

Only by learning to love nature can we be motivated to care for it

I begin with childhood memories. In the winter, my parents would take me to Rocky River Reservation of Cleveland Metro Parks. We would stand scarecrow-style in the snow-covered woods with a fist full of bird seed in our hands. Before our outstretched arms got tired, chickadees would flutter; then land in our hands, snatching seed from our open palms. To have a wild bird land in your open hand is an unforgettable experience.

I also remember my family camping at a farm in western Pennsylvania where there was a spring that flowed out of an iron pipe. Fascinated by the perpetual stream that came out of the ground, I went back to the spring time after time during the weekend campout, and I drank the cold mineral-laden water from that spring. It was the first groundwater spring I had seen in my life.

Both of these experiences occurred when I was no more than 5 or 6 years old when my family lived in the western suburbs of Cleveland. Both of these memories were rekindled and confirmed about a month ago when my mother, now 85, handed me a photo album with black and white photos from my early childhood. But without photographic proof I know these memories have been alive in me for many years.

I am also a person shaped by the tradition and experience of the Christian faith.

Full-time ministry is my calling. Rather than care for a congregation, I am the pastor of a beautiful natural place called Camp Asbury. I link a living faith tradition with empirical experience in the natural world in ways that shine light in people's lives. Through experiences at Camp Asbury, people discover and rediscover the truth, beauty, and connection that they need to find meaning in their daily lives.

A number of years ago I came to the conclusion that the most important work I do is probably walking and listening. It is my privilege to walk 450 beautiful acres in all seasons, in all kinds of weather, sometimes in the daylight sometimes in darkness. Sometimes I walk alone; sometimes I'm with a group of guests or campers or staff. I visit the same spots again and again, to see what's changed since my last visit. When I return from the woods, I often write down notes or reflections.

GREEN

PORTAGE



Rev. William W. Graham
Portage Park District

The landscape of Camp Asbury is defined by steep slopes, ravines, and flat wetland.

Most of the property is wooded. I've heard others describe Camp Asbury as "a natural treasure," "a jewel," "a sanctuary," "a living laboratory." Numerous cold water springs, vernal ponds, wet meadows, pockets of fen and bog make it a haven for amphibians and reptiles — salamanders, tree frogs, spotted turtles. Through the camp property flows Eagle Creek, a headwater source for the Mahoning River.

Camp Asbury is connected to other public green space by Portage Park District's Headwaters Trail and by Ohio's Buckeye Trail.

Because we live in God's world, I'm convinced that we need to see, hear, and handle nature as much as we need the truth of the Bible. We need sacred landscapes, unspoiled habitats — places that we can visit but don't belong; places where nature meets us on its own terms. And we need these places nearby.

Camp Asbury is such a place; the parks of Portage Park District are such places.

People of all ages need to hold a chickadee in their hand and feel the cold current of a spring in order to become lovers of nature. It's only when we learn to love nature — through direct experience — that we are motivated to care for nature. May we take seriously the responsibility of protecting our unspoiled places in Portage County.

Rev. William W. Graham is an ordained minister in the United Methodist Church and has been the director of Camp Asbury in Hiram for the last 14 years. Green Portage is a monthly feature of the Record-Courier in cooperation with the Portage Park District.

OPINION

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