

THE FAITHFUL CONSUMER

By Sarah Streed

In this monthly column, I try to connect faith and the environment in a real, practical way. At the end, I'll offer a practical action that can have a significant environmental impact.

When my husband and I decided to move to Wisconsin nine years ago, we began the house search. We looked at the houses in our price range and decided upon a spacious house just being built along the edge of a wetland. It was brand new construction and really too big for us (but when we added two more children four years later it suddenly became exactly what we needed) and attractive, inside and out. The wetlands out the back would never be developed, so we would always abut a piece of nature.

We moved in and began to enjoy the house and its surroundings. Every window on the back of the house overlooked a beautiful wetlands view that changed with the seasons. In the fall the trees were ablaze with color and the marsh was gold with the dying grass. During the winter the area was covered with an expanse of white snow, pure and unsullied. Spring followed with hundreds of frogs—aptly named spring peepers—calling out their joy in the warm weather. In the summer the mature oaks in full leaf almost hid the wetlands.

Change happened, as it does in life. First a house was built on one side of us—the huge oaks were felled smack in the middle of a Sunday afternoon, during our daughter's ninth birthday party—then on the other. Condos were built across the wetlands, and while we still had our beautiful view, it didn't go on forever, but ended at grey boards across the marsh. The city put in a walking trail encircling the wetlands.

Gradually, I became aware that our city wasn't protecting the wetlands. When the condos went in and drainage filled the area around the hardwood trees and city officials insisted that this was fine because the engineer's plan had been approved. I formed the "Friends of the Wetlands" group with concerned neighbors; initially, we spent a lot of time writing letters and meeting with the mayor and city officials, warning that storm water plans for new development needed to be overseen by environmental engineers.

But at some point I lost my faith regarding the wetlands. I was a "non-believer" when another new development was started last summer and the land was graded to put in seven houses. It didn't look like the straw that was going to break the camel's back—but then I guess straws always look fairly innocuous.

A frantic neighbor called me late Sunday night a few weeks ago, saying, "Sarah, have you seen the water in the wetlands?" I hadn't. Because there wasn't a lot of snow, the dirty storm water flooding into the wetlands was the same muddy brown as the earth. She raged to me about the storm water that had been gushing into the wetlands for two solid days.

After the call, my husband and I walked to the new development to see for ourselves.

It was everything I had feared. Where before there had been a berm separating the wetlands from the road, there was now a newly installed culvert spewing a brown waterfall. The preparatory grading from the new development had altered the storm drainage so that the polluted runoff from the north end of town ran straight into the wetlands. During that week, as we neighbors watched, the water rose until it was over the walking trail and pooling around the trunks of 100 year old oaks. When I called the County Land Conservationist, he told me that things will only get worse—especially if the new Super Center is built as planned at that end of town.

This wetlands story—which is not over—is my own Pilgrim's Progress. Like Christian in the book, I was drowning in the Slough of Despond—consistent with the actual slough behind our house. I was mired in disbelief—disbelief that I could have an effect on the world around me. I was like those—reprehensible to my mind—who believe that since life on this earth is transient and they're going to heaven anyway, they might as well let the natural world go to hell.

I need to climb out of this slough. I need to stand on my belief that creation is sacred and I have an obligation to protect it—then **work toward that end**, and not give up when the going gets rough.

March's tip: Take your own little part of God's natural world—the wetlands, a park down the street, the undeveloped forest and fields outside of town—and live the life of faith with it. Vow to protect and preserve creation, starting with this piece close to you. See where your faith leads.

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