

## Interviews

by Judy Perry



...IN THEIR OWN WORDS

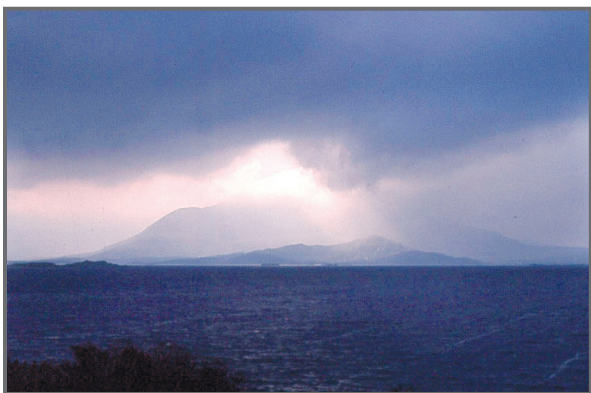
I met Marina when she gave a presentation at The Camden Library. I quickly got her book and read it through, knowing I had found the words to clarify the experiences I had been having over the last few years. My 'turning to earth' is happening through painting rather than reading and writing, but the process seemed much the same. Marina arrived to meet me one morning on her bicycle and we began this conversation.

**Perry:** Tell me how the book came about. Did your interest in environmental issues lead to writing or did you see yourself as a writer who happened to be involved with these issues?

**Schauffler:** The themes in this book are ones that have shaped my life for decades so it's hard to say just when the "project" began. In adolescence, I turned to writing (doing my own and reading the works of others) as a way to try and make sense of our relationship to Earth. I've always been captivated by the beauty and balance inherent in the natural world — how such a wondrous array of creatures and elements enrich one another and evolve. Alongside that awe, though, there's a lingering sadness over our species' seeming incapacity to fit harmoniously within the natural whole — without leaving a wake of waste and destruction.

For me, writing offers a way to help live creatively with that paradox. I see writing and other creative arts as a means of rediscovering our place within the natural whole. The divide between "humans" and "nature" runs very deep in our culture, and it may sound naive to speak of it ever being bridged. I have faith that it can be, but only if we attend to "inner ecology" — the constellation of values and beliefs that shape how we think and act — as well as to the "outer ecology" around us. Writing and other arts provide a means to explore the landscapes of "inner" and "outer" ecology and to share our discoveries with others.

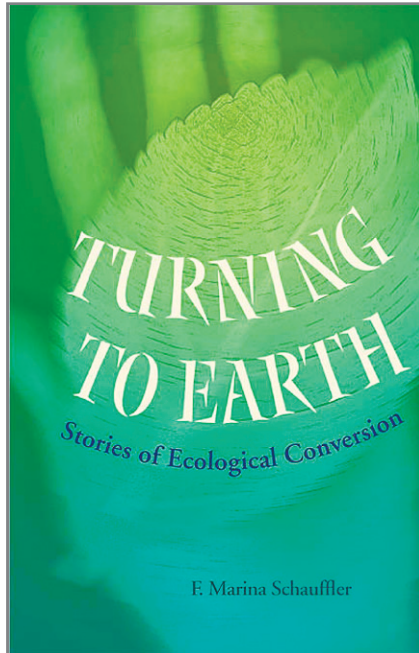
**Perry:** The idea of 'rediscovering our place within the natural whole' suggests a disconnection or loss. What have we lost?



**Schauffler:** We've lost a sense of kinship with the natural world. Rather than feeling like participants in the greater web of life, we tend to see ourselves as "managers" of "the environment" or of "natural resources" — terms that reveal just how detached we've become.

Living in a fast-paced and transient culture makes it hard for people to renew bonds with the natural world. In many primal cultures, those connections are still tangible: people know what constellations are visible in the night sky, where the moon is in its cycle, where their food comes from and where their waste goes. They have a

*Marina Schauffler, Ph.D., is an independent writer and a partner in Headwaters Writing & Design. Her book *Turning To Earth*, just published this spring, explores how the terrain of spirit, psyche and conscience shape our commitment to Earth. Marina also writes essays and articles on such topics as ecological living, voluntary simplicity, and land conservation. Marina lives in midcoast Maine with her husband and son. To learn more about *Turning To Earth* and Marina's upcoming workshops and presentations, visit the website [www.bwaters.com/tte](http://www.bwaters.com/tte).*



great deal of factual knowledge about the flora, fauna and habitats in which they live, and — equally important — they have a heartfelt conviction that they belong there.

**Perry:** In exploring your own inner and outer landscapes how did the writing fit in and what was that process like?

**Schauffler:** Cultivating that deep a sense of belonging is hard in our hyper-

frenetic culture. I find that writing and photography offer a way to slow down and reawaken to where I am. They help to open my senses so that I pay closer attention to "outer" landscapes. That process in turn awakens insights within — which over time shape the contours of my "inner ecology."

**Perry:** That is the process you describe in the book. The cycle of turning to earth is spiral. By slowing down to look at the outer world we gain knowledge about ourselves and that in turn creates change because we have reflected on the experience. The studio process is like that for me and I suppose all aspects of one's life would be affected by slowing down. It enriches whatever it is we do. Do you think that is true?

**Schauffler:** I think that by consciously slowing down we create more room in our lives for joy, wonder, creativity and meaningful communication. Adopting a more mindful pace — whether it's in work, art, domestic duties, travel, or recreation — can enrich our lives immeasurably. I find the experience of biking, for example, SO different than driving — because my pace is slow enough to notice the plants and animals and the small seasonal changes happening around me. In many cases, acting more deliberately not only enriches our own lives but those of other species — because in slowing down we tend to create less of a damaging "ecological wake."

**Perry:** Tell me about the writers you looked at in the book and what you were looking for — what did you set out to do?

**Schauffler:** I wanted to immerse myself in the life stories of writers who had come to put Earth at the center of their spiritual, vocational and political lives. Their creative work clearly grows from their deepening devotion to the natural world and their commitment to sustain its well-being. That's why I came to describe their evolution as a spiritual turn, a "conversion" to Earth.

I hoped to learn, through their stories, what life experiences propelled their turns. Virtually all of them spent a great deal of time outdoors as children, making themselves "at home" in the natural world. Childhood experience clearly laid the foundation for their subsequent writing and activism, but they also made many conscious

choices to foster ecological lives. I see both "will and grace" (to borrow Martin Buber's phrase) as propelling the turn to Earth. There are many deliberate decisions we can make to foster that turn. But there are also moments when synchronous events beyond our control help move us to new levels of awareness and action.

**Perry:** I love the line in the book about cultivating "a listening heart". Do you think we get back to that part of ourselves through a relationship to nature?

**Schauffler:** The natural world invites us to live with heart and senses wide open, experiencing the full wonder and poignancy of being. That perspective is easier to hold when we're outdoors. In my experience, it's much harder to sustain "a listening heart" in the thick of our materialistic and disconnected culture — where we unwittingly participate in so much destruction and degradation. It takes a conscious practice, I think, to hear your heart's leadings and cultivate a life intimately bound to place — when the current of the culture pushes one toward ever-greater activity, mobility, consumption and speed.

**Perry:** It seems that a relationship to nature and childhood experiences can shape one's destiny. I've often seen how an artist's mature body of work is shaped by life experience. Many factors shape our destinies but do you think a relationship to nature in particular fosters a creative and spiritual life?

**Schauffler:** I do believe that a profound connection to the natural world can transform our lives — revitalizing our souls and imaginations and expanding our sense of community beyond our own species.

That bond, as you suggest, often begins in childhood — having the freedom to play outdoors in natural settings where one's imagination can fuse with the landscape. Many of us had that when we were young, and took it for granted. Decades later, we come to realize how priceless a gift that was. For children today, I think it's often much harder because they have less time, less freedom (given concerns for their safety), and fewer natural places that they can claim as their own. I worry that if we fail to provide them with chances to make themselves "at home" in the natural world early in life, they may not be able to forge that vital bond later.

In *The Sense of Wonder*, Rachel Carson writes of how critical it is for adults to share in children's explorations outdoors. She reassures us that we need not be trained naturalists to go outdoors and open ourselves to what is there. What's vital, Carson suggests, is cultivating an enduring feeling for the beauty and mystery inherent in the natural world. That sense of wonder, I believe, can be a faithful guide throughout our days.

*Judy Perry is an Artist, Writer and Consultant. Her paintings reflect an interest in relationship and connection while the writing reflects an ongoing interest in how we create our lives as artists. Her work can be seen at Gallery 407 in Rockland and on line at: [www.judithperry.com](http://www.judithperry.com). [jppaintr@midcoast.com](mailto:jppaintr@midcoast.com).*

