming loud.

But our Lady's not crying just for today, She's crying about things that we did not say, About how we allowed the lies to persist, About how we acquiesced and did not resist.



Use it or lose it – rule one of freedom, Warning bells were ringing, but did you listen? Ten former defense secretaries sent a warning And Giuliani and Trump stirred 'em up in the morning.

Rallying the proud boys, accepting the Klan, Some two-bit criminals, some also-rans, Telling them they would be kings and queens, Load 'em up with flags and freedom rings. The time has come for the madness to stop, I've had enough – let the guillotine drop On those unwilling to stand up for truth, All for self-gain – egos run loose.

This country has been nothing but good to me, I love this place and Lady Liberty, So let's help this lady put her tears away, And work to reverse this horrible day.

Earth Church is a refuge and resource today, The birds bringing tissue to wipe tears away, And for those of us who are simply horrified, Let's go visit a temple that is sanctified.

So welcome to Earth Church, Pull yourself up a pew, Come and spend time with us, We'll make today better for you.

Politically, we must be united in defense of the Earth, we must vote, we must participate, and we must stand up to those who would take our Earth, our vote, our rights away from us. The key is that we have to awaken and act, and action in the face of fear, in the face of political opposition, requires a spiritual connection. And that is where Earth-based spirituality must and will step forward. So I leave this chapter urging you to "awaken."

AWAKEN

Slumber has descended over society today, Perhaps it has always been that way, We shy from the spiritual and from connections, I have no doubt we need a spiritual correction.

I don't understand why Earth doesn't count, It's the key to life, an ever-flowing fount, The provider of food, the giver of liquid, To destroy the Earth is simply wicked.

I feel like an Old Testament prophet walking, Out in the desert, to myself I am talking, And I mosey on into a West Texas town And ask all in the bar to sit right down.

"Awaken," I cry - they give me a look, "Awaken to the Earth" – they think me a kook, "Did you go to Earth Church to start this day?" I just heard the suggestion to put me away.

Perhaps a different tactic is needed, For the call to awaken to be heeded, Our eyes are closed to many important things, Life should include more than society brings.

After 300+ days on this virus vigil, I know Earth Church is real – not superficial, But how do we get the world to acknowledge, That we need to embrace spiritual knowledge.



There's a spirit wireless – we're all connected, And our political will must be resurrected, We must organize efforts across the world With words unfurled and ideas hurled.

Who'll volunteer to be an Earth Church crusader? Mother Earth is our center – no stand-in for her, She'll be so cool – stirred, not shaken, And she'll carry the message for all to awaken.

So welcome to Earth Church, Pull yourself up a pew, Awaken to politics, It will be good for you.

And as said by Rumi, "Don't go back to sleep."



NINE

Legal Action in Defense of the Environment

think much of my drinking problem had to do with the harsh reality of being an environmental lawyer in Texas. Texas is a hard place to practice on the Earth side of environmental law. We value economic development and jobs which are important items, but they should not be valued to the exclusion of all else. That's one reason why we need Earth Church.

We have an economic system that was not designed to be in sync with the Earth as has been discussed. Instead, we have overlaid a set of laws and regulations on top of an economic system that dates to World War II and even before – a system where production was the goal, a linear system of digging, cooking, constructing, and throwing away. This economic system, in turn, was based on a value system that assumed that Earth's resources and certainly the United States' resources were inexhaustible, which of course is not true.

I was a law student when the first environmental laws of the United States were passed – the National Environmental Policy Act, the Clean Air Act and the Clean Water Act – all during my time at University of Texas Law School, which by the way, I did not enjoy.

True story. About half-way through law school my wife Garland came back from a party with the idea that I should become an environmental lawyer, an idea I immediately adopted and started taking any course at UT Law School that was remotely related to environmental law. I remember

making the lowest grade in an international law course in which I wrote a paper on the law of the oceans proposing to make the oceans into a nation so that they could go into court and sue for pollution damage.

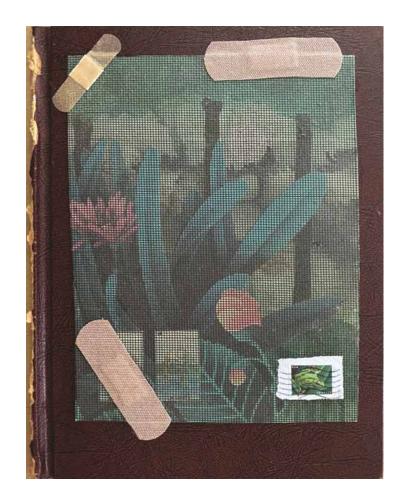
The teacher for that course was a former lawyer for a big oil company, and he thought this was the worst idea he had ever heard. I entered this paper into a U.T. Law School competition sponsored by the American Trial Lawyers Association and won it because my entry was the only entry, a point made clear by the judges from UT. I then proceeded to win the national contest and received an EPA fellowship to go to graduate school in environmental science and engineering at Rice University, the beginning of my career as an environmental lawyer, one that I would not trade for any other, but a hard path, one filled with potholes and briars, one where success was initially hard to find.

What is clear looking back from today's vantage point is that the laws that I thought were so wonderful as needed changes can be viewed today as patches on a failing economic system – one that rewarded the wrong issues, one that did not value the Earth. Today we are in a different place – a place where we are in the process of creating an economy designed to address environmental problems from the beginning. But that is not where we have been, and we have not yet moved far from this failed and failing economic system.

BAND AIDS ON the ENVIRONMENT

The band aid is a wonderful device, A good investment, a reasonable price, Band aids are great emergency measures, But not the way to protect your treasures.

The bulldozer pushes fill in a wetland, Not much is left – just a strand, Migratory bird habitat turned into homes, Gone – another piece of a great biome.



An environmental lawyer is like a band aid, Brought in to prevent a resources raid, Go into court, file for an injunction, Yet others continue without compunction.

Over decades I've band-aided some very nice places, But the assault continues with new faces, Always spewing on about economic needs, Never seeing value in some lovely reeds.

Band aids are nice, but they are not a cure, We need a new economics brochure, One valuing the gifts that nature brings, Like bottomland forests and Hill Country springs.

I would like to think that ethics would emerge, That bring about protection for bees and birds, But I have more faith in the power of money, To protect the habitat where lives the bunny.

Today economics are most interesting to me, The field is evolving as you will soon see, Carbon storage by grasses will make more income, And less valuable land will become a plum.

Here at Earth Church, we're fans of evolution, Particularly as humans evolve a solution, I hope that our evolution can include ethics, Earth Church members turn and smile at the skeptics.

So welcome to Earth Church, Pull yourself up a pew, Here we certainly use band aids, But seek solutions more true.

Unfortunately, for most of my legal career, a new economy was not in the cards and the ethics of Earth Church lacked an effective voice. Instead, as an environmental lawyer, I learned how to fight against powerful foes. I had no illusions that I was a great lawyer, but I did work hard, prepare and fight like the dickens. And I began to win a case or two, and then more, although losses certainly occurred, and they were always hard to stomach.

As mentioned earlier, by the mid-1980s I had quit drinking and found Earth Church and the bay as my higher power, and my life as an environmental lawyer improved dramatically. It is wonderful to be pursuing a profession that is in line with your spirituality. Such was my good fortune – one that most lawyers never encounter – and I am grateful to this day for that alignment.

Early on, I realized that I was not cut out to work for a big law firm or a corporation. I remember being interviewed by a big law firm in Houston, and the person assigned to me started his introduction to the firm by noting that the beautiful wood on the walls in the reception area came from harvesting

the last several hundred acres of a rare South American tree. It was clear from that we were not a good fit.

Similarly, corporations, I discovered, were not interested in my ideas or suggestions. They told their lawyers what they needed and expected them to implement that directive. That also did not fit either with my personality or my ethics. Just couldn't get there.

So, what I was from the beginning was a lawyer for the Earth, for the environment, for people being harmed by air and water pollution and hazardous waste. This focus has served me well personally, and it also helped when I had heart surgery when I asked my cardiologist how come the heart surgeon was so hard to talk to. He responded that he had learned that I was a trial lawyer and was put off by my profession. After that, I searched out the heart surgeon and assured him I was no threat – that I was a birds and bunnies lawyers – and we got along great after that.

So – welcome to Earth-Church lawyering for the birds and bunnies.

BIRDS and BUNNIES LAWYER

I am an attorney for the birds and bunnies, This is not a joke – I am not making funnies, Representing those that cannot defend themselves, Is a really neat thing – it's totally top shelf.

Now signing up clients can be quite interesting, It's hard to get their names signed in writing, And getting monetary payment is a hurdle for many, Contributions are few and failures are plenty.

My first such clients were shellfish of the bay, And in federal court they did have their day, The oysters and shrimp were being dumped on, We got it done – it's one to look back on.

The first bird clients that I ever had, Were those from Wallisville who were treated bad, By the City, the River Authority, and the Corps, But we were able to shut that door.



The high point was the whoopers before Judge Jack, And getting Texas water agencies back on track, If you lose you can win in this crazy legal game, The important thing is to prosecute the claim.

These suits are about where birds and bunnies live, And being heard against lawyers who are quite glib, And if we're successful, we've often observed, The habitat can be bought and permanently preserved.

One must take care to not abuse the trust, Ensuring motive is good, and an action just, For challenges are made to the lawyer's integrity, And with the critters there must be solidarity.

Today new challenges come hard and fast, But to work with these clients is unsurpassed, For to try to prevail on behalf of the Earth, Is what gives my life a bit of its worth.

So welcome to Earth Church, Pull yourself up a pew, We fight for the bunnies, And for the birds too. There are great moments that come from representing the Earth. These moments are magnified every time you go past the place where you were successful, where your intervention either thwarted a bad project or changed it sufficiently that life would not be seriously impaired.

To fight for the Earth requires learning about place – about the species that live in an area, about the habitats that they require, about the chemicals and how they move in the environment, about the water and how it flows. And nothing quite matches fighting for endangered species, those icons of survival, those species that are hanging on after running into the full force of humanity – our practices, our absence of ethical connections to the Earth, our absence of care or concern.

To represent endangered species in court is a bit like having a human death penalty case. The consequences of success or failure are substantial. And as the lawyer representing the Earth and species, it feels as if it is all on your shoulders.

This is a responsibility to be taken seriously. And there is stress that comes with these types of cases – stress that one has to learn how to defuse with mental and physical tools that I was not taught as a young man growing up in South Texas. This ultimately became about my survival and my linkage to Earth Church and the natural system.

No case was more personally impactful or more difficult yet ultimately more successful than my representation of the whooping cranes. Whoopers had at one time been impacted so heavily that only 17 existed in the wild. Franklin Roosevelt set aside the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge in 1937 and the birds have steadily improved since then. However, in 2008-2009, 23 whoopers were killed because insufficient freshwater reached the bays around the refuge, affecting the supply of their primary food source the blue crab.

I went into federal court in 2010 and sued the State of Texas for killing 23 whoopers in violation of the federal Endangered Species Act through their allocation and management of water from the Guadalupe River system. That was a serious allegation against the State of Texas and the water users that contributed to the loss of the cranes. The case was before Judge Janis Jack in Corpus Christi, and it was the highlight of my legal career that has had some good moments.

the WHOOPING CRANE 6

In Judge Janis Jack's courtroom overlooking the bay In 2011 in Corpus on a clear winter's day.

Anxiously we arrive at the courtroom so cold, For the whooping crane trial is about to unfold, "All rise" is the cry as the Judge makes her entrance, And glides to her bench like a powerful empress.

What she's thinking of our case we can't even guess As she asks the plaintiffs to call their first witness. I call George Archibald of the Crane Foundation A sweet-smiling man representing the crane nation.

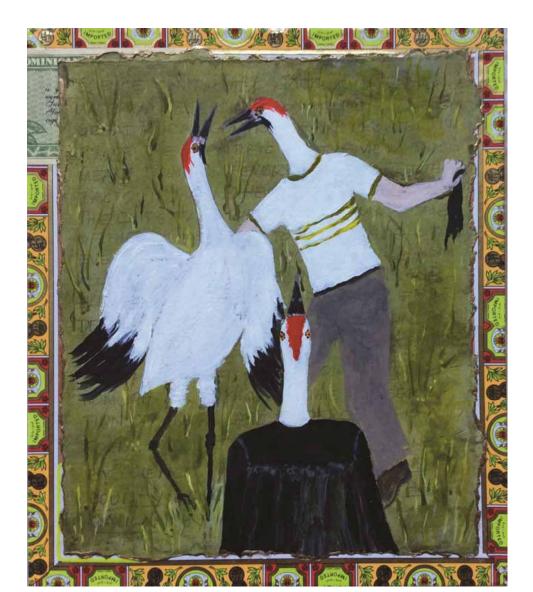
He's a man unused to legal conflict and harshness, But today he's of steel and all about business, Explaining to all a life's knowledge of cranes, About caring and nurturing with hard work and brains.

He talks of helping Tex to mate, A breakthrough, a first, a reversal of fate. I debate asking George to show us the dance, But common sense demands that I not take a chance.

I stick with the man who captured the court, With his talk of the habitat and how it was hurt, About cinnamon-splotched youngsters chasing nimble blue crabs, About making a grab after several missed stabs.

About rainfall and runoff and a sweet estuary, About need for caution, about need to be wary, About these cranes being a gift to protect Regardless of what Texan we happen to elect.

And at night in my dreams, images appear, A vision that is both warming and dear, Judge Jack is a whooper and George is the man, And Tex dances with both flapping hard as he can.



CHAPTER 9 • LEGAL ACTION IN DEFENSE OF THE ENVIRONMENT 207

My hope is restored and erases all doubt, For the dancing Judge has some mighty clout, With her pen she has changed our Texas way, And carved out a path for a better day.

George and the Judge danced well after all, Right out of the courtroom and on down the hall, And history will say that George and the Judge Took a stand for what's good and just wouldn't budge.

Though the case was rejected by the court of appeals, The impact today remains very real, Every water seller in Texas looks around with unease For the courts are there to hear our pleas.

Thank you, George, for being our bright light For giving us hope and playful delight. Come back to Texas whenever you wish And continue your work with love and bliss.

And welcome to Earth Church, Pull yourself up a pew, Here we fight for life, And so should you.

Now as mentioned in the poem, we won this case at the Federal District Court level and then lost at the 5th Circuit Court of Appeals, the worst court of appeals in the United States for an environmental case. Many outsiders were worried that this lawsuit might actually lead to a major ruling that would limit the effectiveness of the Endangered Species Act, but that did not happen.

After our appeal was turned down by the U.S. Supreme Court, however, we reached an agreement with the Guadalupe Blanco River Authority, one of the big water users that was threatened by this litigation. And over the years, we have worked through our differences to find an approach to bringing Texas economic development concepts into much better alignment with the needs of endangered species like the whooping crane, at least in the Guadalupe River drainage region which includes not only whooping cranes but other endangered species such as the golden cheeked warbler, the black capped vireo and several species of riverine mussels and the Kemp's ridley sea turtle.

After such a great outcome, it is easy to forget the fear that is pervasive in these types of cases. Fear of failure, fear of looking stupid, fear of taking on perhaps the best legal team you have ever faced, fear of losing. As a trial lawyer trying to hold onto a very controversial ruling, it feels as if the weight of the species is on your shoulders, and it is heavy. What I have learned is that in these times of stress and fear, it is okay to admit that I am fearful. I go to nature to find respite. I attend church services, and I find strength and power from my connections with other living things like the Ruby Throated Hummingbird.

the RUBY-THROATED HUMMINGBIRD 2

Fear comes flying in at the edge of my dreams With images of failed this and forgotten that, Of being the fool, of letting others down, Of the mouse that is caught by a big fat cat.

And when my heart's thumping, And my head's threatening to burst, I must look fear in the face, And make it give first.



In times like this when I need a guide To get me past my foolish fear, I conjure the ruby humming bird Flying a long way – no navigation gear.

On the Yucatan shore they gather up Prepared to expend the winter's fat, Summoned to act by the north-blowing wind, They cross the Gulf without a map.

No GPS here, no satellite help, Just leaping across the unforgiving sea, The humming wings do beat and beat, To bring them back for me to see

What fear must this buzzing little bird face When it sets out across the deep dark water? For if it falls or misses its mark, There is no tree in which to loiter.

So when facing the court on the chosen day, I know that I will have to do my best, So, I think of the mighty ruby-throat, And put my fear away, to rest.

If this little squirt can do what it does, Then I can certainly handle my part. So I'll take my lead from the mighty mite, And accept an infusion to my heart.

So welcome to Earth Church, Pull yourself up a pew, Say a prayer that the hummingbird Will chase fear from you.

The combination of representation of Earth Church and a bit of the metaphysical is riveting, and it happens in defense of the Earth. The Brazos and San Bernard Rivers south of Houston form a large floodplain that is home to a double canopy forest called the Columbia Bottomlands. This forest is a rest stop for migrating songbirds, an eddy pool of this migratory river of birds.

This woman moved down to this forested flood plain to escape other humans, to find solace, to be left alone, but she could not escape a local governmental entity charged with draining swamps and wetlands. Their tool of choice was herbicides sprayed on the stream vegetation to kill it and then coming back through with a bulldozer, destroying the ecological integrity of the watercourse, denying function, denying life itself.

When they came to destroy her streambanks that were her boundaries on two sides of her property, she denied them entry. Undeterred, they simply sprayed herbicide from across the creek, committing a form of trespass, taking her property without due process. We sued in the local county court, a generally poor venue to challenge the authority of a local government. But then again, interesting things happen in defense of the Earth.

As mentioned in the chapter on metaphysics, this woman had lived in Mexico for a good part of her life and had become friends with a bruja, a woman with supernatural powers, what some would call a witch. It makes me smile today to think about what the other side would think if they knew we were consulting a bruja – a witch – prior to trial. As with many of these environmental battles, we needed every bit of help we could get. This woman had been hit with the full force of a bunch of good ole boys who were in charge of a special government district, and she was determined – as was I – to fight back.

the BLACK-AND-WHITE WARBLER

She calls them pig bastards – The elected drainage commissioners And their minions Who joyfully destroy life in the bottomlands, Gleefully denuding the banks of secret Watercourses incised in the Pleistocene mud, Spraying herbicides across the creek To kill her opposition.

Bullying, blustering, sputtering, spitting, Hating, hurting elected czars, Flicking away concerns, Ripping plants and streams asunder. Acting with deep intent and malice aforethought, Acting from fear and hatred of things They don't understand.

Things such as a woman Who enjoys walking in the late evening light, Delighting in the revealed spiderwebs Spun from sapling to sapling, A woman who smiles at the native shrubs that hold The precariously-placed-streambank soil in place, Providing the cranny for the frog And clean water for the fish.



A woman who marvels At the black and white warbler Working insects in the craggy oak, Moving up and down the trunk, Never stopping, ever moving, A woman celebrating black and white life That has escaped the pig bastards For another day.

And then there are the battles where the outcome is not always clear, where the initial goal of total victory was not achieved, where the result went one direction and the goal went another. There are forces among humans that one cannot control despite one's best efforts, yet there are results that can be realized.

It is sometimes hard in a legal fight to define a win, particularly when there is extreme acrimony moving toward hatred among the warring parties. Human clients often want something different than what the Earth needs. Humans often want total vindication of self and annihilation of the opposing side, yet seldom do we obtain either of these results while the Earth's needs may become forgotten amidst the acrimony.

The legal process is a joust on the one side and a Solomonic problemsolving on the other – a street fight and a nuanced discussion occurring at the same time. Elected judges worry about donations for re-election; appointed judges have party preferences and points of view. The process is never totally clear, never absolute.

Settlement is among the most difficult yet most important concepts, and obtaining a reasonable settlement is an art perfected over time. When opposing a multi-billion-dollar project with strong political support, you have to fight with all you have – with incredible willpower and intent – with body and soul. And only after you have made the other side feel a bit of hesitancy, a bit of doubt, a bit of concern that this might work out badly for them does the door to reasonable settlement open. And it is very hard to know when the door leads to something good.

Over the years, I have been involved in many fights to the end and many settlements. I and my clients have enjoyed absolute wins and suffered heart-rendering absolute losses. We have enjoyed settlements that were

successful, and I have suffered outside criticism of such efforts. And through it all, I have tried to keep one goal in mind – is this not only consistent with my human client's needs but is it also good for the Earth? And that focus on long-term good for the Earth has been my salvation – my rock – my strength through long hard battles.

The ruddy duck poem below is about a fight that had multiple components –controversial settlements that led to changes in the operating practices of a major plastics plant and, among other things, setting land aside for wetlands in a state and a country that were more concerned about jobs than the Earth. It is a poem of deep conviction, with hurt and hope behind it.

the RUDDY DUCK

"Mount up" says the Judge from high on his bench, And we pull on our armor and leave the trench, To participate in a well-known, societal ritual, Trial has begun, and the court is in session.

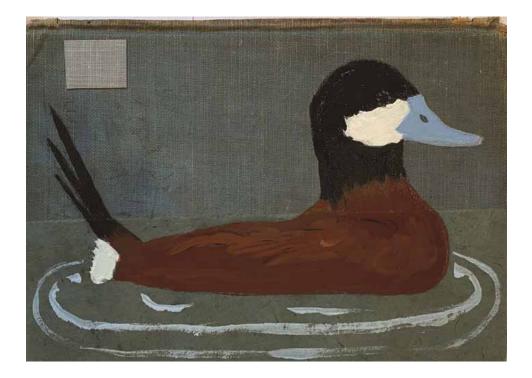
We opposing lawyers charge at each other, Jousters knocking each other asunder, Broken lances and words litter the field, This isn't for play – it's the real deal.

Now the legal jousting has come and gone, And the warring parties are back at home, It's never as simple as it seemed to begin, You never know how these battles will end.

Years afterwards, I go for some nature study, And see the bob-tailed, blue-billed ruddy, I celebrate the construction of this new temple, A wetlands gentle, providing peace mental.

The ruddy ducks float and bob on the water, Tails pointed upward unlike any other, Blue beaks reflecting in the winter sun, Part of the spoils when the joust is done. This ruddy's pond would not exist, Except for the legal system's willing assist, Sometimes the right path is easier to see, After a bit of legal misery.

The ruddy has come to symbolize for me, The picture of a legal victory, A beautiful duck floating on a pond, Hence, the ruddy and I have an important bond.



Gratefully, I hold an Earth Church celebration, Near to the site of the conflagration, And the pintail and the widgeon join in, Celebrating rebirth – life born again.

So welcome to Earth Church, Pull yourself up a pew, Pray that we can restore, Lost temples for you. And then sometimes a situation just appears before you – an unexpected situation where there is no one else to rise up and act. Such was the situation down the coast of Texas where a steel mill was under construction when a public notice for its wastewater permit was issued. And the discharge was to a creek called Chiltipin, pronounced by the locals as chili petine, a place that I knew not.

In the dying days of the oil and gas industry, the Texas coast has been under continuing, unwithering attack by exporters wanting to send oil and liquefied natural gas overseas. These projects have led to widespread opposition along the coast, but there was no entity with the ability to raise concerns about this permit that would discharge heavy metals into Copano Bay which is used by whooping cranes that eat blue crabs that likely would bioaccumulate these metals to their harm.

The same group that filed the whooping crane suit before Judge Jack decided to check into this situation, and we needed to explore the creek into which this discharge would occur at a point twenty or so miles above its end point in Copano Bay. And so the trip up Chiltipin Creek began, and what a revelation, what a place.

Simply stated, Chiltipin Creek is an absolute jewel, a place where South Texas brush meets the tannin-stained creek water, a place of alligators and green kingfishers, of kingbirds and herons, of redfish and alligator gar, and as one goes further up the creek, it becomes tighter, the ash and hackberry almost forming a roof over the water, a true cathedral in the Church of the Earth.

In this situation, we opposed the permit and got the attention of the steel company and worked out an agreement to construct a wetland system to "polish" the effluent to remove the residual metals and hopefully keep them from the creek. In many respects, this was a simple solution, a simple fix, yet without the intervention of a group concerned about protecting this cathedral, it would not have happened. Such is the power of intervention on behalf of the Earth Church.

This poem was written as the legal joust was just beginning, and was sent out to like-minded folks that might help us, a key part of any legal joust. The Aransas Project is the name of the non-profit organization that took the action.

the GREEN KINGFISHER OF CHILTIPIN CREEK

There's a magical corner of Copano Bay Where redfish feed and herons play, A temple of Earth Church that is there for all, And late in the evening you'll hear the owl call.

Chiltipin's like a bayou, but it's called a creek, It's a coastal estuary that's really unique, There's lots of oysters mixed with alligator gar, You can spend time here and never see a car.

This is a place the green kingfishers call home, From tree to tree along the banks they roam, Stopping to fish where the limbs give shade, Watching the minnows swim by on parade.

Now Chiltipin's a temple under attack, For a steel mill seeks to dump its waste back – A waste stream loaded with heavy metals – It will be permitted unless someone meddles.

This wastewater discharge will reach Copano Bay, An important nursery with unsuspecting prey, The discharge will affect the marine food chain, A harm brought to you for monetary gain.

And among the prey are whooping cranes, A species that recently has made great gains, Expanding into Copano full of crabs and marsh, Which we must protect, a job that is harsh.



We must stand tall and protect this stream, To prevent the loss of an Earth-Church dream, The Aransas Project stands ready to defend, And will fight with Earth Church this threat to end.

The green kingfisher knows that we must act now, It would act for itself, but it knows not how, So, we rise up now and support legal action, And hope that it causes the plant to lose traction.

So welcome to Earth Church, Pull yourself up a pew, Here the green kingfisher knows We'll fight for him too.

And then there's my friend Jeff Mundy, a trial lawyer who worked with us on the whooping crane case, an excellent birder who knew the federal rules, who gave me confidence going into the courtroom, who on the first day of trial saw a loon floating in Corpus Christi Bay before the courtroom and looked over at me and said "There's a loon. It's a sign. We're going to win."

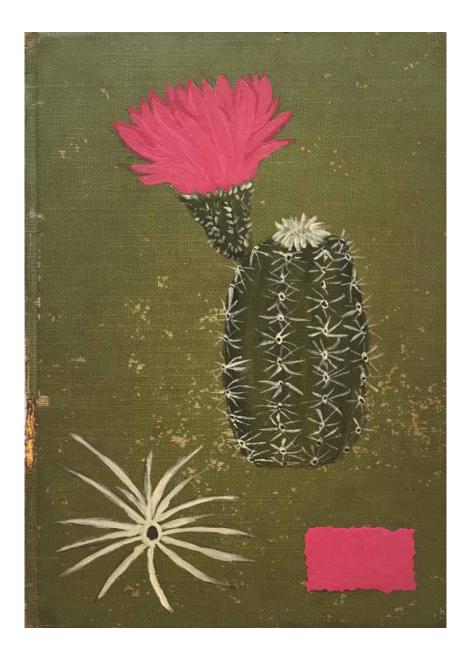
Jeff has become excellent at representing landowners who want to preserve the habitat – the unique plants and birds and animals that live on their ranches, that make their world richer. I am not sure that these ranchers have the same concept of Earth Church as I do, but I think it is very similar. And there have been many ranches under attack by pipeline companies that want to dig a straight trench from the Permian Basin oil fields to the Texas coast through the habitat of these wonderful south and southwest Texas ranches.

So Jeff has become what I call a diplomat for the species. Now diplomacy requires some type of power base as a beginning, and the federal endangered species act and Jeff's knowledge of both trial strategy and birds and bunnies makes him a formidable foe. But the diplomat must combine the hard edge with the seam, seeking the crease for negotiation and Jeff has become excellent on this endeavor, whether it be on behalf of the ocelot, or the jaguarundi or the golden cheeked warbler or the black lace cactus.

the BLACK LACE CACTUS

The Black Lace is an endangered cactus, There's not very many – it's rare amongst us, It's named for the lace formed by the spines That protect the plant with pointed tines.

Some landowners fear these threatened plants, But there may be money in black lace transplants That comes from projects that destroy its habitat, And just in time – meet the species diplomat.



Now a species diplomat is an interesting cat, Wearing jeans and snake boots and an old hat, Knowing how to move within the thorny brush, Working fast – efficient – for there's always a rush.

These diplomats check for species in the way Of a new gas pipeline right-of-way, And then they talk to the various bosses – Trying to limit Earth Church losses. If black lace cactus is determined to be Among those at risk of species jeopardy, Then negotiations will begin to find a solution That will result in a permit granting absolution.

If the diplomats agree the cactus should be moved, It will be expensive, but experience has proved, That money spent to relocate the cactus, Is state of the art and good corporate practice.

And the diplomat for the species is a necessity Associated with issues hard and pesky, They do great work attempting to keep order, In the Church of the Earth's species larder.

The black lace cactus will find a new home, And a way to protect its endangered genome, So, let's tip our hat to the diplomat For accomplishing the impossible like an acrobat.

So welcome to Earth Church, Pull yourself up a pew, Say a prayer that diplomacy Saves the Earth for you.

And finally, there is the satisfaction that comes from seeing the benefits of the work, the challenges remembered, the results savored. Such a situation exists back down in the bottomlands where I represented several landowners against a large refinery that was polluting a pretty little creek flowing through the double canopy forest.

When I first encountered this creek, it was lifeless. No crawfish. No herons wading. No wood ducks squealing. No life in the water or living off the water. Treated industrial wastewater was killing the creek because the formulas used by the agencies to issue permits missed some essential characteristics of the water that was carried along with the crude coming to the refinery. After a bit of a fight and a negotiation, the wastewater treatment system was improved and the heavy metals in the discharge went away. We first knew that things were improving when the foam atop the creek disappeared. And over time, the minnows returned along with the crawfish burrows that should have been everywhere. But then one day, from my car passing over Linville Bayou, I had an experience that will stick with me until I die.

the LITTLE BLUE HERON

Out of my car window I see The little blue heron wading In the clear stained water Of Linville Bayou in Matagorda County Just off State Highway 521.

It stands looking for fish in a bayou That was dead not long ago, Killed by the discharge from a refinery, Killed by toxic metals and polar organics Concealed beneath a smelly foam That meandered with the water Through the Columbia Bottomlands, Water where the frogs and crawfish And minnows could no longer exist.

The little blue heron fishes today Because of the action of citizens Living near the bayou, Citizens like K.J. Richardson Who loved to fish for flounder in the fall, Citizens who worked for the company And knew that it could and should do better, Citizens who were willing to take a stand And go into court and complain That the oil giant was not doing right.



The little blue heron fishes today Because someone cared enough To take a stand for stewardship, For the ethical conduct of business, For corporate responsibility.

The little blue heron never knew K.J. But they are inextricably linked In the wonderful way that ethical action In defense of the Earth Links all living things together. Forever.

Action in defense of Earth Church. Yes.



ΤΕΝ

Disappearing Species

here is something really unique about species that are endangered, that are disappearing from the Earth. As a general proposition, this is not humans, although certain tribes in remote areas may be in danger of eradication. No – this discussion is about birds and bunnies that are endangered – in jeopardy of disappearing forever, lost to us.

Now on one level you might ask – what difference does one species make? And on one level, a reasonable response might be – not much. But another way of looking at species loss is that we are all living on a spaceship, and we have monitors on these species that we have taken with us. When one dies on our ship, a monitor sounds the alarm, with the implication clearly being that if one member of the ship is threatened, we all are.

Now, this example loses a bit in the translation to Earth where we have many ecosystems and countless species, but there is still power to this argument. The point here is that the loss of entire species – the loss of a DNA treasure-trove – is important on a planet that is noteworthy for life and living things. Failure matters. In addition to trying to keep it from happening, we must learn from it – find the root causes, set up programs to keep these damages from continuing to occur.

The first thing that a lost species means to me is that I personally cannot enjoy it. I will not be able to see it in my life, and my life is less for that. My parents were from Central Louisiana, and I remember spending my summers in the woods and swamps so different from South Texas where I was being raised. And later as I read about attempts to find the Ivory Billed Woodpecker in Cuba, in a swamp in Arkansas, I often found myself reflecting back on central Louisiana and what it must have been like when my father and his brothers were working and hunting down in the bottomlands and swamps amongst the Cypress and the Tupelo Gum.

the IVORY-BILLED WOODPECKER

I've heard the story about my uncles When they were boys – A story about a bird they saw Down in the Cocodrie Swamp – A bird that My Uncle Charles called The "Good God Woodpecker" as in "Good God. Look at that Woodpecker."

It happened during the '30s And I always wondered if they were talking About the Ivory-Billed – A magnificent bird that has been Denied to me, A bird that I may never see, A bird that has apparently Ceased to be. It's just not here anymore.

It isn't simply that one specimen died, But instead, it's that an entire species Has left the Earth. Left us with less. Left me wishing for the Good God For whom it was named, The same God with whom I am angry For letting us humans be so blind, For letting us destroy other living things Without thought and without care. AAGGHHHHHHHH. Good God I miss that woodpecker.



The species that I work with are still with us, but doubt exists about whether they will make it or not. In some cases, human programs have begun to either slow the habitat loss or stop it, and in other cases, wildlife refuges have been established to try and bring the species back. Some are successful. Some are not. But all deserve recognition as attempts to do the right thing for a species in trouble. One of the more successful programs that I have encountered is the whooping crane program of the federal government. After President Roosevelt set aside the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge, the numbers have grown from about 17 birds in the wild to over 400. To be sure there are continuing problems for these big, beautiful birds, and we on the Texas coast must be creative to set up programs to expand their habitat and to increase the water flow needed in the life cycle of their primary food source, the blue crab.

Once you start paying attention, you have the possibility of a wonderful encounter with these species whose numbers are very low. There are not many of them in the world, and it is a delightful experience to encounter them, to greet them, to potentially spend some time with them. And it is even a greater experience to encounter a species at a location where you did not know them to be. A surprise – a gift for a lovely day.

the WHOOPING CRANES NEAR OYSTER LAKE

The fishing was finished, the day was done, The boat was flying back toward home, Waterbirds were moving here and there, All was peaceful, there was no care.

Suddenly friend Jack yells "Look, whooping cranes," I thought he was kidding, playing games, But indeed, the whoopers were just flying along, This wasn't the right place, it just seemed wrong.

But my how delightful it was to see them, These magical birds that rule any realm, Imagine them expanding to cover the coast, It would be stunning, it would be the most.



I have been to court to protect this bird, I came to the Judge and asked to be heard, And she listened and ruled with keen acumen, And the whole bird world gave a heartfelt "amen."

My linkage – My connection – with these big birds is real, It's hard to describe how wonderful it feels To meet a former client whose range is expanding In spite of politicians and all the glad-handing.

This is what Earth Church is all about, It's enough to make me stand up and shout, Of my love for cranes and nature and fish, Earth church is my granted wish.

So when I wish upon a star, It's for the whooping crane to come from afar, He'll meet my eyes and wave his arms, And help me forget about fears and harms.

The Earth is my church, I shall not want It is my food, it is my font, It saved me when it was needed most, And to some it's the same as the Holy Ghost.

So welcome to Earth Church, Pull yourself up a pew, Go ahead and scoot over, A whooper's joining you.

When it comes to endangered species, they often have a great ability to surprise you. Take the ocelot for example. This is a spotted cat about twice the size of large house cat. This animal is elusive. It has been hunted. It has lost habitat. And as a result, it is very sly.

I was studying Texas looking for evidence of the spread of endangered species beyond known locations, and I found information about an ocelot that had been killed by a car on a major highway much further west than the known range. It had been speculated that ocelots moved up the river valleys and brush-covered drains from the south coast of Texas, but hard evidence was difficult to find.

I had been retained by a rancher to help them fight a pipeline crossing their land and told them that there was a chance that there might be ocelots on their property. If that were the case, then the pipeline company might have to avoid the ranch.

Many landowners are afraid of endangered species because they have concerns that the federal government will come in and tell them what to do with their land. On the other hand, an endangered species can be your best friend if you are trying to fight powerful interests that are trying to disrupt habitat that you consider to be important or simply want them off of your ranch. In this case, the landowner put out game cameras to see if there was nighttime activity and captured the image of an ocelot at a watering spot.

Since that time, more and more landowners have been reporting sightings. Stewardship and habitat protection are emerging as key concepts in the ranching community which now seems much more willing to welcome these species.

the OCELOT

The elusive form moves in the dark, Ethereal, fluid, the spots are its trademark, Living in thickets, moving after twilight, With few humans ever getting a good sight.

In Texas this cat was almost eliminated, Mostly due to habitat being extirpated, One key for today is brushland corridors, If it's to avoid the fate of the dinosaurs.

These cats moved from Mexico up the coast, And perhaps along rivers and creeks like a ghost, Always moving snakelike below the branches, Hiding away in remote and quiet ranches.

It's a part of the fabric that it inhabits, Living off small mammals including rabbits, Evolved for the brush and so elusive, Wary of humans who can be abusive.

Ocelots have been known to need legal support, They are simply unable to protect their own fort, Today friend Jeff Mundy knows the tools to be used To keep these cats from being abused.

There are times when it's necessary to litigate, When a pipeline insists that the path must be straight, Proposing to take ocelot habitat pristine, Such power's misuse requires response clean and lean.

There's a special place for species like this, In Earth Church liturgy, there's a special list Of those species we will strive to maintain To allow that being to stay in the game.



There is no higher call that we can answer Than to speak up against the spread of cancer That we cause when we callously disregard Those species that need us to be their guard.

So welcome to Earth Church Pull yourself up a pew Where the sly ocelot Wants to friend you.

Endangered species are not limited to birds and mammals. There are also endangered mussels and slugs, salamanders, frogs and toads. Our ability to impact other living things is pervasive, and while the larger, more beautiful species catch our attention, it is the depth of the loss that is a key.

One of the problems is loss of habitat. As more and more people move into an area, trees are cut, brush is cleared, wetlands filled, flood plains developed, prairies plowed. It is essential to identify and protect the areas of habitat that are critical to these endangered species, to establish corridors across the landscape and find way to pay for them, to identify those elements needed to protect these species and provide for them.

The key here is for humans to become committed to the protection of other species, and that is a big alteration from where we are now. Although

provisions exist under the Endangered Species Act, the enforcement is spotty and the desire to comply is often lacking on the part of landowners and on the part of project developers that still see these species as impediments rather than attributes.

A change in attitude about these species is a hallmark of Earth Church. Here we care about the fate, habitat, and future of these species. But before we get to that place, we must understand and enjoy these species.

So come with me to the boggy headwaters of several streams and creeks west of Houston and meet *Bufo houstonensis*, the Houston Toad, a toad that used to be found in Houston but no more, a toad whose future is a major project of the excellent endangered species group at the Houston Zoo.

the HOUSTON TOAD

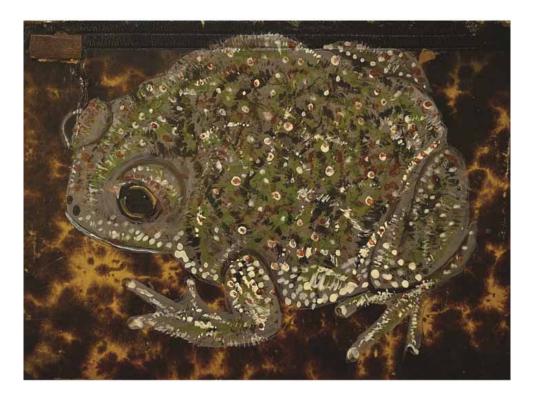
Hi there ya'll, I'm Bufo Houstonensis, Another one of them endangered species, I no longer can be found in Houston town, I now have found much safer ground.

I live in springs and seeps and bogs, It's there you find me and my polywogs, In counties named Austin, Bastrop, and Fayette, We haven't been eradicated from there yet.

When the federal government put me on the list, The Fish and Wildlife Service was a bit embarrassed, They designated my habitat on Houston's west side, Where urban sprawl had committed bufocide.

We once could be found throughout Texas forests, We don't need much, our lives are modest, But I need private puddles that are wet year-round, My feet like to be on spongy, soaked ground.

You humans seem to like draining wetland areas, And requiring a wet home is a bit precarious, I'm hopeful you'll accommodate my special need, And that I'll not be wiped out by human greed.



Thankfully, the Houston Zoo folks took an interest, In captive breeding, and they were persistent, Now they release thousands of egg strands, It's nice being consistent with human plans.

In the spring these days out in Austin County, The chorus can be heard singing loudly, Today many males join in the competition, To see which female prefers which rendition.

And here at Earth Church we smile with affection, That Bufo houstonensis had a population correction, And we thank the zoo for helping nature along, I hope to one day hear the Bufo song.

So welcome to Earth Church, Pull yourself up a pew, Here we work for all species Including you too. One of the most interesting of our endangered species on the Texas Coast is Attwater prairie chicken, another restoration project of the Houston Zoo, a great environmental steward. These chicken-like birds live in the native prairie, a habitat that has been severely impacted throughout the United States. And while stocking project such as those being pursued by the zoo are critical, perhaps more important is restoring this habitat.

This is where the concept of the new economy becomes so important, an economy where restoration of these prairie ecosystems becomes economically preferable for farmers and ranchers. Rather than subsisting on marginal agricultural operations that challenge the pocketbook and generate stress, why not get paid for sequestering carbon, running cattle and restoring habitat for the prairie chickens of the United States, all of which are in trouble.

The other day I was speaking with a man who restores prairies – who finds the seeds, who helps landowners restore their land. And he was discussing with me a restoration project by a landowner who was simply a good steward. This land was next to the Attwater Prairie Chicken National Wildlife Refuge west of Houston, and a large portion of the birds on the refuge were on that restored prairie that day.

That is the hope of Earth Church solutions – that we can do well for humans and for nature. And it is certainly possible if we conform our economics with ecology, and then create markets to do this work for us. Alignment – another key to the future.

We will know we are successful where we hear the drumming on the prairie, that absolutely magical sound called booming that is made by the male prairie chickens seeking mates, a rapid thumping of the feet and the inflation of the orange air sacs on the necks if you are close enough to see. So let's go observe this magical ceremony of Earth Church.

the ATTWATER PRAIRIE CHICKEN

We got up early one morning long ago To meet B.C. Robison and go see the show, We were heading to the prairie near Eagle Lake, Downing the coffee to keep us awake.



We met a few others at refuge headquarters, Assembling like a platoon awaiting their orders, Then in a caravan to the booming ground To await the sun and that intriguing sound.

I'm not sure exactly what I'd expected As the first rays of the sun, we detected, I remember the cold penetrating my jacket, And then we perceived the strangest racket.

The woooohoohoo came low and discrete, Then the boomboomboom from the pounding feet, We could all clearly see the inflated orange neck, Hornfeathers up and feet pounding like heck. To this day I remember the magical ambience, A prairie enshrouded in the sound of the dalliance, The male of the species working hard for a mate, The ladies evaluating who to pick for a date.

And later that morning at the Blue Goose café, Eating the best pancakes from a prairie gourmet, And talking with friends and enjoying good company, The morning's adventure ending just wondrously.

And now, looking back on that wonderful experience I can still hear the sound so eerie and mysterious, The whole native prairie was part of an opera, A meditation to be envied by Deepak Chopra.

Tympanuchus cupido is the scientific name, For the drumming cupid of prairie fame, A bird that is seriously now in decline, For good prairie habitat is hard to find.

So welcome to Earth Church Pull yourself up a pew Say a prayer that the prairie chicken Will boom for you.

And then there is the problem of water. In Texas, the fate of many endangered species is tied to water supply, the maintenance of the hydrologic cycle. All living species need water to some extent, some much more than others. Endangered mussels and salamanders live in the water. Without water, those species are history.

We humans can dry up rivers. In 2000, the Rio Grande ceased to flow into the Gulf of Mexico. The mouth simply silted over, and the great river stopped flowing. Our worldview today does not include ensuring that the rivers continue to flow, but at Earth Church we include flowing rivers in our concept of a complete Earth.

To keep rivers flowing, we must maintain the hydrologic cycle. In much of Texas, that means keeping rainwater that falls on the watershed flowing

back to the rivers so that they may flow to the coast and evaporate and return to do it all again. And in Central Texas, that means maintaining the spring flows that form our major rivers – that feed the Nueces, the San Antonio, the Guadalupe, the Llano, the Pedernales and the Colorado River systems. It means keeping the water supply beneath the ground stable and connecting back with the coast.

Here, the pumping of groundwater for human consumption emerges as a major threat. Much of central Texas is karst, one of the most incredible and vulnerable physical formations of the Earth. It has an amazing capacity to take water into the Earth and hold it in reservoirs where it is slowly released back to the rivers and streams. It is also a very convenient source of human water supply.

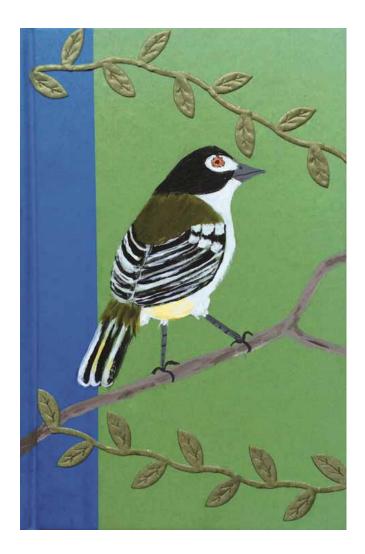
And of course, the problem comes when we put too many straws into the aquifer during times of drought, lowering the water level below the point where the springs are fed. This will starve the spring. This will take the water level down below the point where all other living things across the landscape have a water supply problem during times of drought.

When the seeps and springs go dry, there is no water supply for the birds. And that is a problem I work on with my friend, the Black-capped Vireo, an endangered bird of the Texas Hill Country.

the BLACK-CAPPED VIREO

Walking near Lone Man Creek In the Texas Hill Country in late spring.

The rains came to the Hill Country last week – Soaking, penetrating rains bringing water That found seams within the limestone shelves – Seams that slowly leak life-giving water That is open and available to the small vireo With the black cap that flits down To the natural cup and drinks The life-giving elixir, A vireo that has a special status, A vireo that is labeled by our actions, A vireo that is ENDANGERED.



I visualize this lovely living thing sipping And see the essence of life, The essence of existence On this beautiful place we call Earth, A place inhabited by a magical spirit – A force called life – Something that exists nowhere else but here On Earth that is my church – Life that is fragile – Life that is a flame needing tending, And I get it – loud and clear.

Today I am calling all, calling you To be a keeper of the flame of life, Protector of things endangered, Protector of those that are under attack, Protector of those unable to protect themselves Protector of the DNA that holds the key to life.

And to protect this endangered vireo, We must provide food, water and shelter – Save the springs and seeps, Protect the oak cedar scrub And give life a chance – So simple and yet so hard.

And at night the black capped one lands Within my dreams and wraps me in his wings And says thank you.

And then the water must make it to the coast. This is the water that is needed for the blue crab that the whooping crane eats. This is the same water that is needed for the Kemp's Ridley Sea Turtle, yet another endangered species of the Texas coast, another of living being, another member of the Earth church congregation.

There is nothing quite like hanging around with an endangered species, something that is not the norm. And that happened one day when I was wade fishing in Christmas Bay, one of my favorite places on the Texas coast.

the KEMP'S RIDLEY SEA TURTLE

Wade fishing in Christmas Bay's a delight, You come in the dark and walk in at first light, The bay's surface is mellow, flat and smooth, The wind's not up yet, just a breeze to soothe. I'm wading along, gently shuffling my feet, Alerting the stingray that I'd rather not meet, When I suddenly notice movement beside me, But when I look over, there's nothing to see.

I keep wading and fishing and glimpse it again, And I focus attention to the right and reel in, And stay very still for a minute or two, And a Kemp's ridley sea turtle's revealed on cue.

I take several minutes and experience it moving, It comes ever closer as if it's approving Of my coming to live life with it today, It's a great welcome sign here on Christmas Bay.

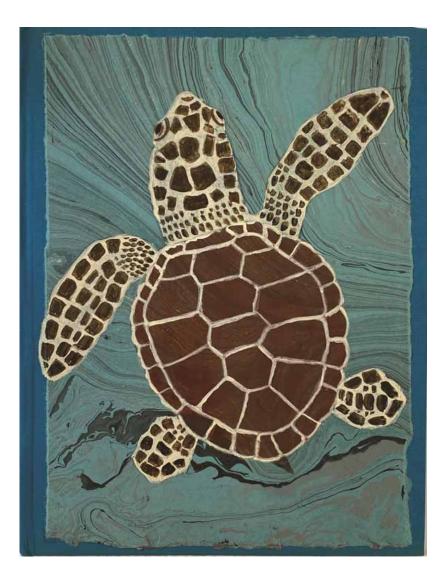
I look at the sky, and the pelicans are coming, The water explodes, the baitfish are running From the school of trout that has come to feed, Mullet flying from the water in a burst of speed.

Now this is why I come to the bay, To encounter memories I can take away, And hours later when I've returned to town, I'm in a great place, feet not yet on the ground.

And at night in bed when sleep's hard to find, The Kemp's ridley comes, joining my mind, Telling me we had such a nice bay encounter, Two beings intersecting, trading life power.

Christmas Bay's a temple where I come to pray, Gratitude overwhelms when in my bed I lay The turtle and Earth Church put on quite a show, It's gold for me – the best place I know.

So welcome to Earth Church, Pull yourself up a pew, Here a Kemp's ridley sea turtle May befriend you too.



Endangered species are our bell weathers – our signals of a system out of balance – our signals of system needing change. And Earth Church is about providing the will for that change.



ELEVEN

Enjoying the Cathedrals of Earth Church

here are many types of cathedrals in Earth Church. Some are magnificent places that you might go around the world to see. Others are out your back door, and they are all good, but they are different one from another.

In many respects, it is the diversity of experiences that one can encounter that is defining and glorious. It can be the beauty of the sunrise or sunset, the luminescence of the moon and stars, the song of the cardinal, the blue flash of the jay. But regardless of where you are, it is experiencing nature and other living things that is the key – breathing it into every pore of your body, letting it come in through your eyes, your nose, your mouth, your ears – connecting with it. Experiencing it. Loving it. The Earth is alive, and Earth Church is about appreciating and celebrating life and living on this wonderful planet.

One truly unique place here on Earth is the Amazon basin, the lungs of the Earth, a place of water, trees, and life – a place where organisms have evolved under harsh conditions – a place where life can be tough. In the Amazon, water levels rise and fall by large amounts. Land areas become water for months at a time and then return to land. The people who live here have rhythms set by nature, defined by the Earth cycles. It is magnificent and awe inspiring. And while there are many unique and wonderful birds and mammals and reptiles to focus on here, none made a greater impression on me than a large, disheveled-looking bird called the Hoatzin, a bird that makes me smile today as I write, a bird that epitomizes survival, a bird of the Amazon.

the HOATZIN 2

In the Amazon Basin in a dugout canoe, The water's dark brown, the sky is blue, It's like a dream paddling through a dense forest, The monkeys and parrots providing a chorus.

This is big water, and it's flowing downhill, Toward the Atlantic and the coast of Brazil, On the mother water of the Church of the Earth, Within the Earth's lungs that to oxygen gives birth.

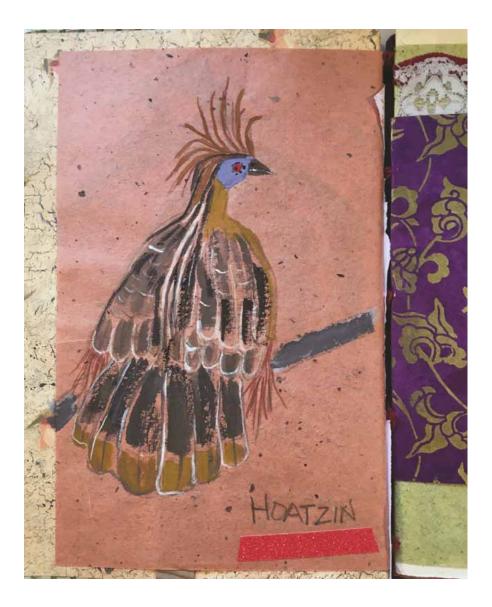
Our canoes are headed to a camp on a lake, We just saw a caiman and an anaconda snake, And over there fishing swims the giant otter, They all are carnivorous, and they love the water.

And next we encounter a bird very quirky, One who the natives call the stinky turkey, This is no sweet thing, no cute little birdie, To appreciate this bird, you must be a bit nerdy.

It's the crested denizen of the flooded swamps, This bird called the Hoatzin that romps and stomps, There's a pair here, and four over there, They're trying to scare us as they hiss and flare.

This bird named Hoatzin reminds me of Watson, IBM's big brain and both are awesome, Watson's pursuing the so-called "natural language," But here the Hoatzin has the clear advantage.

It speaks its own tongue by staring and braying, And I clearly understand that it is saying, "I'm a badass bird, stay away from me, You can kiss my ass – now let me be."



I'll never forget that bird on the Amazon, No translation needed, the message right on, And the stinky turkey will live in my memory, A gift from the Amazon's Earth-based treasury.

So welcome to Earth Church Pull yourself up a pew Natural language spoken here With a message for you. Although most of the cathedrals that catch my attention are totally natural, there are some that are designed by humans using nature as the subject that are noteworthy. One such place is a newly opened section of Memorial Park in Houston called The Glades.

Design with and for ecology is basic here. It celebrates the Earth. Thomas Woltz of Nelson, Byrd, Woltz landscape architects has designed a space that brings wetlands to humans in an accessible and wonderful way – contiguous flooded timber accessed by a boardwalk, wetland plants at the edge of the constructed pond, islands of wetlands surrounded by spongy grasses, small drainage features (not drainage ditches) that are filled with wetland plants and water quality enhancement features. Human design based upon and reflecting nature's design and it captured me from my first visit.

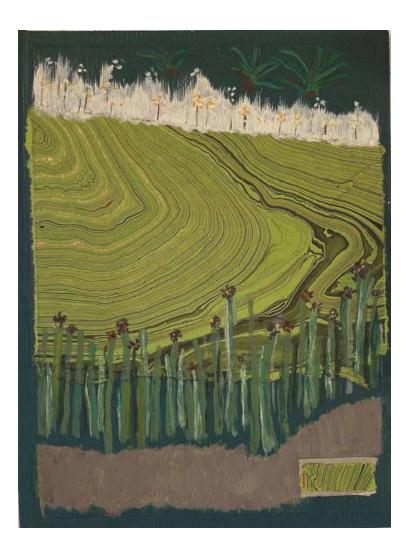
There simply is something magical about this place – the fallen tree from the bad drought cut into pieces and turned into seats arranged for conversation – the pileated woodpecker's call reflecting off of the wetland surface – the sound of the frogs in the spring a symphony. It is a place within a heavily utilized urban park for people to come and experience nature.

I give a big thumbs up to the Eastern Glades and to creative designers who work with nature, with the Earth, with its cycles and circles. I enjoy creativity. I try to teach it. And I love it when it celebrates Earth Church and brings it to the people.

the GLADES

In Memorial Park, they've created the glades Where great landscape design is on parade, It's a park experience of a different type, It's got real substance – it's not just hype.

The touch of the designer is certainly present, The complete experience seems heaven sent, There's love of ecology underlying it all, And beauty as well to keep you enthralled.



The lake's a wonderful walking experience, Here design truly does make a difference, The plants are arranged in the shallows with love, And the wading birds come in from up above.

A pair of least grebes came and built a nest, They have five youngsters and get no rest, These resident grebes are simply a delight, A great endorsement the design is all right.

There's a boardwalk that enters the wetland forest Where woodpeckers play and tree frogs rest, Here you enter a wetland type seldom seen And your mind can play in a scene serene. But now to the glades created here, A celebration of wetlands we all should revere, A design with water meadows oh so sublime, To grasp the design took a bit of time.

Design can destroy a perfect Earth temple, But here the touch is appropriate and gentle, A place is created where I'll return to worship, Ecology and humans together in partnership.

I've never been prouder of this place called Houston, Good has been done – our image needs boosting, This space is a special one dedicated to ecology, A place to celebrate our Gulf Coast biology.

So welcome to Earth Church, Pull yourself up a pew, Come to services at the Glades, There's a spot here for you.

There are some places that you encounter that have a message to convey, wisdom free to you if you are able to interpret it and take it within yourself – a cathedral of knowledge – a cathedral of advice that is yours if you're open to taking it. Such is the situation with the live oak trees down in the Rockport area of the Texas coast.

When you come to this middle section of the Texas coast, you will be struck by the trees that have been shaped by the wind and the salt spray over decades, trees that bend but don't break with the continuing forces of nature, the daily grind that they encounter. Here, the trees stand as messengers with wisdom for our survival.

Life is full of forces that work on all of us. Some would call these forces inhospitable. Others might call them challenging. But for the bent oak trees of Rockport, these forces are simply the conditions within which their acorn was sprouted. Their appearance describes the life that they encountered and affirms that they have adapted to it.

Adaptation is a key to living life, and that is one of the great gifts possessed by all members of Earth church, humans included. And as you

enjoy the Earth and attending Earth church, keep adaptation in mind. We can all learn from it.

the BENT TREES OF ROCKPORT

The tree stands by the waterside, Old – shaped by forces that collide, It may not be what it wanted to be, But then such is life for every entity.

The tree's been burned by wind and salt, Sturdy – able to withstand assault, It's found a way to exist and thrive, It's found a way to stay alive.

I taste the salt and feel the wind, I'm pushing forward but where's the end? Some days seem more than I can take, Some nights I lie in my bed awake.

When darkness looms and I'm losing strength, I think on the tree and muse at length About the ability to bend but not break, Of finding water for my thirst to slake.

I feel beat up and a bit bruised, But no fatal injury, no gaping wound, I am alive and that's positive, I can still create with forces cognitive.

I take a breath of the Earth that provides A calmness moving like a fog that glides Throughout my body, my senses, myself, I'm a bit bent over, but I have my health.



Like the tree in Rockport, I fight to survive, For what is life but staying alive, To remain alive I need a glow, A reason for being, a truth to know.

So I look to the tree that is bent by the wind, To stoke my spirit and begin again, I'm bent and pricked but standing yet, I embrace what I am and do not fret.

So welcome to Earth Church, Pull yourself up a pew, Pray you bend but don't break, And that your roots support you.

And then there are the places that celebrate life – the sources of that which Earth Church celebrates, the most productive of the most productive life-giving places – the estuaries of the world that I have out my door here on the Texas coast, the places where fresh and saltwater come together and join to create the nurseries of the Gulf. I love to see the estuary in my kayak or in a motorboat or even driving up to the edge and gazing across the marsh to the bayous and grassflats and mudflats that define these areas. I simply enjoy experiencing them.

The estuary is where fresh and saltwater come together, a place where fish and shellfish and invertebrates of all types spend some or all of their life cycle, fueled by the microscopic plants called phytoplankton and the single celled zooplankton that are nourished by the carbon and nitrogen and phosphorus that cycle in with the riverine flow. This is the food chain that fuels the estuarine ecosystem, and I appreciate the coast ten times more now that I understand a bit more about how it functions.

The estuary is the circular economy in action, a testament to the wisdom and force of nature. It is not that the water is clear and pretty, for it often is not, sometimes being off color if not muddy looking due to inflow from our rivers returning water to the Gulf. Sediments and nutrients carried by this water create a productive soup that fuels life. And while it may look polluted, don't let the look fool you. This is simply what productivity looks like.

For me, a great day is to come to the estuary and celebrate life – the renewal that comes from the rivers and bayous, the symphony that comes from photosynthesis and sediments and nutrients coming together to create the food chain that feeds the coast, leading to the shrill of the gulls and the grunts of the heron. And I pray that the estuary will continue to be fed from the inland areas with their hunger for more and more water.

the CABBAGE HEAD

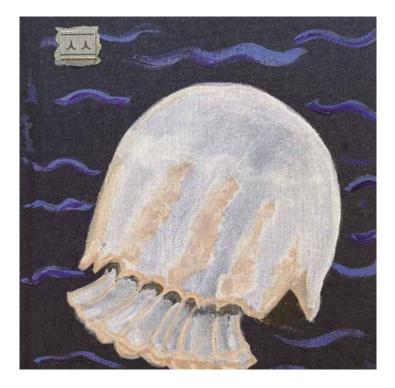
I look in the water and what do I see? A cantaloupe with propulsion going past me, A strange looking organism just pumping along, It looks kind of mushy, not very strong.

The cannonball jellyfish, a.k.a. cabbage head, Has a sting that can turn your skin a bit red, It's relatively mild – not very toxic, But it does make this critter a tad obnoxious.

We saw cabbage heads going up Chiltipin creek, They were in the lagoon, and we just got a peek, They were mixed in with the lovely moon jelly, They seem straightforward – no Machiavelli.

The estuary is alive and peaceful today, With sweet cabbage heads gently pumping away, An organism that makes me smile with delight, Just swimming sideways, the world's all right.

The estuary today is a full-of-life place, A nursery providing life's loving embrace, For the habitat's as important as are the critters The home providers, the life givers.



We should consider certain areas sacred, Off limits – out of bounds – perfectly created, We don't need to destroy just 'cause we can, We've done enough damage, don't do it again. This temple of Earth church is our heritage, It's a very fine wine – an excellent vintage, It provides value to all, but it has no money, It can be stolen away, and that's not very funny.

The thieves plan to steal by governmental allowance, They can only be stopped by acts of defiance, So come stand with those that will fight for the temple, The cabbage head needs helps – it's just that simple.

So welcome to Earth Church Pull yourself up a pew Here we stand up for the cabbage head And so should you.

Something does not have to be big to be a grand cathedral. Creating pocket prairie parks is a recent trend in Houston, and a great one exists on the Rice University campus near the Texas Medical Center, one of the busiest parts of Houston.

In this back corner of the University, a drainage course that has long been covered on other parts of the campus finds the sun and empties into a retention area before going underground again to flow beneath the medical center. This is an area that I got to know when I was recovering from heart surgery, a place where my daily walk brought me into contact with birds and bunnies and the prairie as winter moved into spring. This was a place that helped me heal.

I particularly remember the flowers coming out after my surgery, the blooms appearing one after another, the colors varied, and then one day a rainbow of color before me. I took a deep breath of the boggy soil after the spring rains and I felt strength returning to my recovering body – strength of muscle, strength of will and strength of soul – strength which is restored every time I visit this cathedral.

I returned more recently, walking with joy, walking with wife Garland, when we encountered a wonderful event at this prairie, one that made my day, one that caused me to become engulfed in gratitude – gratitude for the stewards that cultivated this area, gratitude that I could

appreciate it. That is the beauty of Earth Church, unexpected joys, pure pleasure in all types of places, cathedrals all.

the PRAIRIE WARBLER

There's a tiny little prairie over at Rice U, That provides a treat for me and you, It's preserved due to efforts by two men, Who were determined that restoration must begin.

Harris Gully used to flow through the campus, It was dug up and covered and left cattywampus, Out of sight out of mind was the attitude, But that old gully defied the platitude.

The water still managed to flow overland, Where Harris Gully used to stand, And a detention area eventually developed, And by grass and brush it became enveloped.

From this chaos was born the little Rice prairie, A gift dropped upon us by the good prairie fairy, A small bit of nature began to push through, And the birds and bunnies showed up on cue.

A few days ago we were in this grassland, When along came a man who was a birding fan, He had a camera with a huge, long lens, Seeking the prairie warbler rather than wrens.

Now a prairie warbler is a relatively rare bird, Not often seen and seldom heard, Yet here in the city in a tiny reserve, The prairie warbler had found a preserve.

Even though it is small, this prairie's a temple, Just give nature a chance – just keep it simple, Allow seeds to germinate and grass to sprout, And soon you'll have critters all about.

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There's a moral to this story about Earth Church, You don't need huge acreage to have worth, And the prairie warbler found a spot here at Rice, What a happy ending – isn't it nice?



So welcome to Earth Church, Pull yourself up a pew, Pray that small natural treasures Bring you something new. The cathedral can become even smaller, coming down to one plant or one tree, a living carbon dioxide-converting, oxygen emitting source that sustains us all. Have you ever simply stopped and celebrated the great supporter of humans called the tree?

Now, I know many of you worry about appearing a bit silly, but in India, one often encounters trees with wreaths of marigolds around them. I always considered that a spiritual statement, but I did not grasp the full power of that simple act of placing a wreath around a tree – a statement of appreciation and gratitude, a recognition of the relationship between us and trees.

the NUTRITION TREE

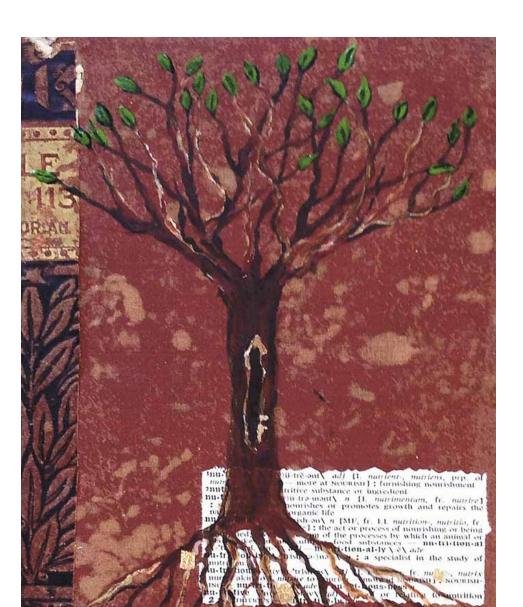
A tree stands alone on the empty lot, From a landscape view, it's just a dot, But it is incredibly important to oh so many And it's worth a million if it's worth a penny.

It's home to birds like the robins and jays, Squirrels nest here and the young one plays, When the Coopers hawk lands it all quiets down For the tree community goes to hawk lockdown.

Now the image in the painting is about nutrition About what was ordered by the Earth's physician, For trees have a very important role to perform As a part of the Earth's recycling platform.

A tree takes carbon dioxide from the air And gives us back oxygen which is only fair, The carbon is converted to a carbohydrate To become wood and leaves is its fate.

And when the leaves fall and limbs decay It closes a cycle yet some carbons will stay To add to the biomass, the carbon reserve, A climate solution with moxie and verve.



The tree recycles water through transpiration, It's a neat phenomenon – a source of inspiration, For the roots suck up water and send it to the top Where it goes into the air to become a raindrop. And then there are elements like nitrogen and phosphorus, To include them in a poem might seem preposterous, But these mineral additives are used and released When the leaves degrade, and their use has ceased.

And they go to the soil where they are collected And reused in a system that the tree's perfected, The tree's a smart being – an amazing life form, Let's leave it alone – it has duties to perform.

So welcome to Earth church Pull yourself up a pew Say a prayer that your love Will include trees too.

To end this chapter, let's go deeper into India, perhaps the most spiritual country I have ever visited, a place where shrines adorn tree roots, where the side of the road becomes a canvas painted by various spiritual artists. I truly enjoyed India and its care and concern about other living things. I loved the painted cows ambling along the road and through town. I loved the vegetarian meals. It smelled of the Earth. It is of the Earth, although that spirituality was more easily accessed in the rural areas than in the harshness of urban India.

I love that Hinduism has hundreds of Gods, many of which are animals. Hanuman is the monkey God, whose upper torso I saw extending from the top of a temple as we descended into a larger town, a breathtaking sight. Lord Ganesha is the multi-limbed elephant who is carried by a rat. The imagery is grand and is celebrated throughout Indian culture. The spiritual abounds.

And from an experiential spiritual standpoint, few experiences compare with the time I spent on the River Normada, a holy river where pilgrims join the women of the town at the river, a place of peace, a place where daily life and spiritual life come together in a way that made a lasting impression, a place that inspired me to begin writing the poetry that you have been reading for a while if you have made it this far. I give you the cathedral known as the River Normada.

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the RIVER NARMADA

Sound opens my eyes above the Narmada, A holy river, a spiritual phenomenon, The river speaking in the early morning light, Pink and orange clothing reflecting bright.

Kathump. Thump. Plop. Kathump. Thump. Plop.



Women pounding clothing on temple stairs, Cleansing and holiness amongst river lairs Riverine pilgrims flocking down like birds, Babbling excitement, hardly speaking words.

They wade in the river of spirit waters, Mothers and fathers, sons and daughters, Seeking something divine from the holy giver By anointing oneself in the holy river.

And later in the evening as the sun retires, Orange-robed priests light tiny fires, And as they say the evening prayers, Lighted cups float off removing cares.

Light floats downriver, a practice divine, Timelessly to the coast, no rewind, A celebration, a happening, a sacred event, My soul flowing with it wherever it went.

Kathump. Thump. Plop. Kathump. Thump. Plop.

As I greet a new day from my riverside bed, The River Narmada flows in my head, Thoughts trapped in the bondage of practicality Fly out like a butterfly with alacrity.

They flit 'round the center of my being, My soul is smiling – my pen is singing. On the River Narmada – alive and renewed, Sanctified, satisfied, gratified and imbued.

I sense a whole never glimpsed before, As I float downriver through the open door, The light of my soul now a roaring fire, Delighted as it now flies above the mire.

So welcome to Earth Church, Pull up a riverside pew, Let your spirit flow, And your eyes will open too.



TWELVE Beyond the Pandemic

o end, we return to where we began – the Pandemic. When this book was first being written, Covid was in decline. Humans were emerging from hiding and socializing again. Garland and I were just beginning to eat out. We were seeing friends again. We were moving back toward what we knew before Covid. And then more recently, Covid is back, not like it was, but back again.

That we are even close to normalcy is due to the creativity of humans. Our scientists were able to develop a vaccine in record time and for now it seems to be working to protect us against this virulent virus although we may need a booster. International travel has not fully returned yet, but it seems a matter of time. Sports and music gatherings are open for business. What we once considered normal is returning, at least in part.

Many may soon forget the fear, the isolation, the need for connectuality that was so apparent, so real during the bulk of 2020, but I will not. So, in this concluding chapter, I would first like to salute our doctors and research scientists and our medical professionals. They answered our prayers. Some died for us. They all worked for us. And they may just save us all if we would just take the shot.

SYRINGE

Never has a shot been so anticipated, Tension is great – real fear was generated, For the shot needle represents security, The need for which there's no ambiguity.

We wait in line at the Methodist hospital, Everyone is so nice – so hospitable, Urging us forward six feet at a time, It's looking good – it's not a bad line.

And then G and I go behind the curtain, The potion is there – the shot seeming certain, And the nurse pulls the juice into the syringe, I will be brave – I will not cringe.

And then we are ushered into a room, To wait to see if the vaccine means gloom, But we are still standing after 30 minutes, We now can leave and end our visit.

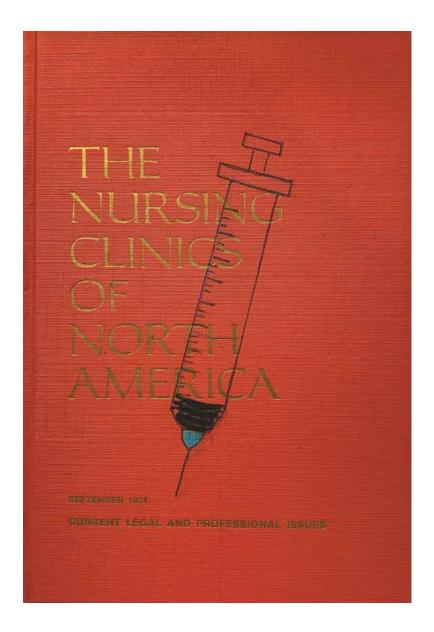
And we're back again four weeks later, We go to the line of the Moderna operator, Who gives us the second of our injections, I'm glad to be done – I have no hesitations.

Never has a vaccination seemed so important, I think this whole effort might become a portent Of how life will be moving forward in time Combating these viruses, a battle sublime.

This is human ingenuity versus rapid mutation, We are lucky to have lived through this situation, This is what a near miss feels like for real, This was no joke – it was the real deal.

At Earth Church we're proud of our human tools, And we shake our heads at our human fools, And today I'm grateful I've been given the shot, It's a chance to survive and that's worth a whole lot.

So welcome to Earth church Pull yourself up a pew Here we're grateful for genius That will save us and you.



Vaccinated, Garland and I are ready to move forward into the future, loving each other, caring for each other, caring for the Earth, she to her garden that she tends with loving care, me to my Earth practice of law and planning and teaching, the two of us together, keeping each other safe to the best of our abilities, always with love.

Importantly, life goes on, Garland and I together. I know we will have hard times in the future. I try to find the positive in life and living, but there are certainly challenges that we all face. Some are tougher than others. But forging forward, I know I have Earth Church to lean on, to go to, to attend. And that is a great comfort.

the BABY OWL

Some days are simply harder than others, Your chest is tight, your breath smothered, Your well-laid plan just came undone The race is over – you have not won.

But nature can come and offer a balm That grabs the beast and makes it calm, Offering a hand pulling you from the mire, Bringing some water to toss on the fire.

And so it is with the owl in the box That says so much as its eyes talk, Telling me that it is safe in there, Telling me that the box means care.

And what a gift the steward has left, The box sparing baby from being bereft, Giving safety and comfort till mom is back, And until baby owl gains the flying knack.

Friend Robin greets the owl on her morning walk, If you listen carefully, you can hear them talk, Robin meditating to find a connection, The owl simply happy to aid meditation.

And connected they become, day after day, Each of them nourished in a spiritual way, One from the connection with a living thing, The other just excited being a being.

Such is the wonder of the Church of the Earth, A place that continues to generate worth, Today baby owl comes through for us all, Tomorrow a smile from the blue jay's call.



And upon reflection my day wasn't so bad As I sit here and smile like a very young lad For nature has done it once again And restored good feelings in this old man.

So welcome to Earth Church Pull yourself up a pew Take a trip into nature It's good for you.

And I will continue to embrace and explore the Earth, finding new jewels and enjoying old ones, but always trying to understand and

appreciate the Earth – welcoming it into the stoop of my soul – finding common ground with all other living things – finding peace and serenity with gratitude and humility. Amen.

the NEST

Walking and thinking about nothing at all, The sun makes me slow, almost a crawl, My mind is free, no worries, no concerns, My brain's at the point of no returns.

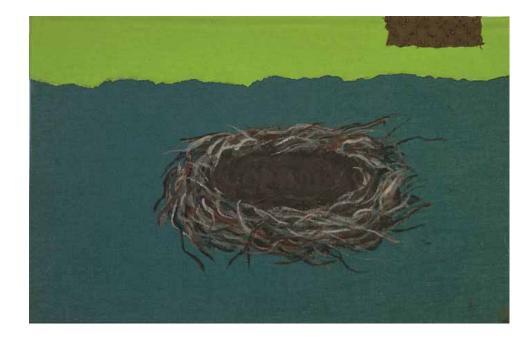
But out of the corner of my eye, I spy a nest no longer occupied, A nest that's fallen from the tree, A nest cast aside, a piece of debris.

But what a home that nest once was, A gift that came straight from the Gods, Assembled with care by the jay so blue, Who used this nest with its mate so true.

Looking at the nest, I am transported, I'm in that nest with the lady I courted, She's sitting atop eggs blue with brown, She makes me smile, I could never frown.

And then four featherless youngsters arrive, It's up to me to make sure they survive, I forage for food in the trees and shrubs, Looking for seeds, looking for grubs.

And then one day they are ready to fly, It scared me so much I thought I would die, But all four of our babies took to the air, We followed their flight with a loving stare.

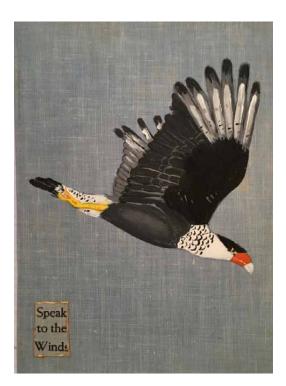


We left the nest – we went on our way, And then one day it was blown away, Put on the ground by a storm from the sea, Removing all traces of my blue family.

The twigs will return from where they came, Gone without fanfare, without acclaim, Back to the Earth, our mother, our keeper, My home, my place, my prayer receiver.

So welcome to Earth Church, Pull yourself up a pew, Here we look in the nest And find a future for you.





The Painter Isabelle Scurry Chapman (a.k.a. Princie) makes art and looks for magic in life. Isabelle resides in Houston where she scours the landscape and old books for inspiration and spiritual connections. She has received a Mid-America National Endowment for the Arts individual grant and has shown her work across Texas, the US, and Mexico. Her art is visceral, from the heart and of the spirit. She is the co-author with Jim Blackburn of *Birds: A Collection of Verse and Vision, 2009.*



The Poet Jim Blackburn is an environmental lawyer and planner who teaches and researches at Rice University in the Civil and Environmental Engineering Department. He has published two books – *The Book of Texas Bays* and *A Texan Plan for the Texas Coast* – along with co-authoring *Birds: A Collection of Verse and Vision* and *Hill Country Birds and Waters: Art and Poems* with Isabelle. He was designated a Rice University distinguished alumni laureate in 2018 and won the International Crane Foundation Good Egg Award in 2015.





The Supporting Spouses

Our spouses, John Chapman and Garland Kerr, are our rocks and our advisors without whose aid and assistance this book would not be possible. They provide excellent wisdom and support on varied subjects and things. They are unwavering in their support of our art and poetry, and we love them both.

