

Northwest Woodlands

A Publication of the Oregon Small Woodlands, Washington Farm Forestry, Idaho Forest Owners & Montana Forest Owners Associations

THE ART, HUMOR AND ZEN OF STEWARDING TREES

The Spirituality of Forestry

Dancer, the Monster Machine

Chainsaw Zen



One Family's Connection to Time and Place through Trees

The Art of Trees

Deep-Rooted Memories



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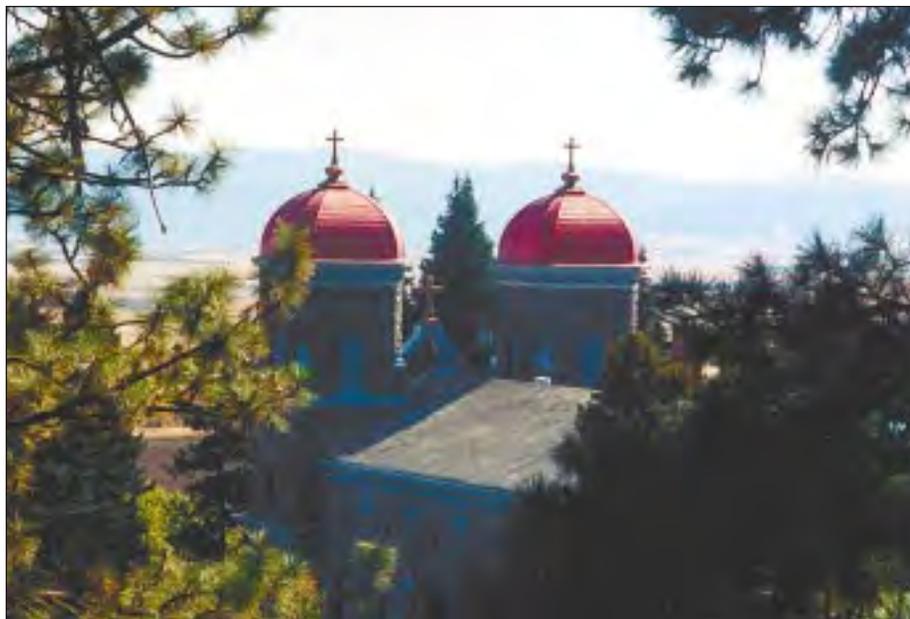
The Spirituality of Forestry

By **SISTER CAROL ANN WASSMUTH**

During the past 15 years I have attended numerous conferences, workshops, seminars and field days to help me improve the way I do silviculture on the forestlands that I manage. At these events I have had the opportunity to meet many other private woodland owners and I have come to the conclusion that they are a very special group of people.

Oh, yes, we have all written our management plans, calculated projected costs and income, and negotiated easement and logging contracts. We have learned how to do these things because they are a necessary part of managing our forests. But I always sense another level of interest, often not expressed, but, nevertheless, just as real.

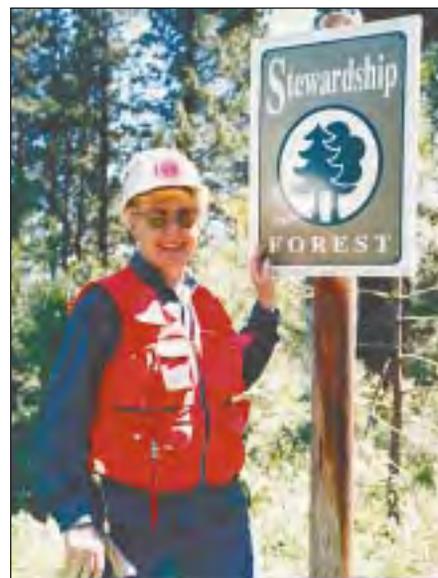
We love our land with its diversity of life and it gives us great joy to see it healthy, beautiful and brimming with vitality. The happiness we feel in caring for our small piece of this planet is more than that final number in the financial report. There is a sense of connectedness, identity, fulfillment and self-expression in our relationship with



This building has been the home for the Idaho Benedictine Sisters since 1924. It is listed on the Idaho Register of Historical Buildings.

this land. This is what I mean by the spirituality of forestry.

I am a member of the Idaho Benedictine Sisters, a community of Roman Catholic nuns living near Cottonwood, Idaho. Our monastery overlooks the Camas Prairie, part of the ancient homeland of the Nez Perce Indian Tribe.



Sister Carol Ann Wassmuth is dressed for some forestry work as she shows off the Monastery's Stewardship Forest sign.

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As a community, our history is closely connected with this land. We own, and therefore are responsible for 1,400 acres, the largest portion of that being forested. The community settled here in 1910 and many of the stories of our early history revolve around the land. Pioneer Sisters talked about tramping through the woods looking for the cows, pinning up their habits

and helping to bring in the hay, and spending much of the summer hoeing the orchard and garden. When the present monastery building was built in the 1920s, the stone used in its construction was quarried from the nearby hillside. Many quiet walks, prayerful moments and happy picnics have taken place on these grounds. We see ourselves as a group of women intimately related to this land and we have made a corporate commitment to its care.

In 1993 we wrote a Philosophy of Land Use as a way to articulate our common understanding of what it means to own land. In it we express our belief that this earth is a gift from our Creator and through it we receive our life and sustenance. The contemplative environment it provides constantly renews our inner spirits. We experience an interconnectedness with the land and recognize our responsibility to reverence and care for the

resources it provides. All decisions that we make concerning our land flow from this philosophy (see sidebar).

The guide for life that we follow was written by a man named Benedict who lived in Nursia, Italy, in the 6th century. The very first exhortation he gives his followers is the invitation to listen, not only with ears, but also with the heart. Only by careful listening are we able to deepen our understanding and experience of life. As we walk among our trees and listen carefully we hear the soft whisper of the breeze through the pines, the songs of the birds, the chattering of the tree squirrels, the skittering of small animals in the underbrush. We might also be hearing the sound of a chainsaw being used, we know, in a responsible way. These are all sounds of a healthy ecosystem and we rejoice in the vitality of the forest.

As landowners serious about good forest management, we also know how

Philosophy of Land Use

We, the Benedictine Sisters of the Monastery of St. Gertrude, have been entrusted with the gift of land by our loving God and Creator. Through the years our community and this land have been bonded together. With humility we recognize the earth (humus) as the source from which we (humanity) receive our life and sustenance. Our inner spirits are renewed by the contemplative environment it provides. Listening with the ear of our heart to the wisdom expressed through creation opens us to the deeper reality of God in our lives. As a source of food, water and firewood, the land has nourished and healed our bodies even providing the stone for the building which shelter us and the flowers and trees that decorate our home. This interconnectedness is ultimately realized at the time of death when our bodies return to the earth.

“A spirit of reverence for all creation permeates the Rule, together with a sense of oneness with the land, the days and the seasons. Such conscious respect for all created goods makes it impossible to pollute land, water or air, to waste resources or to forget about the children who will one day inhabit the earth.” (OF ALL GOOD GIFTS) This challenge of the American Benedictine Prioresses is a call to inner conversion so we might become leaven for change in our world.

We recognize our sacred responsibility to reverence and care for our land and to make proper use of the resources it provides. In order to live in harmony with the earth and to promote responsible stewardship we commit ourselves:

1. To choosing a lifestyle that will give witness to our love of the earth;
2. To joining with other people who are endeavoring to heal the wounds that have been inflicted upon our planet;
3. To providing ourselves on-going education in ecology so that our decisions regarding the use of the land will respect the balance and interdependence found in nature;
4. To using the land for financial profit in a responsible manner always seeking to maintain the quality of soil, air and water and the healthy balance of animal and plant life; and
5. To keeping in mind that the atmosphere of peace and prayerfulness provided by our surroundings is to be shared with all who come to seek God with us.

*Monastery of St. Gertrude
Cottonwood, Idaho
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to listen to professional foresters and benefit from their knowledge of silviculture. I have listened carefully and am deeply indebted to the Idaho Department of Lands personnel, the foresters working for the University of Idaho and my consultants from Northwest Management, Inc. in Moscow. They have been my mentors. The wise person knows there is always more to learn.

Benedict's way of life has endured for 15 centuries because he insisted his

followers use their common sense. We can achieve a healthy, holistic lifestyle if we know how to find balance. Extremes usually result in disaster. The longer I work in our woods the more I am convinced that balance is also the key to good forest management. We stand in wide-eyed and open-mouthed wonder at the mystery of life expressed in the forest around us even as we use the resources it provides. How essential it is to remember

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A crew plants some of the 82,000 seedlings on the Monastery's Cottonwood Butte. Donations from benefactors have paid for these plantings.

that we are guests on this planet, not owners or renters. Then our response will be to treat everything with reverence and a sense of gratitude.

When a woman becomes a member of this Benedictine community, she makes a solemn promise of stability, which means a lifetime commitment to these people and to this place. This results in a deep sense of belonging that would never allow us to cut, destroy and run. What happens to this land and this forest will have a strong impact on us and the ones we love. Walking gently on this planet, living simply and caring for and sharing what we have—this is the Benedictine way.

When I speak with other forest landowners at conferences and workshops, I sense that they share these convictions. It is obvious that they love their land with all its inhabitants and feel a responsibility to do their best in caring for it. This work leaves them with a feeling of peace and purposeful accomplishment. Maybe we use different words, but the reality is the same. Deep down they know what I mean by the spirituality of forestry. ■

SISTER CAROL ANN WASSMUTH, *Order of St. Benedict*, is a member of the *Monastery of St. Gertrude in Cottonwood, Idaho*. She can be reached at 208-962-5032 or st_gertrude_justice@hotmail.com.



Chainsaw Zen

By **GARY SPRINGER**

The landscape is my canvas, the chainsaw and planting shovel are my paintbrushes and my favorite color is green...or something like that!

When I was asked to write an article on the Zen of forestry, my thoughtful response was, "Umm...what??" I know a fair amount about forestry, but not very much at all about Zen, and the two subjects don't generally cross my mind in the same thought. It was not a very promising start toward writing this article!

But then I recalled a conversation about chainsaws that I recently had with a good friend, as we sat sipping beer in a local watering hole. In that conversation, I described the "all's right with the world" kind of high I

used to get when cutting timber. I don't know if that feeling was "Zen-ish," but let me tell you about it and you can decide for yourself.

First, I must flatly state that the chainsaw is the single most important forestry tool ever invented. I'll probably get an argument here, but the modern, gas-powered chainsaw allowed on-the-ground forest management to leap into a new era in the latter half of the last century.

A chainsaw separating the tree from the stump is the single forestry action that starts so many other reactions. The timber cutter and his saw initiates habitat change, produces the raw material for hundreds of forest products, makes an opening in the forest where a new forest can start, creates new vistas, clears the way for a new road, or can increase tree growth and improve forest health. And the modern chainsaw can handle everything from a one-inch sapling to a tree eight feet in diameter.



PHOTO COURTESY OF JERRI O'BRIEN

Gary Springer spends some quality time with his chainsaw.

It is a wonderful tool. I hug my chainsaw every day!

I used to make my living with a chainsaw, leaving home for the woods before dawn, cutting timber all day and returning home in the late afternoon, totally exhausted. It was certainly the most physically demanding and dangerous job I ever had. I only occasionally cut timber today. Most of the time these days I am sitting at a keyboard, attending a meeting, or helping conduct



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a forestry tour. I have a much less physical job now and, unfortunately, I have the pot belly to prove it!

But timber cutting is also the most physically and emotionally satisfying of jobs. It is truly a job for an adrenaline junkie. Laying a big tree on the ground is such a rush! And back when I was in shape, my saw was running well, the chain was sharp and I was putting trees where I wanted them to fall, I got great satisfaction from the work. I felt important doing an important job. At the end of a day cutting timber, you can always look back and mark your progress. That's not so easy to do at the end of a day spent sitting in a meeting!

I have always felt most connected to the land and in tune with nature when I am cutting timber, logging or planting trees. Having said that, I do recognize the irony in feeling most in touch with nature when I am in the act of whacking it down!

Planting a tree is nowhere near as much fun for me as cutting one down and it is nearly as much work. But I have always felt a certain personal responsibility for putting back with a shovel what I have taken away with a chainsaw. So I continue to plant trees every winter.

It took me a long time to get really good at cutting timber. It takes a lot of skill to do it well. I learned the importance of safety first. Efficiency and productivity came later, through much practice and watching the older, experienced cutters. I was working for my father when I first started using a chainsaw and I remember him telling me, "There are old timber cutters and there are bold timber cutters, but there are no old, bold timber cutters." It was a saying and a lesson I never forgot.

So I continue to cut trees on my own property and for others, as I have the time to do it. I can't work at it enough to stay in "timber cutting shape" anymore, but I want to keep the skill. It took too long to develop it and it is too important a job to let it go. I very much want to be an old timber cutter some day. I still get that special rush when I put a big tree on the

ground. The well-made stump and the tree falling where it is supposed to is still my art of choice. And the chainsaw is my favorite instrument.

To me, the legacy of the chainsaw is seen in the mosaic of the wide variety of forest types and ages we see as we drive around the Pacific Northwest. That ever-evolving landscape is still, today, influenced and shaped to a large degree by the hard work of the timber cutter and his chainsaw.

Does all this add up to Chainsaw Zen? You decide. I've got to set this keyboard aside and go talk to my chainsaw right now. I've been neglecting it a bit, lately. It needs a good

scratching behind the handlebar! ■

GARY SPRINGER helps manage about 600 acres of Springer family forestland in eastern Lincoln County, is a forester for Starker Forests and past-chair of the Oregon Society of American Foresters' Mary's Peak Chapter. He serves on numerous statewide forestry committees including the Committee for Family Forestlands (a permanent advisory committee to the Board of Forestry) and the advisory committee for the Fish and Wildlife in Managed Forests Research Program at Oregon State University. Gary can be reached at 541-757-9665 or springer@starkerforests.com.

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