

My Homeland

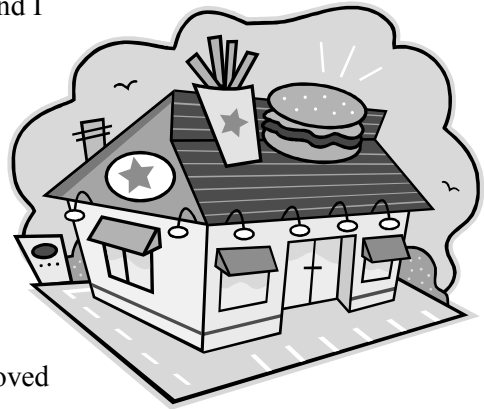
By Dave Cook

I have lived almost my whole life in the Piedmont area of North Carolina, a rolling green area of natural hardwood and pine forests now undergoing rapid “development.”

When I was a boy my family spent summers in Maryland at my grandmother’s house in the woods far from any town. The house was a rammed-earth house inspired by my grandparents’ years of living on a Navajo reservation; my grandmother a nurse, my grandfather, an archaeologist.

The house was remote by today’s standards. It was a 20-minute drive by Studebaker, half of it by dirt road, to the Lanham Post Office, and 30-minutes to the grocery store. My brother and I came “out of the woods” maybe once a week, for the grocery trip; we were pretty much bare-footed the rest of the time, in the woods or nearby on my Great Aunt Widgie’s farm. It was an idyllic life, when I look back upon it. The world, the woods and the farm, were our playground. But we relished those trips to town, because we might get a pack of baseball cards or maybe an ice cream cone.

I remember being thrilled when my brother and I saw that they were building a McDonald’s Hamburger Store. That’s what we called it back then, a hamburger store. We had never heard of McDonald’s before, but the visions of hamburgers, fries and milkshakes sounded very good to us, when our father described what a hamburger store was. I was but a child. I didn’t associate hamburger stores with all the roads they seemed to be building, all the houses, all the trucks carrying the carcasses of trees somewhere, somewhere else. It was a hamburger store and I loved hamburgers.



I remember seeing “500,000 Hamburgers Sold.” McDonald’s used to keep track of how many hamburgers they sold on a rotating sign underneath the golden arches. My brother and I were rooting for them. Would they get to a million? I remember seeing “600,000 Hamburgers Sold . . . 700,000 . . . 900,000 . . . yes, 1 Million Hamburgers Sold!” They kept going, they kept selling hamburgers and we kept buying them. We didn’t know we were financing, the Interstates, subdivisions, and shopping malls. Forty-nine Million Hamburgers Sold is about the last I can remember, and then sometime after that, even *they* stopped keeping count.

Maybe you’ve seen the very same thing happen where you are.

“Our life has brought about a culture, a society, which has become the trap in which we are caught. The trap is built by us; for that trap each of us is responsible.” J. Krishnamurti

In my regular home in Charlotte, North Carolina, I remember a magnificent oak tree I used to climb, and talk to. I can remember sitting up in the crook of one of its large branches and giving it little sugar valentines, those ones with the words of good wishes inscribed in the candy. I must have been eight, nine or ten. Later, my younger sister had that same kind of relationship with the great oak, I know because she told me so. Then, when I was away in college, she called to give me a sad report. She and my mother and father had gone to visit my grandmother in Maryland, and when they came back the great oak tree had been cut down. Its great form lay in stumps and lengths of wood. The city was widening another road.

These tragedies hurt children very much. It is the soul, which suffers, and imagination, which by all rights should be bright, takes on some nature of a shadow.

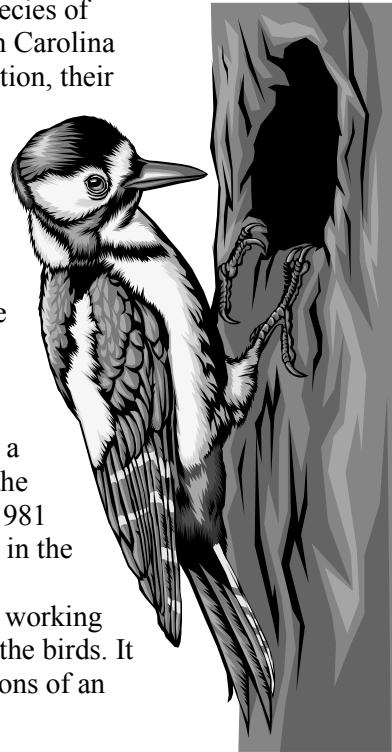
My grandmother couldn’t afford the land taxes living in Prince George County Maryland, not with the nation’s Capital sprawling in all directions: Lanham, Bowie, Seabrook, Bladensburg, Riverdale, Landover, towns which all had distinct identities, began to lose those identities in our all too familiar processes of growth and development. I know you have seen the same thing.

When I was a child, my mother had one of those early copies of Roger Tory Peterson’s *A Field Guide to the Birds*, 1947. In that edition, all the color

plates of the birds were grouped in sections, not so convenient for birding in the field because one had to keep flipping back and forth from plates to text, but wonderfully set up for a child. I loved looking at the series of plates, one after the other—all those wondrous kinds of birds, some of the differences seeming oh-so small, a delight to a child leaning to discriminate, the colors of their eyes, the lengths of beaks and tails, the impossible forms Creation could take. Someone read their names to me, my mother probably: gallinule, guillemot, bufflehead, shrike, thrush, woodcock, crossbill, woodpecker, warbler and grackle. The names themselves suggested lives less known, but not less great. Later my mother would keep that book bound in rubber bands because the glue aged and deteriorated. What is happening now to the birds, which were once so abundant?

My favorite birds, the warblers, are small, and many of them live their lives in the canopies of our forests where they come to ground only to drink at woodland streams. There are more than 30 different species of warblers that might be seen in the Piedmont area of North Carolina during a spring migration. Many of them now face extinction, their migration routes fragmented and their habitat destroyed by development in the Piedmont and elsewhere.

There has been a 50% decline in the numbers of migrating birds in my homeland the last 25 years. Fragmentation of the eastern woodlands generally looms as one of the major causes in this songbird decline. In the past decade alone the numbers of birds in certain warbler species have declined by as much as 33%. One of the warblers on plate 48 of the 1947 Peterson edition, *Field Guide to the Birds*, the Tennessee warbler, is declining at a disastrous rate of nearly 12% a year. The last time I saw the warbler on that same plate, the cerulean warbler, was in 1981 in the foothills near Wilkesboro. And birds now common in the East, the ovenbird, and the wood thrush, on plate 46, are predicted for extinction in 20 to 30 years, because we are working to build a different world, one that doesn't really include the birds. It is the model set out for us in the seemingly endless creations of an increasingly corporate world.



One of the greatest dangers in this scenario is the illusion that there is no problem. To the casual observer, it may seem as if bird populations are doing just fine. We see birds at our bird feeders, perhaps even more than there used to be, and we believe nothing is going wrong. What we are losing however, is diversity. Many, many species are in decline, moving towards extinction, because of human impact on natural habitats. The very character of the Piedmont is changing beyond our apparent comprehension.

Not so long ago the Piedmont was one of the most biologically diverse bioregions in the world. It is not so anymore. Moving into the 21st century there is probably no bioregion on the planet that has experienced more fragmentation and degradation than the Piedmont.

In *The Conservation Assessment of Terrestrial Ecoregions of North America*, completed in 1999 by the World Wildlife Fund, it is written of the Piedmont and the Southern bioregions:

Habitat loss is relatively uniform across the ecoregion. This is the most heavily settled ecoregion along the East Coast of America. The once dense forests harvested long ago have never been allowed to re-grow to a mature age. There are large amounts of tertiary forest that offer little biodiversity value. Fragmentation is very high, and creation of [wildlife] corridors is unlikely except in riparian areas. Because of the rate of conversion there is little left to conserve.

This is meaningless information, unless it is a vehicle for transformation, to the change within ourselves, a change in consciousness. "Use" cannot continue to be our primary relationship to Nature, that which many perceive as *not* themselves, as other, though all life is a manifestation of the Divine. We can say the human has self-reflective consciousness, has emerged from Nature and continues to be nurtured by Nature from within and without. Is self that which creates the illusion of being separate from Nature? Is self that which creates the illusion of being separate from God? Let's call Nature all, an all which includes us, and when we love we feel connected. Love is our way to realize our self in relation to what has the illusion of *not* being self.

The primary relationship of western man to Nature has been one of Use. If one uses people we can probably say, we don't love them. We treat them like objects we might say. It's a quality none of us admire, not in ourselves,

not in others. If we proceed to do as we have always done, continue to fragment our life systems, we will provide the model for perpetuating an ultimately destructive behavior for our children. By our thoughts and actions we are teaching it.

The cause, the impetus for change, is individual. Do we love life? If we love life, we feel this love everywhere; not preservation of self, but *love*, a greater capacity. We receive it and give it, self to self. It has an object outside our self. The more we love the more we are connected. If I love the world, I don't have to go anywhere. I am content. I don't want the world; I am the world, through this wonderful connection of love. So greed, what is greed? I want the world, but I am not connected, and so instead of love I *use* the world. I use Nature. It's an object, but it's different kind of object, different because of how I *feel* about it.

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Thomas Berry says, "The universe is comprised of subjects to be communed with, not a collection of objects to be primarily used."

We are perceivers, we think, we feel—but we do not stand *outside* the world. We are part of the world, immediately, and so as perceivers our thoughts and feelings can affect the world. Love, and who can say what it is, it just is, is the most satisfying of emotions. It has something do with disillusionment, when the walls to our perception come down and we *feel* we are not separate.

If we love life, we love the Earth and all its realizations as they are manifested in other *forms* of life. If we don't love life, why don't we? If we don't love life we are most often motivated by the shadowy emotions, doubt, envy, fear, frustration, and anger, which motivate us to actions such as yearning to dominate, the need to manipulate, and the endless drive to prove ourselves because we do not feel loved in our universe. Where is the source for that suffering, that pain, which keeps anyone from loving life, living in the shadow of darker emotions? What can be done, if we don't love life?

Greater consciousness is often realized through misfortune. Distress can even awaken compassion: a life-threatening illness, losing our jobs, disasters,

national disasters, international disasters. As if it was never a choice we grow in awareness, in spiritual maturity, because nothing else *really* works. In *The Silent Teachings of Meher Baba* it is written, “Man’s search for God is usually not a voluntary and joyous enterprise. As a rule, he is driven to it by disillusionment over worldly things that allure him and to which his mind is slave.”

Many people want to return to life as they thought it was *before* September 11th, as some might have yearned again for the days of slavery, because they perceived their world in terms of their own well-being. One can pray the events of 2001 are asking us for more than that which leads to disaster anyway. A way of life economically, socially, psychologically, philosophically or religiously based upon exclusive privilege, held by some at the expense of others, results in the greater suffering, and in a sense, a turning away from God.

George Harrison wrote, “Forgive them, Lord, those who feel they can’t afford you.” There is an almost incredible immature philosophy, or religion, whatever one wants to call it, in this country. It proceeds as this, “I want well-being for myself. Okay—now I have well-being for myself, I want well-being for my family. Okay, I’ve got that; now I want this for my community . . . on and on until we can finally consider the well-being of a frog.” It doesn’t work this way. If we do not see the world in ourselves we will not be brave

enough to move towards the greatest reality. We are still trying to find our way of life upon this Earth; we are still seeking. A way of life is not a standard of living; it is not a fixed concept, or an attempt to create permanence. We are still seeking divine relationship, while so many of us are pretending otherwise. Our soul calls us to the immediate realization that we are not separate from this world we are seeing. Long ago the world was dreamed integral to the living present. Whether we love and embrace the world as ourselves, or hold ourselves separate from it by the means of concepts—ideology, religion, politics, cultural conditioning—is critical to how the Earth dream unfolds and forms our future reality.

