

Remembering who we are: Sunday, October 8 (Psalm 8)

by [Stacey E. Simpson](#) in the [September 13, 2000](#) issue

"We have forgotten who we are. We have sought only our own security, we have exploited simply for our own ends, we have distorted our knowledge, we have abused our power." So reads the proclamation of the UN Environmental Sabbath Program.

We have forgotten who we are. And who are we? According to Psalm 8, we are at the same time entirely insignificant in the context of all creation and of utter importance to the God who created it all. We are so tiny. "The days of our life are 70 years, or perhaps 80, if we are strong" (Ps. 90:10a). The stars keep twinkling long after we are gone. The waves of six oceans will come rolling in tomorrow just like they did yesterday and the day before and a millennium ago. A new day will dawn whether we are here to call it a "sunrise" or not. We are nothing in comparison with the grandeur and longevity of it all. We are specks in the context of time and history and creation

At the same time, we are of absolute importance to God. The same God that stitched the iridescent feathers onto the littlest hummingbird fashioned a pair of eyelashes for each human baby. The God that painted stripes on the zebra decorated human beings in a wide assortment of shades. The God that spoke the universe into existence breathed life into a clump of dirt. That same God gave us language and emotions and a soul, crowning us with glory and honor. And, as if none of that was enough, God stooped down onto the earth and clothed himself with flesh and bones. As Hildegard of Bingen reminds us, the earth "forms not only the basic raw material for humankind, but also the substance of the incarnation of God's son." We have been created just a little lower than God.

So what part of being human have we forgotten? Have we forgotten our smallness, or our greatness? I think we've lost sight of both. Mostly we have forgotten our place.

It is easy to see how we disregard our smallness. Through industry, technology,

politics, economy, even religion, we have smoothly ordered our world so that we can fool ourselves into believing that we are masters of our universe. We are no longer at the mercy of the elements in the same way our ancestors were. We forget that salmon comes from a stream, not a can; that corn grows from the soil, not in the grocery produce bin. It is easy to forget our connection to all the other parts of the created order, and therefore to forget how tiny we are in the great scheme of things.

It is also easy to overlook our grandness. We have been made just a little lower than God and have been given dominion over this great beautiful earth. But dominion in this case does not mean domination—that would not be like God at all. Dominion means responsibility. It means we have been made partners with God in caring for this earth and all its splendid creatures. If you doubt what an amazing gift this is, consider the remarkable fact of domestic pets that count on us for food, shelter and affection. Is it not extraordinary that the descendants of wild beasts crave our company? Taking care of such creatures is a responsibility, yes, but beyond that it is a gift.

We have distorted this gift. We have twisted this responsibility into self-serving control. We think we are the center of our universe and claim to have the God-given power and right to do as we see fit with the earth's resources. We eat meat with neither humility nor gratitude. We mow down trees to create more roads and drive without any concern about fossil fuels. We complain about bears, deer and rabbits "invading" our suburbs, unaware that we are taking away their natural habitats. We are making this earth less fit for almost all forms of life, including our own.

We have forgotten who we are. We have lost our place—a place that includes partnership with God in the awesome responsibility of caring for the earth. This is our calling, our vocation. And we are squandering it.

How do we get it back? We start by opening our eyes. "When I look at your heavens," the psalmist says, "the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are you human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?" Paying attention helps us to recover a proper sense of awe. Looking at the splendor of creation in its minute details is key to remembering who we are and what our role with God is in this partnership.

There is an old Jewish legend that goes like this: "Before the world was created, the

Holy One kept creating worlds and destroying them. Finally He created this one, and was satisfied. He said to Adam: This is the last world I shall make. I place it in your hands: hold it in trust.”

The psalmist’s response is the most appropriate one: awe before the creator and the creation, wonder at our place in the world. We have forgotten who we are, but we can begin to pay attention, to recover a sense of wonder, practice repentance and relearn gratitude and humility. We have such a small place in the family of creation, and yet such a grand place, partly because its well-being has been placed in our hands. What a gift, what a trust, what a wonder!