



# La Vista Ecological Learning Center

A ministry of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate

February 1, 2020  
E-News

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## January, 2020 Eco-spirituality Calendar Maxine Pohlman, SSND

### February, Branching and Deep Engagement



Everywhere I look this month I see that beautiful branching pattern. Out my window I observe the oak tree with its trunk, boughs, branches, and twigs; the pine with its needle clusters; the spruce and its bunchy branching. On the ground it is evident in the veins in fallen leaves, in the roots reaching out

across the land, and I know it is underneath the soil in root tips and fungi busily decomposing organic matter.

There's no end to it when I image the broader ecosystem here in the mid-Mississippi River basin which is the watershed for streams, creeks, rivers, and tributaries from over three quarters of the country. That branching is a vast network linking 32 states!

So what? One scientist names branching "frozen growth patterns". That nails it biologically, but is that all there is to this pervasive pattern? Think about this amazing fact: All the branches of a tree at every stage of its height when put together are equal in thickness to the trunk below them! This was carefully observed by Leonardo da Vinci in his notebooks during the Italian Renaissance.

How about this: When a parent branch splits into two or more *child* branches, the surface areas of the child branches add up to that of the parent branch resulting in trees better withstanding high winds. How amazing is that?

Consider streams. They have a major role in geology, shaping Earth's surface by eroding, transporting, and depositing sediment. Scientists tell us that streams actually shape Earth's surface more than glaciers, waves on a beach, and far more than wind. Who could have guessed the marvels of the branching pattern!

But, are those scientific facts all there is to it? Poet Mary Oliver considers branching an invitation, "Have you ever tried to enter the long black branches of other lives --tried to imagine what the crisp fringes, full of honey, hanging from the branches of the young locust trees, in early morning, feel like?" She goes on to muse about our inability to enter other lives, "No wonder we hear, in your mournful voice, the complaint that something is missing from your life!"

Branching, so what? Boring. Nothing to do with me. OR... everywhere - life summoning me to take my place in it, to imagine what it is like to be an oak, a stream, a tributary; to empathize. We sense the allurements to amazement, to value the simplest of patterns as having the urgency toward sustaining and supporting life. Here is an invitation to be a part of the ALL.

Contemplative ecology names this practice of entering other lives until we feel a part of the whole a spiritual one, an opportunity for endless communion, for prayer; or, in Oliver's words, "Fall in! Fall in!"

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## **Saturday, February 2: Groundhog Day**

It is common knowledge that on or near this day groundhogs begin to emerge from hibernation to breed through March. But other species are also waking up and deserve our notice: great horned owls start incubating eggs, Eastern screech-owls search for mates this month, flying squirrels, opossums and coyotes breed through March, and chipmunks come out of hibernation. February appears to be in the grip of the icy fingers of winter, but animal life is already "branching out", ready to imitate our birthing, unfolding universe! What about you? Have you claimed your birthright as a member of a birthing universe?

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## **Tuesday, February 11: Work Day in the Nature Preserve 9:30 am - Noon**

Weather permitting, we will get back into the Preserve to remove more honeysuckle. To join us, just let us know you are coming: 618-466-5004.

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**Friday, February 14th:  
St. Valentine's Day and Loving Engagement**



*A thought from Rainer Maria Rilke who, when asked about his apparently long and close contact with nature, wrote: "No...it is only very recently that I have gazed at it and savored it this way. For a long time we walked along next to each other in embarrassment, nature and I. It was as if I were at the side of a being whom I*

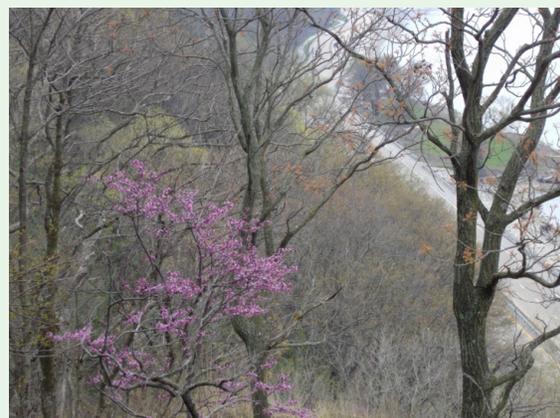
*cherished but to whom I dared not say: 'I love you'. Since then I must have finally said it; I don't know when it was, but I feel that we have found each other."* (Diaries of a Young Poet)

**Wednesday, February 26:  
Ash Wednesday and an Ecological Lent**

"Remember you are dust, and unto dust you shall return." A good idea as we begin the season of Lent might be to watch the movie *DIRT!* which you can get online through *Films for Action*. This could be your start of an ecological Lent. Gather some friends, or watch alone, but know that this movie will change how you view Earth's skin and your own.

After watching the movie, take some time to ponder these words from a homily by Stephen Sundborg, SJ, President of Seattle University.

"This year I am wondering if there is a new way of living Lent ... What if we write our own ecological encyclical through how we live this Lent? We are helped



by letting the season itself carry us as it turns from winter to spring, from darkness to light, from barrenness to growth. Perhaps...we can let the day, the light, the growth, remind us what we are about and we can pray with it...."

He also comments that this vision might "wrest us from the false idea that the kingdom of God, the end point where all time is heading, is God saving us from this earth and taking us to heaven. Rather, all of

scripture shows, and the Church teaches, that the end point of time, where God is leading, ...is a renewal, a re-creation, of us and of the earth itself in the risen Christ before the face of God. Can this vision help us live this Lent this year in a new way?"

Finally, Sundborg suggests that we add the word "divest" to our Lenten practices. He says an ecological Lent is our personal challenge to divest from the selfish ways we take care of ourselves but do not act as agents on behalf of Earth.

May your Lent this year be blessed and ecological.

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## Planning Ahead...

### **Friday, March 6: Climate Fiction Book Club 6:30 - 8:30 pm**

This month we are discussing the book *The Overstory*, winner of the Pulitzer Prize in Fiction. This is the story of a handful of people who learn how to see our challenged world and who are drawn up into its unfolding catastrophe. To participate please read the novel and come ready to engage in a stimulating conversation. You will enjoy a beautiful setting, good literature and stimulating conversation.

**Place:** *Afterwords Book Store* 441 East Vandalia Street  
Edwardsville, IL 62035

**No cost**

**Registration:** Call 618-466-5004

**Sponsored by:** Confluence Climate Collaborative

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## **The Spring Collection: What Well-Dressed Salads Will Be Wearing this Year A Cooking Workshop Saturday, March 14, 10:00 am - Noon**

You eat healthy, right? Lots of fruits and veggies. Light on clean animal proteins and heavy on dark greens and bright beta carotene. Now that spring is nearly here, you'll be shopping at the farmers market, choosing only local, super-fresh produce, bringing it all home to toss in a big bowl for a healthy supper. And just to finish it off you reach for... bottled salad dressing!!!! What are you thinking?

Freshly made salad dressings are among the simplest foods to prepare and are way better tasting than their questionable bottled cousins. Plus, they store well in the refrigerator from a few days to even a few weeks! So why would you buy bottled? You will learn the basics of great salad dressing preparation as you make three

different dressings using basic kitchen ingredients. Then we'll enjoy a group salad meal when the cooking is done.

**Presenter:** Toni Oplt, Green Gal of the Midwest (Google her blog for a real treat!)

**Cost:** \$15

**Registration is requested:** Call 618-466-5004

