

THE UNHOLY TRINITY

CONVENIENCE

INDIFFERENCE

LAZINESS

John E. (Jack) Swanson

Garbage Theology  
Findings of a Garbologist/Theologian/Environmentalist

John E. (Jack) Swanson

Archaeology has been a boon to the understanding of the Bible by giving insights into the language and culture during the time of the writing of scripture.

A science that has emerged today using basic archaeological principles is called "garbology." It is the study of the language, culture, and behavior of the contemporary world by sifting through and analyzing smelly, pasty, moldy, and wet trash.

Garbologists have an advantage over the archaeologists. They can interview the human trash producers. It is here that the study of garbage makes its best contribution regarding human behavior. The garbologists' most significant find is that what their research in the landfills reveals is not congruent with what people say they are doing.<sup>1</sup>

It is the intention of this essay to dig into our garbage to learn what it tells us about our attitudes toward natural resources and how it reflects what we believe. It will also suggest a revision of our understanding and treatment of garbage based on an understanding of the Christian faith.

Garbage is something everyone produces. It is estimated that in the United States each person produces 3.5 pounds per day. It is a viable source of information regarding human behavior.

In the garbage can or landfill we see evidence of our insatiable desire for convenience, our indifference to the other (both human and non-human), and

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<sup>1</sup> William Rathje and Collen Murphy, Rubbish! The Archaeology of Garbage, (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1992), 245.

personal laziness. Values that have been shaped by and emerged from such behavior have led to the disregard for and disruption of the balance of the natural world, glorified the use rather than the love of the natural world, and ignored the necessity of biodiversity.

In a land fill we find these items:

Paper . . . . .	41%
Yard/Garden Waste . . . . .	18%
Metal . . . . .	9%
Rubber, Leather, Other . . . . .	8%
Food Waste . . . . .	8%
Glass . . . . .	8%
Plastic . . . . .	7%
Other. . . . .	1% <sup>2</sup>

What might this tell us about our attitudes toward the environment?

1. We live with abundance. We take more than we need. We have more than we need. We confuse our wants and our needs. We have a compulsion to consume.<sup>3</sup> Landfills show that when there is a shortage of a commodity there is more waste and the greater the variety in a diet the more the spoilage.<sup>4</sup>

2. We impact our natural world with poisons to create a "perfect" piece of fruit and throw the produce in the dumpster behind the market place when it "spoils." We will pay the price for unblemished produce.

3. We are heavily dependent upon technology. As magnificent as this is, Thomas Berry warns, "The immediate danger is not possible nuclear war, but actual industrial plundering."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Paul Connet, Waste Management: As if the Future Mattered (St. Lawrence University, 1988), 3.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Berry, The Dream of the Earth (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1988), 115.

<sup>4</sup> Rathje and Murphy, op. cit., 62.

<sup>5</sup> Berry, op. cit., 72.

4. We are reluctant to acknowledge limits upon our system, and we wear blinders to the population explosion. This becomes apparent when we begin to run out of space to put garbage.

5. Advertising and packaging contribute to products in the landfill. They indicate our obsession with health, sanitation, and the safety of products. Tamper-proofing, quality, and cleanliness are all "good" reasons for packaging.

6. A corollary to the above is what advertising and packaging tell us about the competition in the market place, the lack of trust in the human community, and the absence of personal discipline with regard to the way things that belong to others are handled.

7. Communication in the written form has taken over. Over 40% of the landfill is paper. Ironically, even the environmental groups produce volumes of printed matter to campaign "against the use of certain highly visible and famously odious forms of garbage." <sup>6</sup>

8. Products have short-term use. How often does a polystyrene cup get used before it is pitched?

9. A manicured environment is important to many people. Grass clippings and dead leaves in plastic bags fill landfills. For the sake of appearance we deny one type of natural cycle and create a problem where recycling is virtually impossible. Measures are being taken to minimize this problem.

10. It appears that science exists for the benefit of technology, the welfare of the human species' medical needs, and the fulfillment of the "good life". It is just within recent history science is being directed toward the care of the earth.

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<sup>6</sup> Rathje and Murphy, op. cit., 106.



Let me suggest a theology that emerges from the garbage dump.

1. God is the "good life" in whatever way that is derived for each individual. In this paradigm God is providential. Faith is grounded in the "goodness" of God. The "good life" might be defined as that which is healthy, sanitary, convenient, safe, and cooperative. "Good" is an extrinsic, not an intrinsic value.

2. We believe in our abilities to manipulate the earth. There is sufficiency of resources and the technological skills to adapt the resources. Good stewardship of the earth is expeditiously and rapidly moving natural resources to the trash heap.

3. Evil is more powerful than goodness and is perceived as succeeding. We fear of destruction, invasion of privacy, and contamination. Thus, we strive to rid ourselves of what is wicked to us as efficiently as possible.

4. Time and space are for one's use. Each person decides one's values for oneself. A common criteria is that time is finite (the end will be soon) and space is infinite (there is more than enough, and it will take care of itself).

5. Hope is grounded in an earth that can supply and technical skills that can discover and invent. Comfort and convenience are words used in place of "salvation." When the word "salvation" is used it refers to something beyond this life.

6. The sacred is that which is unblemished and manicured. The profane is the unkept which must be pushed aside. (This is what the garbage person collects.) A sacred space is a setting which is garbage free for communion with God.

7. The creative and redemptive processes are for the benefit of humans

to compensate for the sinfulness of the human species. Sin is inadequacy rather than rebellion against God and God's creation.

8. Stewardship is measured and motivated by the Gross National Product.

9. God's creation is to be consumed.

10. The use and value of non-human entities are determined by the user rather than the used.

For the Christian, theology can be defined as a dialogue engaging the concrete world and the teachings of the Christian faith. One could call it the intersecting of the divine, the human, and the non-human. How might we perceive garbage from this point of view?

1. What God creates is good. (Note Genesis 1 and I Timothy 4:4.) In the natural order that which is discarded by one organism is useful for another organism. We must see garbage as a part of the "goodness" of God's world. Convenience as the "good" must be challenged.

2. There are no sinless alternatives. Humans do not have ultimate knowledge of the consequences of any deed. To think we can dispose of garbage and forever never need be concerned with it is nonsense. Humans are committed to managing garbage, both what we create and what others create.

3. We believe Jesus Christ is the reconciler of the world, restoring relationships. This is the intention of God. Garbage must be treated within God's reconciliation plan. We do it by recycling (returning to the natural cycle what we have used) and restreaming (making second and third uses of the items humans produce that cannot be returned to the natural cycle). We cannot be indifferent to anything we produce.

4. What does it mean to love our neighbor? It means to reduce the amount of garbage we create and to consider others when seeking solutions to

the disposal of garbage. For this, an attitudinal change is needed. Humans have treated garbage and where it is disposed of as the despised, the unwanted. We must learn to live in community with all of creation. This requires our effort not our ease.

As I look at a garbage dump or even my own garbage can, three Bible stories speak to me.

The first is the story of the rich man (Matthew 19:16-26) who asked Jesus what he should do to attain eternal life. Jesus instructed him to give up his possessions. However, he went away grieving because he had great abundance. To obey Jesus would mean to do without his conveniences.

The second is the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31). When I think of Lazarus I picture poor people in Third World countries scavengering the garbage dumps for food with dogs at their heels. The chasm between the two men was not poverty and wealth but the rich man's indifference.

The third is the parable of the man who entrusts his property to three slaves before he goes on a journey (Matthew 25:14-30). Two of the slaves put their talents to work while the third slave buries his in the ground. When the master returns he commends the two slaves and condemns the third for his laziness. The most repeated reason for putting things into the garbage is because one does not want to make an effort to do anything else.

What do you see when you look in your garbage can? Does it tell you what you really believe about God, the care of the earth, and the values that are shaped by convenience, indifference, and laziness? It is time Christians make a greater effort to be congruent about what we believe, say, and do. We can start with our garbage.

## SIDEBARS

John E. (Jack) Swanson

The church teaches a sacrificial style of life to people who practice a lifestyle of consumerism. This is both a crisis of faith and a challenge for conversion.

The unholy trinity that leads to environmental destruction: indifference, laziness, and convenience born of abundance.

Three sins inherent in technology which our society must recognize and combat: mastery, myopicism, and messianism. Mastery is the idea that humans can "control" the natural world. Myopia is disregarding an inclusive and catholic world view. Messianism is the notion that technology can "save" the world.

Garbage is where human history and natural history converge.

file: JACK\LSTC\SIDEBARS

revised: 11/ 6/93

file: JACK\LSTC\ESSAY.ALT

revised: 9/30/93

## Alternate Conclusion

As I look at a garbage dump or even my own garbage can, three Bible stories speak to me:

Convenience - the rich man who asks Jesus about eternal life, Matthew 19:16-26. He grieved over his abundance and what it provided.

Indifference - the Rich Man and Lazarus, Luke 16:19-31. Picture the poor people in Third World countries scavengering the dumps for food with dogs at their heels.

Laziness - the land owner who entrusts property to three servants, Matthew 25:14-30. The lazy servant digs a hole.

What do you see when you look in your garbage can? Does it tell you what you really believe about God, the care of the earth, and the values that are shaped by convenience, indifference, and laziness? It is time Christians make a greater effort to be congruent about what we believe, say, and do. We can start with our garbage.



1100 EAST 55TH STREET • CHICAGO, ILLINOIS 60615-5199 • TELEPHONE: AREA 312 / 753-0700 • FAX: 312 / 753-0782

## LUTHERAN SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY AT CHICAGO

6. October 1993

Rev. Jack Swanson  
Box 239  
Oregon, IL 61061

Dear Pastor Swanson:

We were so pleased to receive your manuscript this week. It is a fine piece of writing and provides a solid, thought-provoking overview of the subject of "garbage" theology. Thank you so much for what will be a real highlight in the manual.

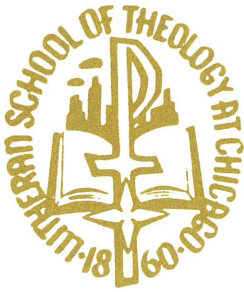
Our business office informs us that in order to compensate our writers properly, we must have a completed W-4 form (see enclosed) for the federal government. Please accept my apologies for not informing you of this technicality in the beginning. Recent changes in the income tax laws, of which I was unaware, require this formality. As soon as your completed W-4 form is received, we can process and send you your writers fee. We will also be sending you a free copy of the manual when it is available in mid-February.

We appreciate your patience and thank you again for your participation.

Sincerely,

  
Tina B. Krause





1100 EAST 55TH STREET • CHICAGO, ILLINOIS 60615-5199 • TELEPHONE: AREA 312 / 753-0700 • FAX: 312 / 753-0782

## LUTHERAN SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY AT CHICAGO

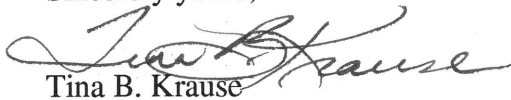
14. September 1993

Rev. Jack Swanson  
Box 239  
Oregon, IL 61061

Dear Pastor Swanson:

Just a note to express again how glad we are that you have agreed to contribute to Care of the Earth: An Environmental Resource Manual for Church Leaders. For your information I have enclosed an up-dated version of the proposed table of contents with a listing of all those who have agreed to contribute to this point. I look forward to receiving your manuscript on or before October 1, 1993 for which we are glad to offer you a writer's fee of \$100 and one free copy of the manual when it is published. Please let me know if these arrangements are satisfactory or if there are any concerns or questions you have.

Sincerely yours,

  
Tina B. Krause

SEP 20 1993

## WRITER'S GUIDELINES

### **Length:**

Please write an essay/article of between 1,000 and 1,500 words on the assigned topic. The titles suggested are working titles and alternate suggestions will be welcomed.

### **Content:**

We are asking you to write an essay or article that provides a general overview of and introduction to the assigned subject.

Depending on the type of essay or article you have been asked to write, our goal is to offer a general description of either:

- 1) the various points of view and issues related to the subject about which you have been asked to write, or,
- 2) the specific project, program or person about which you have been asked to write.

We realize that it is impossible to provide a complete treatment of any of these subjects or projects in less than 1,500 words, and we are not asking you to try. Imagine yourself to be a professional leader, a congregational pastor or a director of Christian education, who is just getting acquainted with these issues, or wants to learn more. Your essay or article and accompanying bibliography, should be a succinct and general introduction or update for such a person.

In addition to the essay or article, please submit a briefly annotated bibliography of your top ten (give or take) resources for further study or networking in the subject area you have treated. Include any resources you have quoted or referenced in your article/essay. This bibliography may include print, curricular, audiovisual, organizational or human resources. Be sure to include for each listing the complete title, author or editor, publisher or producer, copyright and, as appropriate, contact address and phone and any other pertinent information, along with a brief annotation of the purpose and content and/or focus of the resource.

Finally, we invite you to submit any quotes that relate to the subject or theme of the manual for use as sidebar copy. Include any quotes that you have found particularly inspirational, thought-provoking or otherwise pithy. These quotes may be humorous or sobering (we need both). They may be from scripture or from sacred writings of any religious or philosophical tradition; hymns or popular songs; lines from poetry, prose or drama; excerpts from speeches, historical or contemporary; include quotes from scientists, theologians, homemakers, or your three-year old nephew or granddaughter (be creative!), as long as they are documented and consistent with the emphasis of the manual and/or the theme of your essay or article. Please be sure to document all sources completely as outlined below.

### **Format:**

It is asked that any conclusions submitted, whether original or referenced, be consistent with the social statements and stated mission of the ELCA. We particularly encourage all writers to review the ELCA social statement under review at this time called *Caring for Creation*. Please contact Tina or the ELCA Division for Church in Society at the Lutheran Center in Chicago if you need to obtain your own copy. Articles and essays should reflect awareness of and sensitivity to multicultural and global perspectives and make consistent use of inclusive language. We will be using the Chicago Manual of Style and the NRSV for all scripture passages, unless otherwise indicated.

Please document carefully any and all quotes from or references to published or otherwise copyrighted works, even if they are your own. We must get permission to reprint any such material. Your careful documentation, even to photocopying the title page and page (or pages) from which the reference or quote was taken, saves us all a great deal of time.

Please include with your submission a brief vitae including name (the way you want it to appear in print), address, phone, current occupation, and past and on-going projects or published works in this area of concern.

Submit a hard copy of your manuscript double-spaced, typed or jet/laser-printed on white paper. (Sorry, hand-written or dot-matrix is just too hard to read.) If you have the capacity, you may send your manuscript in on a 3 1/2 inch disk. Please include a hardcopy of your manuscript in any case in the event that we cannot access your disk for some reason. Indicate whether or not you want the disk returned and we will do our best to get it back to you. You may also submit your manuscript via Ecunet, but please be sure to have a hard copy as back-up. My Ecunet inbox name is: Tina Krause.

**Copy deadline:**

All copy is due between September 15, 1993 and October 1, 1993 . As with any project like this, there may be the need for some editing and re-writing of copy. Since our timeline is very tight we hope you will be prompt in meeting the deadline and understanding of any changes we feel it necessary to make or to ask you to make.

Feel free to contact the me, by phone, mail or Ecunet, if you have any questions or concerns at any point about your assignment.

**Tina Krause**  
**LSTC**  
**1100 E. 55th Street**  
**Chicago, IL 60615**  
**Office: 312/753-0740**  
**Home: 312/363-6021**

## **Assessments and Models for a Green Church**

**Rationales and methods for analyzing energy conservation in buildings and materials**

Writer: Job Ebenezer

**An Introduction to Comprehensive Environmental Inventories**

Writer: Steve Perkins

**Entering the Green Zone: An action model for congregations and homes**

Writer: David Rhoads

**Ten Commandments for Green Congregations**

Writer: William Pitcher

## **Advocacy and Care of the Earth**

**Owls, trees, and human need: An overview of environmental advocacy issues and strategies of the ELCA**

Writer: Mike Isensee

**Interfaith Coalition on Corporate Responsibility**

Writer: Arianne Van Buren

**Care of the earth and the rural reality**

Writer: Shannon Jung or Dean Freiburger

**Global perspectives on the environmental crisis**

Writer: Gerald Barney

## **Stories of Action from the Grassroots**

**The story of People Against Hazardous Landfill Sites: An Interview with Susan Lynch**

Writer:

**From the Barn to the 'Burb: Subscription Farming**

Permission granted to reprint article or excerpts of article in May 1993 "Lutheran" about Dan Guenther of Minnesota and community supported agriculture

**Bob Klonowski and the City of Chicago**

Writer: Bob Klonowski

**Urban Greening and Mrs. (Gloria) Luster of Baltimore**

Writer:

**Environmental and Social Justice: Catherine Sneed of San Francisco**

Writer:

**Sidebars: Brief stories or descriptions of congregational programs, projects and other activities promoting environmental awareness, justice and advocacy**

Solicited through "Seeds for the Parish" and elsewhere by editor

**Annotated regional listing of organizations, periodicals**

Writer: Wanda Bremel



LUTHERAN OUTDOOR MINISTRIES CENTER  
Oregon, IL 61061

To: David Rhoads

From: Jack Swanson

Date: October 5, 1993

Time: 8:49am

Re: Recent Observations Regarding the Chief Seattle Statement

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I remember being around you one day when you were looking for the source of the Chief Seattle statement. You might find the book by Suzuki and Knutson, Wisdom of the Elders - Honoring Sacred Native Visions of Nature to be helpful. They bring some research to light that brings the authorship into question.

You might already have heard about this and read the book. In case you haven't I am sharing it with you.

Hope things are going well with LSTC

Peace.

LUTHERAN OUTDOOR MINISTRIES CENTER  
Oregon, IL 61061

To: Tina Krause

From: Jack Swanson

Date: October 5, 1993

Time: 8:44am

Re: Addition to Bibliography

=====

The other day I ran across these three books which I felt could be included. The one by Suzuki and Knutson is extremely important because the church has in many ways endorsed the Chief Seattle quotation. They bring some research to light that brings the authorship into question.

I also hope that you realized that because of the length of my essay I gave you the option of an alternate conclusion. Sorry about the length.

Peace.

## PROJECT OUTLINE

### WORKING TITLE

Care of the Earth: An Environmental Resource Manual for Church Leaders

### PURPOSE

The purpose of this manual is to offer professional leaders in congregations rationales, practical suggestions and resource information for increasing environmental awareness, advocacy and action in the congregation.

### AUDIENCE

Professional leaders in congregations, including clergy, associates in ministry and other church staff of the ELCA, specifically for the (February) 1994 LSTC Professional Leaders Conference: Care of the Earth.

### PRODUCTION AND COPYRIGHT

Produced by an editorial board consisting of the David Rhoads and Robert Conrad and Joan Schwander (faculty and students of the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago), Jim Schwab (of the American Planning Association and chair of the Metro Chicago Synod committee on environmental issues), and Tina Krause (editor and project manager), in cooperation with Job Ebenezer and staff of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Division of Church in Society.

### SPECIFICATIONS

Size: 8 1/2 x 11, black on white, with simple graphics

Number of pages: 100-150

Cover: Separate, front and back, two color-black and one PMS

Binding: Spiral or velo

Print run: 500 (estimated)

Distribution: Initial distribution at LSTC 1994 Professional Leaders Conference; further distribution to be determined.

### TIMELINE

Printing deadline: January 15, 1994

Copy due: September 15, 1993 - October 1, 1993

## CONTENTS (Tentative)

### **Cover**

#### **Title page and table of contents**

#### **Introduction and Dedication**

The Life and Work of Joseph Sitler

Writer: Linda-Marie Delloff

One to two pages outlining the purpose and content of the manual.

Writer: Tina Krause

### **Preface**

Overview of the Environmental Crisis

Writer: Paul Lutz

## **Part I: And God saw that it was good...Exploring the Green Mind and Spirit**

### **Biblical views of creation and stewardship of the earth**

Writer: Diane Jacobson

### **Theological perspectives on the care of creation**

Writer: Paul Santmire

### **Creation spirituality**

Writer: Jay Rochelle

### **Care of the Earth and Culture**

Writer: Gordon Straw

### **Environmental ethics**

Writer: Martha Stortz

### **Environmental peace and justice**

Writer: Jim Schwab

### **Garbage theology**

Writer: Jack Swanson

## **Part II: What then shall we do...Developing Awareness, Assessment, Advocacy and Other Models for Environmental Action through the Congregation**

### **Learning to Be Green**

#### **Educating for awareness in the congregation**

Writer: Lib Caldwell

#### **Church camps as environmental education sites**

Writer: Mark Burkhardt

### **Worship in a Green Congregation**

#### **To the glory of God: Care of the earth as worship**

Writer: Jenny Edinger

#### **Preaching Green**

Writer: Paul Harms

#### **Earthly elements: The sacraments and the celebration and renewal of creation**

Writer: Craig Mueller

#### **For what shall we pray? Care of the earth and the devotional life**

Writer: Jay Rochelle



Tina B. Krause  
Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago  
1100 East 55th Street  
Chicago, IL 60615

5. August 1993

Rev. Jack Swanson  
Box 239  
Oregon, IL 61061

Dear Pastor Swanson,

I am writing today to invite you to consider contributing to a special resource manual that is being produced in conjunction with the 1994 LSTC Professional Leaders Conference: Care of the Earth. The working title of this resource is Care of the Earth: An Environmental Resource Manual for Church Leaders. You were recommended by Job Ebenezer and David Rhoads and we sincerely hope you will be able to participate in this special project.

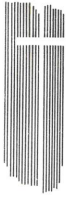
I have enclosed for your information an outline of the project, a tentative table of contents, a listing of suggested writers, and writer's guidelines. Please be aware that all titles are working titles, and that the stated guidelines are general and intended to be negotiable. Please call me, or expect a call from me soon, to discuss any questions, including questions about content, deadlines and honoraria, you may have. Since our timeline is so short, we hope you can tell us as soon as possible whether or not you are able to contribute.

Sincerely,



Tina B. Krause, Managing Editor

LUTHERAN  
OUTDOOR  
MINISTRIES  
CENTER



August 13, 1993

Tina B. Krause  
LSTC  
1100 East 55th Street  
Chicago, IL 60615

Dear Tina Krause,

Thank you for the invitation to participate in this venture. I will be pleased to do that. Chances are I will take some of the material from the paper I wrote for the D. Min project.

Peace,

Jack Swanson