

'We take a lot of naps'

Rich Heffern | Jan. 11, 2010 NCR Today

"There is nothing wrong with the human species today," wrote Fr. Matthew Fox, "except one thing, that we have lost the sense of the sacred." What does a society or world look like that has misplaced its radar for the sacred? Just look around, read the newspapers.

One primary symptom, I believe, is the way in which we have become experts at trivializing everything, at sucking the awe and mystery out of each and every aspect of our living. Guests on television talk shows display the most intimate details of their personal lives, sandwiched between ads for toilet bowl cleaners. Almost every seasonal day of celebration and rest is a lucrative bonanza of a marketing opportunity. Our politicians and civic leaders are now bought and paid for long before they get to the debate on key issues and policies. We manage to pay quarterbacks and movie stars huge salaries but somehow can't find the money to repair our children's schools, pay our teachers well or even allow a few mom and pop stores to remain in our neighborhoods. We hang on every detail of the life of some celebrity and simultaneously disparage our own living to the point that depression and low self-esteem are epidemic. We overrate the trivial, the frivolous, the glamorous at the expense of the best of our humanity.

Local life and communities everywhere are being discomfited, disrupted, endangered or destroyed. Our affluence buys us precious little joy. Speed, dissatisfaction and anxiety are our constant afflictions. We are dismembered from our work. Our leisure fails to renew us.

Healing perhaps begins at home: finding ways that are practical, available to everyone, and rooted in age-old human practices that provide for the safekeeping of the small acreages entrusted to us. Block by block, household by household, one person at a time, may very well be the way back to a world that is cherished as sacred.

Poet and farmer Wendell Berry wrote a wonderful book titled *What Are People For?* In it he asks pertinent, probing questions: Do communities and neighborhoods have a spiritual value? What is the proper relationship between the scale of human enterprise and the estate of nature?

Berry was the keynote speaker at a conference I attended once. After his address, he introduced to the assembly an Amish farmer he had brought along with him from his home in Kentucky. This man spoke, and was particularly eloquent, describing life on their human-scaled farms. During the question and answer period, someone asked him what these farm people did during the winter when the crops had been harvested and snow covered the fields.

"We take a lot of naps," he replied -- and this answer got him a standing ovation. That's how hard naps are to come by in our overachieving, time-stressed, speeded-up world. What really appealed to the crowd though, I think, was that human scale of the Amish enterprise. The farmer talked of halting a communal plowing to move a meadowlark's nest out of the path of the horse-drawn machinery. Profits and efficiency were not the bottom line. Community and neighborliness took first place, leaving plenty of room for human things like quilting, putting up preserves, playing horseshoes, talking, eating together and napping, to name a few.

These are also ways to regain our sense of the sacred, and a proper estimation of what we humans are really for.

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