



# Planted

*A Story of Creation, Calling, and Community*

LEAH KOSTAMO  
with a foreword by Eugene H. Peterson

PLANTED



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Written and illustrated by  
LEAH KOSTAMO

Foreword by  
EUGENE PETERSON



CASCADE Books • Eugene, Oregon

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Manufactured in the U.S.A.

For Markku  
and in memory of Frank and Dorothy Richardson

The real work of planet-saving will be small, humble, and humbling and (insofar as it involves love) pleasing and rewarding. Its jobs will be too many to count, too many to report, too many to be publicly noticed or rewarded, too small to make anyone rich or famous.

WENDELL BERRY

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## Foreword

WHEN I SAT DOWN to read the manuscript that became this book, I intended to read for twenty minutes and then go back to working on my own manuscript. Adrenalin had been building since I got out of bed. I was itching to continue. But there was to be no other work that day. Five hours later I turned the last page with a sense that I was participating in the remarkable story of people who ventured into seriously caring for creation in a highly unusual way—establishing an Environmental Center for the care of creation, *God's creation*. With neither money nor experience they managed to acquire ten acres of land on the Little Campbell River in the Lower Mainland of British Columbia.

Eight years later, at the time this book was written, evidence had accumulated that confirmed the authenticity of what had been taking place. This book tells the story. The Center has welcomed thousands of visitors, as well as hundreds of interns, day campers, and school kids. It has grown literally tons of organic vegetables, served thousands of meals, and conducted conservation research on a myriad of species. All of this has taken place within an intentionality of staying true to the original convictions regarding creation care, hospitality, and justice.

Not the least of the excellencies of this book is the vivid liveliness and skilled artistry of the writing itself. Writers who immerse themselves in God's creation, "God's grandeur," seem to absorb some of that very grandeur into the way they write—the rhythm of the prose, the freshness of the metaphors. As I read

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Leah Kostamo's witness I found myself in the company of the likes of Henry Thoreau and John Muir, Aldo Leopold and Annie Dillard, Wendell Berry and Bill McKibben, Rick Bass and Terry Tempest Williams among many others.

This is a book full of good stories told by a good storyteller. Instead of making a pitch or sermon or propagandistic tract on creation care, Leah has woven everything into a narrative, a story with characters and movement and relationship, and Jesus. Hers is an inviting witness to firsthand immersion in this creation that is "never spent."

The grandparent Environmental Center of what is described here was begun in 1983 by Peter and Miranda Harris. Peter was an Anglican priest serving a parish in Liverpool. In the course of his priestly work he developed an interest and passion in caring for and entering into the beauties and intricacies of God's creation. He observed that a widespread disconnect had developed in contemporary Christian communities at the critical point in the Lord's prayer where we pray "on earth *as* it is in heaven"—a prayer that *heaven* gets embodied, lived out, cared for, and enjoyed on *earth*—in our neighborhoods, our wetlands, our streets, our mountains, our rivers and oceans, in the air we breathe and, yes, in the birds as we learn their names and habits.

The first Environmental Center was established by Peter and Miranda in Portugal, located at Quinta da A Rocha—farm on the rock. A Rocha (pronounced *a-raw-sha*) at present has national organizations in twenty countries on five continents.

I have been in conversation and prayer with some of the leaders of A Rocha now for more than twenty years, observing the ways in which they do their work. In an arena frequently marked by controversy and acrimony, A Rocha is cheerful, winsome, exuding gratitude. I continue to be struck by two common characteristics that are given fresh expression in this book. To begin with, modesty, a humility that permeates A Rocha culture. There is nothing grandiose about what they do—it is all local, personal, relational, hospitable. As Leah Kostamo notes in her storytelling, their Center does not have a chapel as one might expect of a

Christian organization; it has a table, an altar at which they share the food they grow. And then there is such joy. These people are not motivated by anger or fear or guilt. They are quite evidently glad to be in on even the smallest and out-of-the-way venues in which they can participate in caring for God's creation.

Maybe a major contribution this book can make in the Christian community these days is to challenge the widespread reluctance, a procrastination to embrace creation care—right now. My mother guided and motivated me in wonderful ways to embrace the entire gospel with energy and joy but with one unfortunate exception, creation. Whenever we happened to be outside under Montana skies on a clear night she would often say, “Oh Eugene, I can hardly wait to get to heaven and learn the names of all the stars.” One night we were talking together at the edge of the mountain lake where my dad had built a summer cabin. The night was clear and the sky was a symphony of stars. She said it again.

I was seventeen at the time and with just a trace of adolescent impatience replied, “Mother, why wait? We can start right now. Look, that's Orion the hunter. And over there is Deneb. Do you see those two bears, Ursus Major and Ursus Minor? And you really need to make friends with the Pleiades, the seven sisters—Job mentions them.”

Now she was the impatient one, shrugging me off, “I can't be bothered right now; I'll wait for heaven.”

But why wait. Why not *on earth* as it is in heaven? Yes, why not?

Eugene H. Peterson  
Author of *The Message*  
Professor Emeritus of Spiritual Theology  
Regent College, Vancouver, B.C.



## Acknowledgments

THE THEME OF COMMUNITY that runs through the work of A Rocha runs also through the writing of this book. I am deeply indebted to many colleagues, friends and supporters—not only for living the history described in these pages with me, but also for helping shape the written words of that lived story into something readable.

I am grateful to Peter and Miranda Harris: first, for having the audacious vision to start a bird observatory on the Portuguese coast all those years ago; secondly, for having the courage to allow A Rocha to grow into the big, beautiful, multicultural thing it has become; finally for their cheerful companionship along the Way.

I am grateful to Loren and Mary Ruth Wilkinson who have kept the flame of creation care alive in the Christian church these past thirty years and whose friendship has shaped both my life and thinking.

A particular expression of gratitude is owed to my colleagues, past and present, who have trekked with us down the A Rocha trail in Canada and have labored faithfully and at great sacrifice. They inspire me. In rough order of appearance in A Rocha's history they are: Karin Boisclair-Joly, Patrick Lilley, Ruth DesCotes, Rick Faw, Heather Robinson, Cindy Verbeek, Jessica Brouwer, Glen Carlson, Tiina Hildebrandt, Brian Marek, Sarah Willer, Stephanie Leusink, Paul and Angela Neufeld, Henry and Elma Martens, Jay and Milissa Ewing, Susan Davies, Elizabeth McKitrick, Katie Withrow, Milissa Oaks, Sandra Baird, Steve Kroeker, Jennifer Kornelsen, Agatha Kube, Samuel Chiu, Nick and Susan Pharoah, Luke

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Wilson, Paul Abell, David and Shauna Anderson, Ute Lindelauf, Matt and Roxy Humphrey, Christy and Sean Juteau, Queenie Bei, Sandra Gaglardi, Bethany and Josh Paetkau, Steven Mueller and Rob DesCotes.

Likewise I am grateful for the various “teams” of folks who keep A Rocha aloft: for the wonderful and skilled men and women who comprise our Board of Directors. Their gifts of wisdom and prayer undergird this ministry and make it work; for the team of forty or so “Kostamo staff supporters” who have prayed, given financially and literally kept food on the Kostamo table so that we could be their hands and feet in the work of creation care; and for the wider circle of A Rocha friends across North America who give of their time and finances in faithful partnership.

I stand in awe of the tenacity and generosity of Irwin and Harriet Leitz, the Neufeld family, and Henry and Elma Martens, who all, in their own ways, have dreamt dreams for their land and have taken courageous steps to make those dreams a reality.

I am grateful to those who encouraged and advised me in the writing process, particularly Denise Unrau, Deana Strom, Luci Shaw, Peter and Miranda Harris, Loren Wilkinson, and Karen Hollenbeck. Thank you to Karin Boisclair-Joly for her help with the section on the Little Campbell River in chapter four, to Melissa Ong for her reflections on A Rocha Kenya’s ASSETS program included in chapter nine, and to Anne Smith for the concluding sentence in chapter eleven.

I wish to thank my literary agent Blair Jacobsen for his unwavering encouragement and his tenacity to see my manuscript arrive in the right publishing hands. I also wish to thank the good people at Wipf and Stock and my editor, Rodney Clapp, in particular for their excellent and efficient handling of this project.

Finally, I wish to acknowledge those nearest and dearest who hold me in a circle of friendship and care. Thank you to my farmmates at Kingfisher Farm who consistently expect good will and have given so much grace when I’ve typed at my computer while they’ve pulled weeds. Thank you to my family: to my mother for taking me to Orcas Island, my father for telling such good stories, and

## *Acknowledgments*

my brother for building forts in the woods. Through these acts both my life and these pages have been shaped. I am deeply indebted to Markku's parents, Seppo and Annikki Kostamo, who together have logged more volunteer hours for A Rocha than any other couple in Canada. I honor my sister Deana, my truest friend and the wisest person I know. Her encouragement was the springboard from which this book was launched. I salute my amazing girls, Maya and Bryn, who remind me every day what it means to be truly joyful. Finally, a deep thank you to Markku, my love, who has taken me by the hand and journeyed with me to places I would have feared to have gone alone. I can't imagine a better traveling companion.





# 1



## The Study of Home

*When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the Universe.*

JOHN MUIR

I GREW UP IN Arizona. And though the arid climate of the region conjures images of dusty roads and adobe houses frocked with cacti, our three-bedroom rancher was, in fact, surrounded by a lush lawn that fronted a wide, paved street. The housing development in which we lived had been carved out of a retired orange and grapefruit orchard, requiring our yards to be bermed to contain the monthly influx of irrigation drawn from a centuries-old canal system originally built by the Hohokam Native Americans. With the irrigation came crayfish and even the occasional real fish. As soon as the water started bubbling, my sister, brother, and I ran to retrieve our inflatable toy war canoe—an ironic tribute to

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the canoe-less Hohokam. We spent hours paddling around the back yard, hunting for aquatic life, splashing each other with little plastic paddles. That monthly deluge was a wonder. The rest of the month, life was dry and deserty.

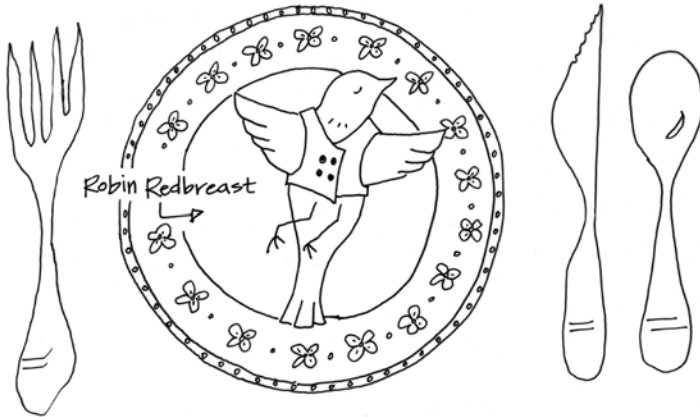
But each year, for four glorious weeks, we escaped the desert. Every summer, from the time I was eight until I was eighteen, my mom shoehorned three kids and a mountain of luggage and coolers into our two-tone station wagon and made the four-day pilgrimage to Orcas Island, where my grandparents lived. (My father, who couldn't spare so much time off work, parachuted in for a week or two and then grudgingly headed back to the heat to make a living.)

Every bit of those summers was magical. The temperate rain forest of the island was a tangled green so lush it almost hurt my eyes. Parched from the previous eleven months in the desert, my sister, brother, and I gulped it down in great verdant draughts. We spent nearly every daylight moment outside, scrambling along deer trails, prying limpets off rocks to use as bait to catch rock cod, building tree houses in sturdy Douglas Firs, and, as teenagers, sitting for hours at the ocean's edge contemplating the mysterious workings of the universe.

And we came back, one by one, like a stone skipped along the Northwest coast, touching down in Seattle, the Skagit Valley, and Vancouver. This was my mother's gift—not just the days of driving—but the long-term gift of taking us to a place that each summer tethered an invisible strand to our imaginations, until one day the combined strength of those strands created an irresistible pull that would draw us back and tie us down, each one, firmly to the Pacific Coast, far from her.

Those strands were woven by Orcas, the place, but also by the people—and two people in particular: my grandparents' neighbors, Frank and Dorothy Richardson. Frank was a retired professor of ornithology who looked strikingly like Leo Tolstoy, and Dorothy was a homemaker with a graduate degree in biology and crinkly fairy godmother eyes. They both were slight and ate like birds. They also ate birds. Not just chickens and turkeys: they ate little birds.

They ate robins. Or, at least, they ate one robin. We entered their kitchen one afternoon—unannounced as usual—just as they were clearing their dishes from lunch. We were surprised by the teeny bones on their plates. In response to our bewildered expressions, they explained that a robin had flown into their car windshield while they'd been driving back from town, and, not wanting it to go to waste, they had brought it home, cooked it, and ate it.



I myself have yet to eat roadkill, but I appreciate the amazing commitment to conservation it represents. There's a First Nations-esque respect and love for creation in their unwillingness to waste what lost its life, if not at their hands, then at their windshield.

The Richardsons approached the entire natural world with this degree of care and concern. They never once sat down and lectured us on the evils of clear cuts or the plight of endangered species; they simply invited us into their lives. We caught Lingcod from their rowboat, pulled carrots in their organic garden, paddled along the coast in their hand-built kayaks, hiked along woodland trails and learned (momentarily) the Latin names for wild orchids, and when need arose used their outhouse so as not to waste the precious "indoor" water that they had collected from their rooftop.

The combination of Orcas Island's wild beauty and the Richardsons' example and friendship packed a double punch, which formed in me a deep love for creation, even the creation of my

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desert homeland. That love transformed into a conviction that has become an impetus for caring for creation in both my everyday and vocational life.

### TRUE CONFESSIONS

But now, a confession. Despite this early grounding in creation stewardship, I must admit that on occasion I question the legitimacy of “earthkeeping” as worthwhile work. Sometimes I look down at the Little Campbell, the river in Surrey, British Columbia we’ve labored for over ten years to protect, and it looks, well, *little*—more like a creek than a river. And I think to myself, *Is this pathetic trickle worth all the effort!?* I think this now, after over twelve years working for A Rocha, and I thought it in the early days, when we were full of vim and vigor for the cause.

We were so full of vim and vigor that as a rule we said yes to absolutely every conservation request that came our way. An early one involved a day trip from our home in North Vancouver down to White Rock so that Markku could join a team of four people transplanting eelgrass in Boundary Bay. Now, eelgrass is important stuff—it forms the basis of a complex food web in estuaries and other shallow marine waters and provides a protective hiding place for vulnerable creatures like juvenile salmon. Though I lacked a thorough understanding of how sub-marine plant transplanting worked (I guessed, at least, that watering the seedling wouldn’t be an issue) I came along for the day. I kissed scuba-clad Markku farewell at the pier and watched him descend into the very chilly Pacific waters. Two of the four divers started experiencing symptoms of hypothermia almost immediately and retreated from the ocean. That left Markku and our friend Hans to do the bulk of the work. Floundering through the murky water with a bag of sodden seedlings strapped to his side, Markku felt so constricted he could hardly move. This was not turning out to be as fun as he thought it would be. And then he saw a sailboat’s keel pass just a few feet between himself and the oblivious Hans. If either of them had been in the sailboat’s path they would have been knocked out.

Meanwhile I strolled along the boardwalk, pushing one child in a stroller and wearing infant Bryn in a front carrier, which I had not secured properly. The end result of my inability to properly snap up the Baby Bjorn was Bryn dropping like . . . like what? . . . a dead weight, yes, but more like a heavy helpless baby onto concrete. She landed with the most sickening thud I'd ever heard. And, naturally, her wails woke the happily slumbering Maya who chorused in with her own cries of distress, and I cursed scuba diving and eelgrass and the whole conservation endeavor all the way to the emergency room. Of course Bryn's tumble from the snugly had nothing to do with eelgrass replanting, but somehow, irrationally, I drew a direct connection from Markku's underwater shenanigans to his lack of availability during Bryn's near-death experience. And I found myself thinking, *Is this worth it? Quitting a secure job, begging for money, selling our house and moving from our beloved community—for what? Seaweed!?!*

## MAKING CONNECTIONS

The incident highlights my intermittent struggle with the importance of the whole environmental stewardship enterprise. Theologically I'm on board with the centrality of creation care to authentic Christian living, but sometimes my heart wants to perform triage on the needs of the world so I can prioritize my vocational work and financial giving accordingly. On most days malnourished African babies and AIDS sufferers in Asia go to the front of the line while the pretty fish and waving strands of eelgrass can twiddle their thumbs and wait all day to see the doctor as far as I'm concerned.

But when I perform this kind of triage I'm forgetting the principle on which all conservation is founded. I'm forgetting the fundamental definition of ecology: that everything is interconnected. I might not care about the eelgrass, but the salmon do. And the bears and blue herons need the salmon, not to mention the fisheries, and so it goes, spinning an intricate web of interwoven relationships.

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A Rocha founder Peter Harris tells a story which illustrates the rippling aftershocks created when we tamper with one bit of creation's web. Apparently, the villagers in a small Peruvian hamlet got sick of the pesky bats swooping down over their huts at night, scaring their women and children. Okay, I'm embellishing; I'm sure no one, especially not the women, were afraid of those harmless bats. And hamlet sounds too romantic, but the point is, the villagers wanted the bats gone. So one morning after the bats had hung themselves up for a long day of sleep, the men of the village snuck into their cave and killed them. All. The next summer the villagers' crops were eaten up by a plague of insects, whose major predator had been eliminated by the same people who planted all those nice crops in the first place.

I'm suspicious that this story is apocryphal. I'm pretty sure those living so close to the land would be more wary about tinkering with their ecosystem, but a similar story is sadly very true. Brian Brett, in his excellent book *Trauma Farm*, recounts the devastating results of Chairman Mao's fateful Four Pests Campaign. It seems that Mao, as part of his Great Leap Forward, decided his nation would be far better off without sparrows, flies, rats, and mosquitoes. The latter three seem logical pest suspects, but sweet little House Sparrows? Evidently a sparrow can eat ten pounds of grain a year, landing it on Mao's most wanted list. Hoping to eradicate this pest from his nation, Mao instructed every citizen of China to kill sparrows on a single spring day in 1958. Over six hundred million dutiful citizens did just this—chasing sparrows from their nests and banging pots to scare them from returning, thus rendering the eggs left behind unviable. What Mao wasn't told was that while a sparrow *can* eat ten pounds of grain a year they seldom do; their diet consists mainly of insects, locusts in particular. Within two years China's crops were overrun by noxious insects, with locusts leading the assault. This, along with several other supposedly "scientific" decisions affecting farming practices, led to China's famine, which killed over twenty million people.

## MAO'S LIST OF BADDIES:



1. HOUSE SPARROWS
2. FLIES
3. RATS
4. MOSQUITOES

Turns out it's not so easy to say that conservation is a luxury for citizens of wealthy nations who value hiking trails and salmon dinners, not when the survival of the world's most vulnerable people depends almost entirely on healthy ecosystems to sustain them. Again, this is where the definition of "ecology" is helpful: *eco* from the Greek *oikos*, for household, and *logia*, for "the study of." Anyone who has grown up in a household understands that it's a complicated web of interrelated relationships. (If Mama ain't happy, ain't nobody happy, right?) In essence, the word *ecology* draws attention to the relationships between living things and their environment and implies that if one tinkers with one bit of the world, the effects are felt in radiating ripples throughout the rest of the world. Tug at this thread of creation, to paraphrase John Muir, and you find it is attached to everything else. Even the smallest actions for creation care have implications for the larger web that makes up our larger home.



## 2



### Backing into the Future

*Begin at the beginning and go on till you come  
to the end: then stop.*

LEWIS CARROLL, *ALICE IN WONDERLAND*

OBVIOUSLY, MARKKU AND I didn't throw in the conservation towel when Bryn toppled from the snuggly. Nor have we given up on the Little Campbell River, though in the summer months it is reduced to creek-like proportions in places. And though we both struggle at times with the value of our work, we plod on, convinced on our better days that our vocation in the field of environmental stewardship is a calling and a privilege—convinced that matter matters to God, who created the stuff and even became the stuff and calls us to steward the stuff on his behalf.

We also try to remember the words of a wise friend who encouraged us, when faced with discouragement and tricky decisions

that bring uncertain outcomes, to “back into the future.” That is, we are to employ the discipline of retrospection, applying the fine white dust of memory, which reveals God’s fingerprints where we might not have noticed them before. Seeing where God has led and provided in the past gives us confidence to back into the future when we feel immobilized. That’s what these pages are—a way of backing into the future in order to detect God’s hand in our past, that we might have courage for our future.

## EARLY DAYS

Traveling back to A Rocha’s beginnings in Canada isn’t a long trip. Internationally, A Rocha dates back to 1982, when Peter and Miranda Harris left a thriving Anglican parish in Liverpool to start a Christian Bird Observatory (if such a beast could be started) on the coast of Portugal. Canada’s chapter in the A Rocha story began in 1996 when Peter and Miranda left Portugal and, as part of a year-long sabbatical, taught a class called “Incarnational Mission” at Regent College in Vancouver.



I was in their class and readily admit to falling hopelessly in love. Their attractiveness lay not only in their winsome personalities and British accents, but in how authentically they lived out their faith. They seemed to exhibit a thorough integration of belief and life. In a nutshell, they loved God, they loved people, and they

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loved creation. Theology found legs in their work, friendships, and family life. For many of us, their embodiment of faith helped us shift environmental stewardship from a fringe concern to a thoroughly normal part of our Christian lives. That class, coupled with lectures presented around Vancouver, spawned the future work of A Rocha in Canada. Soon the first Board of Directors coalesced, and in 1999 A Rocha received charitable status.

While the Board was launching I was heading across the Atlantic to teach at an international university in Lithuania—an experience which proved to be very chilly, but hugely rewarding. A year and a half into my stint on the Baltic I was lured home by a marriage proposal from Markku. He likes to joke that my consent to marriage hinged upon his own consent to work for A Rocha. His version of my stance goes something like this: It was my goal in life to work for A Rocha, but having trained in the humanities, I was in need of a scientist on whose coattails I could ride into the conservation parade. Markku, an ecologist by training, was my ticket in. The truth, of course, is much more romantic—his quick smile and hearty laugh easily trumped all professional credentials! We married in 1999 and Markku joined A Rocha's fledgling Board with no coaxing from me.

Our first Board of Directors was quintessentially grassroots. Most were professional ecologists or science teachers. All were short on finances but long on volunteer spirit, giving hours of their time to write newsletters, organize outings, and dream A Rocha dreams. When Karin and Alain Boisclair-Joly returned from serving with A Rocha in Lebanon they joined the Board, and soon after Karin was employed as A Rocha's first Canadian staff—for a whopping ten hours per week. Squirreled away in a tiny office under a staircase, she was A Rocha's administrative point person for getting the creation care word out to the wider Christian community.

Our first challenge in this regard was to establish A Rocha as a legitimate Christian ministry. The subtext of our name back then, *Christians in Conservation*, read like an oxymoron to many whose only category for environmentalists was of hippie types with strong body odor and a penchant for chaining themselves to

trees they'd named "Egeria." We ran into such typecasting when we inquired about setting up a booth at a large Christian conference in the area. We actually were not asking whether we *could* set up a booth, but *how much* it would cost. We were truly shocked, therefore, when we were informed that we were not welcome because our work was not deemed Christian mission. Ten years later our staff have led workshops and seminars at this same conference, which just goes to show how far attitudes have changed. It seems tree hugging and Christianity have something in common after all.

## STEPPING FORWARD

Karin's work was invaluable in getting A Rocha off the ground, but it quickly became clear that full-time staff were needed if we were to see significant conservation and education programs established. And so the Board drew straws. Sort of. One September evening the eight or so members of the Board sat in a circle and took turns saying whether or not they'd be willing to be the first director of this vulnerable little thing. The caveat, of course, was that there was no salary, a minor detail that no one thought would hinder the employment process. In the end it wasn't so much that Markku and I put ourselves forward, but that everyone else stepped back, leaving us standing alone and eager on the starting line.

When it came time to break the news to our parents—that Markku was going to leave his well-paying job as an Environmental Consultant, which meant leaving his twelfth-floor downtown office with a view of the Vancouver Yacht Club for a desk in our basement—we framed the vocational shift in a flattering light. We might have even hinted at something like *crème de la crème* entrepreneurial directors needed for this exciting new initiative. In reality the hiring process was more like a pot put on to boil; rather than the *crème* ladled from the top, we were the lonely little potatoes left over at the bottom.

At any rate, we realized immediately where our gifts lay—in vision and enthusiasm, but definitely not in administration and the nuts and bolts of what it takes to get a non-profit off the ground

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(exciting stuff like database systems and donor receipting). It was thus with great delight that we welcomed the incredibly competent Patrick Lilley to join us. His hard work and amazing ability to do just about anything—from rattling off the Latin names of plants to resurrecting a malfunctioning computer system—quickly made him an invaluable member of our three-person A Rocha team. Since Karin's closet was no longer available and none of our cupboards fit both Markku and Patrick, the office moved to our home's basement and then to the basement of St. Clement's Anglican Church down the road in Lynn Valley, North Vancouver.

## ENCOUNTERING INUITS

Those early days were heady, but also stressful. The primary stress lay in the fundraising and time required to get A Rocha out of the nest and into the air. In hindsight I'm amazed at the blasé attitude with which we initially approached both these hurdles. Markku left his job on a Friday in early March and started with A Rocha the following Monday. He'd been working full-steam for an environmental consulting firm and I was busy figuring out how to be a new mom, so we hadn't given much attention to fundraising for our salary. In fact, the only thing we did was send out a single letter stating our needs and then hoped and prayed for the best. The best proved to be a number of commitments of financial support, the biggest coming from our church, Capilano Christian Community, which staggered us with a start-up commitment that came to one-sixth of our goal. After a couple of months we were about halfway to our goal (which we randomly chose as a beginning teacher's salary in B.C.). Of course, half a salary wouldn't support us, so Markku spent many of his evenings plugging away at environmental consulting contracts, which helped cover the personal bills. But there was still a lot of money to raise, not only for our salary, but for the general budget, which included a portion of Patrick's salary and general operating expenses.

Needless to say, the combination of long work hours and the lack of funds was stressful! I remember one particularly bleak

afternoon in late spring when things came to a breaking point. The A Rocha honeymoon was over and sheer vision was not going to carry us any further. Markku and I sat despondently on our bed while baby Maya entertained herself in a pile of rumpled laundry. I was mad at Markku for leaving his secure, well paying job and Markku was mad at me for hatching up the whole A Rocha idea in the first place. Curt words were exchanged, tears were shed, and despair set in. We were ready to quit. We needed a sign. Now, we are not normally sign and wonders kind of Christians, but even an atheist prays for a miracle in the foxhole, and this was our foxhole.

In this regard, I am reminded of that old man-walks-into-a-bar story:

“I’m done with religion,” a man tells the proverbial bartender. “I was up in Alaska, see. Stranded on this ice drift. And I pray to God to rescue me.”

“So?” says the bartender.

“So, two days pass and nothing happens. Finally, just when I’m thinking I’m going to die, along comes these Eskimos.”

“And?” says the bartender.

“And they pick me up in their boat and rescue me.”

“So God came through in the end.” says the bartender, satisfied.

“What?” says the man. “It was the Eskimos that rescued me while God sat on his hands.”

Our story had a couple of Inuits in it too. As I said, we were in a pit, completely daunted by the task of launching A Rocha in Canada and in particular of raising the funds to see it through. And so we prayed (after a good bit of sulking). We prayed specifically that God would send us someone older and wiser to encourage us and pray with us. We decided not to call anyone, but to wait and see who would turn up. We went for a walk at the beach. We picked the busiest beach on Vancouver’s North Shore (we’d prayed for a miracle, but we weren’t against upping the odds of running into someone we knew). With each step we glanced about, expecting a familiar and godly face to beam out at us from the crowd.

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But not one did. We walked for over two miles along the West Vancouver Seawall in total anonymity and then drove home in silence. The day passed. No one showed. God, it seemed, was sitting on his hands while we huddled, shivering on our iceberg, adrift.



But then—dum, dum dum!—early the next day Uncle Tarmo knocked on our door. Now you have to understand that Markku’s Uncle Tarmo had never just shown up before. Never in the thirteen years that we’ve been married has he just dropped in unannounced. Furthermore, though his name conjures images of someone furry, possibly blue, and Muppetish, he very much fit the “older and wiser” bill. His visit was full of encouraging stories of firsthand accounts of God’s provision during his days as a Bible smuggler in the former Soviet Union. (I’m not making this up—he really was a Bible smuggler in Russia.) At the end of his visit he asked if he could pray for us. He prayed specifically that God would *confirm* his calling to us and provide for the needs of this fledgling ministry. And then he left.

The very next day we got a letter and a sizable donation in the mail, thus ending the donation drought. The financial gift was tremendously encouraging, but it was the letter—the only letter to accompany any donation to that point—that really staggered us. In the letter our older and wiser friend Irene wrote (and I quote), “Your qualifications would *confirm* that you are the couple to fulfill

the task ahead. May God's Holy Spirit guide, support, direct and comfort you in the days ahead."

Hmmm.

The writer Anne Lamott comments on such events when she writes, "The nonreligious types think, 'Well, that's a funny little coincidence,' but we Holy Rollers say that coincidence is just God working anonymously."

So, we persevered.

## **SETTING UP SHOP**

We knew that our home of North Vancouver would probably not be the long-term base for A Rocha's work in B.C. Our goal was to set up a Field Study Center like the one established in Portugal by Peter and Miranda twenty years earlier. To do this we wanted to be in an area that would benefit from our presence. We were hoping for a place with environmentally sensitive habitat that needed protecting, but which didn't have a host of people already trying to protect it. Markku's job on A Rocha's Board had been to investigate possible conservation areas, and we had spent many a weekend tooling around the Lower Mainland of B.C., exploring possible sites. We kept this up for our first two years on staff until we stumbled upon Boundary Bay and the Little Campbell Watershed.

Actually, at this point in the story I am boldly going to take credit for landing A Rocha in the Little Campbell Watershed. But lest anyone think I had some clairvoyant insight into its ecological worth and suitability, let me hasten to add that I zeroed in on this bit of geography for purely selfish reasons. You see, my twin sister was then living in Washington state about an hour south of the Canadian border, and it struck me that if A Rocha's Center were positioned as southerly as possible, cross border rendezvous would be happily convenient.

So, finger on the map, I casually asked Markku, "What about this bit down by the border? It has this big bay and some interesting looking rivers."



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Markku pondered and we began reconnaissance missions to check out the area. The more we poked around, the more it seemed that Boundary Bay made sense. Not only did the area comprise one of Canada's most significant Important Bird Areas, it was also home to the Little Campbell Watershed, which drained intact, via a beautiful estuary, into the Pacific Ocean. Finally, in comparison to other environmentally sensitive areas in B.C.'s Lower Mainland, surprisingly few people were working to preserve it.

Markku met with municipal leaders as well the director of Friends of Semiahmoo Bay, the most active local stewardship group, led by the indomitable Marg Cuthbert. They all gave us an enthusiastic invitation to set up shop in the watershed. Markku joined a couple of local conservation groups and after monthly meetings would drive the back roads of South Surrey looking for potential properties that might serve as an environmental center.

Lo and behold, he came home late one night from the Little Campbell Watershed Society all in a dither about a fabulous property quaintly called "Heritage Acres." He wondered if we could drive back down the next day to see it. I looked down at my belly and wondered if he were mad. I was two weeks shy of my due date with our second child and I wasn't going anywhere, thank you very much. Markku relented and paced the house, waiting for baby Bryn to be born.

One month later a two-week old Bryn paid her first visit to the future A Rocha Environmental Center. With two ponds, pasture land, a small cedar forest, a tree house, log cabin, outdoor washrooms, two houses, and a heritage barn—all packed into ten tidy acres—the place put us in mind more of A Rocha Disney than the humble A Rocha Center we had visited in Portugal. The only thing it lacked was a roller coaster! Lest we lose perspective in light of all the property's perks, we were aided in our evaluation by a list of eight criteria the Board had prescribed for the future center property, among them: two dwellings for staff and interns, proximity to transit, a variety of habitats and proximity to the Little Campbell River. Check, check, check. Heritage Acres fit the bill in every category.

That first visit was rather comical, thanks to the sellers' real estate agent, who didn't get us at all. He'd heard that we wanted to start a Field *Study* Center and so on the initial tour, he would pause at picturesque spots overlooking the pond or in the woods and say, "Now, this would be a lovely spot for your people to *study*." And then a few moments later, at another beautiful location, "Ah, here's another perfect spot where your people could *study*." I think he thought we were starting a giant outdoor study hall.



But the owners, Harriet and Irwin Leitz, "got" us. So we sidestepped the real estate agents (though they still got their commissions in the end!) and asked for a personal meeting. The defining moment came when we sat down in the barn with the Leitzes.

"So," said Harriet. "How serious are you about this property?"

"Quite serious," said Markku.

Pause.

"But," he went on, clearing his throat and furrowing his brow in a sincere knot. "I have to be honest, A Rocha doesn't have a penny in the bank."

Pause.

"Well," said Harriet, her words weighted for emphasis. "I'm sure you've been praying about it as we have."

It was an "Aha" moment that opened the door for a joint journey of faith for both A Rocha and the Leitzes. We all learned to be open handed as we entered a three-month long dialogue regarding

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price and terms. A few times the purchase seemed truly dead in the water, but finally a deal was struck, which included both a significant gift from the Leitzes and also a remarkably generous arrangement whereby they'd carry the mortgage, the first year interest free. Of course, not having an aforementioned penny in the bank meant that A Rocha had no money for a down payment and so Harriet and Irwin, in a continued show of generosity and faith, agreed to an experiment. They would stay living on site in their home and the Kostamos would move into the old farmhouse across the lawn. We would have four months to come up with \$250,000. If we didn't, the deal was off—we'd move out and A Rocha would wait for something else.

## COUNTDOWN

A few days into that first month I asked Markku, "So, what exactly is your plan for raising all this money?" I'm well aware that this makes me sound like a chump. It makes me sound like Ma Ingalls in her most simpering simplicity, ready to be dragged hither and yon at the whim of a restless husband. Actually, I probably was a bit of a chump. I was also tremendously sleep-deprived, what with juggling two kids under three and welcoming a constant stream of volunteers and visitors—who started arriving almost moments after we did. I frankly didn't have the energy to strategize how we were going to raise all that money.

Markku, however, did have a plan and it centered on a little inner-city church in East Vancouver. The members of Grandview Calvary Baptist, home church of our Board Chair, stunned us with their generosity. An elderly member had left the church a very large donation, which was slated for a low-income housing project. Since that project was still a couple years off, we boldly asked for a loan—for the entire amount of the down payment. The church called a meeting and voted. To give us half. Interest free. It was an amazing act of solidarity and grace.

It also provided a profound lesson in fundraising: don't put all your eggs in one basket. While their offer was magnanimous

in the extreme—given we were a bit of a high risk venture, never mind the fact that we weren't even Baptist—we had naively been hoping to be loaned the entire amount. But in their wisdom, the members of Grandview Calvary understood that, in the long run, a sugar daddy can be a crippling benefactor for a non-profit.

And so with six weeks to the down payment deadline we were scrambling to come up with another \$125,000. We wracked our brains for someone to ask. Bono seemed distracted by Africa. Gates had the malaria thing tying up his thoughts and finances. Oprah had her own gig with a girls' school in South Africa. Who to call? When we lowered our sights to our own friends and relations they all seemed too humbly situated to be able to swing such a big gift or loan.

Just as things began to look bleak Markku had a conversation with a not so rich, but very well connected friend in Vancouver. It went something like this:

Friend: "You know the thing I like about you, Markku?"

Markku: (In an *ah shucks* kind of way) "What's that?"

Friend: "You're so needy."

Markku: "Ah, shucks."

Taking this conversation as an invitation to display yet more neediness, Markku asked him to set up a meeting with the most sympathetic philanthropist he knew. That person turned out to be Ken Smith, who gladly agreed to visit the property with his wife the following week.

"It's like the promised land!" Ken exclaimed, picking an apple from a tree in the orchard. We were just finishing a tour of the property and heading inside for tea. Ken and his wife, Ruth, were enamored by the site and the vision of a Christian environmental center dedicated to conservation and education. They had read Peter Harris' book, *Under the Bright Wings*, which tells the story of A Rocha's first project in Portugal, as a warm-up to the visit and were encouraged to find that they resonated thoroughly with A Rocha's approach to mission.

Despite all this going for us, we sat fidgeting at the kitchen table, chatting about everything under the sun except money. We

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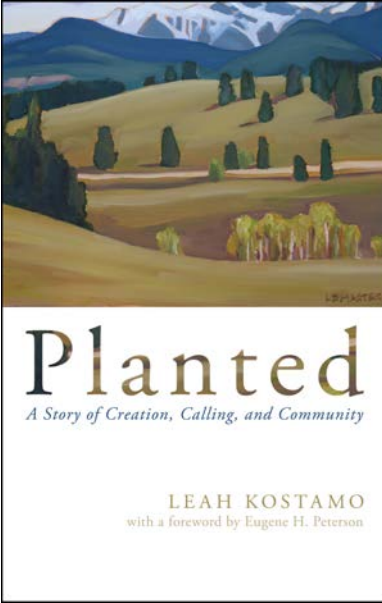
were new to the fundraising game and had no idea how to ask someone for so much cash. So, we didn't. Thankfully Ken was a seasoned philanthropist and, seeing our inability to grasp the nettle, he leaned across the table, looked into our eyes and said, "What can I do for you?"

And we made the down payment deadline.

## **EIGHT YEARS LATER**

Now here's the funny thing. While we did raise a fair chunk of change, we were never able to raise the whole amount. Not even close. We did eventually pay out the Leitzes, but we did so through a bond offering that served as a second mortgage, complete with interest. Over the years, carrying this debt, we questioned whether A Rocha had been rash to jump into property ownership so quickly. Perhaps we should have bided our time—waited for a windfall so we could buy a site outright. Who knows?

We do know this: That first Center allowed A Rocha to welcome thousands of visitors, as well as hundreds of interns, day campers, and school kids. That Center allowed us to grow literally tons of organic vegetables, serve thousands of meals, and conduct conservation research on a myriad of species. That first Center allowed us to do all these things with a measure of intentionality as we strove to be true to our convictions regarding creation care, hospitality, and justice.



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