

The Water in our Own Backyards

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When I was a child one of my favorite pastimes was crabbing off of a dock. This involved a string tied to a piling and long enough to reach the bottom of the river, creek, or bay, and a chicken neck tied to the end that would rest along the bottom. With a fishing net and wooden bushel basket with a lid, my brother and I would sit patiently and quietly peer down into the water, watching the crabs make their sideways approaches to the neck. Once two or three were hanging on, I would very gently raise the string just a bit, dip the net into the water, scoop up the crabs, and shake them into the basket. That was it, not much to it, but we sat there in the company of the smell of salt air, the warm breezes, the changing colors of the water and sky, the strategies of the blue crabs approaching the neck, and it was all we needed.

My idyllic childhood, with much centered on the bounties and beauty of water, was possible because we lived near the Chesapeake Bay and its many large tributaries on the Lower Eastern Shore of Maryland. Surrounded by farmlands and water, I found God in the physical world. For me, the metaphysical and Holy, the mysteries, wonder, and joy of all of life were in *everything* that God created. Nothing has changed for me in that regard, and I often still seek the solace of the waters of the Bay as assurance that God is with me, in all of nature's beauty.

The Chesapeake Bay Watershed

Here in Arlington, we too are inhabitants of the Chesapeake Bay region. Not only do we have opportunities to enjoy the Bay's natural wonders, we have a responsibility to contribute to its stewardship. The Chesapeake Bay is the nation's largest estuary and its watershed spans from the Appalachian Mountains to the Atlantic Ocean, across six states: New York, Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Maryland, Virginia, and Delaware. The glacial terrains of New York, the coal mines of Pennsylvania, the poultry farms of Delmarva, and the streets of DC, all drain into the Bay through groundwater, streams, creeks, and rivers. The Chesapeake Bay watershed covers 55 million acres, and the Bay itself includes 8,000 miles of coastline. The water quality, biodiversity, and health of the Bay are dependent on every aspect of the habitat of the watershed, from the cities to the countryside.

The Chesapeake Bay is God's gift of bounty, and although certain aspects of the life of the Bay have diminished since I was a young girl, there is still much to preserve and revive. The Bay is an interwoven eco-system of insects, birds, mollusks, fish, amphibians, mammals, and plants, supporting 3,600 species of life. It is a significant gathering point along the Atlantic Flyway, the migration route of over a million waterfowl between the Arctic tundra and the Caribbean Islands. In the winter, 30 species of waterfowl reside in and along its waterways. As a child, I remember the sky dark with flocks of Canada geese loudly honking as they migrated in the spring and fall.

Today, there are 348 different types of fish, but the fish population, like that of the waterfowl and other living things, is diminishing because of our human activities. Pollution reaches the bay from many sources. Nitrogen pollution affects the life of the Bay most significantly. The sources of nitrogen pollution to rivers, streams, and the Bay, from greatest to least, include (a) agricultural runoff containing animal waste and fertilizers that wash off or contaminate groundwater of agricultural land and yards, (b) air pollution, from power plants and motor vehicles that falls back to the ground and washes into waterways by rain, (c) direct discharge from wastewater treatment and factories, (d) urban and suburban runoff from parking lots, roofs, and other hard surfaces carrying fertilizer, pet waste, and other pollutants, and (e) the drain fields of septic systems carrying

contaminants through groundwater. Much is known about these sources of pollution. For instance, one inch of rain falling on one acre of paved surface yields 30,000 gallons of polluted runoff.

The polluting nitrogen creates dead zones in the Bay. This is just as it sounds: there is a large area of the upper central Bay, amounting to 21.9% of the total volume of the Bay that supports no life. Algae blooms, caused by too much nitrogen from farms and lawns, deplete the water of oxygen and literally suffocate the Bay. Even in areas of the bay and its tributaries that are not declared dead zones, pollution abounds, as witnessed by the lack of clarity in even shallow water.

In addition to pollution issues, the Bay is one of the areas of our nation most at risk for sea level rise. Norfolk is the second city only to New Orleans in vulnerability from rising water. In colonial times, there were 35 islands in the Bay, and in recent times twelve of those have been lost. Two more islands, Tangier and Smith, inhabited by watermen and their families for generations since the colonies, are succumbing to erosion caused by increasing sea levels. Even today, the people of these islands speak an old English dialect of the Shakespearean era, and their 400-year old way of life is literally slipping away into the Bay.

Your Stewardship

We are all daunted by the implications of pollution and climate change and many of us feel that our contributions would be a mere drop in the water. Precisely! But, it takes all of those drops to create a body of water, much as we are all one body of Christ! There are lists of things that we can all do, because the decisions we make every day affect the life of the Bay. These are found on various websites and include simple measures to reduce nutrient and other pollutant laden storm-water, such as **(a) plant native plants (b) plant more trees (c) do not use fertilizer or pesticides, (d) drive hybrid cars and drive less, and (e) advocate in our community for green spaces instead of parking spaces.** To deepen your involvement, there are organizations to which you can contribute both your talent and money, such as the Chesapeake Bay Foundation and the Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay.

We can embrace our stewardship by first nurturing the love for life that God has given us. When we have created a personal connection with the gifts of the Bay, our consciences will inform us. Begin simply with an hour, a morning, or a whole day beside the water. Pick a body of water in an area free from signs of people and enjoy the view with your picnic, camera, binoculars, or sketchpad. Observe the shoreline on the opposite bank, watch the tide, the ripples or waves, and the sky. Perhaps there are clouds reflected in the water, maybe a dragonfly is hovering around. A turtle slides off a dead tree branch into the water, an osprey suddenly makes a dive for a fish. A blue heron stands nearby and a fish splashes in the water. Notice how the water changes color and the tide shifts. Perhaps sparkles of sunlight adorn the tips of each ripple, dazzling your eyes. Keep watching, listening, and breathing deeply. There is much to see, to hear, to smell, and to give thanks for this present day Garden of Eden that God has created for us, in our own backyards.

Resources for this article:

- Barnett, L. A. (2013). Save the Bay. *The Journal of the Chesapeake Bay Foundation*, 39(3).
- Tillman, N. (2009). *The Chesapeake Watershed: A Sense of Place and a Call to Action*. Baltimore, MD: The Chesapeake Book Company.
- Warner, W. W. (1997). *Beautiful Swimmers: Watermen, Crabs and the Chesapeake Bay*. New York, NY: Penguin Books.
- The Chesapeake Bay Foundation at www.cbf.org
- The Bay Journal, a monthly publication of Chesapeake Media Service, Inc. www.bayjournal.com

What did you do for the Bay - today?