



DON'T CHALLENGE NATURE



It is sunny here as I write. A large number of robins have arrived, a bit ahead of their normal schedule. They are very active and seemingly feel at home. It seems to me that our dear little snowbirds are trying to figure out if it's safe to return to their homes in the Northwest mountains. I will miss them. They are so courteous to each other and find ways of getting along with other types of birds. They provide an example for our fractured country.

In the upper Midwest and the Ohio Valley the scene is very different. A Polar Vortex has descended. In some places temperatures will drop to as low as -50° . The vortex is expanding in an eastward direction. Apparently very few struggling under the impact of the vortex have ever experienced anything like this before.

The weather service refers to the situation as "very dangerous and life-threatening." Health

officials advise that even deep breathing could be damaging. People are urged not to go out except for very short times. Schools and other facilities are closed until further notice. Officials are desperately attempting to care for children, the sick, the elderly, the homeless, and pets. I can't get one casualty out of my mind. Gerald Belz, an 18 year-old pre-med student froze to death right outside a college building. Perhaps he had just come out, took a deep breath, become unconscious and died shortly thereafter. This was in Iowa! A physician in Minneapolis, a city used to dealing with severe cold and snow put the situation succinctly when he said in a public warning, "Don't challenge nature!"

Mr. Trump thought this was a good opportunity for making a joke,
What the hell is going on with Global Warming? Please come back fast we need you!

Personally I don't find anything humorous in the situation, and I doubt that those who are struggling heroically to keep millions of people warm and alive would laugh about the situation.



Last year we had incredibly bad wildfires in California. As with the Polar Vortex, no one had any recollection of fires like that. Mr. Trump had some comments about that as well. He suggested it was because of "improper forest management" — which is a euphemism for cutting down more trees and removing environmental restraints.

The impact of the California fires is continuing. They didn't threaten Starcross, but they did great harm to many of our friends. The fires are out but the trauma goes on. A person doesn't easily forget neighbors who died, houses burned down, dreams destroyed, pets vanished, or perhaps the pain of reliving the time you were racing from your home with fire on both sides of the road! I know that the impact of the Polar Vortex will go on in a similar way for many years.

Mr. Trump withdrew our country from the Paris Agreement of 2015. The Agreement was a good attempt to gather nations and collectively find ways of responding to climate change. Mr. Trump pulled out because he believes climate change and global warming are just a hoax. Or so he says. Recently he has nominated a person to head the Environmental Protection Agency who shares his views — Andrew Wheeler, a former lobbyist for the coal industry. In the meantime the temperatures in parts of the upper Midwest are lower than

the temperature at our McMurdo Station in Antarctica. That's not a hoax. That's not a joke.



February is an odd month. Long ago it did not exist but for various boring reasons it was inserted in the Roman calendar during Imperial times.

A few miles to the south of Starcross is Kashia, a village of one branch of the Pomo tribe. I am used to referring to them as Native Americans, but more and more indigenous people simply call themselves “Native” to distinguish themselves from the descendents of those who came from other places and laid claim to land which one time belonged to everyone. The Pomo have a name for February — “Qogalasal” or something like that (their rich language is difficult to reduce to the English alphabet.) It is the beginning of a season which is sometimes labeled the “Newness of the Land Time.” In this season they moved from an interior site to a site on the ocean. Thanks to a recent conservation acquisition by the State of California, the Pomo are now allowed to do this again for the first time in many years. They were hunters and gatherers and from February until July they let the great ocean provide for them. They returned to the interior when it was the season to harvest all manner of berries and other edibles. There was a kind of natural logic to what they did and when. It is possible that some will do it again now that they have access. My grandson is in a grade school which is about ten percent Native so perhaps I will hear about it.



I wondered if there was anything from Pioneer days that was also unique to February. I consulted a book by Eric Sloane (1906–1985), a landscape painter and cultural historian. Sloane says that our interest in the past should not be just nostalgia but recognition of a homesickness for something we yearn for because it's missing in this speeding up world of ours. America was mostly rural during the 19th Century, so what were the farmers doing?



February was a time for pruning. According to Sloane, pruning “tends to exercise the mind as well as the body.” To prune trees requires making thousands of decisions. So it is natural that as the farmer decided how to prune the apple tree he or she was also considering the future of the farm and family.

This is a good place to remember that in many parts of the world, and in our own cultural history women have played a crucial role in farming. The Latin word for “farmer” has a feminine ending — “agricola” as do most Latin words concerning “Mother earth.” More than half the people coming to Starcross who hope to combine their spirituality with their love and respect for the land are women.



In times past, February was also the primary time for cleaning and scouring the soup pot. In each home there was a giant pot under which the fire was always kept going. Left over vegetables would get thrown into the pot. What was in the pot was known as “pot likker,” served with cornbread. The pot also served as a seasonal forecaster. An old adage went,

*When pot likker’s low or ceases to stew,
the farmer doth know that the winter is through.*

In many ways February marked an end of the farming year. People traditionally also ended their diaries and settled accounts in February. I find some relation between those concepts and the cultural history of my Pomo neighbors. And for that matter the flying in then flying out of the many birds who bring us beauty and joy.



We here are just beginning to prune our olive and orchard trees. I asked Lance, our farm manager, if he agreed with the farmers of olden times about what was going on in your head he you are pruning. He said, “Absolutely! With every cut my mind is spinning and it keeps on spinning about many future things as I move from tree to tree.” Others who had helped with the pruning agreed. Some things don't change!

Here is how Sloane concludes his reflection on February,
The Round of Seasons has ended, and the farmer has finished another year of living his [or her] creed — that there is a proper time for everything on earth, and that all the earth has to offer appears in its appropriate time.

Sounds like a pretty good creed to me. How about you? Well, it is going to take a lot of

planning and working with all of our neighbors on this planet to move in that direction. Some young people that I'm privileged to come in contact with are willing to devote their lives to the effort. I support them. It is a vocation as sacred as any I could imagine.

Brother Toby

