

Help! Let Me Out Of This Damned City

If only I could so live and so serve the world that after me there should never again be birds in cages.

- Isak Dinesen (pen name of Karen Blixen), author (1885-1962)

Is she really concerned about birds in cages or is this a metaphor for something much larger? Both could be true at once.

Birds are kept in cages because people want to be able to see birds daily. These are the only wild animals that are permitted in city residences.

If birds were no longer allowed to be caged and people still wanted to be able to see them, they would have to create natural environments in urban areas where birds other than pigeons and gulls could safely live and propagate.

That would mean planting many more trees than presently exist in many cities, building more parks that are larger than will hold a playground for small children and perhaps creating some bird-friendly locations for nesting.

Ironically, the kinds of wild animals that live in cities today tend to be those that we don't want, such as rats, raccoons and some skunks. Many large cities have more rats than people and about one raccoon for every four people. Most of the time these are out of sight, so city dwellers are not aware of their presence unless they become a problem.

Why would anyone care as much about birds as Karen Blixen does? Big city environments, especially those with a great number of living units above ground level, have created a disconnect between humans and nature. Children grow up believing that meat and produce must be manufactured in the back rooms at supermarkets. That there is never enough room for cars on the streets or in parking areas.

That people should naturally secure their doors with multiple locks because anyone could break in with only a couple of security measures. That many people will be mean to you, even bully you, no matter what you do unless you are as hard-hearted as they are. That no one cares about you or loves you except a precious few in your family, if you are lucky.

Many studies have shown that people who live most of their lives above ground--such as in apartment buildings and office towers--feel less connection with nature than those who have regular contact with the ground and who can see ground when they look out their windows.

Today in North America, though people live in all parts of the USA and Canada, 85 percent of the populations of those countries live in urban environments. Few people have regular contact with what those who live outside of the city would call nature. Those who live in cottage areas can testify how very little city people know about nature and the countryside and its inhabitants when they escape the city to their cottages. They abuse nature by trying to turn a natural environment into a suburban type property.

The Iraq war pits military personnel who have lived most of their lives in cities and who have been trained by superiors who dictate high tech and sophisticated ways to fighting the enemy against people who are mostly "of the land," even those who live in a big city like Baghdad. In a guerilla war where terrorism is the main weapon of one participant, the side that knows the land and its features will present a challenge that foreign city-soldiers can never overcome.

How can a city be made more countrified? For one thing, the need to conserve energy has resulted in many large city buildings with flat roofs turning these into gardens with flowers, trees and birds, and people who love every minute they spend in these rooftop Shangri-las.

We can develop more ideas about how people can engage in activities that are outdoors, such as devoting some parts of parks to garden plots where people can have permits to plant real flowers and real vegetables. These can also be built on the roofs of buildings with flat tops, resulting in a cooling effect in summer and a warming effect in

the minds of those who use them. (They clean the air as an added benefit.)

Just like their ancestors did. Those ancestors didn't need birds in cages to feel a part of nature. They lived on the ground and felt part of it every day.

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