

Nature's Essential Beatitudes

The nail guns start before seven a.m.; across the street, they're building three new houses on a lot meant for two. Practicing deep breathing and selective hearing is a habit I've studiously cultivated in order to bear the onslaught of workers' trucks, construction equipment, drills, hammers, voices, and all the other molestations that begin before dawn nearly every day since last fall. Sigh. I'm in favor of in-fill, preferring density within city limits rather than stretching urban growth boundaries, but I fret at Sonoma County construction going full tilt, cementing over the fertile land of my youth and the spaces of my maturity. They have preserved the trees, however, and I chose to be grateful for the grace and age of the Douglas firs that still occupy the lot. The same trees will provide the new families with shade from the harsh summer sun as well as that delicious resin scent.

I choose gratitude, too, for the Valley oaks and palms preserved from the previous project, the one on the corner, that used to be home to that old, run-down, but majestically beautiful Mediterranean villa that should have been restored, but was destroyed with all its magnificent woodwork and real paneling inside. It was sent up in smoke and flames—a training exercise for our fire department—with all its valuable wood and accouterments (someone forgot to tell the previous owner that recycling is a *good* thing). That corner is now filled with Villagio Toscano, a tasteful little shopping center that houses the office of the dentist who conceived of the project and executed it beautifully. I preferred the house.

Meanwhile pneumatic hammers continue to sound day after day, as the two-storey houses take shape. The construction workers are mostly hard-working Latinos. The taco truck arrives daily to the tune of "Here Comes the Bride," the sound offering a little levity among the other, harsher rasps and banging. I hear the workers talking and laughing back and forth in rapid-fire

Spanish, the usual banter and maledictions that construction workers are known for. I wonder if they realize I can understand them. I wonder if they care. They don't loiter at the end of the day. I'm sure they are exhausted and want to get home to showers, hot meals, and well-deserved rest.

The houses are McMansion-style—all house, no lot. The only landscaping they are going to be able to do is in pots on porches (if they have porches). I wonder that people buy such things, living in apartment-dweller coziness, while owning a house. I wouldn't want to live that way—but, heck, that's me. Well, at least we have the trees.

The other side. On the side away from the corner, we enter a different world—my *tierra*, my earth, my ground. As the sun rises, mockingbirds fluff their feathers from their nighttime roosts and resume the repertoire of songs and sounds they burbled into the night. My mockingbirds greet the morning, and me, out by the pond, whose gurgling and swishing partially masks the city sounds around the block. Two newly fledged mockers insist their parents feed them, perched in the bush outside my office window. Lazy babies. I watch their parents industriously flit to and fro providing their voracious offspring with sustenance. Bird life abounds in my *tierra*. The scrub jay raucously ridicules me from the fence, and though I spout multifaceted retorts, he continues to laugh and call my bluff.

The baby goldfinches came for the first time last week. Tiny replicas of their small parents, they also insist their parents fill their gullets. I watched one slide down a dandelion stem this morning, as if it were a toddler on a playground slide. He was obviously having fun as he and his sibling pecked at the dirt next to the garden. Such tiny little creatures, so full of life. I wonder how soon they will frolic in the pond, the favored playground of their parents. Swooping

in to bathe, perching on the fence, or hiding among the dense leaves of the star jasmine, they entertain me endlessly.

The garden is verdant, though we planted late—those dratted spring rains kept us out of our clay-bound garden for far too long this year. I picked my first Armenian cucumber today, its fat bottom heavy with seeds, the light green skin scored with lines that run up its crook neck. We ate that cucumber for dinner and are already longing for the next. The yellow crook-necked squash I picked, has my name on it—a breakfast I am looking forward to. Onions, crook-necked squash, bell and chile peppers sautéed in sesame oil and served with scrambled eggs. Yum.

We have two garden plots—one on the north-west side and one to the east—at our modest home. The plants on the east don't look so healthy, but this is our experimental plot. Hell, maybe all gardening is about experimentation, hope, and promises. The artichoke plants are there—one of them, the largest, looks pretty sad. Hubby said he'd move it, but that hasn't happened yet. This is our first year with artichokes and we wallow our way through.

The avocado trees, on the other hand are gloriously healthy and hearty. Although two of them are four years old, they are still far too young to bear fruit. We tend to them zealously and I spray them with my bug “concoction”—all natural ingredients, no pesticides. My husband and I have had numerous conversations—ones our neighbors might construe as fights—about the use of chemicals in the yard. I caught him with a chemical fertilizer last week and took it away from him. His turn to sigh. (Now I don't know what to do with it, as it can't just be tossed in the garbage, and household hazardous waste only takes things in their original cartons. This is in a plain “wrapper,” the better to hide from me.) Mostly we agree, though, and take our turns with the garden and yard we both love and want to do more with, but lack wherewithal to bring in oh-so-expensive soil amendments.

Speaking of enhancing soil, my venture into vermiculture is proving fruitful. I've fertilized with my first worm castings (worm poop for those not privy to vermiculture vernacular). My chiles, bell peppers, tomatoes, and cucumbers all attest to the richness of their food, and are tall, strong, healthy, and bearing fruit. I keep my worms in a blue plastic Rubbermaid bin on the patio and feed them scraps from our kitchen. I started out with 500 worms—bought from the drugstore refrigerators in containers of 50 each—and they have reproduced to thousands. Being squeamish, I'd thought I would find a neat way screen out the castings (not). Instead I sort worms from their castings by hand, lustily picking through them. The castings have a sensuous, earthy aroma, somehow healthy and rich. Not pungent, just like good earth after a gentle rain. It's interesting what happens to potato peels, banana skins, Kleenex, and assorted papers and kitchen discards when tossed into a bin of writhing worms. The wigglers lie atop shredded paper bedding and have another layer over them. Their bedding must be kept moist as desiccation leads to stiff worms. I bury the refuse under the top layer and the worms go for the gusto. My hard-working worms energetically process their food and give back to this woman who has learned to respect such fecund squirmers. (By the way, for the trivia minded, a group of worms is called a squirm.) When I started with the 500, they processed maybe a bucket of compost a month. Now they compost three to four bucketsful a week. I can tell when I will have more tiny, tiny worms. The ring around the large worm's middle attests to the arrival of new life, just as a human mother's full, round figure speaks of imminent arrival. And tiny the new worms are, about the diameter of coarse thread and about a quarter-inch long; these creatures wriggle and squirm just as heartily as their parents. One of the perks of their rapid reproduction is when there are too many for the box, I get to start another box, *and* I can

just plop them into the garden and they will continue their work without stop—tilling the soil, enabling it to breathe.

There are a multitude of other symbiotic creatures that live in the worm box—fruit flies that accompany the fruit from the store (they're there even if you can't see them), and other miniscule creatures that help break down the scraps and that enjoy the same environment. These creatures thrive in the box and the birds thrive on them—ecologically sound practice this balance of nature.

We have two beach chairs on the patio, where I sit and read my school books and take in the birds and bees at the same time. I observe the garden's progress, commune with the birds, delight in the butterflies, damsel- and dragonflies, and listen to the bees. There is so much *life* here, and the year's cycle of dormancy, birth, aging, and rest play out through the seasons. There can be no true dying amid the promise of rebirth. (While death is a reality it is not permanent—Ann's Nature Philosophy 101.) The cycle is never ending and in my *tierra*, even in nature's slowest cycle January and February, there is abundant proof of life. Some birds stay all year and twitter, chirp, and flit through the garden from feeder to feeder. They even watch me through the kitchen window, letting me know when it is time to refill the feeder tray. The titmouse is a seasonal favorite. He's another of the smallest birds with the short, fat beak of a seedeater. He's an inquisitive winter bird, gray with a topknot. He likes to perch on the feeder and cock his little head at me. I wonder if he is trying to figure out why I don't fly. Or maybe why I am inside such a large cage?

Some of the flowers are their boldest in the winter months. Paper white narcissus bloom, so much like daffodils in shape and appearance, but smaller and more delicate. The Daphne, with its sweet perfume, small bunches of white and pink flowers, and glossy green leaves, chooses to

winter-bloom, too. The azaleas' white and pink buds appear, the daffodils hover just behind the narcissus, and the hyacinths' purple blooms arrive quickly thereafter. Even the oh-so-depressing rain doesn't prevent these harbingers of life and sun from trumpeting their messages of home and warmth to come. (Last April's showers didn't bring more flowers, they just brought more rain.)

Right now, during the height of summer, those flowers are a memory and the roses, lilies, vines, and jacaranda are all in bloom. The California mission fig usually gives us (humans *and* birds) three crops every summer. The tree has its first ripe fig hanging heavy on the branch, with a hole picked into it. Sun-dried figs—nature's sweetest candy. We share our blessed bounty with family, friends, and acquaintances. I also freeze, dry, and can tomatoes, spaghetti sauce, chiles, fig puree, grated squash, and tomatillos for the whole year—summer's flavors captured. Who needs money when we have produce? What blessings!

Meanwhile the building frenzy marches on, around the block, around the city, around the county. The construction business owners grow fat, like the zucchini in the garden. And, like the zucchini in the garden, they give no thought to the tomorrow that will become today when the only bits of California that are not covered with cement and buildings will be the places like my *tierra*, a haven to worms, birds, and plants—and sun and water and earth.