

## Ecological Care and Justice

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Over thirty years ago, Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* urged us to broaden our ethics of justice and care, including besides humans all the other creatures/forms of life with which we must share our air, fire, water, and soil. The fact that Carson's concerns for our soil and its other creatures was not expressed by philosophers in ancient times, [like Plato or Aristotle for example] is contextually understandable--given that they could take "both soil and virtue...for granted,"<sup>1</sup> much more so than we can. The fact that these concerns have not been expressed in the discourses of contemporary educators/moralists stems from profoundly troubling reasons, including academic fashions and turf wars that marginalize ecological concerns from philosophy, psychology and other modern disciplines. The result: gross global injustices, the insane loss of lives, and the rape of soil. Snauwaert's emphasis on ecological care and justice is most welcome. It fills a tiny part of a vast vacuum, one that threatens us with "silent springs" such as Carson warned us of.

In joining Snauwaert's support for the ethical ideals of friendship, ecological care and justice,<sup>2</sup> I see the necessity of underscoring another moral virtue: modesty. In its absence, the others will remain elusive. This virtue of modesty demands an honest recognition of human limits in times of rank grandiosity and immodesty, of *Earth Summits*, manifestos and "global facilities" that proclaim care for all of nature. In modesty I also balk at Snauwaert's grand invitations to befriend the whole earth. As a middle-aged woman, already vastly overstretched and unsuccessful in taking care of a minuscule garden and a small family/community, I know that I cannot befriend or care for humanity, the planet, or all of nature. While not aspiring to be Mother Theresa, I can, however, still modestly care: for a few friends, relatives, students, colleagues and neighbors who, like the trees and vegetable beds in my garden, are within "the horizon." I can care by reducing my burden on others through "voluntary simplicity," while hoping, even praying, that other ordinary people will do this much or even more within their own communities and ecological niches.

This virtue of modesty in considering care, friendship and justice seems alien to too many modern men and women. To better appreciate this virtue, we must learn from the knowledge/wisdom of indigenous peoples, free of the false sense of Godly power that our technological system inspires in us, the Promethean lust to be Divine. Our technologies, like our institutions and other elements of modern culture, continue to destroy justice, caring and friendship practiced on the human scale, *misrepresenting* their modesty as backwater "provincialism/parochialism."

When care, friendship and justice (ecological or other) are considered with modesty, the issue of "human scale" becomes central. The caring that defines friendships, as well as other moral relationships such as marriage, cannot be globalized. They can only be practiced on the human scale. Ecological care requires the marriage of persons to particular places in order to cherish and to "husband" them. A wise man, knowing his limits, does not seek to husband a thousand "partners." Ecological care and justice demand similar wisdom, notes Wendell Berry, husbanding with care his native Kentucky fields:

The inability to distinguish between a particular woman and any woman is a condition predisposing to abuse....The inability to distinguish between a farm and any farm is a condition predisposing to

abuse...Rape, indeed, has been the result, and we have seen that we are not exempt from the damage we have inflicted. Now we must think of marriage.<sup>3</sup>

The ecological marriage proposed by Berry demands that each of us take better care of the farms and factories, in all their particularity, that feed, clothe and shelter us. To try to care for more than that is tantamount to pretentiousness. Yet, the more each of us practices these virtues of care and friendship at the local level, the less ecological damage and global injustice we perpetrate writ large.

Berry's life, like Carson's, is a testimony to the global impact one person can have by taking care of the people and places she/he learns to belong to. Neither has pretensions of being a "friend of the earth." In contrast, Berry has devoted decades to taking good care of his small farm and community in rural Kentucky; while Carson was moved to write *Silent Spring*, deeply disturbed by the holocaust taking place in her friend's backyard sprayed by pesticides. Berry's example has literally moved thousands across America and Europe to initiate Community Supported Agriculture. Similarly, in terms of global impact, Carson continues to educate millions to stop the immoral greening of their backyards with Chemlawn and other modern miracles. Inspired by her, but accustomed to "Think Big," President Kennedy established the EPA. This institution's dubious role in the politics of ecological regeneration should keep us on our guard against those claiming national/global ecological care and justice.

Underscoring modesty, I end by inviting all of us gathered here to bring our philosophical deliberations down to earth -- engaging in a conversation about what we are doing, on and off campus, for promoting the praxis of teaching ecological care, friendship and justice on the human scale, in our own concrete local places.

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1. Sigmar Groeneveld, Lee Hoinacki, and Ivan Illich, "The Earthly Virtue of Place," *New Perspectives Quarterly* 8, no. 1 (1991): 59.

2. For my extended support of all the moral ideals Snauwaert presents in this essay, see for example, Madhu Suri Prakash, "In Pursuit of Wholeness: Moral Development, The Ethics of Care and the Virtue of Philia," *Philosophy of Education* 1984 (Champaign: Philosophy of Education, 1984), 63-74; and Madhu Suri Prakash, "Ecological Literacy for Moral Virtue: Orr On [moral] Education for Postmodern Sustainability," *Journal of Moral Education* 24, no. 1 (1995). For an earlier conversation Snauwaert and I have had about the appropriate scale for human care, friendship and justice, see his response as well as that of others to my essay "From Global Thinking to Local Thinking: Reasons to Go Beyond Globalization to Localization," *Wholistic Education Review* 7, no. 4 (Winter 1994 and Summer 1995).

3. Wendell Berry, *What Are people For* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1990), 210.