

2021

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Augustana Digital Commons Citation

Laura Hartman (2021) "Hospitality to the Wild," *Intersections*: Vol. 2021 : No. 54 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/intersections/vol2021/iss54/8>

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Hospitality to the Wild



“Everyone says they love Mother Nature, but they never invite her over to their houses!”

Niel Diboll’s comment was greeted with sympathetic laughter from the subjects of my research, members of an organization called Wild Ones Native Landscaping.¹ These

mostly retired homeowners joined the Wild Ones because they want to prioritize native plants in their landscaping efforts. Diboll was speaking at an annual conference which, to my eyes, also doubled as a kind of tent revival: an opportunity for members to reaffirm their commitments to a worldview and practice somewhat at odds with the mainstream (Diboll).

Most buildings feature lawns and bushes; not the houses of the Wild Ones. The Wild Ones members dig up their lawns and plant prairies; they eschew begonias and pansies for native flowers; they tirelessly dig up invasive species; they restore forests and wetlands, plant native “weeds,” and welcome wildlife to their land. It’s an effort towards sustainability, a piecemeal restoration of functioning ecosystems in the aftermath of human domination.

These people are the ones who *do* invite mother nature to their houses. Doing so is not easy. All landscaping takes time and effort, but native landscaping requires even

more, particularly in its beginning phases.² Why bother? They do it for the reasons you might expect—an attraction to the beauty of the plants, a desire to remedy problems of drainage or access, or an effort to un-do some of the harms perpetrated by human action on the land. But according to my interviews with members of the Fox Valley (WI) Area Chapter of the Wild Ones, I discovered another, surprising motivation: hospitality to insects and birds.

Douglas W. Tallamy, author of a Wild Ones’ favorite, *Bringing Nature Home*, clearly lays out a plan for hospitable native landscaping as follows: native birds require native insects, and native insects require native plants, so hospitality to native birds requires a garden of native plants (Tallamy 13-17). One member I interviewed boasted that owls had come to his property after following Tallamy’s advice. Another member gushed to me about her native butterfly garden, which attracts a panoply of native insects, including Monarchs. Clearly, hosting these insect visitors gave her deep joy.

At a gathering of the group, I asked if anyone was interested in native edible plants—plants that humans might forage and enjoy—but the answer was no. One member said that she would rather feed insects and birds than feed herself: she prioritized a posture of hospitality

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toward others through her landscaping (Hartman). Others agreed: their main concern was to host these “underdog” organisms who struggle to find a home in our all-too-human world.

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At a recent conference, I heard an extraordinary paper: “Creature Comfort: Foundations for Christian Hospitality Toward Non-human Animals” by Marilyn L. Matevia. Matevia examines the plight of wild animals in a human-dominated landscape, and calls Christians to a “radical, kenotic, challenging, potentially costly kind of hospitality” towards animals (6). She draws on robust traditions of Christian hospitality to the stranger, rooted in norms from the Hebrew Bible and parables such as the Good Samaritan. Matevia concludes that we should, at the least, “protect existing habitat,” create “sanctuary spaces for animals that have been displaced,” build “wildlife corridors over highways,” find ways to help migratory animals deal with border walls, and similar basic measures to minimize harm to the wild animals with whom we share a home (18-19). Matevia is calling for humans to create safe, hospitable spaces for animals in our too-human contexts.³

In the discussion after the paper presentation, someone questioned this idea of human hospitality to non-humans. Isn’t God the true host, the real proprietor of wild spaces? Who are we to consider ourselves hospitable, as if we’re in charge here? I had wondered something similar about the Wild Ones—isn’t there some kind of false *noblesse oblige* or even grandiosity in the idea that it is up to us, the heroic humans, to extend a welcome to poor suffering plants and animals?

In spite of this critique, there is some truth to the implied power dynamic: we humans do have power over other creatures. Why do the Wild Ones members use their land to feed birds and insects rather than feeding themselves? Because these humans get their food from a grocery

store. They have options; the Monarchs don’t. Wild nature is vulnerable in this situation. Indeed, nature’s vulnerability brings out the Wild Ones members’ heroic side when they participate in plant rescues. A plant rescue occurs when some patch of native vegetation is under threat from construction; word goes out among club members, and they converge on the site, spiriting the native plants to a location safe from the bulldozers. Humans are the heroes for the vulnerable vegetation in this tale.

Whether we should or not, humans do control—or at least influence—a very large proportion of the world’s ecosystems. We have the power to destroy it all; any bit of wildness that exists, exists because we have decided not to obliterate it. I want to believe that God is the true host and ultimate proprietor, but we have a vital role, too. We are the stewards, the gatekeepers, the bouncers at the doors to the club. We are the ones who can exercise hospitality to animals, or choose not to. What does the situation demand of us?

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Both Matevia and the Wild Ones represent an appeal to our “better angels,” asking us to embrace the virtue of hospitality as we help those who are worse off—the animals or plants seeking to live their lives in a world controlled by humans.

Some of my research subjects were descended from pioneers who they referred to as “sodbusters.” These ancestors came to the Midwestern prairies and imagined farmland; they enacted their vision by busting up the sod, plowing the prairie and planting row crops. Now, their descendants who are Wild Ones members both make excuses—“they had to make a living; they didn’t know how much damage they were causing”—and make changes, bringing the prairie back to the land once more.

Groups like the Wild Ones try to reverse human damage to the land, to go from desolation to community. They are like healers, restoring what was lost and conjuring vibrant interconnected ecosystems where there once were sterile

lawns. They can do this, in part, because they are able to envision a world with no lawns, where the prairies are put back: a world in which “landscaping with native plants becomes the norm” (Wild Ones: About). There is a backward-looking nostalgia here, a longing for a time before colonization and civilization bent the wild toward pursuit of profit or narrow, cultivated versions of the beautiful.

Scholars like Matevia also deploy imagination. Matevia talks about hospitality to animals as “restorative justice,” implementing this virtue of hospitality in the service of habitat restoration (17). Our faith demands that in cases of injustice, or ruptured relationships, we put back what was lost: restore habitat, create wildlife corridors, build bridges and tunnels and ladders for wildlife to handle the roads and the dams. This, too, involves the imagination, as Matevia exhorts us to make manifest in this world something that ought to be, but is not yet here.

“Hospitality *should* stretch and challenge us.”

All of these represent the “ecological imaginary,” that is, the human vision of what a specific natural space should be, by contrast with what it is (Foster and Sandberg 196). That imagination holds tremendous transformative power. We can’t change something until we can imagine it changed. And the changes don’t stop with the Wild Ones members’ homes or Matevia’s dam ladders. Christian hospitality extends as far as Christian stewardship extends—over the whole earth, including our neighborhoods and farms, our parking lots and roads, our churches and our colleges. We are called to recognize what is, and what has been lost—and to imagine what should be restored or renewed.

There may be a downside to hospitality. Do we really want to welcome someone dangerous, offensive, or unpleasant into our homes? Maybe there’s a reason we don’t invite Mother Nature to our houses: if she brings dirt, disease, or disgust, she may be an unwelcome guest. For example, some churches in Great Britain have struggled with bats, which are protected by law and cannot be eradicated from church buildings, even if their presence disrupts the worship.⁴ This may present a very difficult conundrum, but Matevia wishes to challenge us: “the

practice of hospitality privileges the stranger over the insider, and honors difference over sameness” (8). In other words, hospitality *should* stretch and challenge us.

There are mutually satisfactory solutions to the bat problem—and to other drawbacks of hospitality to the wild. In the spirit of this challenge, Matevia argues, we are called to exercise hospitality to non-human animals and in so doing, repair relationships we may not even realize had been ruptured. For the Wild Ones members, inviting the wild to live in their back yards is both sufficient challenge and groundwork for relationship repair. One member I interviewed referred to the birds and insects on her property as “neighbors,” proudly recounting her friendly interactions with them as they shared a prairie plot. “Whose earth is it anyway?” James Cone has rightly asked, pointing to racial disparities in environmental work. The answer to his question must include a diversity of people; it must also include the diverse tapestry of non-humans who also call these landscapes home:

Even the sparrow finds a home,
and the swallow a nest for herself,
where she may lay her young,
at your altars, O Lord of hosts,
my King and my God. (Psalm 84:3, NRSV)

If the psalmist can imagine birds finding a welcome in the temple, what about our other institutions? Can a desolate parking lot become host to a vibrant community, to an ecosystem? Can a college campus foster not just human diversity but biodiversity? What would a hospitable form of sustainability look like in our institutions? We may not even realize that a parking lot is stifling a floodplain, or that pesticide practices are threatening pollinators, or that bright lights at night are preventing fireflies from

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communicating well. But once we tap into an ecological imaginary, we see what has been lost, and we can see the possibilities for restoration and renewal all around us.

With Matevia, I want to appeal to our “better angels” and ask how we might welcome the non-human in our lives, in our spaces, and in our institutions. It is time to reverse some of the damage done to the non-human world, to open our doors to Mother Nature’s knock. Whether God is the ultimate host or not, we are the gatekeepers. Let us imagine, and then implement, a hearty welcome to the diversity of God’s creatures, as we welcome strangers and friends.

Endnotes

1. The research of this essay was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh.

2. A well-established native landscape may not require more maintenance than traditional landscaping. Unlike traditional landscaping, native plants rarely need extra water or fertilizer. But to establish a native landscape requires significant extra work in the beginning, to eradicate current invasives and continue to shield slow-growing native seeds from aggressive invasives over time.

3. She doesn’t get into the questions raised by farmed animals or domesticated animals. For some, these might indicate a kind of mutual hospitality in which we provide for the animals who also provide for us. At the same time, it seems to violate a standard of hospitality to kill one’s guest, which is the case for nearly all farmed animals.

4. Thankfully, the Bats In Churches partnership is seeking solutions so the bats can be unharmed and the worship can go on [see <https://www.batsandchurches.org.uk/>].

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