

Celebrating and Preserving Biodiversity

MARIANNE PETERS

In September, when it was still warm, I nearly stepped on a slug, four inches long, stretched out magnificently as it slid across the sidewalk—and spotted like a big cat. Who would put leopard spots on a slug?

“In nature, improbabilities are the one stock in trade,” writes Annie Dillard, whose book *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* knits science and faith into awe. “The whole creation is one lunatic fringe. If creation had been left up to me, I’m sure I wouldn’t have had the imagination or courage to do more than shape a single, reasonably sized atom, smooth as a snowball, and let it go at that. No claims of any and all revelations could be so far-fetched as a single giraffe.”

Dillard is marveling over *diversity*—the ways God’s creatures adapt themselves to survive and reproduce. The web of life depends on the intricate chain of existence woven by creatures large and small.

We celebrate the world God has made, but we live in a time of unprecedented loss of biodiversity. Harvard professor and entomologist E. O. Wilson helped develop the theory of biodiversity and calls its loss a “tragedy.” He points to five causes, all underscored by the effects of climate change: habitat destruction, invasive species, pollution, human overpopulation, and species over-harvesting. The consequences, according to Wilson, include a loss of links between the food webs we depend on, loss of

opportunities in medicine, biotechnology, and agriculture—not to mention the loss of our natural heritage.

In the Midwest we are experiencing our own loss of diversity thanks to an invasive species. In 2002, a tiny Asian beetle was blamed for destroying native ash trees near Detroit. (It probably arrived via imported goods from overseas.) Since then, the emerald ash borer has spread to fourteen states and two Canadian provinces—scientists predict it will spread to at least twenty-five states. Hundreds of millions of ash trees will eventually be destroyed at a cost of billions of dollars.

Last summer and fall I heard the sound of chainsaws as the city sought to remove infested ash trees along the streets as well as the ones that hadn’t been affected yet. Ash trees grow throughout the forests of the Midwest, valuable in landscapes because of their brilliant yellow fall color and valuable to the lumber industry for their timber production. Local Native American populations use ash to weave traditional baskets, and ash tree seeds provide food for small mammals, food, and insects. The loss of these trees is incalculable.

Annie Dillard writes, “The question from agnosticism is, Who turned on the lights? The question from faith is, Whatever for?” I believe that God created the world for his own enjoyment and for our provision. Now as a new year begins and we look forward

to spring, I renew my commitment to work for environmental stewardship in my own life and in the life of my community.

How? The answers aren’t new, nor are they easy. Preserving biodiversity means we ask less of the world’s limited resources by reusing the things we already own and reducing our desire for more. We need to see the connections between our lifestyles and the water, energy, and land they require, being willing to trace the things we own and desire back to their beginnings.

We also need to look beyond our individual values and choices to think about building sustainable communities. How can we design a community where we not only conserve resources, but where people thrive? The next generation wants to live in close-knit neighborhoods where they can live, work, and play. Imagine the possibilities if families no longer felt the need to own and drive multiple vehicles, which is one of the biggest contributions to global warming and pollution.

I picture myself sitting atop a fragile framework of life, supported by all the amazing creatures that live interdependently on the planet. It’s my species alone that God has given the power to understand and decide. I pray that I can continue to seek out the best choices for his world. ■

Marianne Peters is a freelance writer living in Plymouth, Indiana.