



Tending and Mending Earth

by Gretchen Dysart, MSC

Earth literacy takes root at Holy Angels.

I'm an *Earth literacy* student! "A *what?*" most people ask. "What does *that* mean?"

Technically, it means I'm part of the Earth Literacy Certificate Program at St. Mary of the Woods College in Terre Haute, Indiana. In practice, it means I'm learning to read planet Earth and her creatures and to articulate the stunning interconnectedness that's always right before our eyes, but seldom recognized...from the intricacies of minute eco-systems present in the dew on rainforest orchids to the gigantic web of life that makes us humans kin to all beings on Earth and beyond.

Weeklong residencies on campus have introduced me to the latest philosophical and scientific thought about the birth of our universe, evolution, and humankind's unique ability to self-reflect. Through interdisciplinary study, I've explored human interaction with the natural world through lens as diverse as music, art, economic and cultural systems and eco-justice. I've studied ethical philosophies of deep ecology, eco-feminism, and nature and animal rights, to name a just a few. At home, this classroom instruction has been augmented by many readings, much writing, and lively online interaction with professors and classmates.



Sisters Pascaline Tougma and Gretchen Dysart tend the garden at Holy Angels.

But Earth Literacy isn't an ivory tower discipline! Students also study environmental issues in their own locales and develop projects that address those needs. Living here at Holy Angels Congregational Center – site of our congregation's original foundation in Louisiana – has given me ample opportunity to put my academic learning into practice.

We Marianites, like many other religious communities, are learning to interact with the land we call home in some very new (or, in some cases, old!) ways. Compost piles have sprung up around campus, as have lush flowerbeds and a small organic

vegetable garden. Residential recycling is burgeoning.





ABOVE: A group of scouts who helped with the rain barrel installation. RIGHT: Sister Audrey making use of stored rainwater to care for her plants.

One of my favorite projects is our rainwater catchment system, built last year with the help of Scout volunteers and their fathers. One of the Scouts obtained 55-gallon barrels that previously held olives from Italy from *Central Grocery* here in New Orleans. At home, he and the other volunteers built a strong bench to hold the barrels and gathered other materials needed for installation: spigots, plastic tubing and downspout connectors. On September 12, 2009, the Scouts and four dads installed the barrels and they've been catching rain ever since – recycling it to thirsty gardens and houseplants.

We have other projects in mind too: labeling neighborhood storm drains leading to Lake Pontchartrain as *No Dumping Zones*, expanding campus-wide recycling possibilities, and inviting Earth-conscious allies in to share expertise and experience.

Earth literacy is changing life at Holy Angels, but I find it's also changing me. I ask a lot more questions now: *Where are your receptacles for recycling? Is this product sustainably produced? What's its carbon footprint? Is this cleaning product Earth-friendly? Can we make this lighting more efficient? How can we save or recycle more water?*

One of our neighbors from the senior apartments here on campus now calls me "the *environmentalist!*" She means it as a compliment, but at first it made me a bit uncomfortable. It seemed presumptuous given the small steps I've taken. But I don't feel that way anymore. Now I believe that every action taken to protect Earth, however small, is inspired ... a spark of God's light in the darkness. So, as eco-musician *Earth Mama* sings, "Even a small star shines in the distance ... don't be afraid to be a little brilliant...!"



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