

MY DEBT TO ASCLEPIAS

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Gen. 1:11. "And God said, 'Let the earth put forth vegetation, plants yielding seed, and fruit trees bearing fruit in which is their seed, each according to its kind upon the earth.' And it was so."

Born to a mortal woman, Asclepius was the son of the god, Apollo. He was schooled in medicine by the centaur, Chiron. So proficient did Asclepius become in the art of healing that he was on the verge of making men immortal when Zeus took action to defend his divine prerogatives. He had Asclepius put to death by a thunderbolt. But Apollo revived his son and set him up in the sky where he became the god of healing. The ancient Greeks sacrificed cocks to Asclepius. You may recall the dying words of Socrates as he succumbed to the poison given him by his executioners. He turns to his friend Crito and says, "I owe a cock to Asclepius; will you remember to pay the debt?"

Along the banks of dusty roads there grows a thick-stemmed, flappy-leaved plant with pinkish-green flowers whose perfume is cloying in its sweetness. In late summer the plant begins to lean like a tired porter under the weight of its fat, ungainly pods. Some varieties of the genus to which this plant belongs are supposed to possess medicinal properties. Hence it is called Asclepias in honor of the Greek god.

Covered with the dust thrown by passing automobiles, Asclepias syriaca is a plant without apparent grace. In the fall, however, the fat pods split open, releasing myriads of winged chariots that glide forth, iridescent in low-sunned afternoons, defying the decree of Zeus with a thousand promises of new life.

Asclepias is a fun plant too. It is full of surprises. It is always a surprise to break the heavy stem and discover the sticky white liquid inside. It is a surprise to open the pods. No matter how many times I have broken one open I have experienced the same thrill of astonishment. Some people gild the pods when they are dry and empty and keep them through the winter. I have never done that. But I have taken the miracle inside, softer than eiderdown, and used it to make a pillow.

Have you ever made a milkweed pillow? I think I have made three. The first time I was ten or eleven years old. My cousin and I gathered huge quantities of milkweed supplemented by thistle down. We stuffed the fluff into sugar sacks. (Sugar came in cloth in those days.) Then my Aunt Vinnie sewed up the ends. The second time was many years later. I made a pillow for my youngest daughter in the days of her much-sleeping. But soon afterwards the pillow disappeared, we moved to another clime, and my daughter grew up without the memory of either milkweed or milkweed pillows.

That seemed to me a serious cultural deprivation, which is why last week I made her another pillow. It was not easy. According to a work on the local flora, milkweed is only "occasional" in these parts. What is occasional to the botanist is almost non-existent to people like me. But with the help of our all-knowing church secretary I found some milkweed twenty miles north of here. Week after week I monitored

a small and scraggly stand until in the fullness of time I harvested the whole crop.

Milkweed is paradoxical. An amazing mass of fluff pours out of one little pod. The same mass presses down almost to nothing when you stuff it into a pillow. An evening's work with seventy pods resulted in a pillow that is purely ornamental.

My wife first sewed the cloth together on three sides and then I was told to work in the basement. It was while I was chasing one of those elusive chariots around the furnace room that I noted something I had forgotten since childhood. It was the iridescence.

I said to myself, "I don't think I would have thought of that if I were making the world, I don't think it would have occurred to me."

The milkweed plant is equipped with a remarkable system of seed dispersal. But it is not that so much that impresses me in this technological age. It is the bonus of beauty, the added touch of grace that speaks to me of the mind of God.

I also said to myself, "That is what we are here for. This is why he needs us. The other creatures are just what they are. Each carries its touch of grace without knowing it. Only we know it. Only we can appreciate it. Only we can bring that act of appreciation without which any work of art is incomplete. That is our role. That is why God made us in his own image."

Without our act of appreciation God's creation is incomplete. Without that act of appreciation we also are incomplete.

This is the message brought to us by Sigurd Olson for whom the Environmental Institute is named at Northland College. He laments our estrangement from the wilderness. The danger is not only that in damaging the environment we put in jeopardy the survival of our own seed. The danger is further that we destroy something indispensable to the human spirit. He writes:

"Man's problem today is more than escape from the world; he must understand the reason for his discontent and know that while his roots may have been severed, they can be nourished again if he is aware of its true meanings. He must believe that the spiritual values which once sustained him are still there in those parts of the world he has not ravished, and that they can return again when the wounds of the land are healed."

Which is to say that when the wounds of the land are healed, so are we. If we can respond to nature not only as something to be used, but as something to be appreciated, we can be made whole. Very often I have found this to be so. Whenever I have been badly wounded I have gone immediately to some place, however small and domesticated, where the plants are "yielding seed" and the birds "fly...across the firmament." And there I have found Asclepius still plying the healing art he learned from the centaur.

As for that other Asclepias, the one I discovered so long ago beside dirt roads, I owe him a debt from of old. Neither Crito nor anyone else can ever repay that debt for me. But when the milkweed sets his sails adrift on the sea of an October sky, I can share his faith that amid all the dying, the tree of life still blooms in the garden.