

EARTH CARE & SPIRITUALITY MONTHLY REFLECTION

February 2021

Winter Woods by Stephen Hastings

Until a couple years ago my wife and I owned a fixer-upper farmhouse in a nice wooded area in the central Maine town of Mount Vernon. We spent a lot of time rehabbing that 200+ year-old home, and the backyard became almost a sacred after-work haven to us because of the songbirds and all kinds of birds. A truly delightful place to be, and you get to know the birds. There was one in particular – I could never see him but I could hear him – always down back from the house along the edge of the field and the woods. *Widgety widgety widget, widgety widgety widget*. It took me weeks with my binoculars and stealthy ways to find him, but I did: Common Yellowthroat Warbler. I felt like we had bonded! I don't know if he appreciated it, but I would frequently call to him. And there was something about the woods down there ... alluring. It wasn't old forest. It was a deep woods reclaiming the apple orchards from generations ago, lots of the apple trees still alive, productive (good for applesauce), and neatly aligned amidst the randomness of the wild trees. Surely the woods, adjacent fields, and the presence of all the birds was not a coincidence. Wildlife habitat. We would hear the occasional owl and coyote at night ... out there in the woods. Whippoorwills and Woodcocks were there, too. Now Woodcocks are really amazing! But I want to get back to the woods. The woods was everything to this community of life and I spent a lot of time in there myself. One winter, I decided to make a video of "winter to spring." I found a place in the woods where I attached a camera stand to the side of a tree. Every several weeks, starting in mid-winter, I would go out there, place the Canon 7D on the stand, and record video and audio for about 10 minutes. When I started, it was cold, snow was deep, colors were mostly black and white, and it was very quiet – a calming peace with the occasional sound of wind in the trees. As winter waned, the sound of running water began to build, there was the occasional chickadee, and hints of color. Yes, I still have the video and I watch it now and then. Here's my favorite part. Right around the time the snow began to melt down, the brook began to flow, and the chickadees made their presence heard, I put on some snowshoes, went out in front of the camera, and walked away, up into the woods, winding my around trees, and I just went ... in. In the video, when I watch it now, I grow smaller and smaller, my movements more and more obscured as I put more distance and tree trunks between me and the camera; but, when I watch very carefully, I catch the occasional final faint glimpses of

myself, winding my way around and between trees, until ... I vanish in the woods. I smile and say, "That was glorious! Holy, Holy, Holy, God all Creation, the whole Earth is full of your glory."

Rev. Dr. Stephen Hastings is founder and Chair of the Earth Care and Spirituality Resource Team of the Maine Conference UCC. He is minister to the Dover-Foxcroft Congregational Church. His Ph.D. is in environmental ethics and creation spirituality and he is the author of "Whole-Earth Ethics for Holy Ground: The Development and Practice of 'Sacramental' Creation Spirituality."