

The following is adapted with the permission of David Mitchell (CU, 1992), currently living in Lovettsville, VA. Both David and his wife Liz are seeking to define what it means to be biologists and conservationists while being in pursuit of the mission of God and His church on the Earth. David is currently employed as a liaison between the US Fish and Wildlife Service and the Integrated Taxonomic Information System (ITIS)¹.

Hello Dr. Silvius,

Liz sent me the photo of you and Abby on the North Rim. Wow what a beautiful place. I've never been there but certainly hope to visit with Liz one day.

It was a real encouragement to learn about the Center for Bioethics, and a joy to read several entries of your blog (*Oikonomia*). I see Cedarville has an environmental science program now, and that you teach an environmental ethics course. This is all very encouraging because it seems you have to search hard to find Christian Communities concerned about creation care. More on that in a moment.....

David's Life Post Cedarville

I thought I would share how God worked in my life just after leaving Cedarville.

Before leaving Cedarville I asked Pastor Green (the Christian Ministries VP during my time at Cedarville) if he knew any missionaries in the Townsville area of northern Queensland. He knew one: Buddy Smith. Before leaving I sent the Smith's a letter asking about churches in Townsville. I guess the letter arrived late because Buddy called my home in Virginia the day after I departed for Australia! My parents told him when I was arriving, and Buddy came to meet me at the airport. That was really nice. But my plane arrived early and I collected my bags and was out of the airport before he arrived.

Despite the two missed connections we finally made contact and Buddy told me about the Townsville Baptist Church and their youth hostel: Willows Lodge. The Lodge provided accommodations for Christian students attending James Cook, and there was one opening for a male student. Super! It was in a Christian community and cheaper than anything on or off campus. Sign me up! A few days later other students began arriving at the Lodge. One was a botany major. Her name was Liz. It seems botanists are destined to outline the contours of my life.

Some students arrive at University with a research plan because their supervisors have grants to conduct specific investigations. Others like me arrive without research funding and work with a supervisor to draft a research plan and write proposals to obtain funding.

¹ My new job, which I only started about 4 months ago, is working with a taxonomic database. ITIS is the US government sanctioned species checklist. Problem is the database doesn't have all the species needed by the Fish and Wildlife Service. So I am there to make sure all species having some form of legal status are included, and I act as a liaison between ITIS and USFWS. ITIS website: <http://www.itis.gov/>

I thought I would study rainforest birds. To seek inspiration for a plan of study I went to a rainforest research station to volunteer with Simon Conroy, a herpetologist studying ecotonal lizard communities. While checking his crooked transect I strayed from the line of pit-fall traps and was lost. Simon found me soon after I missed the rendezvous, so I was wandering for less than an hour. I left motivated to study community ecology, but in an open forest landscape where birds and landmarks were conspicuous.

In cooperation with my supervisor we decided to do a niche partitioning study with Grass finches (Estrildidae). I developed food abundance and availability methods for these granivorous birds in cooperation with the Golden Shouldered Parrot Recovery team, a group investigating the diet of the critically endangered *Psephotus chrysopterygius* by observing seeds the medium-sized parrot consumed from the ground and sweeping their foraging patches.



I also worked in cooperation with the Gouldian Finch Recovery Team to develop my mist-netting skills and practice extracting seed from finch crops with a small tube. This finch species (*Chloebia gouldiae*) was declining precipitously and one hypothesis for the decline was decreased food availability from increased grazing and altered fire regimes.

After travelling across the wet-dry tropics of Queensland and the Northern Territory I wrote a proposal to conduct a community ecology study of several finch species on the Cape York Peninsula, a place where three species of finches formed very tight mixed-species foraging flocks. The proposal failed. The research site was remote, and the cost of travel and board was too much.

A year went by and I still didn't have funding for a project. Then I benefited from a tragedy. Darryl Reimer and Terriss Walker, ornithologists studying birds in the Gulf of Carpentaria area of Queensland, went missing. Only their small boat was ever found, floating upside down in crocodile infested waters. To honor their effort in conserving threatened and endangered birds the Queensland Department of Environment and Heritage established the Darryl Reimer and Terriss Walker Memorial Fund for Bird Research.



I altered my proposal to study a single threatened subspecies of finch, the Black-throated finch (*Poephila cincta cincta*), and was awarded the grant.

The Black-throated finch is a bird about the size of a Dark-eyed Junco that feeds almost completely on grass seeds found in the savanna. Their sociality is amazing. They form large foraging flocks. In courtship males and females will hop between two branches, and males will do a head-bobbing dance. During nest construction males will present long pieces of grass pinched between their bills. Bonded pairs will allopreen.

I extended my 2 year program an extra year, and had the God-given privilege of chasing and studying the foraging ecology of this charismatic bird. Since leaving Australia this subspecies has held on, but is not recovering. The threat is now nationally recognized, and the bird is endangered under the Commonwealth Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act. In the recently published recovery plan my thesis was referenced heavily.



Creation Care and Communal Discernment

I certainly couldn't have done this without the grace of God, realizing now how my self directed development for research had to be re-aligned with the mission of God.

I always find it reassuring when Christians care for creation in the response to the call of God. It tells me the Spirit is moving individuals to be caretakers of creation, and this is affirming as I try "to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which [I] have been called" (Ephesians 4:1).

These caretakers are usually members of a congregation of believers. But while these individuals have a Spirit affective awareness of creation care, it is rare to find a church making communal decisions to delight in God's creation. I am talking about a community of believers factoring theological and practical matters and making corporate pro-stewardship decisions. The type of decision where the leaders state "it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and us" (Acts 15:28) to steward the earth in this manner, and the announcement is received with great joy (v. 31).

How can the Spirit be seemingly leading more individuals towards creation care, yet not our pneumocratic (Holy Spirit ruled) churches?

This is a question Liz and I discuss often because many of our affections, desires, and gifts cannot be exercised in our local community of believers. This excludes us somewhat from the Kingdom work the church is doing because the particular good we are called to do includes teaching bird banding skills or organizing native pollinator surveys.

A Sunny Autumn Day

The sun is shining on this day in Lovettsville, VA. So I am going outside and soak up some radiation, and smell the fallen leaves and their sweet alchemy of rot. If I were in Cedarville OH on a day like this, I think would take my bike and take advantage of the Prairie Grass Trail.

All the best,

David Mitchell

PS

I see you co-authored a paper with Lynn Holtzmann a few years back. If you are still in contact with him, please tell him hello and that I fondly remember working with him as an intern my senior year. You are welcome to forward my address to him.

Acknowledgments (for thoughts shared above):

If there is any wisdom in what I wrote it came from other sources. On self-directed work versus Spirit-guided vocation I am influenced by the writings of R. Paul Stevens' *Playing Heaven: Rediscovering our purpose as participants in the mission of God*. 2006 Regent College Publishing. For personal and communal discernment see *The Voice of Jesus: Discernment, Prayer and the Witness of the Spirit* by Gordon T. Smith, (2003 InterVarsity Press), especially when he quotes Inagrace Dietterich as follows with respect to the church being a pneumocracy:

The focus here is not on the prerogatives of the designated leaders or on the equal privileges of the members, but on the corporate responsibility for discerning the wisdom and prompting of the Holy Spirit. Thus communities of giftedness are neither autocratic (the rule of one) nor democratic (the rule of the people), but pneumocratic (the rule of the Holy Spirit).

Also, I know I didn't come up with the "alchemy of rot"... [but]... I heard it one morning from Garrison Keillor, apparently on 30 January 2007 to be exact..[from]...the poem "Eager" by Kim Garcia.

Eager By Kim Garcia

Above the snow, a single maple holding forth
its dying flame. Among the feats of Nature:
the wild

greening from dry bulb, sour alchemy of rot, a rusty
handprint of lichen;
the eager

space-seeking species springing up after fire,
as though they took no lesson from destruction
but to begin again, twice as joyful.