

The Casual Alchemist
Trail Markers for Spiritual Explorers,
seekers, elders, outliers, caretakers, the
wounded and the healing.



Thin Places 2016 and 2017

a term from Celtic spirituality --indicating places in nature, and spirit, where the veil between this world and the Other, is “thin” and offers a different perspective. It’s a chance to find the sacred in the ordinary.

Robin’s Nest, Invasives, Artist’s Home,
Dead Bird, Sacred Spaces

Robin's Nest

It's quite a surprise, and an honor, to watch some special place actually get made. I saw a robin build her nest in the rhododendron bush just off my front porch. There was this fluttering and darting into and out of the foliage. Over and over. I quietly got up to look. A wounded bird? A demented squirrel? A lost chipmunk? All I saw was a pile of dry stems and grasses. They were not in the crotch of the bush, but only on the ground below. It finally occurred to me that I was witnessing "nest-building" or some variation of it. I sat back down to watch. Soon she showed up again with a beak full of dried grasses and flicked her head at the rhody branches. Down to the ground. This happened several more times. Even the brighter-breasted male was gathering materials. I was so tempted to start the nest for her. Just a helping hand. I could place a few sturdy twigs, perhaps screw them in and put in a mud sub-floor? I did not.

This seemed an exercise in futility. Was it just chance that was going to finally get those grasses and twigs to catch? I was both judgmental and awed by the relentless stamina of this robin. Frustration and self-doubt didn't seem as hard wired into the robin brain as the relentless urge to build!

As humans do, I finally got bored or hungry or distracted and left. Three days later, I remembered this whole little drama and came back to look. Yikes! There it was!

Sturdy, quite round, protected, mud-lined with a feathery coating. I was humbled. No help needed from a rustic carpenter!

In a few days, four blue eggs appeared. In another few weeks, they hatched. Both parents came and went with bits of food. After another few weeks of chirping and feeding, those fledglings left. Parents, too.



The nest is still in that rhody. I hear it'll not likely be used again because of parasites like lice and mites and the leftover poop. Should I take it out? No, I'm leaving it as a twiggy, grassy, mud reminder of who shares my world.

Invasives

On a hike, I overheard bits of a conversation: “*non-native, eradicate, alien, threatening, new laws, protect.*” I thought these woods should be free of political talk. Just be in nature, people! Imagine my surprise when I realized that this was not about the election, Trump or Clinton, but about the very plants we were walking by.

It’s been a year and a half since the State of New York declared war on 126 species of non-humans: plants, fish and snails, clams, bugs The Mute Swan, various algae, bacteria and fungus are on the list. No selling, buying or transporting. This is all to slow the harm these invasives might cause by squeezing out the native species and reducing biodiversity. The cousins of the invasive are the aliens or the non-natives who, at the moment, are not seen as harmful. Most honeybees are aliens and Queen Ann’s Lace. The list is long.

Where does this military thinking gets us? New York is now divided into regions each with volunteer invasive hunters. My friend, Linda Rohleder, runs the one in this region. After she spoke recently at OCCC, I ripped out one of several beds of periwinkle. I had a distinct sense of righteousness. I built a Wall around my other beds to keep it in or out, I’m not sure.



How far I can take my yard? Pre-Periwinkle? (It came over in the 1700s, like many of our families did) Should I try for pre-contact? My yard in 1491. Or pre-glacial? See my problem? It's a kind of nativism, a "seductive vision of a healing wounded nature and returning it to a stable natural state." That's from Emma Marris' *Rambunctious Nature in a Post Wild World*. She questions sacred beliefs in environmentalism. She asks us to see what happens if we let go of the romantic ideal of pristine nature and explore what she calls the "eco-industrial vision". Yes, we have to be alert to invasives, but let's not get too distracted from the larger, tedious, less visible political issue of development and zoning policies that destroy more ecosystems than alien or invasive plants ever can.

Artists' Homes

We often learn about ourselves by looking at how others have put their lives together. It's the stuff of basic cable, and great literature. We can watch it, read about it or sometimes actually visit a place to get that aha moment that helps us wake up and tone up. Artists' homes seem to have an extra twist of the eccentric that makes them especially interesting. Within a few hours of here are several such places. Many are open during these winter months.

Olana, near Hudson, NY, is one of the crown jewels of the region. A visit is an immersion in nature, art and history. Beyond the primal, exhilarating hilltop experience of the Hudson River, there are 250-acres of parkland and the rich, obsessively appointed house and built and furnished in the 1870's and lived in by the family till the 1960's. It was the home of successful, prolific landscape painter Frederick Church, whose massive 10-foot work, *The Heart of the Andes*, hangs in The Met. He was part of that Hudson River School and at the center of it becoming a major presence and foothold for Americans in art.

The docent on my recent visit was part historian, part spell-caster creating the feeling that the Church family was just in the next room. The original rooms are packed with furniture and mementoes of world travel highlighting that fine edge between tourism, inspiration and cultural appropriation.



Olana is also important as a complex success story of rescuing and developing a property on the edge of becoming just another piece of real estate. Olana is core member of The Historic Artists' Homes and Studios, a national

organization of more than 30 artists' homes. It supports the efforts of local groups to secure and ensure public awareness and access to the homes of their noted hometown artists. The Thomas Cole House in Catskill is on that list. The Edward Hopper House in Nyack, the Henry Varnum Poor House in New City and the Kurt Seligmann House in Sugar Loaf are in the process of developing a more secure and public presence. A visit to Olana is inspiring encouragement. More at www.olana.org and www.artists homes.org.

Photo of the Week (NOT)

Please save me from one more picture of the sunset or trumpeter swans. This Sierra Club Calendar approach to nature is just a way to manage and control feeling about nature. Show me that fluorescent toxic algae bloom on the Wallkill, seagulls and landfills, birds killed by the thousands at the regional airports. By having these “photo of the day, week, month” arrangements in newspapers and local TV news programs, we are losing touch with the brisk, feral quality of the natural world. These static captured shots of nature sedate us. A good photo enlivens and makes us curious.

Lots of bird activity this time of year and it’s likely you too may find a baby bird on the ground. What to do?



I found this nestling - a baby bird without feathers. It had fallen from a nest built in the track of my sliding barn door or maybe it was pulled out by predator birds that often poke around there. Local crows, jays, woodpeckers all have a taste for baby birds.

Had it not been dead, I would have been faced with that human thing: “Oh dear, a baby bird!” If it was a feathery “fledgling” or “brancher” I would have been tempted to put it back in the nest. Wrong. It was starting that natural and dangerous progression towards its independence, literally trying out its wings. Its parents still keep an eye on it and still bring it food. Yes, there’s the danger from cats, dogs and children. Maybe I would have just moved it under a bush where the parent birds could still hear it. (Birds have a poor sense of smell).

Even had the nestling been alive, the nest was too inaccessible for me to reach and such a bird needs feeding every 15 minutes or so from sunrise to ten p.m.! That’s currently above my pay grade! I was reminded of the raw survival quality of the natural world. I found some dark beauty in that. I took the picture and in a half-hour the bird was gone. There are a lot of squirrels and chipmunks waiting for such tasty beauty themselves.

What makes a space “sacred”

“Sacred” implies some contact with a force outside yourself, something transcendent and likely irrational. Awe and wonder are probably involved in that experience. So a sacred space might be nature, certain parks, trails to overlooks and lakes, where you can experience that Aha moment.

Theologian Rudolf Otto used the word numinous to talk about the sacred. It encompasses the ideas of god, spirit and divine and implies an experience that is set apart from daily life. So Sacred Spaces provoke extra-ordinary experiences. It’s likely a deep, old, primal need we have as humans. It often emerges at times of transition when our old storylines and identities are falling away. These are times of sickness, aging and confusion when we must rework the story of who we are. The story actually never stays quite the same. Similarly, sacred spaces charge and discharge for each of us.

A few questions come up. A local elementary school is now mothballed and rented to a church. Does that make it a Sacred Space? An Gothic-style African-American church built in 1906 is now home to a theater company. Is it still a sacred space? What about those roadside shrines to people who died in auto accidents? And that cornfield next to the Warwick Cemetery that was once part of a large indigenous Lenape settlement? And what about that place in my back yard where we buried the beloved family cat? The sacred is something

very personal, fragile and just beyond words. You know it when you feel it.

Where are your Sacred Spaces? At home? Shared in public? Are they traditionally religious or more animistic? Several years ago, PBS Frontline did a program that included a handbook on finding and visiting sacred spaces.

www.pbs.org/godinamerica/outreach/tour.html