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To desire less

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We cannot really know any complex thing like the natural world — or a human community, or a human person — without getting to know it, living with it, observing its features and moods, honoring its claim on us. In short, as Augustine put it 1,600 years ago, “We cannot know what we do not love.”

Knowledge of nature or a community springs from a commitment to it, a concentration of our attention on it, so that we cease to think primarily of ourselves, and attend carefully to that which is outside of us, but to which we are nevertheless connected in a complex web of meanings. . . . Our willingness to make room for nature, to change our habits, begins with caring for our own place, attending to it, observing it, coming to respect and appreciate it.

Environmentalism teaches that knowledge must reconnect us with the local, the parochial, the place where we actually live, for it is only by attending to that corner of the real that we will be knowledgeable enough not to destroy it.

To have a healthier environment will take a new kind of life, which Wendell Berry describes as slower, “harder, more laborious, poorer in luxuries and gadgets, but also, I am certain, richer in meaning and more abundant in real pleasure. To have a healthy environment we will all have to give up things we like . . . things we have come to think of as necessities. But to be fearful of the disease and yet unwilling to pay for the cure is not just to be hypocritical, it is to be doomed.” . . .

Changing our relationship to nature is about improving our character. Do we really decide what kind of life is best, or do we passively accept what television, advertising and the shopping mall tell us our lives ought to be like? Are private property, unlimited growth, money and consumerism the best values on which to build a healthy human community, on a sustainable planet? Are we going to be environmental stewards, or environmental parasites?

G.K. Chesterton wrote, “There are two ways to get enough: One is to continue to accumulate more and more. The other is to desire less.”

We have mastered the first way, and the results have not been good. The challenge to our character is to try the second way, to desire less, and so be a lighter burden for the earth.

Excerpted from the March 28 Founders Convocation address titled “Everything is Connected” by David Rutledge, Reuben B. Pitts Professor of Religion.