

Finding Refuge in God's New Earth

by Bob Ekblad

Today we are facing an unprecedented assault on both the world's poor and the natural world. Marginalized people and wildlife all need refuge or the planet's most vulnerable and beautiful life will become extinguished. Those of us in solidarity with people at the edges of society and with nature feel the pain and chaos of marginalization. We often find it difficult to step out of the fray into contemplative spaces where our minds, bodies and spirits can be renewed. Yet this is essential since there are direct links between the degradation of the human spirit and the destruction of the natural world.

Seeing the beauty in God, in ourselves, in the poor and in nature is essential if our resistance is to be sustainable. In fact it was Moses' mother and Pharaoh's daughters' seeing the baby's beauty that led to the first acts of non-compliance with Pharaoh's imperial power in Exodus. Seeing the beauty requires cultivating watchfulness and prayer—precursors to contemplation. I am convinced that we all need sanctuaries so we can not only survive but flourish in the struggle for life and liberation.

We have recently been graced with 35 acres of forest and pastureland on the Skagit River an hour north of Seattle where we have established New Earth Refuge—a family-based hospitality and retreat center tied to Tierra Nueva—a ministry to Latino immigrants and others on the margins. Here we actively seek a sustainable life of solidarity with both people and nature under assault.

Our journey has been long and perilous, but also rich and rewarding. An extended trip to Central America in 1980-1981 was both an awe-inspiring awakening to the beauty and dignity of the poor and a jarring introduction to the dark side of US Empire. While studying Spanish in Guatemala for six months we learned from our Guatemalan teachers about our nation's numerous violent interventions against democratic movements throughout Latin America. We witnessed the terror of a civil war that claimed thousands of lives of Guatemala's indigenous peoples. We felt called to somehow address the root causes of poverty, and found support from a Christian community in Oregon to work among peasants in Honduras.

Honduras

In 1982 we partnered with a Honduran development maverick named Jose Elias Sanchez , who insisted that if we wanted to combat poverty at it's roots we had to teach farming. “Production must be increased so people can feed their families and the nation,” insisted Elias. First the soil and forests must be protected and rebuilt. Yet material change was not enough for Elias. Compost piles and contoured, soil and water-conserving ditches must be built and dug into people's minds or they have no lasting value for the land. People must conscientized, converted so that their “si” comes from the heart and head, leading to action. Elias recruited us a Honduran campesino sage, Fernando Andrade to help us set up an experimental farm and training center for teaching sustainable farming and preventive health to help rural people avoid migrating from country to city and from city to North America.

For six years we lived in rural Honduras , farming our own land, training village promoters in preventative health, intensive hillside agriculture and leading Bible studies. Courses happened under mango trees in what we called the Universidad del Campo (University of the Countryside). We founded Tierra Nueva (New Earth) together with longtime activists with the Omaha Catholic Worker, Larry and Joni Geer-Sell and a cadre of campesino promoters, who have continued to provide technical and pastoral support to small farmers since 1988. The teaching consists in practical alternatives to slash and burn that include composting, mulching and planting green manure crops instead of burning, as well as digging contoured ditches, building soil conserving barriers and planting to the contour instead of farming steep land unprotected from torrential tropical downpours. We organized women's groups, trained health workers and launched campaigns to teach intensive vegetable gardening, hygiene, nutrition and herbal medicine.

Together we witnessed first-hand God's creating “a new heaven and a new earth” (Isa 65) during a time when the United States was building military bases, pressuring countries to recruit the region's youth into the armed forces, conducting endless military maneuvers to train the region's armies and launching wars against the people of El Salvador and Nicaragua. Our farm was a hub of hospitality and training that both enriched and exhausted us. What most sustained us in the end was our growing practice of reading Scripture with the people.

Through trial and error we learned to read for the good news in the Bible with people who often felt at the receiving end of God's big stick. We learned to directly confront pervasive

negative images of God through asking questions that helped people identify a liberating God at the heart of both the Biblical stories and their broken lives. Eventually we came to feel that we could best serve the people as pastoral agents, but felt we needed more training ourselves.

We left Honduras in 1989 and spent five years studying theology, raising children and making regular trips back to Honduras . As a result of our studies and continual work leading Bible studies we are convinced of the need for quality theological training to be offered to people at the margins. This requires deliberate, creative work as Biblical scholarship does not trickle down any more than do financial resources. Our own conversion “from below” in Honduras convinced us that mainstream churches and the Biblical studies and theological academy need direct contact with both marginalized people and nature for their spiritual health and survival. We felt called back into the mainstream church to serve as agents of call and empowerment for ministry. In 1994 we launched Tierra Nueva del Norte (New Earth of the North)-- an ecumenical ministry among migrant farm workers and other Latino immigrants in Washington State .

Tierra Nueva del Norte

Burlington is in the heart of the Skagit Valley , a fertile, agricultural valley an hour north of Seattle that winds down from the North Cascades, and is drained by the scenic Skagit River . Like many farming communities near cities, Skagit farmland is under assault. This is most visible in Burlington , where hundreds of acres of prime farmland have been paved over to host nearly every major retailer imaginable. Cucumber, berry and apple farmers struggle to compete with producers in Sri Lanka , Mexico , Chile and China . Farmland is giving way to housing developments as Seattle commuters looking further north for affordable housing.

Thousands of farmworkers from Mexico have been drawn to Skagit County , where they find work in fields, fish processing plants, restaurants and in construction. Seasonal workers crowd into nine migrant labor camps from June through October. Most of Skagit County 's immigrant workers are undocumented, placing them at constant risk of deportation should they run into the growing army of Department of Homeland Security agents who patrol this area an hour south of the Canadian border. Skagit County Jail is used as a holding facility for immigrants arrested by local law enforcement and detained by the DHS for deportation.

In 1994 we moved into a downscale residential neighborhood a few blocks from the Latino center of Burlington . We began visiting immigrants in the strawberry and cucumber fields

and migrant labor camps of the Skagit Valley . I was hired as part-time chaplain of Skagit County Jail, where I lead Spanish Bible studies twice a week. In the nine years now that I have led these Bible studies I have met thousands of immigrants and locals who have cycled through jail. The jail serves as the primary connection place between Tierra Nueva and the most marginalized Latinos. Many men ask me to visit their families, help them with immigration and other legal difficulties, get into drug or alcohol treatment.

TNN has grown rapidly and become increasingly demanding. Our home became known to migrants and ex-offenders, who came by unexpectedly, day or night. Clearly we needed to train volunteers and future staff through setting up some kind of equivalent to our earlier Honduran Universidad del Campo. Our first seminars involved bringing farmers and farmworkers, and community members together to oppose INS raids. We then began offering courses like “Reading the Bible with the Damned” and “Walking with People on the Margins,” to train jail volunteers and then expanded our courses to seminarians and community members with courses like: “Breaking the Chains: Social and Biblical Perspectives on Resisting personal and structural evil,” “Exodus and Liberation,” “Reading the Word, Reading the Street.” Then in 2000 The People's Seminary - Seminario del Pueblo was formally launched with help from a generous grant.

The People's Seminary is now up and running as an ecumenical learning center where people from the mainstream and the margins meet for Scripture study and theological reflection in preparation for service, ministry and social transformation. Scholars & leaders from all over the world come to teach here, together with farmworkers, ex-offenders, & people who serve at the margins. Through Seminario del Pueblo we offer courses in Spanish to train Hispanic pastors and lay leaders.

Now Tierra Nueva (we dropped off the Norte due to our work with members of both Nortenos and Sudeno gangs) includes eight full-time staff and 17 half-time Honduran workers and many volunteers to operate the Skagit County Jail ministry, the Family Support Center , a bilingual faith community Camino de Emmaus-Road to Emmaus, The People's Seminary and TN Honduras. Tierra Nueva seeks to link together issues that are often separated. For example, preservation of farmland must be linked with the preservation of farmers and farmworkers—which requires confronting globalization.

In July of 2002 Gracie and I and our three children Isaac, Luke and Anna moved onto 35 acres of land near the mouth of the North Fork of the Skagit River . The land consists of 10

acres of pasture and 25 acres of second growth forest. Now a healthy twenty minutes away from Tierra Nueva and The People's Seminary instead of three blocks, we are coexisting with raccoons, beaver, river otter, coyotes, deer, hawks, eagles, and numerous migratory bird species. In addition we are raising eight sheep, a llama, dog, two rabbits, a rat, and guinea pig.

Since this is our home, our first commitment is to learn to live out spiritual practices that sustain us for life and ministry as both individuals and a family. We are committed to watchfulness, which includes daily prayer and Scripture reading: morning, noon and night when possible, regular walks, Sunday worship and many experiments. One family practice that has been working lately as we homeschool our children is to begin in the morning by reading a local, national and international articles from the newspaper or news magazines followed by a chapter from one of the Gospels. The children are challenged to find some connection between the world and the Bible—not always immediately evident.

Conclusions

We are currently raising money to build outbuildings so we can host as many as 20 visitors. In their desire to protect the land forever, the previous owner placed 34 of the 35 acres into a conservation easement with Skagit Land Trust, limiting our building to the one acre house site. Here we intend to offer hospitality to friends, families and people visiting Tierra Nueva and taking courses at The People's Seminary. We want people to experience this beauty and find rest through spiritual retreats.

Nurturing and protecting the human spirit must be directly linked to the nurturing and protection of the natural world. Solidarity with the vulnerable natural world must be dynamically linked with solidarity with vulnerable human communities. True solidarity begins when we contemplate and value the beauty: in God, ourselves, in the other and in nature.

Snow geese are flying low over our land today, free over this acreage from the danger of hunters. Last night's Spanish Bible study in the jail was on Jesus as our “coyote”— who brings us into the Reign of God, into the Garden, the New Earth, against the law, free of charge. There is good news to be discovered and new life to be protected from the hunters, whether they are law-enforcers, addictions or other forces that oppress. Living a sustainable life in these dark times demands constant watching, praying and delight. Without times of retreat & fellowship, all people, including those seeking to serve in the mainstream or at the

margins will become endangered species. Yet with or without a riverfront paradise we affirm with the Psalmist: “God is a refuge for us” (Ps 62:8).