

Silent Spring: The Obligation to Endure

Reading and sermon preached by Reverend Carolyn Patierno

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“A Fable for Tomorrow” adapted from *Silent Spring* by Rachel Carson

There was once a town in the heart of America where all life seemed to live in harmony with its surroundings. The town lay in the midst of a checkerboard of prosperous farms, with fields of grain and hillsides of orchards where in the spring white clouds of bloom drifted above the green fields. In autumn, oak and maple and birch set up a blaze of color that flamed and flickered across a backdrop of pines.

Along the roads ... wildflowers delighted the traveler's eye through much of the year. Even in winter the roadsides were places of beauty, where countless birds came to feed on the berries and on the seed heads of the dried weeds rising above the snow. The countryside was, in fact, famous for the abundance and variety of its bird life, and when the flood of migrants was pouring through in spring and fall people traveled from great distances to observe them.

Others came to fish the streams which flowed clear and cold out of the hills and contained shady pools where trout lay. So it had been from the days many years ago when the first settlers raised their houses, sank their wells, and built their barns.

Then a strange blight crept over the area and everything began to change. Some evil spell had settled on the community: mysterious maladies swept the flocks of chickens; the cattle and sheep sickened and died. Everywhere was a shadow of death. The farmers spoke of much illness among their families. In the town the doctors had become more and more puzzled by new kinds of sickness appearing among their patients.

There was a strange stillness. The birds, for example – where had they gone? ... The feeding stations in the backyards were deserted. It was a spring without voices. On the mornings that had once throbbed with the dawn chorus of robins, catbirds, doves, jays, wrens ... there was now no sound; only silence lay over the fields and woods and marsh.

... The apple trees were coming into bloom but no bees droned among the blossoms so there was no pollination and there would be no fruit.

The roadsides, once so attractive, were now lined with browned and withered vegetation as though swept by fire. These, too, were silent, deserted by all living things. Even the streams were now lifeless.

No witchcraft, no enemy action had silenced the rebirth of new life in this stricken world. The people had done it themselves.

“The Fable for Tomorrow” is about a town that did not exist when *Silent Spring* was published in 1962. Rachel Carson, the woman rightly credited with starting the environmental movement, pointed out however, that each of the fabled events happened in some community in America.

I imagine that in 2013, there are many towns for which nearly all of the environmental disasters have reigned down and up. Alas, it is “tomorrow.”

Silent Spring is a classic. Required reading for the Earth-concerned. More than 50 years later, it reads like an edgy blog written by a cool environmentalist. Al Gore wrote the introduction when the book was reissued in 1994 and recalled that in 1992 *Silent Spring* was named as the most influential book of the previous 50 years. Read one chapter and you will know why. Take a listen to the chapters' titles and you will see that it's not a beach-read: Elixirs of Death; Needless Havoc; And No Birds Sing; Rivers of Death; Indiscriminately From the Skies; Beyond the Dreams of the Borgias; The Human Price; The Rumbblings of an Avalanche. Etc.

But we shouldn't let chapter titles scare us – although we should, indeed, be very afraid. The brilliance of Carson's work is that it is as hopeful as it is devastating. And here at All Souls, we're all about hope.

So let's get to the bottom of the hope part.

For all those shake-in-your-boots chapter titles, there are others that balance them: Nature Fights Back: The Other Road; and my favorite, The Obligation to Endure.

The Obligation to Endure. Really, it's the bottom line that's less existential than it is essential. We are obligated. Sure, we are obligated to harness our best scientific thinking in order to push back the powers that would have us use harsh chemicals that ultimately destroy our water and soil and air.

But in order to live up to an obligation to endure, our first obligation must be to check our arrogance, an arrogance that says that the natural world is here only to serve humankind's needs and desires.

Silent Spring was written in 51 years ago and is filled with examples of arrogance of that time. Here are two more recent examples: In 2009 NASA bombed the moon in order to see if there is water to be found there. The practice of

genetically modifying seeds and therefore foods is receiving the attention it rightly deserves. It is a topic that was addressed from this pulpit when Reverend Catriona Grant was our guest preacher.

Right about now, there may well be someone here this morning wondering why this issue is considered religious and one about which we need be concerned. Let us be reminded of our seventh principle: "We covenant to affirm and promote respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part." Let us be reminded of the good work done by our Green Sanctuary Committee. And let us be reminded of Dick Goodwin's legacy. Dick and his wife Esther were environmentalists who were deeply committed to our seventh principle. The Goodwins were vital members of this congregation through to the end of their long and faithful lives. They took seriously their obligation to endure. So much so that as Dick was nearing death, he still mustered the energy to complain to me and anyone who would listen about what he saw as tremendous waste in the hospital and nursing home settings where he was receiving care. Well-respected in the conservation movement, with a twinkle in his eye, he did not suffer fools gladly.

So I was not surprised but I was thrilled when Rachel Carson cited Dick's research and that of his colleague and fellow CT College professor, Bill Niering. Most Souls understand that even in our little pristine corner of the world, we are hardly shielded from environmental exploitation. Indeed, Carson shines light on at least one disaster.

She wrote:

Botanists at the Connecticut Arboretum declare that the elimination of beautiful native shrubs and wildflowers has reached the proportions of a 'roadside crisis.' Azaleas, mountain laurel, blueberries, huckleberries, ... dogwood, bayberry, sweet fern, ... winterberry, chokecherry, and wild plum are dying before the chemical barrage. So are the daisies, black-eyed Susans, Queen Anne's lace, goldenrods, and fall asters which lend grace and beauty to the landscape. Trees within the CT Aboretum ... were seriously injured when the town of Waterford sprayed the roadsides with chemical weed killers in 1957. Even large trees not directly sprayed were affected. The leaves of the oaks began to curl and turn brown, although it was the season for spring growth. Then new shoots began to be put forth and grew with abnormal rapidity, giving a weeping appearance to the trees. Two seasons later, large branches on these trees had died, other were without leaves, and the deformed, weeping effect of whole trees persisted.

There you have it. It is, of course, the Connecticut College Arboretum cited therefore, SE CT made famous – or infamous – by the Dick Goodwin's work. Dick whose legacy is one of reminder to all who will hear: we are part of an interdependent web and we are obligated to endure.

But we need reminding about said web. We need reminding that the balance of nature is actually much more sophisticated than we mere mortals believe. On Friday night I attended a poetry reading at the Mystic Arts Center. There was an exhibit there about Mystic's history as an art center, in fact. There hung a plaque that recorded an ad from the June 5, 1876 edition of the *Mystic Press*. It said:

During the summer season quite a large number of landscape painters are welcome guests in Mystic. It has been suggested to us by one of the profession that unless they are careful with their paints they are a source of danger to animal life as for instance: an artist ... painting in a field or pasture finds it convenient to clean his palette by wiping it on the grass. A cow or horse eating the grass, as they are sure to do, will be poisoned and injured seriously if not fatally as has frequently happened. Against such a practice, or the careless leaving of painty rags in the way of domestic animals we would most emphatically say – don't do it!

We need reminding that every seemingly tiny destruction sets off a trail of destruction. We need reminding that it may not be okay to *bomb the moon*.

Perhaps you are thinking: We're doing our best here at All Souls! We're aware of the truth and the consequences! We reuse, recycle, and repurpose! We dutifully compost our Coffee Hour coffee grounds. We go for long walks about town and pick up trash all the long while! We partnered with FRESH New London in their maiden voyage into Community Sustained Agriculture (CSA).

That's all great!

And still. There's more to do. There's more to learn. There are things about which we are not aware and need to be. Maybe we shut down. Understandable. The world is too much with us at times. We become overwhelmed by news of oil spills the magnitude of which is incomprehensible; toxic dumping; or any number of devastating and perilous decisions. Sometimes we would wish to cover our eyes, cover our ears. But Friends, we have an obligation to endure – to snap out of the coma. Said Carson:

Have we fallen into a mesmerized state that makes us accept as inevitable that which is inferior or detrimental, as though having lost the will or the vision to demand that which is good? ... It is also an era dominated by industry, in which the right to make a dollar at whatever

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cost is seldom challenged. When the public protests, confronted with some obvious evidence of damaging results of pesticide applications, it is fed little tranquilizing pills of half truth.

Let's put down those little tranquilizing pills of half truths. There is a great deal at stake. I know that you know that.

If you want a little burst of hope, meander over to Fiddleheads after services some Sunday. Many of you do that. Sometimes when at Fiddleheads I think to myself, "Let's pull up those crates and call it a pulpit! The congregation is in the house!" By supporting a local co-op or CSA we are supporting our 7th principle – you are caring for the earth and those who till it's land while taking care not to harm its soil and waters planting and growing and harvesting the food that nourishes us.

We can all always do more. As a congregation we can do more. And we will do more.

Rachel Carson concluded *Silent Spring* offering us a choice:

We stand now where two roads diverge. But unlike the roads in Robert Frost's familiar poem, they are not equally fair. The road we have long been traveling is deceptively easy, a smooth superhighway on which we progress with great speed, but at its end lies disaster. The other fork of the road the one 'less traveled ...' – offers our last, our only chance to reach a destination that assures the preservation of our earth.

The choice, after all, is ours to make. If having endured much, we have at last asserted our 'right to know,' and if, knowing, we have concluded that we are being asked to take senseless and frightening risks, then we should no longer accept the counsel of those who tell us that we must fill our world with poisonous chemicals; we should look about and see what other course is open to us.

With an obligation to endure, let's look about and live lightly upon the earth, our home.

Blessed be. Amen.