Nurturing Catholic Community
Curriculum Connections – Grade 11 English

The Shack

Essay by Margaret Laurence in Imprints 11 (2001 Gage Learning Corporation)

Margaret Laurence describes her day in the life of a small cedar cabin on the Otonabee River in southern Ontario. It is summer time, and she spends her time writing, but also in observing the environment around her from dawn to dusk. She thinks that the speed boats that are so much part of the river, miss the real impact of the river….the early morning mist, the changing colours of the water, the variety of tree life, the beauty and diversity of the bird life, and then there’s the deep memories of old Jack…a beloved neighbor who used to come visit before he died. In the evening time she goes walking and weed inspecting and sees the beauty in the wildness of the weeds. As night emerges she watches the stars and realizes that though she is alone, she is not alone at all.

The Value of Contemplation

In this short essay Margaret Laurence evokes a sense of contemplation. She paints a word picture that allows one to sense the peacefulness and goodness within nature. Her reflection on the beauty of the passing day and the scene around her allow her to integrate it all into a suspended “ah....” moment: the beauty and simplicity of what is around one, permits one to simply be.

Within the Catholic world view, many spiritual writers allow a further shift in consciousness to shape their response to the beauty of the surrounding world. In the Contemplation for Obtaining Love in his Spiritual Exercises, St Ignatius of Loyola encourages people in prayer to contemplate nature in its purest form, and to give thanks to the God who brought all into being, and now holds things in being. Gazing at the stars at night helped lift Ignatius’ heart to praise and glorify God. Stepping back from the rush of life, appreciating the wonder of nature, encountering the wisdom in people – all these things nourish the soul. We grow in appreciation of the depth and beauty within things, and from within the horizon of faith, we grow to appreciate the wonder of the One who brings all of this about, whose Providence stitches together such dynamism, such balance, such diversity, such strength, such awesome depth.

Within the rush of post modern culture, this message from Margaret Laurence or from the Catholic spiritual tradition is counter cultural and challenging. But when we open the door to it, it increases both the love of life and the love of God within us.

http://www.ignatianspirituality.com/12953/the-contemplation-on-divine-love/