

Saint Paul's Youth in Costa Rica

Exploring our spiritual connection to the earth



April 2015

As we first stepped into the Monteverde Cloud Forest Reserve on our fourth day in Costa Rica, I got same feeling I do getting into the ocean: that I was surrendering all control to this massive entity, one with a power and will of its own. Here 5% of known species reside on just .01% of the planet's landmass. Yet despite my awe for such biodiversity, I was not thrilled about our afternoon plans: alone time in the forest, glued to one area, way too easy a target for that 5%. Despite my prime spot assignment on a ledge overlooking the continental divide, I spent the first five minutes completely tensed, pondering the likelihood that I shared my fifty square feet with a puma, a tarantula, a fer de lance, or maybe even all three. But after finally settling into the quiet, I began to notice that which I'd overlooked in constant movement on



the trails. What I could see - the ants, the birds, the ferns, the moss - only scraped the surface of the layers and layers of biological activity occurring in this place. The thrill of that sort is a sensation lost upon today's society, where just being or just observing can't compete with the instant gratification social media affords us. What we forget is how superficial and transient these satisfactions are

juxtaposed with the ability to just sit alone in a rainforest, or by the lake, or in the backyard. Sometimes, we get so focused on controlling our environment that we disturb the balance that sustains us. In the rainforest, where growth occurs at a rate 20x faster than here in Vermont, the cyclical nature of the world is especially evident. As humans, we don't always like to be reminded of our own inevitable mortality. Yet our wellbeing depends on understanding that we too are included in this rhythm. It is a reminder especially crucial in this fast-paced, technology-driven era, and one that I found to be humbling over the course of our trip. Rather than belittling my own existence, that afternoon in the rainforest underscored how each role has a significant part to play towards the success of the system.

When we first arrived at the Friends Quaker school, we were all a little nervous. A bunch of gringos facing off in a soccer match against South American kids? This wasn't going to be pretty. We all walked onto the beat up field; us in our flip flops and hiking boots and the Costa Ricans in their cleats. Immediately we began to walk to one side of the field, expecting them to do the same. But before we made it, one of the older kids called us back over. He announced that we were all going to mix up, dividing everyone randomly. With our new teams made up of both countries, a wave of relief washed over all the Saint Paul's kids. Phew, I thought allowed. This genuine act of compassion was probably not even realized by the Costa Ricans. We had just expected that they'd all stick together, use this as an opportunity to laugh at the unathletic, unskilled Vermonters, wherever that was. Surely that's what Americans would have done if a group of Costa Ricans had come visited for a game of football. This game really reflected the kindness that we felt wherever we traveled. Welcoming, enthusiastic and compassionate people.



I've been to Costa Rica three times now, this being my third time. And I can remember being absolutely terrified of even thinking of going on a service trip. My stereotype I had come up with on my own was that service trips are all work and no fun. That and staying in accommodations not fit for tourists made me really afraid. Not to mention going on a trip with people I knew very little about. So of course, when I heard we were staying in the "bishop's house" I immediately thought of some ancient rock church with 10 by 10 rooms with 2 bunks in each room. The first clue that indicated I was wrong was when a tour bus pulled up at an airport, drove us half an hour, and turned up at the equivalent of a mansion in Costa Rican terms. (Or at least a house for financially lucky people.) From that point on, I knew my feelings toward service trips couldn't have been any more backwards. I really enjoyed the diverse activities planned out for us that had nothing to do with being a slave all day and I also enjoyed the activities where we were required to work for a while. During every activity I was slowly getting to know more and more people I had never met and in some cases, never seen before who were on the trip. Also during every activity came new life lessons such as always wear sunscreen and you run your own life.

The most memorable of these occasions happened when I was feeling sick. I didn't want to go zip lining, I was feeling sick, so I ducked out and went on a walk with our tour leader who was named Victorino while everyone else went zip lining. Victorino is a special person because he is personally involved with the reforestation of Costa Rica, the protection of one of the rarest and most special Costa Rican birds, (the bellbird) and he is one of Costa Rica's finest biologists. Bellbirds are pigeon-sized, with a white head and neck and a brown body, with three characteristic worm-like things coming from the top of the beak. According to Victorino, these are attractive mustaches used on female bellbirds. On that walk I was lucky enough to see a bellbird 30 feet away from a suspended bridge. To put that into perspective, there are more rattlesnakes in Vermont per acre than there are Bellbirds in Costa Rica per acre. It was very special to see something that Victorino was so animated about and so closely involved in. He deeply cares about what happens to these birds and can truly be called a friend to nature.

By the end of the trip, I felt that I had formed a connection with each person and my fears of service trips had dissipated from my mind.

This trip changed my life. From the start, during the planning, I was unsure of what to expect. I figured that it would be pretty incredible to leave the country and learn new things. I knew we would be giving up our phones, our entire connection to anything back home. I knew that we would all be together for ten days straight, and I had the opportunity to get to know new people. I remember laying in my bunk at the Bishop's house our first night in San Jose, really thinking about what was in store. As the week went on and we ventured out into the rainforests of MonteVerde, I grew smarter every moment. Winding up into the mountain tops on our four hour drive to our new home, I didn't take my eyes away from the window once. I learned more about the world, nature, people and myself than I ever thought possible. On the day hikes, I thought a lot.

In the forest solo (an hour period of alone time in the rainforest), I was wonderstruck. Though we made observations about nature, which I also enjoyed, to me the most important part was being truly alone. In our world today, especially at my age, life gets pretty crazy. Every adult wants to know how your grades are, what schools you're looking at, if you're prepared for the SATs, how your relationships are. It's hard to balance this on top of family time, friends, homework, sports, and choir. Being truly isolated from all of this I believe is truly important, especially at the point in my life where big decisions are being made. This time with nature helped me focus on my personal well-being, and really relax. I figure whenever I get stressed in the upcoming years, it's pretty neat to think that this miracle of life in the rainforest is constantly occurring. No matter what. That gives me peace and comfort, which can be hard to find for a lot of people. I learned so much on this trip, and so much I will take with me. I am so lucky to have been given this opportunity, and I will carry it along wherever my journey takes me next!

During the church mission trip, I had a great experience and learned a lot from it while I also had fun. Some of my favorite things were watching the hummingbirds and tracking down Bellbirds. I enjoyed helping other people by measuring trees and moving rocks to build a trail. And most of all, the sip line! The sip line made it so I could see the forest from so many other views. I know it is and will be something that I will always remember.



Some other things I liked within the church group was getting to know everyone so much better and making tons of new friends. Overall, my trip to Costa Rica was amazing and I will always remember what we did to help.

Liz Brown 12th grade

We live in a world consumed by noise. The noise of religious intolerance, of

violence and or pain. It is especially refreshing to find oneself in a peaceful silence. Prior to Costa Rica, I had never really sat alone in silence before - removed from technology and conversation and books. The Quaker Meeting was a brand new experience. We sat in a large room made of glass and light wood. For the first 10 minutes school children entered, silently joining the elderly people sitting in the center circle. The wind blew the trees outside as water droplets fell, the sun shining through the massive windows, filling the space was calming, peaceful light. The thoughts rolled around in my head as I reflected upon the simplicity of it all. We were safe, healthy, fed, clean and content. What more could life give us? Halfway through the meeting a voice interrupted by thoughts and a woman stood. "I would like to share a quote from the Dalai Lama, 'My religion is kindness' it sticks with me. Those words, the only words spoken in that hour tumbled around in my mind. "My religion is kindness." How simple. How easy. How peaceful. There is no doubt the world would be a better place, a safe place is everyone strove to be kind. In a world filled with violence and oppression it is important to remember what truly matters - empathy, kindness and love.

The nature in Costa Rica was amazing. Never I have been so excited to see a rare bird or tramp through a forest that contains Pumas and man eating snakes to look at trees. However, nature was not the most amazing part of the trip, that honor goes to our wonderful naturalist guides. Their never ending enthusiasm to share the beauty of nature with us was inspiring.



One night, we went on a night hike while staying in the Children's Eternal Rainforest. While splashing through a stream our naturalist, Victoriano, suddenly stopped. "Did you guys here that, it was the call of Glass Frog." I had heard nothing, but followed Victoriano up the stream anyways, looking for the elusive Glass Frog.

Unfortunately, ten minutes of searching the stream bed and surrounding woods turned up nothing and we moved on. I did not end up finding glass frog that day, but other in the group did, after I left to go farther down the trail. John 15 states that there is no greater love then to sacrifice for your friends. Our guides gave so much of their time answer our questions, explaining the life cycles of animals, trying to keep us interesting, and splashing through streams looking for a tiny Glass Frogs. They did not have to do any of this, but they wanted to. They shared their love and excitement about god's creation with us, a gift that will stay with me for the rest of my life. They taught me how to look at the world and see the beauty in everything that surrounds me. They taught me to see God in the woods that surround us.

Zora Stewart 8th grade

Nature is a gift from God. It is something too often taken for granted by people, thought of as something that has and always will be there, a resource to be pillaged and persecuted without consequence. While in Costa Rica, we experienced a lot of natural beauty. There was the city, the farmland, the coast, the rainforest, and cloud forest. The kind of beauty varied from place to place but everywhere we went the people remained the same. They all seemed to have a communal sense of responsibility and pride for the earth around them.

On the third day of our trip, we took a particularly long bus ride. What I'd like to remember from that bus ride was not the unbearable outside heat or the endless hours of perpetual highway, but the moment we climbed off the ground and began our ascent into the mountains. Suddenly we were high up looking down into valleys and beyond at the approaching forest which elicited a series of delighted chatter throughout the group. For that last stretch of the day's journey there was a sort of collective joy, not to mention hope that we'd actually make it to Monteverde. This was the first of many times during the trip that I felt we were endeared and connected to the Earth, our matriarch, and her many splendors.

Our fragile yet unbreakable planet is often forgotten and neglected by its own protectors.

This was a lesson of appreciation and respect we all learned well during our stay and is also one I believe we will all carry with us the rest of our lives.

Ian Barnaby 8th grade

This trip was hands down incredible. I know everyone is going to say that, but for me, this trip had a special meaning to me. I've gone to Europe, I've gone to Canada, I've gone to places all around the US, but this trip really felt like my first world travel. On all my other trips, I felt like it was still similar to home. Sure, I know I was far from home, but I was with my family, I was a super tourist, and I didn't feel like it was all that different. This trip changed everything for me. I realized that the world is a diverse and wonderful place, not just cars and computers. I realized that I didn't want to stay in Burlington, and that I wanted to travel the world. This trip was eye-opening for me, and if I had the option to do it again, I would sign up as fast as I could. This trip has pushed out of my comfort zone, and exposed me to a completely new place. This experience has changed me for the better, and for that I have Marti Churchill, Jen Green, Peter Jones, and Terry Donovan to thank.

My life revolves around noise. Everyday I wake up to the sound of an alarm, I get up and immediately hear my family arguing, laughing, talking. I take the bus to school and hear yelling and commotion. I meet my friends at school and immediately engage in conversation. In Costa Rica, for the first time in my life I experienced true internal silence, and I realized that unplugging from technology, slowing down, and taking time to recognize inner peace and silence allows you to deepen the appreciation of the environment you're in. Of course this trip was full of singing, laughter, and lively conversation as well, but it was the quieter moments that really stuck with me. Sitting alone in the middle of the rainforest for over an hour gave me the chance to hear the symphony of sounds created by nature, to see some of Costa Rica's most incredible wildlife. Flying through the air, over the canopy of the Children's Eternal Rainforest on a zipline, showed me the tremendous beauty of the world, reminding me of all the places I still want to visit. I especially loved mornings at La Calandria, the research lodge in Monteverde. Waking up early to do yoga outside made me feel more grounded with the earth and air around me. But my favorite thing was sitting outside and eating breakfast on the deck, looking out onto the picturesque Costa Rican landscape, surrounded by my friends, but enjoying the view in silence. I used to think friendship was all about talking, and I would feel the closest with my friends when we were engaged in conversation. However, on this trip I realized that friendship is so much more than just sharing stories and laughs. Now, to me, friendship is having an experience so incredible with someone else that you don't need words to describe it, you can just experience it together. Today, society tends to reject the idea of silence, because it feels awkward and uncomfortable, because we are taught that if we have nothing to say something is wrong. For some reason we view silence as an indicator of sadness or disinterest. But in reality silence is beautiful. Silence helps us relax and see things for what they are without getting caught up in our own prejudices. If everyone could step out of life's hectic bubble for a few minutes everyday I think the world would be a better place because everyone would be just a little more clear headed. I want to take what I learned and use it to improve my experience through life and strengthen bonds with my friends and family. I believe finding an inner silence can lead to true happiness, and lead you to a richer living experience. Because life's too short not to live and be happy, and if there's one country that destined to teach you this lesson it's Costa Rica, the happiest country in the world whose informal motto is "pura vida" live life.

Obviously there were so many amazing things about this trip, but one of the things I've thought about the most since then was the people we met. I'm always amazed at every new place I visit how welcoming everyone is, but Costa Ricans, or Ticos as they call themselves, went above and beyond. Victorino, our guide, was absolutely hilarious but also really kind and thoughtful. He was so knowledgeable about everything we encountered, from Costa Rican history to anything about the rainforest, and he was always ready to answer any question. All the people we got to meet at all the places we stayed were kind, welcoming, and patient: the couple who lived at the Bishop's house in San Juan, the cooks and caretaker at La Calandria, and Giovanni and his wife at San Gerardo. Zora and Evan and I had a ten-minute-long conversation with Giovanni right after we first arrived, and he was extremely patient with my terrible Spanish!

And, of course, Paul. Originally from Texas, he wasn't technically Costa Rican, but he fit right in to local culture and was a great go-between for us. He also made friends with everyone on the trip, playing cards, organizing morning runs, and just chatting with us. One of the things I was trying not to think about on the trip was my looming college decision, and he and I had a couple



deep discussions about life and the directions you can go. During one of these discussions, Paul offered some advice I know I'll remember for a while: don't worry too much about those big decisions. It might seem like there's only one right choice, and that making the wrong one will be a huge mistake, but all you need to do is make a decision based on love. Love of your family, love of the earth, love of yourself: any choice that is based on love will end up bringing more happiness into your world, and that is the right choice.

Before Costa Rica, I hadn't really traveled very far out of the United States. I'd only been to Canada, the Virgin Islands, and Mexico, but that's it. First of all, the first thing you realize in Costa Rica is all the signs switch from English to Spanish, and sometimes, if you're lucky, with a small English translation underneath. Another immediate thing I noticed was that we stood out a lot. We were huge group of twenty-four gringos, and many of us (including me) spoke very little Spanish. Over the course of our amazing trip, I learned to notice the small, beautiful things, and ignore the glaring difficulties and disconnect.

In San Herald, or the Children's Eternal Rainforest, I really felt myself notice every little thing about the scenery around me. Even on the night hike through the forest, I found that past all of the gross bugs and tiredness, I really was appreciating every second.

The next day, we spent an hour alone in the woods. I got placed in a really nice spot. There was a slight opening in the tree tops and some sunlight was shining through. There was a stream with little minnows and waterbugs. There were hummingbirds chasing after each other above me. And then there was about four big horse flies buzzing around my head. The cicadas' buzz was ringing harshly in my ears, drowning out all of the beautiful bird sounds. Mosquitoes were biting at my legs, and I really could not appreciate anything around me. About 10 minutes into kicking, swatting and arguing with the flies, I decided to give up. Once I let go of the flies, I saw what a beautiful place I was in. I noticed the bright orange flowers where hummingbirds were drinking. I saw the little minnows trying to swim against the current. I saw little brown birds dipping in the stream. I saw little things I never would've seen if I was just taking a little walk through the forest. A little spider, no bigger than the head of a pin, was scrambling up a mossy vine. Some light green fungus was bursting out from under a leafy root. The tree's bark was smoother on the right side than the left side. The songbird above me would not stop proudly singing his tune. I had the realization that my brain automatically cancels out little background noises and plants. I am so focused on getting from point A to point B on our short hikes that I only notice the dirt filled path in front of me. I wish this realization was brought to my attention before the start of the trip, instead of within the last three days.

This is a lesson I will try very hard to remember throughout all my life. Notice every miniscule insect, fungus, or seedling. No matter when, weather I am in a blocky office building or beautiful rainforest, I will notice the little, beautiful things.

Eli Van Buren 11th grade

One of the things that really stood out for me in Costa Rica was hanging out in the rainforest by myself for an hour or so. It was very interesting to see how the forest thrummed with life and how unimportant humans are to it. I was really able to connect with the forest and I find it comforting that no matter where I am or what I am doing, there will always be peace in that forest. John Muir said "Keep close to Nature's heart... and break clear away, once in a while, and climb a mountain or spend a week in the woods. Wash your spirit clean." I certainly felt



my spirit being washed clean in those woods by some green magic of nature. This is one reason why I'm planning to hike the long trail this summer, the same feeling of being surrounded by nature and walking among trees much older than I am has that magic to it. "The mountains are calling, and I must go"-John Muir

Andrew Trainor-Clark 11th grade

I could come up here and tell you all what you want to hear, that this trip was exciting and meaningful, but I am not going to that! I will tell you what this trip was like from the heart. This trip was one of the best experiences of my life. Those 10 days with these amazing teenagers showed me how to grow in friendship. In the reading, John, we hear Jesus talk about friendship and how crucial it is to our lives

on earth. Paul Spellings, the group leader on this trip and man who came to speak here before we left said something on the last day we were in Costa Rica before we went to get 4hrs of sleep then to catch a plane. He spoke about the disciples and how they relate to us. He said, if Jesus was about 30yrs of age because we believe that he died around 35, that would put the disciples around our age, 15-18 yr olds not those 60 year old white bearded men who we hear and see in the bible. I felt that Friendship brought us together more then anything else did. We all grew together as the disciples did.

When I went to Costa Rica I did not expect what I saw. It took me about six days to finally realize I wasn't in the United States anymore. Costa Rica is such a beautiful country with so much culture, people, and nature. Everyone in the country was so appreciative and kind. The culture was different and I really liked it. It is kind of crazy that I live in Vermont and I never realized that I'd appreciate nature and the beauty of it. Even though Costa Rica has an incredible nature world, Vermont is just as beautiful, in a different way. I feel like I have missed a lot but now I have the power to notice it revealing itself. During the trip we spent many hours sitting in silence, on bus rides, in worship meetings, standing in nature, and other activities that require patience. At first I was bored out of my mind but as time went on, I started enjoying the time and finding ways to embrace it. Why waste your life waiting for something to be over or happen, when you can just live in the moment? You can't gain back time you've already lost.



Imagine sitting alone in the middle of a rainforest, in a place you have never seen before, for an hour and a half. You can see the sunlight shining through the gaps between the leaves. You can hear the sound of water splashing down a stream just out of sight, you can hear the wind blowing through the trees, the song of birds in the canopy, and the chirping of cicadas. Once you get over your fear of the countless snakes, scorpions, spiders, and large cats you are sure are waiting to kill you, it is easy to lose yourself in the rhythm of the forest.

After a week of painting, measuring trees, carrying bags of rocks, and spending time in close proximity to wonderful people that inevitably get on your nerves, this time for quiet reflection was just what I, and I'm sure what many others, needed to stay sane. But this time wasn't just a brief respite from the chaos of the cabin where we were staying, but time to reflect on the work that we were doing, and to think about favorite parts of the week that you know will stick with you.

One experience that I know I will remember forever, took me by complete surprise. We hiked up a short path into the clearing where one-year-old trees were growing. Becca our guide and I split off the path deeper into the forest. The trees were planted in neat rows, and we were given the job of measuring their height, counting leaves, and noting any damage to the tree. It turned out that more than half of the saplings were dead, and 75% of the surviving ones had some sort of damage. Despite this, every ten trees or so, Victor would find one that was growing beautifully. They were only a year old, but some of them were nearly two feet tall, with lots of leaves, and no damage. Whenever Victor found one of these trees, his whole face would light up, and he would call for us to come over. We would watch him as he checked the tree, caring for it as someone cares for their children.

The obvious joy that Victor felt when he found a thriving tree made me realize how invested he and many others are in the reforestation project in Costa Rica. Sitting alone in my secluded glade in the rainforest, I realized that this was the practical example of our call to care for creation. Some people find their call to action in church, and other find theirs in the bible, but Victor found his in nature and it was an amazing experience to have this shared with us.

Emma Sutton **9th grade**

During my time in Costa Rica, I was especially struck by the natural beauty it possesses. Although Vermont has beautiful scenery, it was amazing to see how different everything was there. It was incredible to be in the midst of a rainforest, and explore the magnificence and diversity one place can hold. Before the trip, I was trying to go technology a little less, and focus on other things. This trip reminded me that as incredible the invention of technology is, it's really not necessary to have. I had one of the best weeks of my life and I didn't ever touch a screen. It was so refreshing to have the chance to enjoy nature without the distraction and responsibilities of everyday life.

William Sutton **11th grade**

This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.

Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. -John 12-13

I think that the main idea of these lines is that being part of friendship, family, or community generates the greatest kind of love. This love brings us happiness. To earn this love, it is all of our duties to serve and care for our neighbors. As the Beatles say "in the end, the love you take is equal to the love you make". In Costa Rica I enjoyed strengthening and creating new friendships, but also found joy in serving people I did not know. Visiting Costa Rica made me realize how important it is to not only serve our family and friends, but also our global community.



The Saint Paul's Youth Group has had a major impact on my life, and every time we go on a mission trip I'm able to bring back a new view at life and the world. The trip to Costa Rica shed light on me about the massive deforestation issue they once had and are recovering from. In the 1980's much of the jungle was cut down to make room for pastures for cattle that farmers sold primarily to Burger King. This massive deforestation caused countless species to lose their homes, and took away from the scenery of the country. Very soon a group of children decided they wanted to help reforest Costa Rica, they bought a plot of land and started what is known as the Children's Eternal Rainforest, this is now thousands of acres big. Other forest reserves soon started to form all over and the reforestation effort really took off.

When we were in Costa Rica we were able to help continue the work started by the group of children who wanted to save the rainforest. When were in Monteverde we worked in a tree nursery to help prepare saplings to be planted soon in the rainy season. In addition we also measured the growth of trees that were already planted, and how healthy they were. It was an honor to know that I was helping to make a difference, and that I was able to assist in reforesting Costa Rica. Even though Costa Rica is very far away we are still connected, it is very important to help our brothers and sisters everywhere. Everything that happens there impacts everyone everywhere, we need more rain forests, we need the trees within them to give us clean air. I believe reforestation, not just in Costa Rica, but everywhere in the world is important, it is vital to everyone on this earth to stop tearing down forests. Another thing that I learned in Costa Rica was that it's ok to live Spartanly, using less can mean that there will be more for others, this was something Paul the missionary and I talked about briefly but it made me change at least a little. It made me realize that if I waste resources such as always taking a leisurely long shower, or always having the heat on high in the winter, or leaving the light on adds up. So in attempt to try to use less I have been taking the bus more instead of getting rides to school, trying to cut down my water use, and using less electricity. If everyone did this then there would be more resources, more trees, and less pollution. We would then have more to pass on to future generations. So if there's one thing I took from this trip it's that everything is connected, and we all have to be mindful of how much we use.

Marti Churchill Youth leader

On this Mother's Day it feels right that we honor the grandest mother of all, our Mother Earth.

This service mission trip has had so many layers for me – starting with the Creation Bible study SPY did for 6 weeks in January and February. We dove into learning about the Biblical call for earth stewardship and caring for planet earth, our island home.

Our group of twenty 14-18 year old SPY members and 4 chaperones traveled together with such grace and blessings I felt God was with us. The reading today reminds us of Jesus's call to love one another and share in the joy of that love which is so much bigger than ourselves.

I witnessed our youth loving one another and extending themselves to each other over and over in the small and the bigger hardships and joys we encountered in Costa Rica. The sheer challenge of being away from home, traveling with friends and strangers for 10 days, eating different food, encountering bugs at every moment stretched many of them. And yet they kept calm and engaged and persevered through, with nary a complaint.

On an even bigger level I was touched by what we witnessed in our time in the rain forest and the learning we encountered there. The vast and complicated interconnectedness was deeply moving. The interplay between humans and the delicate ecosystems in which we were staying was amazing and disturbing. Our guide and naturalist, Victorino stopped and picked up a fig. Breaking it open he shared the fig's story: this one gigantic fig tree, hovering over us, which feeds so many different species, bears its fruit because a tiny wasp bores her way into a fig and lays an egg. When that larvae hatches then matures and returns out of the fig it pollinates the fruit. This wasp is 2 millimeters in size. He showed us a wasp crawling out of the broken fruit in his hand.

As John Muir puts it, "Tug on anything and you'll find it connected to everything else in the universe."

We cannot escape how intricately we are all interconnected with nature and each other.

Global warming is also a big concern in Costa Rica where 7 ecosystems are condensed into a 180 mile (or less) expanse. It is like taking the two coasts of the US and squeezing them together. A one degree increase in temperature has shifted these delicate ecosystems moving animal, birds and insect species higher into the mountains to find food and temperatures they need. The reforestation project is creating corridors for the wildlife to travel between fields which were cut for farming. Each zone has its own trees and they cannot live in neighboring zones. So these plantings must be specific to each zone. We worked in a tree nursery and then

on charting the health of trees planted from different zones to see if the trees could live in higher elevations as the animals are moving higher. Those trees, not of that zone, were mostly dead.

These lessons of interconnectedness and fragility of the earth happened over and over during our week. It here that I recalled the lessons we learned in our Creation Bible studies and God's call to us to care for our fragile planet. In the second chapter of Genesis God calls us to "to till and keep" the Garden of Eden. Another translation of the Hebrew le-avad u-le-shamar, is to serve and preserve. God calls us to live and care for the earth compassionately and with responsibility.

As you have already heard— over the week we spent several different times sitting alone, quiet in the forest or in the Quaker meeting. It was a theme we explored many times- this being quiet, opening ourselves up to, listening in the stillness. This quieting and listening takes practice and it was new for many of the youth.

As I sat by myself in the rain forest, I listened to the birds and the cicadas around me, watched butterflies and humming birds pass me at arms-length, smelled the musky moistness of the rain dripping from the moss – tears sprang to my eyes, tears of gratitude. Gratitude for the ability to share this time with these youth and the other chaperones, gratitude for our St. Paul's community and all you have done and do to support SPY, and gratitude for the beauty around me. I raised my face as I was praying my prayer of gratitude and the sun broke through the clouds and basking me in light and warmth. In that moment, I knew God was with me, blessing me and the work SPY does.

