

SINGING HILLS AND CLAPPING TREES

I have always admired the writing and insights of the late Erma Bombeck. Her columns about home and family life were often right on the money. Among other things she really seemed to understand the trials and tribulations of being a parent. One of my very favorite columns dealt with the perils of lending things to your children:

“What parent,” she wrote, “has not heard the term ‘borrow?’ It is usually preceded by ‘Can I’ and followed by everything you own.

“To borrow, as parents know it, is a temporary condition where you . . . receive a loan of something with the promise of returning it or its equivalent.

“To a child ‘to borrow’ is the first stage of ownership.

“This is not to say things are never returned. It is to say when you press for their return they are never quite the same as when you loaned them. Our sleeping bags [for instance] never smelled like pizza before we loaned them to our kids

“Of course the favorite item to ‘borrow’ is your car. Within 15 seconds after they climb into it, the mirror and the seat are adjusted, the radio can be heard by flying aircraft and something slushy is sliding down the seat cover. It will not be returned until it needs gas, oil a tune up, a battery, tires or new plates.

“The other day, one of our kids said, ‘Can I borrow some firewood for a campout?’

“By our definition, firewood is something that can’t be borrowed because it can’t be returned. By their definition, anything is possible.” (*Leader-Herald*, 11-18-86)

Bombeck certainly struck a chord with this parent. My oldest son is thirty-six, and I’m still waiting for him to return a shirt he borrowed when he was in high school!

But several years back, I was first exposed to a Native American proverb that has caused me to rethink the whole idea of borrowing. “We did not inherit the earth from our ancestors,” it says, “rather, we have borrowed it from our children.”

On a personal basis, we can treat the whole idea of borrowing the way Bombeck says parents do, that is as a “temporary condition where you . . . receive a loan of something with the promise of returning it or its equivalent.” But that won’t work when it comes to the earth! With all our advanced methods of scientific exploration, with our huge telescopes, and our space craft probing the heavens, we have yet to find another world that comes anywhere

close to being like this one. If we have indeed borrowed the earth from our children, and if we keep up our end of the bargain, it is this earth we must return. Without it smelling like pizza! With the tank full, so to speak. For there is no equivalent!

But all too often when it comes to the earth we think of borrowing like the kids in Bombeck's column—all too often we think that because we've borrowed it, we own it. And in our society, the prevalent notion is, if I own it, I can do with it whatever I want.

How else can one explain a phenomenon like strip mining? Every time I visit my mother in Kentucky, she points out another mountain being stripped for its coal. Huge machines rip into the sides and tops of a hill, topple trees, destroy top soil, extract the minerals, and then, the denuded countryside is abandoned, while the machines and the people who own them, move on to a new vista. We own it—we can do what we want with it!

How else to explain the gradual disappearance of rain forests in Brazil? More machines, slashing away at trees and vegetation, with little regard for the jungles' native inhabitants, human or animal, followed by huge fires designed to clear the land for building or massive plantations. Fires that sometimes dwarf the wild fires of California. Who cares about the balance of nature and the lives of living beings! WE own it—we can do what we want with it!

And the list goes on. The renewed interest in drilling for oil in the protected lands of the Arctic Circle. The refusal of so many folks to take seriously the need to develop alternative energy sources. The cavalier attitude some have towards global warming. We own the earth, and if we want to use it all up, turn it into a cinder, that's our business!

But what if we don't own it? What if we are, indeed, living on borrowed ground? What if we really don't own it, but are here as guests of future generations? Who, in turn, are guests themselves? What if every generation is living on ground ultimately borrowed from the Giver of Life, the Creator of All That Is, the God of the Universe? What if we have a responsibility to God, to future generations, and yes, to the earth itself?

Our passage from Isaiah comes out of the time when Israel was in exile in Babylon. It looks forward to the day when the Israelites finally return to their homeland. It will be such a glorious day, says Isaiah, that the trees will clap their hands — the hills will sing for joy!

What a powerful reminder that the fate of creation is closely linked with our fate as human beings! What we do impacts our environment in ways both bad and good.

If we act in ways that are just and right, creation itself will be impacted for the good. Trees will clap. Hills will sing.

But if we act in ways that are unjust, if we forget our obligation to God, to the future, to the earth, if we fail to treat one another and our planet with dignity and respect, creation will be pained and damaged. The burning stumps of trees will wring their hands in sorrow. The denuded and stripped down hills will weep in silence.

I know a young man who was very active in his school's space club when he was younger. He once wrote a letter to Astronaut Frank Borman, asking him about the flight of Apollo 8. Borman wrote back and offered a bit of wisdom to my young friend.

"In many ways," he said, "The earth seemed similar to our space craft. It too, mandates resources management, environmental protection, crew size limitations and the requirement for peaceful coexistence of its inhabitants

"While we were circling the moon, my thoughts invariably reflected on that beautiful, fragile blue sphere which obviously meant so much to our crew and the dedicated people who sent us on our mission and eagerly awaited our return. The concept of 'spaceship earth' created for me a new awareness of our common destiny and of our responsibility to preserve the quality of life on our planet."

Our common destiny. Not just your destiny, not just mine, but our destiny, yours, mine, future generations and the very ground we walk on, the earth itself. It is indeed a fragile blue sphere.

I recently heard author Barbara Kingsolver being interviewed. She spoke of how her children are concerned about the environment. One day her oldest daughter, having read some especially distressing environmental news, said, "I don't know how my generation will ever be able to fix the earth!" Kingsolver thought a moment, and then responded, "Honey, it's not your generation that has to do that, its mine."

The time is now. Not next year, not even next week. The time is now. We are living on borrowed ground. And if we want our children and their children to have what we have, if we want trees to clap and hills to sing, then we must do all that we can to preserve this wondrous place.

Amen

John H. Danner