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'Deep ecologist' finds laughter and beauty in nature

by Sharon Abercrombie

Eco Catholic

The late Fr. Thomas Berry, renowned geologist, was not the only environmentalist who believed we need a new creation story. Brenda Peterson, novelist and essayist, is of like mind.

While Berry believes we must regain our sense of gratitude and courtesy toward the earth and its inhabitants and recognize the sacred character of habitat, Peterson proposes that we also need large doses of humor and hope to neutralize the often fundamental, tragic doom-gloom-guilt and shame attitudes from some environmentalists who cast the earth in a crucifixion mode.

"I never saw a stand up environmental comic," Peterson, a fallen-away Southern Baptist who became a deep ecologist, writes in her delightfully funny and affectionate 2010 family memoir, *I Want to Be Left Behind: Finding Rapture Here on Earth*.

Even as a kid, Brenda Peterson was deemed "lost" by her Southern Baptist kin. By the time she had reached the ripe old age of 9 or 10, Peterson had carved out a permanent place for herself at the top of their prayer list.

Good little fundamentalists just didn't confess to witnessing a squirrel flying between two trees as a sign from God, a message yet to be revealed. Nor, heaven forbid, theorize aloud that Moses' parting of the Red Sea might have coincided with a tsunami.

"To me, nature's language was God's way of engaging the earth to speak for Him to us -- since most people had stopped conversing with animals, trees, rocks and rivers," writes Peterson, the author of more than 16 fiction and nonfiction books.

Peterson is the daughter of a U.S. forest service employee and a dedicated stay-at-home mom. Her parents

longed for the rapture, when all the saved would be swept up in a twinkling of the eye from this evil, earthly life. But little Brenda didn't want to go with them. Why would she, when here in the beautiful mountains and rolling hills of Virginia, she can see "the divine everywhere I looked -- a flock of geese lifting off the lake, a horse nudging her foal to walk, a thunderstorm rising over the hill like a cumulus revelation."

But out loud, this kid can ask the most annoying questions: "Will Snookums (the beloved family cat) be raptured, too?"

Although the term "deep ecology" was only gaining hold in the environmental movement at the time, little Brenda was speeding away from her safe, secure, fundamentalist family clan, straight into Arne Naess' planetary scope of thought. Some of the most hilarious conversations between Peterson, her parents and her siblings take place at the family dinner table.

Southern Baptist theology and right-wing politics are debated over mountains of her mother's delectable moose-meat entrée (courtesy of dad's s hunting trips) and homemade blackberry ice cream. Years later, while living in Seattle, the author is astonished by the realization that her environmental friends are manifesting some of the same kind of fundamentalist righteousness as her family. Doom, gloom and judgmental pitch their tents in both the fundamental and environmental camps? It just can't be happening.

Her concern grows one evening at a Thai restaurant in Seattle, when Peterson and two friends, Alice and Bill, are ordering dinner. Alice, a member of PETA, leaves the table in a huff when Peterson and Bill order meat dishes. (Peterson eats meat once a week to stave off a family propensity towards anemia.) Alice then proceeds to self-righteously dine alone on tofu pad thai across the room. But later, she owns up to a painful confession: "I do sometimes just break down and hit up the Thirty-One Flavors."

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"You mean you commit Baskin-Robbins?" Peterson asks Alice, noting, "I couldn't help but smile."

Admits poor Alice, "Yes, yes, I cannot help myself. ... Sometimes late at night I just jump in my car and go get a three scooper. Once I even had ... a banana split."

The evidence grows. *Outdoor Review*, the magazine Peterson works for, is preparing to run a story about the opening of more off-shore drilling on the West Coast. There are dire warnings of urban sprawl and a salmon run threatened by a new dam project. One day, a colleague rushes in with a grim news story about strip mining in the Utah wilderness. Peterson asks him if there might be another way to talk about the natural world beside fear and catastrophe. He's not certain.

"People only seem to wake up and change when they're scared to death, or when they think they're going to lose something they really love, like salmon or a favorite river. Fear of extinction is a strong motivator. And so is righteous anger, on both sides," he replies.

A few days later, as Peterson sits in her backyard beach at Seattle's Salish Sea, she takes out her notebook and draws up two columns, one for fundamentalists, another for environmentalists. Here is what she writes: both are enraptured by doom, dwell on Apocalypse Now or Near; fear future consequences; have righteous anger; humorless, holier-than-thou attitudes, peppered with shame and judgment. Both are evangelical in their approaches.

Peterson is disturbed and startled. She hides the list in the back of the notebook, feeling disloyal to all her environmental causes.

"Yet I could not help but see that both sides were so busy envisioning an afterlife, or future Eden, that they took no time to appreciate the present moments," she writes.

Just in time to save her from despair, literary ecologist Joseph Meeker appears on the scene. Author of *The Comedy of Survival*, Meeker adds a much-needed crucial piece to her "philosophical puzzle."

"You ever see how much both the biblical and ecological heroes act out of a tragic vision of life?" Joe asked. "One's vision is evil, the other's is extinction."

The other way out, he said, is "to see ourselves as a divine comedy. You know the tragic hero always dies at the end to fulfill some divine order that is supposedly higher than this immoral world. But the comic character just bumbles along, adapting and taking evasive action -- like the animals do. To evolution, and comedy, nothing is sacred, nothing but life itself."

A relieved Peterson comes away with a different take. She now asks, "What might have happened if the early Christian storytellers, who imagined this world was still a paradise, had prevailed over the state Christian empire-builders who chose crucifixion, not Eden, as their main drama? And what if environmentalists stopped portraying nature as crucified? What if both camps simply stopped all their fear mongering and found a new story? We might imagine a future in which all species flourish along with us. A garden that is more beautiful than it is battered, more sacred than it is scarred."

And with beauty, Peterson adds on her website, comes laughter and play. "Play always ends in community," she says in an online interview.

Brenda Peterson would be delighted to meet *Columbus Dispatch* columnist Joe Blundo. In his May 29 column, "So To Speak," Blundo, a standup comic in newsprint, pokes fun at a recent bill passed by the Ohio legislature that allows the oil and gas industry to keep some of the chemicals in fracking liquid secret from the public. The bill rules that people who fear that the secret chemicals sickened them or polluted their water could find out what those chemicals are only by filing a lawsuit after the fact, Blundo writes.

He literally turns the tables on the fracking guys with a large dose of droll humor. To celebrate their recent lobbying victory, they go to a restaurant for a festive meal. And as someone once said, what's sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander.

I'm not going to tell you what transpires. Go to Blundo's column site. You will laugh. As the fracking debate intensifies in the Buckeye State, a little humor and playfulness like Joe Blundo's are real gifts, saving graces to smooth the sharp edges of despair.

"Despair," Brenda Peterson notes, "is the one luxury the planet can't afford."

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