

Ecojustice and Ministry **Carol Hepokoski**

Out of the stars in their flight, out
of the dust of eternity, here
have we come,
Stardust and sunlight, mingling
though time and through space.

Out of the stars have we come,
up from time;
Out of the stars have we come.

- Robert Weston, from *Singing the Living Tradition*

Out of the stars we have come . . .

For most of the year, I live in Hyde Park, a neighborhood anchored by the University of Chicago in the midst of Chicago's vast South Side. Hyde Park is where Meadville Lombard Theological School is--it's a tree-lined neighborhood full of three story walk ups, schools and seminaries, pockets of high rises, restaurants, and co-op supermarkets. Hyde Park enjoys the distinction of being an integrated neighborhood--many colors, many languages, mixed economic levels. We're easy walking distance to Lake Michigan. From time to time, we see a star or two or three in the sky. Sometimes the big dipper peeks over the roof of my apartment building.

On the occasions when I return to my lakeside cabin in northern Minnesota, I am sometimes caught by surprise: countless stars in the night sky. A zillion, at least. "Oh, the stars are still here." As if they had vanished from the earth. "Oh, so this is where the stars are." As if they had left the urban areas, and moved to the country.

I've been thinking a lot lately about how it is that the stars have just about disappeared from urban areas. How it is that there are children in the city who may have never seen a dark, starry night.

And that's because the city skies are polluted. Part of the pollution is light pollution. And that light pollution separates use from the experience of our largest wilderness--the wilderness of the dark and starry night sky.

So I've taken an interest lately--an environmental interest--in streetlights (!). There are bad streetlights--globes that throw light in all directions: up, to the sides, and down to the streets. There are better streetlights--these have a cap on top, so that light does not go straight up, but it still goes to the sides, as well as the street. The best streetlights have a recessed bulb--the light is directed

downward, to the street, and not to the sides or up above.

It's possible to retrofit streetlights, capping them and putting on side shields that focus the light downward, where it's supposed to go. One result of better street lighting is less light pollution, hence darker skies and more stars. A second advantage is energy conservation. Recessed and shielded lights can use lower wattage bulbs, and that can amount to significant savings in energy. And that means less carbon into the atmosphere, carbon that has an impact on global warming. Still a third advantage of better street lighting is less glare. Some night as you're walking down the street, shield your eyes (make your hand into a visor). You'll find it is easier to see because lights don't hit you in the eyes. What you are experiencing is ambient lighting, not light in your eyes. Aging eyes are more sensitive to glare. Less glare makes night driving safer, and makes it easier to see at street level.

So, better street lighting means less light pollution, less wasted energy, and less glare. It adds up to darker skies over our heads and a more pleasant nightscape on the ground. For more information about light pollution, visit <http://www.darksky.org/>.

I've learned about street lighting through my involvement with a Chicago regional project: the Interreligious Sustainability Project. In neighborhoods and towns throughout Chicagoland, we are forming interfaith circles of people who want to help create a more just and sustainable world. In Hyde Park, our circle comes together monthly to eat and reflection and share and strategize.

Our imaginations have been caught by the stars. By our desire for the beauty of the dark starry night sky. The night sky opens the universe to us--puts things into perspective--to see into the heavens--out of the stars we have come--to know who we are.

And as we've thought about this, we've come to realize that part of why our urban night skies are so over lit has to do with fear--fear of darkness, of crime, of poverty, of racialized poverty. Our interfaith circle has come to think about the value of embracing the dark night sky--of welcoming darkness--welcoming the dark wilderness over our heads.

Dark skies--the energy conservations of better street lighting--is one of our projects. Another is to work for safer, seamless, more efficient public transportation--so that all our citizens can move more easily from buses to trains to the "L," to areas of the city and the suburbs where they need to go. So that those who are most dependent upon public transportation--people who are poor, those who can no longer drive--can more easily move around the region to jobs and urban necessities.

These projects are ecojustice projects--improving the health of our communities,

of our people, of our environment. They represent small steps in a religious journey toward a good society, a good earth.

For many of us, involvement in the neighborhood circles is a ministry--an interfaith, community ministry, a public ministry. The important thing is that we create ways of "walking our talk"--that we join others in communal actions. I've shared one way of addressing a contemporary issue in liberal religion: increasing the odds of our survival on this earth.

Out of the stars we have come.
Time out of time before time in
the vastness of space, earth spun to orbit the sun.
Out of the stars we have come.