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*Active Hope in the Midst of  
the Babylonian Captivity  
of the Rural*

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In spite of, or because of, the decline of rural communities, our rural parishes are in a privileged position. They experience first hand the confluence of crises, from the economic to the ecological, that plague our twenty-first century. In larger urban areas, it is easier to ignore, for example, the impact our political and economic decisions have on the land from which all of us who eat, live. Rural parishes also are in a place where the crises can be more readily transcended, since parishes are still rooted in faith and the stories of faith, and in concrete communities, their people, and the land. The parishes are still parts of, or at least remnants of real and complex communities of diverse people who through several generations have learned to live and survive together. This is not to devalue the amazing work that many sensitive individuals and groups are doing in our regional

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\* In revising this paper I have attempted to keep the character of an oral address. The initial audience was an ecumenical gathering of rural clergy and lay leaders from Mennonite, Salvation Army, Pentecostal, Lutheran, United, Anglican, and Roman Catholic parishes, and possibly others.

urban settings from Portland, Oregon to Edmonton, Alberta to build or re-build neighbourhood communities and to care for the land within the cities and around the cities. My point is that we who are members of rural parishes should not bemoan the fact, but celebrate the gift and calling, of living rurally.

Walter Brueggemann tells us that the role of those who are parish leaders—and by extension of all of us who want a living faith—is to cultivate a prophetic imagination.<sup>1</sup> We have to learn to see our piece of the world with prophetic eyes. But, he does not mean that we simply nurse and express our rage against governments and other power-brokers who are not creating the world we want. We do have to learn “prophetic criticizing”, but that can only be done if it is rooted in *doxology*, that is, in awe and praise before the Creator of Life, otherwise our criticism becomes simply another ideology.<sup>2</sup> Rather than impotent rage, a more appropriate expression of prophetic criticizing is grieving, since grief connects us to life—even if it is the lost life of our community, our land, our people. In our time, where so many people are immersed either in apathy or, the sensitive ones, in despair, a primary role for parishes would be what Brueggemann calls “prophetic energizing”.<sup>3</sup> We have to be rooted in faith. But no faith is genuine if it does not hope for renewed life.

The purpose of this address is to invite us all to look at the confluence of crises in our rural communities through the lens of the story of the Babylonian captivity of Israel. Once we imaginatively see our own communities, businesses, and farms in their own form of captivity and the apathy, despair, or false

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1 Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 13.

2 Ibid., 25.

3 Ibid., 13.

optimism the captivity creates, we can hear how the prophet<sup>4</sup> who speaks in Isaiah 40–55 awakens an active hope, a waiting on the Lord, the Creator of the ends of the earth, that renews the strength not only to imagine, but also to prepare for, a *return* from exile and a rebuilding of a community that views the land as the Lord’s and the fullness thereof.

#### COMMUNITIES AND PARISHES IN BABYLONIAN CAPTIVITY

*The nature of the captivity.* After a first deportation in 597 BCE and then a massive deportation of all but the least powerful people of Judah to Babylonia in 587 BCE, the “people of God” found themselves in captivity. For two generations their lives were shaped by forces beyond their control: the Babylonian Empire, its military, its advanced civilization. Hopelessness and with it apathy became a common spiritual disease. They asked themselves: What can we do in the face of such powerful forces that are holding us captive? The gods of the Babylonians obviously are more powerful than our God. How can our God whose temple is in Jerusalem see us or hear us when we pray? Isn’t our way disregarded by the Lord? (Isaiah 40:27.)

Let us use this story to look at our time. Could we too be living in a “Babylonian captivity”? I am discerning at least four aspects to a captivity that contributes to apathy or despair in the face of the decline of rural communities and the health of the land. The first one I will call captivity to global corporations. In a “relearning community event” (a five-part series of workshops in Viking, Alberta)<sup>5</sup> a professor of sociology asked the farmers,

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4 For the purpose of this talk, it is irrelevant whether we call the prophet Deutero-Isaiah, as many scholars do, or simply Isaiah. The context of the Babylonian Exile is the key to hearing the prophet correctly.

5 “Relearning Community: A public gathering to talk about the place of our community in a changing world”, Viking, Alberta, January 24, 31, February 7,

local business people, and community leaders to list all the areas in which large corporations influenced or controlled their lives. That was an easy exercise for the participants. Their lists included: vendors of seed, fertilizer, pesticides, farm equipment, and fuel; the buyers of their grain (the four global grain merchants that control close to 90% of the grain market); sellers of veterinary supplies; the two transnational packers in Brooks and High River to which they have to ship their cattle; food processors, marketers, transporters; and finally chain-store retailers. In fact, once they looked at their lists, they realized that they, the primary producers, had very little control left over their farms and what they produced, let alone over the price they received for their produce. A slightly different list was produced by local business people, who also were totally dependent on transnational corporations that produced the equipment and other products they sold. They were in a sense captives to corporations, whose offices and decision-making were far away from the rural in general and from any particular rural community.

The farmers were also aware that their time, their labour, their life-blood—the health of their families and communities—was being exploited for corporate profit. For example, 2004, the worst year to that date in terms of net farm incomes in Canada, was the best year, a record-breaking year, for many transnational agribusiness corporations.<sup>6</sup> So farmers and rural town folks are very aware that they are captive to large corporations and that someone is financially benefiting from their work, and it is not they. Since the average age of farmers at the

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15, and 22, 2007. See online: <<http://www.augustana.ualberta.ca/files/group/514Relearning%20Community%20Brochure.pdf>> (accessed January 23, 2010).

6 “The Farm Crisis and Corporate Profits”, in *Farm Crisis*, November 30, 2005: <<http://www.nfu.ca>> (accessed October 10, 2009).

event was about 58, they still had a memory of the independent or largely independent family farm, at the very least from the story of their farming parents or grandparents.

Behind this corporate captivity lies the captivity to an industrial paradigm of agriculture in an industrial growth economy. Captivity to a paradigm means that we are caught in a way of seeing, and responding to, the world. In an industrial paradigm, we see even farming as an industry. If farming is an “agro-industry”, then the way farms, farm families, and rural communities are looked at—and we often internalize this—changes. We view them not as “land, people, and community” that are intimately connected, but as factories, mining operations, or sites of production of agricultural commodities that can be sold anywhere in the world. Agricultural policies are not measured in terms of whether they increase the health of people, of their land, and of their communities and strengthens their connections, but rather whether the farm is “efficient” and produces more and more with less and less human labour and more and bigger machines and technologies. The cost to the fertility and tilth of the topsoil, the health of the waterways, the quality of the groundwater, the coherence of the farm families and their villages does not get calculated in economic measures of “efficiency”. (Is “efficiency” even a proper measure when what we are dealing with is nurturing, preserving, and using the means of all of humanity’s life? We don’t measure parenting by “efficiency”. So why would we measure farming by this industrial standard?) Ongoing expansion is a measure of success in the industrial paradigm. “Growth” is what our economy requires and measures, even though it is both mathematically and ecologically impossible to keep on growing within a finite planet. Translated into farming, the “growth model” of the economy means “get big or get

out”. Competition between industrial firms, in which fewer and fewer can win until there are only a few firms left which span the globe, is a key element in this paradigm. As a result farmers who had co-operated for centuries are now thrown into a win–lose competition with each other. Smaller family farms lose regularly and the winners get bigger and fewer in number.

In “The Agrarian Standard”, Wendell Berry, who as a farmer and Christian writer has made a point of articulating the difference between using an industrial and an agrarian paradigm to look not just at farming but at human life in urban areas as well, summarizes well what the industrial paradigm as a way of seeing and interacting with the world is:

The way of industrialism is the way of the machine. To the industrial mind, a machine is not merely an instrument for doing work or amusing ourselves or making war; it is an explanation of the world and of life . . . . Because industrialism cannot understand living things except as machines, and can grant them no value that is not utilitarian, it conceives of farming and forestry as forms of mining; it cannot use the land without abusing it.

Industrialism prescribes an economy that is placeless and displacing. It does not distinguish one place from another. It applies its methods and technologies indiscriminately . . . in the United States and in India.<sup>7</sup>

Once we interact with our land and community and our own household and economy industrially, we can’t help but become captives to the global culture of the giant corporations

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7 Wendell Berry, “The Agrarian Standard”, in *The Essential Agrarian Reader*, ed. Norman Wirzba (University Press of Kentucky, Shoemaker and Hoard edition, 2004), 24.

that produce ever new technological devices, from big machines to household gadgets, for everything from doing chores to entertaining ourselves. This culture that takes us captive is a culture of consumerism. Industry produces commodities—including processed food commodities—and we consume them. Our own culture, even our identity, gets shaped around what we “have” and “consume” (whether on credit or not), and not what we are as creatures of God within our farming communities. Aside from the fact that machines have replaced the work of many of the members of the farm family and that farms have been in an ongoing crisis for the last forty years, so that many parents dissuade their children from relying on farming, another reason the next generation moves to the urban centres is that it is easier to gain the money to consume what all other “self-respecting” young people in our consumer culture consume. The city seems closer to consumer paradise.

Behind corporate, industrial, and cultural captivity lies captivity to the god of “material progress”. It was not only in Babylon that the gods seemed stronger and more impressive than the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, the Judges, the Prophets, et al. Our way into captivity was laid out at the beginning of the Modern Age. As José María Sbert puts it:

With the rise of the modern world, a distinctly modern faith—faith in progress—arose to make sense of, and give ultimate meaning to the new notions and institutions that were now dominant. Our deep reverence for science and technology was inextricably linked up with this faith in progress . . . . And increasing conformity with the rule of economics, and intensified belief in its laws, are still shadows of this enlightened faith.<sup>8</sup>

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8 José María Sbert, “Progress”, in *The Development Dictionary*, ed. Wolfgang Sachs (London: Zed Books, 1992), 192.

To modern man, and to those who want to share his identity, rejecting faith in progress is unbearable. Modern man is defined by progress. His self-esteem is rooted in it and it is his deepest justification for the ruthlessness he displays towards his fellow man and nature.<sup>9</sup>

Regardless of what we think in our head about our religion or what or whom we profess to believe in, what our heart is devoted to to give it meaning is, in Martin Luther's phrase, "properly our god".<sup>10</sup> So faith in "material progress" becomes the spiritual foundation for our modern age, that is, the idol that holds us captive and allows the abuse of God's creation, creatures, and communities to continue.

*The spiritual impact of captivity: hopelessness and false optimism.* It is only natural that when we live in captivity to a god of material progress, its culture of consumerism, an economy of ongoing industrial growth, and its human rulers of place-less and often face-less corporations, we shall be invaded by hopelessness. The addictions and suicides of farmers as they lose the farms which belonged to their families for generations are only the most dramatic expressions of this hopelessness.<sup>11</sup> The more widespread hopelessness is the one shared in urban and rural

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9 Ibid., 195.

10 Martin Luther, "The Large Catechism", in *Concordia or Book of Concord*, translated by F. Bente and W. H.T. Dau (St Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950), 169.

11 This is happening not only in rural Canada but in record numbers in India among those farmers who had joined industrial "modern" agriculture through the green revolution. When input costs go up dramatically and the commodity prices stay level or go down, the indebtedness increases, let alone when there are several years of bad harvests. See Prachi Pinglay, "No let up in Indian farm suicides", BBC News, Mumbai, 5 May 2008: <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/7383662.stm>> (accessed January 12, 2010).

areas alike, in the often partly unconscious sense that there is no real meaning to progress, since there is no measure of “better” or a “better life” than more of the same, i.e., more goods to consume. Anxiety and apathy become constant companions of us, the captives. It was reflecting on this passivity and non-engagement of people in the second half of the last century that made Erich Fromm ask of this age that is dedicated to the machine and technology as our saviour: “*Do we have to make people sick in order to have a healthy economy ...?*”<sup>12</sup> We can answer: Our idol of progress and its growth economy has made people, land, water, air, and communities sick. The consumer paradise can only be reached by doing violence to the essence of being human. Humans are creatures designed to live by faith, hope, love, and courage within communities and the land on which they depend for sustenance. We have made people both spiritually and physically sick in the name of industrial progress.

An almost more dangerous form of hopelessness than the partially conscious despair is false optimism, since it hides its passivity and its nihilism, that is, that it has given up on the search for any deeper meaning to our life in society and nature. A common form of this false optimism is expressed in the phrase: Our scientists and inventors will find a technological solution. This, currently, is how we deal with the ecological threat which the development of Alberta’s tar sands presents. Whether it is carbon capture technology or any other heralded break-through, the point is: We don’t have to change our ways; we don’t have to examine the costs of progress. The technology that caused the problems will be relied upon to solve the problems: just in time, since right now we don’t have

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<sup>12</sup> Erich Fromm, *The Revolution of Hope: Toward a Humanized Technology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 2 (emphasis in original).

the solutions yet. Anyone who wants a good object lesson in the silliness of this way of arguing should go and visit the Giant Mine in Yellowknife which contains 237,000 tons of arsenic trioxide, which is so toxic it can't be moved. When the mine was at its peak, with gold-feverish exploitation on everyone's brain, the issue of the toxic tailings was always deferred. Once the exploitation was done, the company could not pay the cost of clean-up, nor was there a way to clean up. Ultimately the Giant Mine became a responsibility of our federal government and thus of us, the citizens and taxpayers. And still there is no solution to the pollution, only harebrained schemes such as permanently "unto ages of ages" mechanically freezing the arsenic trioxide in place.

Let us look at a rural example. Farm income is in crisis. The solution: bigger and better equipment, now with GPS guidance systems, will allow for a more efficient and precise seeding and harvesting. This will give farmers the edge to make a living in adverse times. This optimism prevents one from examining why farms and farm communities are in crisis, or more accurately: how they are the canary in the mine-shaft which shows us that our global consumer cultures are in ecological and social crises.

False optimism is expressed in the words of so many of our politicians, in the slogans of so many advertisements, and in the pronouncements of such a variety of experts that they seep into the way many people, even in rural communities, think. "You have to adjust to the global realities, or be left behind." "There is no alternative", so you better join the "get-big-or-get-out" bandwagon. Here is an oft repeated story of this internalized false optimism from the farming community: A farmer works on his family farm for thirty years and has some good off-farm income. His desire to work only on the

farm lets him be convinced by a corporation to build a few gigantic finishing hog barns. He has to leverage everything he owns to do it. He hurts for his neighbours who are about to go under in the ongoing rural economic crunch. However, he is convinced that “the real world” dictates that they will just have to go under. He repeats the mantra that “Only those of us who are big enough and efficient enough will survive.” When asked about the chronic volatility of the hog market in relation to the huge debt he has just incurred in building the barns, he says: “I don’t have to worry about that. The corporation I raise my hogs for guarantee a market. I just feed the hogs for them.” Three years later that hog corporation goes under, together with 25% of the other large and small scale hog producers in Alberta.

False optimism expresses itself in the blind belief that the next generation, the future, the free market, or a new technology will solve our problems. So, while we can be very busy, we are basically passive: passive in terms of freeing ourselves from the dependencies that destroy us and our world. This passivity is a clear symptom that these optimists are not living in hope. Genuine hope, as we shall see shortly, always affirms life and liberates from captivity to life-destroying dependencies.

Many churches too peddle false optimism and thus perpetuate apathy toward the plight of rural communities, because they have a totally spiritualized or dis-embodied hope. In this view, it doesn’t matter what we do to the land, people, and community, as long as you can go to heaven or, in one variant, are not left behind in the rapture.

There are many churches of all denominations who have a spiritualized hope in the hereafter for which the soul, divorced from the body and its intimate connection to the earth, is being

prepared. In such a view, our captivity is not an issue. In fact, it is not polite to raise political, economic, or environmental issues in sermons or study groups. The deeper reason: we are so invested in and committed to our rural-community-destroying economy that we cannot afford to become aware of how we are its captives. Salvation by faith in Jesus gets pitted over against concerns about what is happening to nature rather than being seen as intrinsically linked to it, as in an early Christian hymn that states that Jesus is “the firstborn of creation . . . in whom all things hold together”.<sup>13</sup>

Paralysing despair for some, apathy, false optimism, or an other-worldly hope for others, keep us in our current version of a Babylonian captivity. We conform to the dominant patterns of a presumptuous culture that has a global reach. The ongoing damage is best described by Wendell Berry, who has closely watched it from the date his *Unsettling of America* was published in 1977 to twenty-five years later, when he was invited to write “The Agrarian Standard”:

It [*The Unsettling of America*] remains true because the conditions it describes and opposes, the abuses of farmland and farming people, have persisted and become worse over the last twenty-five years . . . . Our farm communities are far worse off now than they were then. Our soil erosion rates continue to be unsustainably high. We continue to pollute our soils and streams with agricultural poisons. We continue to lose farmland to urban development of the most wasteful sort.<sup>14</sup>

With some minor modifications this also describes rural real-

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<sup>13</sup> See the whole early Christian hymn recorded in Colossians 1:15-20. Christ is both the first-born of creation as well as the source of the reconciliation of the world with God.

<sup>14</sup> “The Agrarian Standard”, 23.

ities in Canada and thus can serve as a summary of the consequences of our captivity and resultant apathy.

#### THE REVOLUTION OF HOPE

*The nature of hope.* It is in a context of apathy during the Babylonian exile that the prophet known to us under the name of Isaiah cries out to his compatriots in the following words:

Why sayest thou, O Jacob, and speakest, O Israel: “My way is hid from the LORD, and my judgment is passed over from my God”?

Hast thou not known? Hast thou not heard, that the everlasting God, the LORD, the Creator of the ends of the earth, fainteth not, neither is weary? There is no searching of His understanding.

He giveth power to the faint, and to them that have no might He increaseth strength.

Even the youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fall;

but they that wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles, they shall run and not be weary, and they shall walk and not faint. (Isaiah 40: 27-31.)<sup>15</sup>

These are revolutionary words to a despairing and hopeless society: they call for a revolution of hope, a revolution of “waiting upon” the Creator who is present in the midst of the captivity. Captive Israel is reminded that their unnameable God is not tied to a temple in Jerusalem, but is both the Creator of the ends of the earth as well as the Lord of history.

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<sup>15</sup> Holy Bible, 21<sup>st</sup> Century King James Version (KJ21 Publishing, November 1994).

Waiting or hoping for God is not passive. It allows those who hope to “walk and not faint”, even while still in captivity. It “renews their strength”. It allows them to prepare for a return to their land and community, even when they don’t know when or how it will be possible. Historically—we do not know how long after those words of Isaiah—the unpredicted and unexpected happened: Cyrus the Persian emperor conquered Babylon, ended the Babylonian captivity, and allowed the people of Israel to return to their own country. Similarly, while there are clear signs on the horizon that the Empires of global consumerism and debt cannot last, no one can predict accurately when or how they will collapse and what will replace them. Yet, the same message applies to us: we are not permanent captives to any economic or cultural determinism. In spite of all we have done and are doing to our world, there is, in Gerard Manley Hopkins’s words, “a dearest freshness deep down things”. The abused world is not spent, because “the Holy Ghost over this bent world broods . . .”.<sup>16</sup>

If we today participate in a revolution of hope, we direct our lives not to the abstract future of empty material progress but to the future of life—concrete, embodied, earthly life that can break us out of the bonds of our captivity. Genuine hope, in the image that Erich Fromm gives in *The Revolution of Hope*, is like a crouching tiger.<sup>17</sup> Even when apparently motionless the tiger is very active, constantly on the lookout, engaged and ready to act, to pounce at the appropriate moment. Of course those who are engulfed in their hopelessness will neither eagerly wait for God’s future, if it means uprooting their lives to go into an unknown future, nor take any actions to prepare for

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<sup>16</sup> Gerard Manley Hopkins, “God’s Grandeur”.

<sup>17</sup> *The Revolution of Hope*, 9.

this departure. We become so easily creatures of habit, especially when in captivity. After all most of us were born here, in captivity, and in spite of our condition as captives, we are relatively comfortable. All we can grasp of a different future is a promise, contained in the biblical stories (such as those of exile and return) and in the stories of alternative ways of being rural communities told to us by our parents, our grandparents, and people in so-called developing countries.

Hope is one of the three theological virtues; the other two are faith and love. That means they are gifts of God to all humans regardless of what religion or culture they are born into. Without some kind of hope we cannot live. In a dingy hotel room that I once had in London, someone had scrawled the words across the wall facing the bed: “Tomorrow is cancelled due to lack of interest.” Without interest in life, in tomorrow, the tomorrow of God, the tomorrow of our children and grandchildren, in the tomorrow of our communities and the tomorrow of our land and water, we cannot live human lives. The false optimism described above capitalizes on our need for some kind of hope. However, though pointing us to the future, it does not take any real interest in life—and the survival of all of creation.

A primary task for rural parishes is to help members of their community to overcome their despair or apathy and “renew their strength” through hope, not in the likely success of their activities, but in the Creator of the ends of the earth. Two crucial tasks are given to us. The first is to announce the end of our captivity maintained by the idolatrous faith in ongoing material progress, by opposing it with the presence of God in creation and in the Word made flesh that lives among us. Worship, preaching, and teaching the stories of the Bible announce the end of captivity. They open our eyes so that we

can see and respond to our rural communities and the farm or ranch land as God's creation. The second task is to support members of the community at large who are taking their first steps out of captivity. We support each other by exchanging stories of what others are doing in similar circumstances to reduce their dependencies on life-denying forces and increase their connection to the social and natural communities within which they live.

*Rejuvenation by seeing creation as a presence of God.* The prophet who spoke in poems and songs to Judah in its Babylonian captivity used his words to inspire hope in the Creator of the ends of the earth. His words were what broke through the apathy and despair of captivity. They created new possibility and new hope. So, now, a main source of hope is being lost if we lose the words "creation" and "Creator" that tell an alternative story to the stories of our dominant culture. This loss occurs when we frame our image of the world as God's creation "scientifically", as in the factual problem of intelligent design versus evolution. Spiritualized and other-worldly religion also loses a connection to our bodies and the earth<sup>18</sup> as God's creation. Sometimes faith in Jesus is pitted against such worldly ecological concerns as the health of land, air, and water. However, in Christian theology, Jesus is the incarnation of God's Word that lives among us. The incarnation points to concrete, bodily, human life on this earth, which God so loved, as a major point of encounter with God. Isaiah claims that if the captives trust in the Creator of the ends of earth they will renew their strength. Let us ex-

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<sup>18</sup> See Wendell Berry, "The Body and the Earth", in *The Art of the Commonplace: The agrarian essays of Wendell Berry*, ed. Norman Wirzba (Emeryville, CA: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2002), 93-134.

plore in what way viewing the world as God's creation liberates us from captivity to alien ideologies and patterns of living and thereby renews our strength to act in new ways.

Our North American world in its fourfold captivity tells itself a story that hides its captivity from itself. In this story, which George Grant named and analysed in "In Defence of North America",<sup>19</sup> we have to master human and non-human nature for our survival and success. Within this story we see nature as resources that are there to be exploited for our benefit. Even the fruits of the earth are agricultural resources sold, and speculated upon in stock markets, as commodities. We treat the land as our property to be used for extracting as much financial value as we can. The biblical story, prompting us to respect human beings, human communities, the earth and the fullness thereof as God's creation, is a potentially liberating, hope-inspiring story. It liberates us by limiting us, and by putting us back into an overall, complex set of patterns which we did not make, but need to respect, if we want our communities, land, and planet to survive. In this story, it is presumptuous and destructive to play god, imposing our industrial economic, agricultural, and cultural model on the rest of the world with its diverse cultures and ecological regions. We are only limited "earthlings", not gods. We acknowledge, for example, that we cannot make the complex topsoil from which we live, nor do we produce diverse living forests. At best we can maintain and preserve what the patterns of Creation have provided for us, as we use the land, the sea, and the forests for our survival. It is liberating to be allowed to be mere humans with limited knowledge who nevertheless receive the gifts and bounties

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<sup>19</sup> George Grant, "In Defence of North America", in *Technology and Empire* (Concord, ON: House of Anansi Press, 1969), 13-40.

that Creation holds in store, if we develop the necessary skills and wisdom to live within its dynamics. We don't have to be university-trained experts or specialists who know more and more about smaller and smaller parts of agro-forestry realities. We can learn from those farmers, ranchers, and foresters who pay close attention to the land and the many complex inter-connections with all that is in and around it. It is restraining and liberating to discover, in this story that sees nature and community as God's creation, that we are not "free to do what we want", not autonomous selves, not hyper-individualists,<sup>20</sup> but creatures bound to one another, to the earth, and to the mystery of life that is beyond our knowing.

It does take a leap of faith to see and respond to nature and community as God's creation. But it is a leap into foolishness to see small segments of the strands of the complex web of life as objects that we can truly know and control by studying them and manipulating them in isolation from the overall patterns within which they cohere. Honesty would have us acknowledge that the conservationist John Muir was right, who is quoted as saying: "When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it is hitched to everything else in the Universe."<sup>21</sup>

Creation, not as objective fact, but as sung and spoken Word, has the power of making the natural and social world of spiritual use to us.<sup>22</sup> The natural and social world is of spiritual use

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20 This apt expression comes from Bill McKibben, *Deep Economy: The Wealth of Communities and the Durable Future* (New York: Times Books, Henry Holt and Co., 2007), 96.

21 <<http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/j/johnmuir107171.html>> (accessed January 15, 2010).

22 This notion is derived from Luther, who views the whole world sacramentally. He says: "Set aside the word 'God created the heavens and earth,' and I would like to see who would have a God or of what use [for the spiritual or inner person] he would be." "That these Words of Christ, 'This is my

to us when it inspires confidence in the Creator, the inaccessible mystery of life clothed in the existing realities around us. As we develop trust in the Creator, we get orientated in life by God's creation, its patterns, cycles, particularities, rather than imposing our will to mastery on the world. Our farming practices, like those of the "new agrarians",<sup>23</sup> try as much as possible to mimic nature, rather than modelling themselves on industry. Rather than being orientated to a future of material abundance through linear progress (technologically and economically), we rest in the natural cycles of birth, growth, maturity, death, and decay. Nature and community received spiritually as God's creation have the power to heal our souls (and often our bodies). While nongovernmental agencies and churches clamour that we should participate in the healing of creation, it seems to me that the primary role of parishes who announce and celebrate that the world is God's creation is to allow God in creation to heal us. Nature in its rhythms, patterns, creativity, and unpredictability has a healing capacity which is experienced and expressed by such diverse groups as the English Romantic poets and our Albertan back-country hikers. Community as the other aspect of God's presence in creation is also healing, since it reconnects us to the human family. It is the real, complex, blemished humans that are God's gift and challenge to us.

In both nature and community, we have to be healed, whether from presumption and from playing god with the world or from the apathy that sees no alternatives to the current des-

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Body,' etc., Still Stand Firm Against the Fanatics, 1527", *Luther's Works*, vol. 37, ed. R.H. Fischer (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1961), 88.

23 See the many authors who contributed to *The Essential Agrarian Reader* as examples of the "new agrarians". They are the ones who are committed to an "agrarian paradigm" for looking at the world and assessing the health of the current global economy.

tructive patterns. We have to be healed to be earthlings, mere humans within the larger and complex web of life. Only as creation heals us<sup>24</sup> can we truly participate in the “healing of creation”. We get exhausted physically and spiritually as we race to an endlessly regressing future of more stuff or as we isolate ourselves more and more as hyper-individualists in our pursuit of consumer happiness. Our strength gets renewed as we get reconnected to a community, within a specific place, accepting our limits, including our limited span of life. We learn to pay attention to what the natural and social world is telling us as well as what it is demanding of us.

*Taking first steps out of captivity.* In our worship and study together as Christians, we shall discover anew how counter-cultural and liberating it is to view nature and our communities as God’s creation. As we see the world differently, we shall feel about what is going on differently and begin to act differently. Worship and study help our world-view or our paradigm to shift from seeing the rural as an industrial production site for the wealth of corporations and a few farmers to recognizing it as a central part of God’s creation. Our treatment of the land shifts from extraction of resources to nurture and respectful use. The evaluation of our economy shifts from measuring it in terms of whether it “produces an ever larger pile of stuff to whether it builds or undermines community—for community, it turns out, is the key to physical survival in our environmental

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24 God’s other presence, according to Martin Luther, is in the Word made flesh. God’s presence as incarnate Word is there to re-create us, to re-connect us to earth, neighbour, self, and God. Thus our worship, preaching, teaching, confessions of sin all heal and re-connect us. See Hans-Dittmar Muendel, “Indirect Communication and Christian Education” (unpublished dissertation, Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, CA), chapter 3.

predicament and also to human satisfaction”.<sup>25</sup> These changes in perspective have very practical consequences. As members of local communities we come together to re-learn what it means to be a community and not just isolated individuals.

An example of this way of supporting the rebuilding of a vibrant local community was the “Relearning Community” public gatherings in Viking, referred to above. We looked at ecological, economic, political, cultural, and spiritual aspects of the community: at both present realities and emerging alternatives. The same group that were easily able to identify all the ways that they were dependent on global corporations were also able to list many concrete ways some of them had started to move out of this captivity to a global economic system that cared little for the income of farmers, the health of rural families and communities, or the integrity of the land. Some farmers stated that they reduced their dependency on large petro-chemical companies by spreading their hog manure on their fields. Fertility increased and the debt load on the farm decreased. Others shared how they were adding value to their farm produce by making their own jams and sausages that were being sold at nearby farmers’ markets. Someone shared his experiences of reconnecting the young people of his (ecumenical) youth group to the land by having them plant root crops on his farm, which upon harvest they brought to the poorest district of Edmonton. Many rural youths—let alone urban ones—no longer grow up intimately involved in growing things, so this activity of planting a hope garden served many purposes: reconnecting to the land and rebuilding community at the same time. The many small steps taken by the participants of the “Relearning Community” events all gave new value to the local, and thus moved away from the global juggernaut.

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25 McKibben, *Deep Economy*, 2.

While the majority of farmers present were still using the traditional forms of capital and equipment intensive farming, some had made a more radical change by using a “holistic farm management” approach. In this approach, concern for clean water, healthy soil, wildlife habitat, and an overall quality of life is combined with the need for a farm to be financially viable. An *Edmonton Journal* article summarizes this approach as Don Ruzicka shared it with us at our event:

“We decided what we wanted in life and linked it to a pasture-management production model. By using that simple framework, we opened our mind to new thinking. We now make decisions based on what quality of life we want and how we want our farm to look,” says Ruzicka, who has planted 30,000 trees of 16 different species over the years, with over 200 birdhouses dotted along the fence posts.<sup>26</sup>

Don was moved to take these steps not only by a massive debt on his farm and a lot of personal stress, but also by his view of his role as a steward of God’s creation. Since making his changes that have kept many neighbours shaking their heads, he has become a mentor to others who want to make their life and farming more sustainable.

Changes out of dependency on corporations or a globalized market do not only occur on farms, but also in town. For example, Yvonne Brown of Busy B Bargains shared how the three thrift stores and recycling centres in Tofield, Alberta involve a hundred volunteers and contribute to many projects and the overall vibrancy of the community. The Busy B stores with all

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<sup>26</sup> <<http://www.canada.com/edmontonjournal/news/bistro/story.html?id=eefb77fo-3eb9-4baf-92fo-1f81d65f32of>> (accessed January 22, 2010).

their volunteers have created a way of connecting people, from seniors to the disabled, with one another and with meaningful activities. Someone else described the “buy locally first” campaign in their community. While it is often not possible to buy only locally—since so much production of goods has been moved overseas that you often can’t find a “made in Canada” or a “made locally” option—you can, however, support local businesses and restaurants before going further afield. Buying as locally as possible also means becoming aware of what our bioregion produces or can produce to feed, clothe, and house us. Rather than merely bemoan their captivity and its negative impacts, these participants in the public gatherings gave signs of a hope that healthy rural communities can be rebuilt in smaller or larger ways.

The conversations showed that there is not one new model, either for farming or for local businesses, that can be imposed everywhere. Rather, each person and each community has their own distinct challenges and possibilities. Attending to the particularities of a situation is crucial. At the same time the exchange of ideas allowed for the participants to open themselves to new thinking that someone else had already put into practice.

The small steps are not insignificant, even when members of our communities feel that they cannot stand in the face of the massive power of global economic systems and global corporations. It is important for those who feel they are so small that they cannot stand, as the people of Israel felt in the face of Babylon, to hear about others embarked on their return from exile in other parts of the province, Canada at large, or in other countries. For example, there are a variety of ways that people have returned from their captivity to the global market. Selling your own produce “at the farm gate” makes sure that

you get an adequate price to cover your costs and your work.<sup>27</sup> Selling at the farmers' markets also gives the farmers control over their prices as well as creating connections between the consumers and the farmers. Community Shared Agriculture (CSA) is another model, in which the consumer shares in the risk of crop-production by buying shares at the beginning of the season. As the produce is ready for harvest, the shareholders traditionally get a box of produce a week, depending on what is in season. In many cases churches have become central pick-up points for the produce (ranging from vegetables and fruits to eggs and meats). In some CSAs the shareholders also pay in some "sweat equity", taking turns either in the fields themselves, or in the cleaning and packaging of the produce. In all these forms, a new connection is created between farmers, community members (a community that may extend to neighbouring cities), and the land that produces the food.

There are also more conventional ways of moving out of the power of the global food industry, as practised by some grocery stores. For example, Thrifty Foods grocery stores on Vancouver Island and in Vancouver have as an objective to get more than half of all their fresh produce from farms that are organic and use sustainable farming practices. They negotiate a fair price directly with the farmer or a group of farmers. They state their reasons for focusing more and more on organics and justify the higher prices as follows:

By purchasing organic products, we are:

Showing support for farmers who practice sustainable forms of farming;

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<sup>27</sup> This selling "at the farm gate" is easier for those who work in market gardens or in smaller scale meat production. It is more challenging for those who have specialized, e.g., in organic grains.

Helping to protect our air, soil, water and food supply from toxic chemicals;  
Conserving natural resources by recycling natural materials as compost to build healthy, fertile soil;  
Encouraging an abundance of species living in balanced, harmonious ecosystems.<sup>28</sup>

The increase in urban farming and the concern for local food security, as well as the presence of more educational farms, all help to show that many people are taking the first steps to return from their life as captives subject to seemingly invincible forces that constrict our lives. It also leads more and more urban consumers of food to appreciate the role of farmers and rural communities in providing an essential service both to the consumers themselves and to future generations through the conservation of the land.

Apathy would keep us trapped in the political, economic, or cultural captivity we find ourselves in. Re-learning to see our social and natural realities as God's creation has the potential of awakening us from apathy and hopelessness in view of the state of the world. It awakens an active hope. Active hope renews our strength; it reconnects us to people, to community, and to the land. Active hope is first an inner change. It also opens us to new thinking and enables us to explore new ways of acting in our communities. Rediscovering our interest in the well-being of our land, our communities, and our families is itself a step out of captivity into the bound-freedom of living in this world as God's creation. In the following words, Wendell Berry beautifully brings out the key motive for "re-learning community"—to reignite our interest and joy in living:

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28 <<http://www.thriftyfoods.com/EN/main/stores/produce/produce-organic.html>> (accessed January 25, 2010).

Only the purpose of a coherent community, fully alive both in the world and in the minds of its members, can carry us beyond fragmentation, contradiction, and negativity, teaching us to preserve, not in opposition but in affirmation and affection, all things needful to make us glad to live.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> *The Agrarian Reader*, 78.

## Biographical Notes



Cynthia Moe-Lobeda is a faculty member of Seattle University's Department of Theology and Religious Studies and graduate School of Theology and Ministry. She holds a doctoral degree in Christian Ethics from Union Theological Seminary, and master's degrees in social work and in theological studies. Dr Moe-Lobeda is the author of *Healing a Broken World: Globalization and God* (2002), *Public Church: For the Life of the World* (2004), and numerous articles and chapters in books. She is a co-author of *Saint Francis and the Foolishness of God* (1993) and *Say to This Mountain: Mark's Story of Discipleship* (1996). She has recently served as theological consultant to the Presiding Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. She lives in Seattle, Washington, with her husband, Ron, a pastor in the ELCA, and two wonderful sons, Leif and Gabriel.

Dittmar Mündel has been a professor of religious studies at the Augustana Campus of the University of Alberta (formerly Camrose Lutheran College) for the past 30 years. As Associate Director of the Chester Ronning Centre for the Study of Religion and Public Life, Dr Mündel has been involved in various events in rural communities to deal with “re-learning” community. After spending part of a sabbatical in Ghana, West Africa, he organized the Ghana Rural Development Program for students. From 1995 to 2005 he directed the Prairies–Mexico Rural Development Exchange in which Canadian and Mexican students spent one term each in rural Alberta and rural Mexico. He received his MA in Theology at the University of Göttingen and his PhD at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California, and has served parishes in Edmonton, Vancouver, and Wetaskiwin.

