

## CARING FOR CREATION NEWS

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One of the more popular **Caring for Creation** outings has been the spring wildflower walk. Both the walk and the company of friends have made for an enjoyable time. I suspect that each walker has had their own reason for going; maybe it's the carpet of trillium that look like a new snowfall, maybe it's the redbud leaning out over the stream, or maybe it's just the optimism that comes with winters passing. This month Richard Smith reflects on his own history of spring walks.

*Peter Boogaart*

### **My Wife Gave Me Flowers**

I have always loved camping and hiking and just being outdoors in general. Even as a boy I was pretty good at naming trees and birds. If I heard a bird call on a hike, I might well stop to see if I could spot the bird somewhere, or I might make a detour to check out the leaves of a tree that caught my attention. But I never really paid much attention to flowers.

Then I met Deb. She and I were both Hope College students, and she also enjoyed camping and hiking and just being outdoors in general...and since she was botany major she taught me about wildflowers. What before had been just splashes of color on the landscape, now became more familiar. I learned names: trillium, trout lily, toothwort, Dutchman's breeches. I learned histories: Native Americans used horsetail to scour pots and brush their teeth. I learned a new sense of time: maybe we were too late to see bloodroot or harbinger of spring on our hike, but we might still see bluebells or marsh marigold. I learned new terms like "hirsute stem" and "lanceolate leaf" and "bell-shaped calyx." I even learned the Latin names of many flowers. (Did I mention that Deb was a botany major?).

I was given a whole new world. Those splashes of color became for me—for us—the occasions to stop and look closer, to stop, for example, and look beneath wild ginger's heart-shaped leaves to find that stunningly, breathtakingly deep burgundy flower that I would never, ever have noticed as a boy. Even a walk in town was changed. That weed I might have barely noticed growing by the sidewalk became shepherd's purse, a plant used by pioneers as a seasoning, a pepper substitute. (By the way, its Latin name is *Capsella bursa pastoris* which I didn't even have to look up...Did I mention that Deb was a botany major?).

What a revelation to have that new world opened up. When Creation sings its song of praise to God like Psalm 96 says, I can now hear a new voice in that harmony. Epiphany ears.

The whole business of learning the names of things has been a revelation too. Even though I know more names and nomenclature about flowers, I really don't feel any smarter. So the revelation is not about knowledge or wisdom. It's not about power either although some ancient cultures regarded the possession of names as a source of power. It was risky to reveal your name to a stranger, because the one who knew your name possessed a certain power over you. As a nation we have sometimes been guilty of imagining ourselves to possess power like that. I learned recently from Rich Cook that the U.S. National Park Service originally saw its mission as "the efficient exploitation of Nature."

But for me learning the names and stories of wildflowers is a different thing altogether. It's about relationships. As corny as it sounds, almost every hike that Deb and I take ends with one or the other of us saying, "It was good to see our old friends." Honest. We really say that. Knowing those names, discovering that relationship confers, not power or wisdom, but responsibility. It's part of the same neighborhood where we watch out for our friends across the street or the kids up and down the block.