

Backyard Spirituality by Helen Gunderson

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I do not recall having a “backyard” when I grew up on my parents’ farm. Instead, my world was made up of the road, the lane, the yard, the house, corn cribs, barn, hog house, Dad’s shop, the grove where we built forts in snow banks in the winter, the farmyard, and the fields.

In many respects, I thrived on that farm, but in other respects, I did not feel “at home” there. However, I did feel at home at my grandparents’ farm that was three miles away. We called it the “homeplace.”

Grandpa died when he was 67, and I was 11. Grandma died when I was 18. Dad died in 2010. I assume my siblings and their descendants, when they write the family history, will say that Dad and my grandfather were the last farmers in our family.

In 1990, I was at the home-place when workers tore down the house, bulldozed rubble into the basement, and lit a match. I wrote in my journal, “I watch the roaring fire slowly tame down to mere embers. What will happen to the final flickering flames? Where will the energy go? Will it suffocate and die when the bulldozer covers it with the black clods of Iowa earth?”

And I concluded with a poem:

Grandpa and Grandma,
Your place is special.
It is the homeplace,
Jerusalem of my heart.

My longing for the home-place and a heightened sense of intuition helped me find my place on Burnett Avenue in Ames in 2006. Prior to that, I had lived in apartments. I had a garden on my apartment deck in Gilbert, and I learned a lot about farming there.

I was overjoyed to find my place on Burnett. It seemed like a miracle after a long and otherwise a futile search. I have developed the place into an urban farm. There is no sign of the refined, chemically-treated lawn. For the record, I have no car.

I love the place, especially the wooden shed at the back of the lot. It reminds me of Grandpa’s tool shed where, after his death, I hung out and grieved for him. Sometimes, I go to my shed to meditate or write in my journal. For the record, some nights, the moon is right over my shed.

Spiritual growth for me means understanding the myth systems of my heritage and redefining who I am.

Although stories about the hero's journey are interesting, the paradigm of Sarah's circle is more helpful. In it a person's life moves in a circular dance, connecting with other people, her own inner being, nature, and the divine. For me, it has been helpful over the years to have good spiritual directors and therapists. In Sarah's circle, a person becomes new, and yet, frankly, the apple really does not fall far from the tree.

I wonder who I am when I feel so wholesome in my backyard. Am I an adolescent girl or just really a 67-year-old woman getting older with nostalgia? Or all of the above?

While out and about my farm, I often find myself humming the hymns, "Living for Jesus a Life that is True" and "It's in everyone of us to be wise."

When I was growing up, I did not perceive there was a way for a woman to be involved in farming except maybe as a farmer's wife. That role did not seem to fit me. Although I inherited land, I felt exiled from farming until at least the late-1990s. At that time, sort of a miracle happened. It's a long story, but essentially, I started managing my own land. In hindsight, that exile was helpful. Otherwise, I may have lost my land in the 1980s or never taken sustainable farming seriously. I probably would have had a narrow understanding of spirituality. I probably never would have found this Fellowship, and I am grateful to friends that I have made here who have helped me grow both as a person and as a farmer.

The 1962 children's book, *A Wrinkle in Time*, actually has a female protagonist. Unusual for that era! Meg Murray is 13 and bright but feels unattractive and like a delinquent in school. Her father has vanished, and she misses him.

For the record, both Meg and I have a brother named Charles.

I was a frustrated middle child, obstreperous tomboy, and got a Red F in deportment in sixth grade. Neither my family nor my culture at that time knew much about grief work. In hindsight, part of what was going on was that I deeply grieved for my grandfather.

Meg and her brother Charles go at night to the stone fence at the back of their property where there is a gazing ball. They meet a snake. There are also three witches who teach them about a fifth dimension of awareness and help them bring their father home.

On many a dark night, I walk to the back of my lot to lock the chickens in their hotel, empty a bucket of food scraps into the compost bin, and shut the shed door. I experience a sacred fifth dimension. It is as though the veil of darkness has created a sacred biosphere. I feel whole and wise.

I also experience "wrinkles in time" during daylight when hosting guests. For instance, Peggy has often come and toured my garden. Or Cindy Scholten has brought her grandchildren from Chicago to see the chickens. And SueAnn Peck farmed there with me this past summer.

I like working with others like my handyman Kent—not Kent McCusick—but Kent Savely. This past week, we built garden beds and reconfigured the fences. At one point, I turned to him and said, "Hey, Kent, we are ag engineers." And then there are my four cats and five chickens. I had not had any pets as an adult until just a few years ago. Caring for the cats and chickens has taught me much about life.

That was especially the case recently. One of my five chickens, Addy, had been attacked by an eagle on the day after the presidential election. I was able to have a veterinarian come to my house. She assured me that Addy would be OK. Addy was wounded—in shock—under a gooseberry bush. The veterinarian picked Addy up. We carried her to a place in the garage where I had put down straw. And the veterinarian showed me how to nurse Addy's wounds with honey. I kept that up for 10 days. And now there are times I pick up Addy and carry her out to be with the other chickens and guard her so the other chickens do not attack her. And I carry her back to her shelter in the garage.

Indeed, my urban farm is a place to connect with other people, my own inner being, with nature, and the divine. It has been and is a place of learning to love and be loved.