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## **PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS**

The address, "Roots in the Soil and Water and Sky" was presented by retiring president, DR. DAMIAN V. SCHMELZ, Department of Biology, St. Meinrad College, St. Meinrad, Indiana 47577, at the annual Fall Meeting dinner at the DePauw Student Union Building Ballroom, DePauw University, Greencastle, Indiana, on Friday, November 1, 1974.

## PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

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### ROOTS IN THE SOIL AND WATER AND SKY

DAMIAN SCHMELZ, St. Meinrad College, St. Meinrad, Indiana 47577

A full moon, with a few wisps of clouds drifting across its face, lighting up the landscape golden and bright, quiets our spirits and enriches our lives for the moments or hours we lie on a hillside on an autumn night. Beautiful from more than 200,000 miles away, the Apollo missions have shown how drab and barren the moonscape really is. On the other hand, NASA photographs have revealed the incredible beauty of the earthscape, the deep blue of the oceans under puffed and swirling silvery clouds, an exciting and vibrant thing. This new perspective should awaken us to perceive and appreciate those things about our earth, close enough to touch, that account for the difference. Many questioned the value of the whole program to explore the moon, whether by man or machine: what practical use can we ever make of it? Unhappily, that is the same question man still asks of his own planet.

We are at the summit of nature surely, dominant and becoming ever more so, convinced that technology in time will place nearly total control over nature in our hands. Necessarily, in becoming human, the species has injected its will onto the earth and all it holds, giving new form, marshalling energy and materials for the purposes and pleasures of its growing and demanding population. With neither the perspective of distance or time nor the wisdom to understand past or future, we have come to prefer our plasticized and metallic world, with its ready cash and easy convenience, even though it means the now familiar scarred and plundered land, sluggish and dirty water, and poisoned and noisy air.

All the while, and especially now when in sheer numbers we press upon one another and compete almost viciously for what we want and need, from somewhere inside we feel the urge to return to an earlier, simpler life, to escape what we have made, to rediscover our roots in the soil and water and sky. We are no longer as sure that the land is meant merely to provide plots for our buildings and pits for our wastes, the water meant simply to sprinkle our lawns and dilute our sewage, the air only to carry our jets and blow away our smoke.

Increasingly, there is a surge to parks where there are trees and grass and flowers, waterfalls and paths along streams, and clean, open sky. Leaving crowded campgrounds to be alone, soothed by the quiet and the green, we sense that somehow we belong, as a part, to all around us. Our renewed peaceful sanity tends to erase any lingering doubt that the earth is our mother and that our biological-mental being has emerged from her. Adaptations built into the human species during a million years or more of evolution in response to her stimuli seem to have fitted us better for this real world than for the artificial one we have

created in a few thousand years. We seem to have inherited a human need for natural beauty as much as for food and love.

Man must intervene, of course, with nature to satisfy his multiple needs. He can do so respectfully and creatively, manipulating nature while loving her for herself. And sensing a sacred relationship to the whole earth, he wisely will leave some areas untouched, and quietly worship their beauty. Spring Mill State Park near Mitchell illustrates both such a creative intervention by man and his reverent preservation of nature's own work.

A Canadian, Samuel Jackson, came to the area in 1814 and built himself a log cabin and a grist mill along a stream in a cove of the rugged hills. Finding life on the frontier strange and a little frightening, he sold his land and moved back east. In 1817, Cuthbert and Thomas Bullitt built the three-story mill of stone, remarkably preserved today, with its 24 foot diameter overshot water wheel and flume of hewn tulip beans. Seven years later William and Joseph Montgomery bought the mill and 1400 acres of adjoining land. Several stone houses, a distillery, and a tavern became part of the growing village. Beginning in 1832, Hugh and Thomas Hamer, the next owners, added a blacksmith shop, loom house, pottery shop, apothecary, tannery, hattery, cabinet shop, cobbler shop, limekiln, and post-office. Other residences sprang up, as well as a church and school. For about three decades Spring Mill Village was a thriving commercial and social center of the region. But then in the 1850's, the railroads came to Indiana and by-passed the village sheltered in the hills, taking business and people away. The village slowly died, and by the mid-1880's was silent and abandoned.

The charm of pioneer settlements has been caught in the restored village. A piece of humanized landscape, the transformation conveys a sense of fitness. Some areas—the Grand Canyon, the Rockies, the Redwood groves—overwhelm us with their magnitude and splendor, and man's presence only detracts. Here, the pioneers, limited to materials of the immediate area and to methods of the day, seem to have identified with nature and to have added to its beauty.

Since it was established as a park in 1927, there have been added an inn and cabins, camping and picnic sites, hiking and bridle trails, a lake for swimming and boating and fishing, a pony ride and a boat trip inside Twin Cave. These have not all added to the beauty of the area so much as accommodated the thousands who visit the park annually, some of whom bring their artificial worlds with them, many of whom are trying to escape what they have at home yet expect to find the same here, a few of whom are honestly, even if unconsciously, searching for some return to their roots.

Our roots in the soil are best embodied here in the tract of virgin timber known as Donaldson's Woods, the legacy of a wealthy and eccentric Scotsman, George Donaldson, who would tolerate neither hunting nor woodcutting. Here one feels small, hiking the marked trail in the shade of giant oaks and hickories and beech and sugar maple, and sees the largest tulip in Indiana. Here in a primeval stand,

now incorporated into the State's System of Nature Preserves, one sees dead and windthrown trees slowly giving up their nutrients to the soil with the help of plant and animal decomposers. Here, except for the badly placed bridle trail, man's presence is not allowed to detract. Here, too, a natural transformation has been detected. Since 1954, when a tree-by-tree scale map was made of 20 acres of the woods, the oaks and hickories have been declining in importance while beech and sugar maple have been gaining.

Our roots in the soil can be felt throughout the park in the lesser plants: maple leaf viburnum and spice bush; the ferns—maidenhair, grape, and walking; true and false Solomon-seals; may apple, jack-in-the-pulpit, spiderwort and dwarf ginseng; squaw root and beech drops; the violets; and dozens of others. The beauty is there, perhaps especially for a little girl. One hears the birds singing but generally does not see the other animals, yet they are there.

Our roots in the water are found in the streams that pour from limestone caves and flow down the deep valleys and through the village.

Our roots in the sky are seen in the blue-bright day and the starlit night, and in an especially contemporary way at the Virgil Grissom Memorial, a witness of man's daring adventure into space.

*Genesis* speaks both of man's dominion over the rest of nature and his responsible stewardship. Having managed her so poorly for so long and desecrated her so frequently, we have endangered our natural relationship with our mother earth, who nurtures us still. In rediscovering our roots in the soil and water and sky, we contact our distant origins and so better understand our own nature, discovering at the core of our being that we are part of the whole earth, that it is biologically imperative for us to create beauty in the landscape when altering it for our purposes, that we are right to the extent of how much natural beauty we can afford to let alone.

