



Amy Domini

Preserve our wonder

Progress is essential, but not at the cost of our environment.

I’LL ADMIT THAT I’VE NEVER BEEN PARTICULARLY CAREFUL about honeybees. As a kid, I’d catch them in jars and threaten my younger brother with them. As a gardener, I find it fun to stare hard and watch as they bob in and out of the blooms, covering their legs especially with yellow pollen. I don’t worry about getting stung. It doesn’t take much to start noticing the difference between wasps and honeybees. The honeybees are fuzzy. They don’t want to sting you.

My garden has been a bit of a haven for bees and for butterflies. I like to watch them, so I always try to have something flowering to tempt them in. But last year, it was July before I had any good bees. That was really late and I was really worried. It has been a number of years since I’ve seen bats in my yard. They used to come swoop around each summer evening, putting on a show for me. I don’t want to lose bees, too.

I’ve been reading that there is an international phenomenon of colonies of bees just dying. A scientist at Harvard recently wrote a study that implicated the pesticides used on many crops. Of course, the company making the pesticide said the study was full of holes. One line of thinking was that maybe cell phones were the cause. But a few countries in Europe stopped using the pesticide in question a couple of years ago and their bees came back.

That strikes me as a pretty big coincidence, if true. In fact, this is beginning to feel as if we’re experimenting on the planet, and that makes me mad.

When do we stop experimenting this way? It’s been 50 years since Rachel Carson published *Silent Spring*. Her revelations about the impacts of DDT showed that that pesticide was devastating. Fifty years later, we haven’t admitted that sometimes it is a lot better to prove safety before approving products for widespread use. It’s a commonsense argument, but there are those who worry more about the economic impact of not using the newfangled product. This makes no sense to me. The line of reasoning pits a known economic benefit against an unknown cost. Should the cost be, as it was with diethylstilbestrol, or DES, that for at least three generations those exposed develop cancers, are born with intersexual

characteristics and now appear to have permanently affected DNA chains? And the benefit there was not to the mothers-to-be. They took it to ease nausea, but it didn’t do much about that. The only benefit was corporate profit.

Back to the honeybees. I did some looking around and there is a lot of information about the bee collapse and the economic costs of it. Almond growers, blueberry growers, orange growers ... in fact, any farmer with a crop that flowers needs bees. Trucks with hives drive around the country bringing bees from place to place, charging farmers for the service. The estimates you read are

mostly about the \$15 billion worth of American crops that depend on the honeybees. Then there are the honey business and other support businesses. That seems like a lot of economic impact, but it is being ignored so far.

The jury is out on this one. In the end, it may be that colony collapse disorder is the result of solar storms or some other oddity. But I’m ready to bet that when we get to the bottom of this we are going to find out that the cause is rushing ahead with some great new product without regard to the broader implications of using it.

I used to think my mother was funny. Way back when, we went to a new store with a new parking lot. She complained, “Why do they have to make such an ugly parking lot? It

wouldn’t kill them to put in some trees and shrubbery.”

“In a parking lot?” I giggled.

“Just because you need it doesn’t mean it has to be awful,” she retorted.

Now I think she was prophetic. We may need ways to progress, but we don’t need to degrade our environment to do so. We don’t need to be awful. Haven’t most of us enjoyed a lazy summer day watching the bees dip in and out of flowers? Haven’t most of us been treated to hot water, lemon and honey to cure our ailments? Fifty years after *Silent Spring*, 25 years after the California Condor Program, can we take a moment to assure ourselves that we are preserving the wonders we now enjoy? ■

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