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Saying yes could help save our planet

by Sharon Abercrombie

Eco Catholic

Yes,

Yes is a vulnerable word.

It leaves you wide open like a tree.

Susan Windle, a Sufi poet living in Philadelphia, composed these words in her 2005 book, *Between the Doors*. Today, I thought about Susan's poem, "Ode to Yes," one of the works in her collection, because so much is happening environmentally that speak to vulnerability and its willingness to risk being wide open.

Being vulnerable can trigger both silent unexpressed pain as well as active out-loud and often outrageous action in the name of compassion. It can mean asking a simple but unpopular question, like "Why?", to the cutting down of a few neighborhood trees. It can mean taking major action to protect baby seals in Seattle or organizing to protect an endangered ecosystem in the Philippines.

Being vulnerable takes courage.

At the most literal level of "Ode to Yes," there is this recent situation of six vulnerable trees in front of my senior apartment building. They fell to earth a couple of days ago. Trunks and limbs are already chopped and stacked neatly, waiting for a truck to carry them off tomorrow.

Existing landscaping, flowers and grass will soon be smothered over with asphalt to make way for more parking places. The problem surfaced earlier this year, when new residents arrived with their cars. We now have more vehicles here than ever before.

Expressing regret aloud did not go over well with a few of the neighbors. Admittedly, this is a messy situation, where the human needs of fragile seniors must take priority over nature and one small circle of trees.

But it still hurts. So in a private ritual of grieving, I bless these chunks of trunks and scattered branches, silently thanking limbs and leaves for providing shade and coolness during our brutally hot Ohio summers and for sheltering the birds and squirrels living among us.

Do tree roots weep silently, crying out when their trunks, branches and leaves are no more? But daring to voice this outrageous question aloud would be just one more terribly foolhardy action here in this domino- and bingo-playing enclave. It would prompt funny looks and thoughts of crazy California tree-huggers.

That tree roots might grieve would only be taken seriously in one of Susan Windle's poetry classes or within the safety of an environmental meditation setting at an earth-centered retreat center.

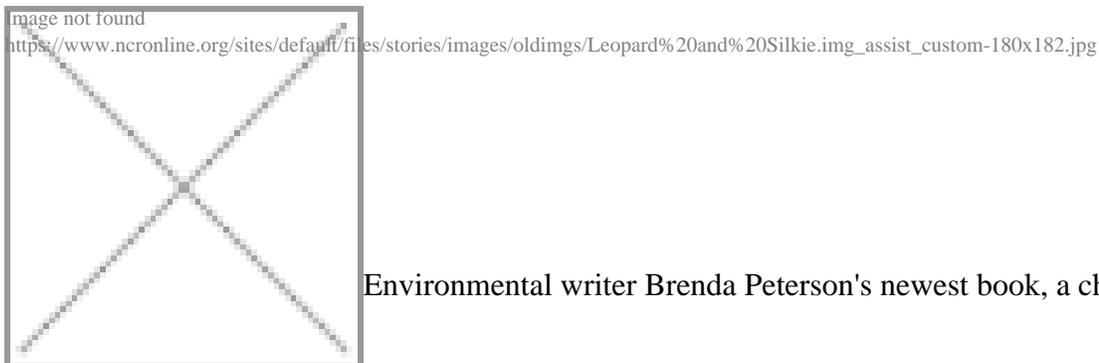
So I draw comfort from the small woods outside my bedroom window, with its population of redbirds, blackbirds, chickadees and deer. Four does, a young buck and a little Bambi visit each morning for the fresh water and crisp apples that a few of us provide for them. But I worry about this little patch of nature and her vulnerable creatures. What if the property owner is approached with a lucrative offer to sell? The prospect of more invasions is fearsome.

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In the last 40 years here in northwest Columbus, development has already destroyed all too many large swaths of scenic woodlands for houses and shopping centers. Two centuries ago, early settlers began the process by clearing away old growth forests.

Systematically destroying landscapes is a creeping erosion. Just one massive, deep, dark, green grove over here. Just those few front lawn trees over there. Then, eventually, nothing but concrete, asphalt and ugliness remain.

It is so good to know there are situations where people dare to be wide open and vulnerable like trees and are actively involved in healing what is left of our planet. In Sufi poet Susan's words, "Make the sound (yes). Notice the longing in the back of your throat. Send it out now through your lips: the best dream you have -- full of hope. It doesn't matter that your leaves will leave. It doesn't matter what the others see or say. The beautiful yes of trees will stand and breathe life, health to the struggling creatures of this world."



Environmental writer Brenda Peterson's newest book, a children's tale,

Leopard & Silkie, is one of those beautiful yeses. It tells about the Seal Sitters, her volunteer organization. Moms, dads, grandpas, grandmas and even little kids sit in shifts at the Salish Sea, discouraging curious crowds from touching the marine babies. The Seal Sitters form quiet and protective circles around the pups while their mothers are out fishing for food. Their presence helps keep Seattle's beaches wild and safe for sea life, Peterson says. Her book features Miles, a youngster who goes out after school each day

with his binoculars to keep vigil from a safe distance.

Nature photographer Robin Lindsey accompanies Miles, shooting great pictures of two pups named Leopard and Silkie, crowds of curious beach visitors, and some of Miles' group of junior Seal Sitters. Miles comes up with an ingenious way for the pups to escape from the scary-looking human curiosity-seekers: He gets his family of grownups to build a floating raft where the babies can wait safely for their mothers to return.

Seal Sitters come to protect the pups from humans for several reasons. Harassing a marine mammal is a crime, Peterson explains. "Also, if the mother returns from fishing and finds her pup overwhelmed with people, she may abandon him. A nursing pup separated from his mother rarely survives." Even with Seal Sitters around, only 50 percent of the babies make it through their first season.

Climate change and warming, more acidic oceans, pollution and over-fishing are reducing the number of fish that seals depend upon for food. Other threats include wild predators, dogs, infection, dehydration, starvation, ingesting of plastics from balloons or bags and human interference.

Adults will treasure Peterson's book just as much as the children in their lives. They might even want to buy their own copies. *Leopard & Silkie* is a beautiful story about a group of generous-hearted people who are saying yes to compassion for animals. To learn more about their work, go to SealSitters.org.

While the seal people watch over Seattle's whiskered sea babies, a Benedictine sister in Mindanao, Philippines, is shouting her persistent yes to environmental protection of the land around Sendong. Sr. Stella Matutina heads up an environmental activist group that fights mining and logging companies.

In a July 6 Catholic News Service story, Matutina recalls witnessing massive landslides, flooding and deaths caused by logging and mining practices during 2007.

height="120" width="180" height="120" width="180" "I heard the cry of the poor and the groaning of creation, but our government was deaf," she said. "Thousands of people were dying every year but our government was doing nothing to protect the environment."

Since then, she has organized environmental action sessions to teach the people how to push back against the ecological destruction.

Companies are enraged. She received death threats after helping one community block the entry of heavy mining equipment, the CNS story reports. The blockade prompted the canceling of one company's mining permit. Matutina does not stop. "We have to stand with the people," she said.

Not surprisingly, this brave, outspoken nun has run into problems with her bishop. After members of the Philippine Army's 67th Infantry Brigade detained her and threatened her with execution during a nighttime raid on Feb. 16, 2009, the local prelate pressured Matutina to not bring charges against the military officials. She gave in, fearing he might expel her Benedictine congregation from his diocese.

But now, once again, the army is harassing Matutina. It is spreading the word that she is just posing as a nun but is really a member of a rebel group. So as a safety precaution, the Benedictines want to send their brave friend back to Europe to get her away from the real prospect of being gunned down. In October, environmental activist Fr. Faustino Tentorio, a member of the Pontifical Institute for Foreign Missions, was shot to death.

Should she return to Europe? Matutina is torn.

"If people are dying by the thousands, it's high time to go out from chapels and do something. ... The other sisters are afraid for me ... But why worry about my life if people are afraid and ordinary people are killed every day?"

Stella Matutina is one more yes person who continues to breathe life and health to the struggling creatures of this world. May the roots, branches and green leaves of her beautiful life continue to flourish and remain safe.

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