

Is Ignatius Jesuit Centre land more sacred than other land?

by Ralph C. Martin

In May, I attended a meeting at the Ignatius Jesuit Centre (IJC) north of Guelph to reflect on the writings and work of Father Jim Profit. Sadly, he passed away in January. Rev. John Buttars noted that Jim not only talked about how the 600 acre IJC farm is on prime agricultural land. John told us Jim went further and said it is sacred land.

A surprising question was then posed. Is IJC land more sacred than other land? Some noted that all land is sacred, indeed all of creation is sacred. It was argued that urban intersections, such as Norfolk and Paisley, are just as sacred as a grove of IJC hardwoods, harbouring melodic song birds.

Others pondered the energy of prayer, meditation, reflection, and intention. They wondered if that energy, once expended in a particular place, is subsequently layered with the energy of others who have also deliberated in reverence, at the same place?

Further discussion, in a more pragmatic vein, was about IJC land as an oasis of green space and a natural limit to city expansion at the northern boundary of Guelph. Many are grateful for the privilege to rest there.

Nevertheless, I can't let the original question go. Is IJC land more sacred than other land? I'm certain Jim would not have postulated that IJC land was more sacred because it was owned and managed by Catholics, rather than by another organization. To Jim, IJC land was sacred as he communed with its integral essence.

Our relationship to land goes beyond land stewardship so that it can be an ongoing resource for our use. Fully functioning land with ecological integrity has agency and can communicate and offer healing to humans.

It is not uncommon to think about the organization of life at molecular, cellular, organism (i.e. plant or animal) or population levels. However, we tend to neglect appreciating how life is also organized at the ecosystem level. An ecosystem is more than lots of plants, animals, rocks, soil and water. An ecosystem has identity. It functions as an entity with feedback signals, interactions and flows.

Ecosystems have capacity for resilience, despite damaging practices. Thus those who derive short term financial returns from land, may assume, mistakenly, that ecosystem intervention is a simple economic calculation.

A related argument is to intensify land use for agriculture, forestry or mining in specific locations in order to reserve natural habitat for Bambi and bunnies elsewhere. This ignores the “dotted line” boundaries of ecosystems and the flows of energy, nutrients and pollutants across these boundaries. For example, DDT is still detectable in penguins in Antarctica, even after decades without DDT use, far from Antarctica.

Ecosystems are complex. Interventions to derive a livelihood for our species warrant a thoughtful and well informed base of decision making to minimize disruptions to ecosystem function. Nevertheless, as noted in the Desiderata Poem, by Max Ehrmann

“You are a child of the universe no less than the trees and the stars;
you have a right to be here.”

A fully functioning complex ecosystem, according to our indigenous relatives and our ancient ancestors, has spirit and communicates to us, as do plants and animals. We can tune in to listen and learn from ecosystems. Healing comes to us as we engage with ecosystems.

Perhaps the IJC land carries a sacred sense because it can still function as an ecosystem. The 600 acre land base includes organic field crops, organic gardens, wetlands, vegetated fence rows, woodlots and all the fauna associated with healthy plants and soil. As a special place, where humans have done minimal damage, IJC retains enough of its integrity to maturely hold up its end of nourishing relationships.

Recently the TD bank reported that trees in Toronto are worth \$7billion. Trees reduce temperature extremes, moderate water flow and absorb carbon dioxide, while improving property values. Are they also sacred?

In our period of focusing on industrial and commercial possibilities, there is a tendency to separate physical, financial, ecological and social knowledge from spiritual ways of knowing. To the extent that we have separated how we know aspects of our world, we may have constrained how we can mature in our human integrity. We could dare to grow up and not indulge ourselves as perpetual teens of the Industrial Revolution.

The flip side is to be the earthlings we are, rather than expecting spiritual nirvana without connection to where we are now. Disconnected contemplation may be only that.

Yes, we have a right to be here, with deference to Earth. Earth is the ecosystem of all ecosystems, evolved to survive as a whole. Retaining our right to stay may depend on how well we relate to sacred land, in the places we know it.

Ralph C. Martin, Ph.D., P.Ag. is the Loblaw Chair, Sustainable Food Production and Professor, Ontario Agricultural College, University of Guelph. Comments welcome at rcmartin@uoguelph.ca