

Environmental *enthusiasm*

AN INTRODUCTION

BY LORA E. GERIGUIS

The following essays reflect each person's engagement with the environment at a level that requires the longevity and intensity that is the gift of enthusiasm.

Air pollution, in mid-twentieth-century America, was broadly “accepted as the smell of prosperity.”¹ Nevertheless into this world of “new affluence and intense social conformity... [when i]n postwar America, science was god, and science was male”² came a little book with a whimsical title written by a woman. Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1962), which warned of the carcinogenic property of the pesticides, such as DDT, was a surprise run-away best seller.³ The *New York Times* heralded the book as a “20th century *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*” as an expression of its intense focus on righting *and writing* a wrong.⁴ Rachel Carson (1907–1964), a one-time English major turned marine biologist, combined her literary talents and scientific knowledge to write compelling books about the relationship of humans to the environment. In *Silent Spring*, she predicted over-use of pesticides by industry and individuals would result in a coming spring when the sound of birds would be silenced due to ecological devastation. The warnings for humanity to better nurture our relationship with the planet haven’t lost their relevancy in the half-century since *Silent Spring*’s publication. What is needed is a stimulus to keep our vigilance active in the face of enormous, global-scale challenges and discouraging set-backs.

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Carson was particularly successful at expressing “deeply intricate scientific material in clear poetic language that could captivate her readers and pique their interest in the natural world.”⁵ The popularity of *Silent Spring* became the catalyst for Carson testifying before a Congressional committee, which eventually led to banning the domestic production of DDT in the United States, though its use internationally continued so that, sadly today, “[g]lobal contamination is a fact of modern life.”⁶ *Silent Spring* put Carson in the crosshairs of the pesticide industry, which mounted a massive campaign to discredit her. Linda Lear reports, “[u]nbeknown to her detractors in government and industry, Carson was fighting a far more powerful enemy than corporate outrage: a rapidly metastasizing breast cancer.

The miracle is that she lived to complete the book at all.”⁷ What drove Carson to persevere in her writing against the odds for a woman of her day, despite the resistance of the rich and powerful, and in the face of the treachery of her own body? A sense of purpose, and, above all, enthusiasm.

The year 2020 will mark the fiftieth anniversary of Earth Day, first established in the United States on April 22, 1970 (six years after Carson’s death).⁸ Reporting that evening in

1970 for the television news on what he called a “unique day in American history,” Walter Cronkite (1916–2009), iconic news broadcaster from World War II to 1981, cited the impetus behind the Earth Day movement as the mounting recognition that economic growth and prosperity was extracting a heavy toll on the environment, which he poetically described as the “deadly byproducts of bounty: the fouled skies, the filthy waters, the littered Earth.”⁹ April 22 has since become an annual day of political organization and practical action world-wide, and Earth Day is now recognized as “the largest secular observance in the world, celebrated by more than a billion people every year.”¹⁰ Mobilization on such a scale is driven not just by obligation, or even by fear, but must include a significant element of enthusiasm.

We’ve titled this collection of essays “Environmental Enthusiasm” because that is what these five authors have in common. Representing a diverse range of disciplines, including Biblical studies, English literature, American history, and psychology, their journeys have taken them down different academic paths, but all have picked up an enthusiasm for the environment along the way that has spurred them forward. Each one’s expression of that enthusiasm varies. Our authors include a hiker with enough grit to mount the summit of Kilimanjaro and another with the herculean patience and persistence necessary to track birds all over the world. The others have found the determination to unearth the history of a people buried by extermination, to discern early evidence of pollution awareness in the poetry of bereft mothers of centuries past, or to open new “green” eyes so as to reread well-known scripture in order to discover its linkage to the land hidden there all along. All of these projects have been fueled by the clean, renewable energy source of enthusiasm.

Stewardship of God’s creation, and its corollary *dominion*, have long been two major (and debated) pillars of Christian philosophy and practice, arising from God’s celebratory invitation to humanity on the sixth day of creation to “Be fruitful, and multiple, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth” (Genesis 1:28, KJV). We are suggesting that a third way, a vigor emerging from *enthusiasm* be harnessed to help direct our way of living in the world God has entrusted to us. Enthusiasm for one’s subject is the hallmark of a university professor; it’s what we hope to inculcate in our students. Enthusiasm is what drives us to study our subjects intently for a life-time, conduct complex experiments to learn that

next new thing, write books that demand months, even years of dedication. The following essays reflect each person’s engagement with the environment at a level that requires the longevity and intensity that is the gift of enthusiasm. We hope in reading these essays, in sharing part of our journeys with us, you’ll (re)discover your own spring of enthusiasm for living well in our vibrant but vulnerable world.

End Notes

1. “The History of Earth Day,” www.earthday.org/about/the-history-of-earth-day.
2. Linda Lear, “Introduction” to Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1962), 50th anniversary edition (Boston: Mariner Books, 2002), x–xi.
3. See Mark Stoll, “Carson’s *Silent Spring*: A Book that Changed the World,” Virtual Exhibitions 2012, no 1, *Environment & Society Portal*, Environmentandsociety.org.
4. *New York Times* (27 September 1961): 35. The reference is made to the serialization of Carson’s book in newspapers before it came out in book form. Quoted by Stoll.
5. This quote, though it applies to all of her writing, was directly referencing Carson’s first book, *Under the Sea* (1941). “Rachel Carson,” *U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service*, www.fws.gov.
6. Lear, “Introduction,” xviii.
7. *Ibid.*, xvii.
8. Given the current highly polarized divide over environmental politics, there is a (perhaps surprising) element of bi-partisanship in the early history of Earth Day, the original co-sponsors of which were US Senator Gaylord Nelson (Democrat, Wisconsin) and US Congressman Pete McCloskey (Republican, California). See “The History of Earth Day,” www.earthday.org/about/the-history-of-earth-day.
9. Walker Cronkite, “Earth Day: A Question of Survival,” CBS News (22 April 1970), www.earthday.org/about/the-history-of-earth-day. Biographical information from “Walter Cronkite,” www.imdb.com. Awareness raised around environmental degradation, heightened by the media coverage of Earth Day, fueled the establishment of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) by the United States government in 1970.
10. The first year’s observation of Earth Day attracted the participation of 20 million Americans; in 1990, the Earth Day movement spread globally, when 200 million people in 141 countries participated. “The History of Earth Day,” www.earthday.org/about/the-history-of-earth-day.



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