

## MEDITATION

Lloyd H. Steffen

It is sometimes thought that facts speak for themselves. It is sometimes thought that if we only had all the facts, it would be obvious what to do--our problems would dissipate and the world would be a better place. There is probably some truth to this, for we can all think of situations where a lack of factual information contributed to errors in judgment, blunders, and misunderstandings. We all take wrong turns, mix signals, miss the signs, misread the map and wind up in the wrong place. So we have learned to honor the facts, to seek the straight unadulterated objective data that will show the way to avoid mistakes. Mistakes are errors that go uncorrected due to our lack of diligence, that is, through laziness, inattentiveness, or willful neglect. Yet given a choice, none of us would choose to make a mistake.

In coming together this week to discuss ecology and contemporary faith, we have perhaps reminded ourselves that a great deal of factual information is available about the dangers facing the human habitat and natural environment. The curious thing, however, is that rather than focusing our attention solely on the facts, we have chosen to discuss a variety of other matters. We have talked about space and habitat, politics and policy making, about priorities and responsibilities, about imagination and aesthetics and the need for finesse, about the need for perspective, about faith, and hope and the spiritual practice of the common life. Here is an important point: the question is never simply: "What are the facts?"--though that is surely where we must begin; the issue is "What do the facts mean?" By raising a wide range of questions of humanistic and spiritual and value concern, it seems that we have been trying to understand what it means that our human habitat is in jeopardy because of decisions human beings have made. We have been using our religious resource as a way of orienting ourselves towards the facts, as a way of deciding what the facts mean--the fact of pollution, the fact of scarce resources, the fact of desert encroachment, the fact of erosion, the fact of environmental disintegration.

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Lloyd H. Steffen is Associate Professor of Philosophy and Campus Minister at Northland College, Ashland, Wisconsin. This meditation was presented in a morning service of the class in "Ecology and Contemporary Faith," in August, 1987, one of the Iliff-at-Aspen courses. The Psalm version referred to is a paraphrase of Psalm 104 by Leslie Brandt in *Hymns for the Family of God* (Nashville: Paragon Associates, 1976). Environmental studies are given particular priority at Northland College.

In our Scripture reading, we are reminded of a fact: that the world exists and human beings inhabit it. All the rest is interpretation. All the rest is an interpretation of what those facts mean in the context of faith. The fact of the world means that God is glorious and the creation beautiful. The fact that human beings exist means that God has imparted the image of God on the human heart, that men and women have been invited into an ever-continuing process of co-creation--to be co-creators with God, to see in their hearts and in each other and in the world around them evidence for a mystery that no accumulation of facts could ever add up to.

The Psalmist tells us that the world was "vibrant and alive in every part." That is no longer so. We must not, however, lose our perspective on the Creation because of our ecological crisis, for Creation is grander than our power to imagine--even our power to destroy. Human beings shall never destroy the Creation--and it is arrogance to think we can: we can only attack a small part of it. Our faith resource, because it sets us on a path of faithful appreciation and stewardship, calls us to avoid cynicism and despair, even in the face of ecological disaster, nuclear annihilation, or omnicide. Terrible as this prospect is, it is not the final word even if it should prove to be our final act. God's power and beauty extend throughout the universe; and each of us, in whatever capacity, can serve to witness to that truth, finding in that vision of Creation strength and courage, perhaps even wisdom, as we struggle to preserve and conserve what has been entrusted to our care.

As persons concerned with the state of the world's well-being, and as persons of faith, we are called to use our resources of intellect and passion to search out the facts, discern the problems we face, and seek well-reasoned solutions. But that is not the whole story. We cannot depend upon our enormous capacities for creating new technologies and manipulating still more resources to revitalize what we have already contaminated or killed. Recognizing that we have problems taxes none of us. Recognizing that the earth and we ourselves are mysteries of Creation, wonderful beings able to delight in all that is--that is our difficult chore and the task of faith. The solutions to our ecological crisis lie ultimately not in science and engineering but in the human heart. That is the message I hear in the Psalmist's words.

It is in our hearts--in our faith, in our ability to understand the facts while standing under the mystery of God's creative power--that we shall come to assume the task of God's co-worker. This is not a fact as we think about facts; it is rather a call to meaningful life. This is not a fact that speaks for itself; it is rather an interpretation of the world and all that is in the world. This is an interpretation that seeks to steer us from errors and mistakes to the light of God, grace and truth.

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