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Editor's Picks

Weekly Features

Headlines

Spotlights & Profiles

Inside IUB » Editor's Picks » FYI » Saving God's Garden: Professor Albert Ruesink's Last Lecture

editor's picks

health &
wellness

arts &
humanities

technology

research

campus life

fyi

FYI

Saving God's Garden: Professor Albert Ruesink's Last Lecture

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Oct. 30, 2014

by Albert Ruesink, edited by Jennifer Ruesink

Editor's note: The late Albert Ruesink was a faculty member in biology at IU from 1967 until his retirement in 2012, during which time he taught about 14,000 undergraduates. He also connected annually with alumni through lectures for **Mini University** on topics spanning molecular biology to global change. The writing here combines the last two church newsletter articles he authored from the perspective of his involvement in Earth Care, which brings faith communities together on the topic of environmental ethics and climate change. The articles were edited by his daughter, Jennifer Ruesink, a professor of biology with the University of Washington. Ruesink died Aug. 17, 2014.

The landscape behind our house in Bloomington has become for me one of the most special places in the world. Surely it is a reminder that there is a good God around us, trying to help each of us reach our full potential.

Five months ago, I was diagnosed with terminal cancer. Knowing my time here is limited has given me a new lens to appreciate the garden that my wife and I have cultivated and enlarged over nearly five decades. We seem to have managed through careful work to achieve many of the traits of intact nature -- diverse, productive systems with species splendidly intertwined in webs of interaction.

Flower colors in perennial beds have changed seasonally, set off by vegetation kept green by this summer's regular rains. Behind the flowers climb beans, tomatoes, squashes, and other delicious vegetables that feed both body and soul. Against this backdrop I have witnessed delightful life cycles -- rabbits in a continuous parade of sizes, bird nests tucked into secret places. Sometimes the nests were raided by predators. And the vegetables suffered from being eaten by deer, prompting a recent family effort to build up the fence. Even in God's special place, some living creatures are taken away early, and some human intervention is necessary to manage the landscape.



Albert Ruesink | PHOTO BY INDIANA UNIVERSITY

Tended well, a garden is a gift to future generations: I shall never forget my three granddaughters dancing in the dark with assorted colors of sparklers in early July, accompanied by lightning bugs.

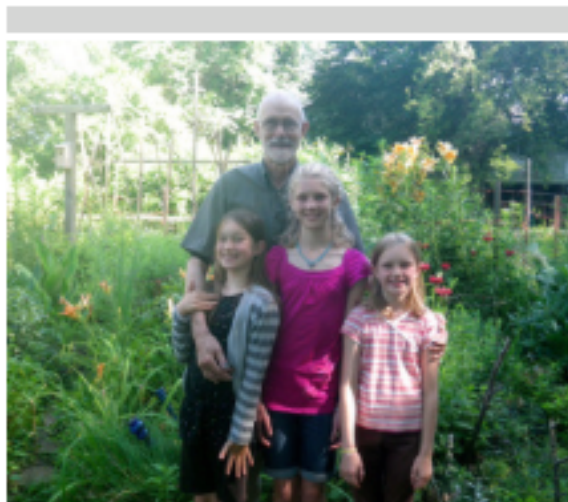
Yes, our backyard, "God's One Tenth Acre," has been special to me as I work out my last days.

My thoughts, though, often turn to God's larger world as I continue to peruse the scientific data that connect fossil fuel use, the level of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere and oceans, and climate change. And frankly, I can sometimes become much more concerned about the future of humankind over the next 50 years than about my own health.

Why do I say that?

My major concern is the path of the world as a whole towards ever-increasing carbon dioxide emissions, especially from fossil fuels. On an individual basis, we in the U.S. are among the highest energy users, but as incomes rise in developing nations so too does the move towards a more energy-intensive quality of life.

At the same time, over the last 20 years, the percentage of energy produced by alternative sources has remained constant at 13 percent, despite efforts to switch to non-fossil fuels in many parts of the world. To meet the goal of capping atmospheric carbon dioxide to a level climate scientists say might let us dodge catastrophic climate change, we would apparently have to increase non-fossil fuel use to 90 percent. This transition needs far-seeing leadership and a massive societal push to keep sequestered carbon underground.



Ruesink in front of his garden with his three granddaughters, from left, Katie Ruesink, Emma Barker and Tess Barker. | PHOTO COURTESY OF JENNIFER RUESINK

The sheer number of humans on earth contributes to increased energy needs and the deterioration of our natural environment. Although population is no longer growing exponentially, it has followed a linear trend of about 80 million people added for each of the past 10 years.

The earth and its resources are finite, and human population size must stabilize to live in a sustainable way. Data show that populations often stabilize when economies develop and quality of life improves. Worldwide, 44 countries, including nearly all those in Western and Eastern Europe, have reached population stability through low birth rates. This strategy for population stabilization seems much preferred over high death rates from war, famine and disease.

Much more attention must be given to population stabilization worldwide. Removing

some "individual rights" to have as many children as one wants may be absolutely essential to promoting the wellbeing of humanity as a whole. And, birth-control options must be readily available to all who desire them.

Academic scientists do not often venture into the arena of values, so I take some risks by joining data, spirituality and a call to action. However, scientific facts don't always have much to do with getting a problem solved. In addition, thinking deeply about what is right for our families and our descendants is imperative, as is noting what others are doing for the earth and following their lead.

Just as "God's One Tenth Acre" has done much to sustain me in this, my last, summer, may all of us do more to sustain our own "acres." Let us show others -- including political leaders -- what we are doing and should be doing to promote the opportunity for future generations to enjoy the eternal nature of our world.