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Elizabeth Ann Seton’s Vision of Ecological Community

Based on Elizabeth Bayley Seton: Collected Writings, Volume Two

SISTER SUNG-HAE KIM, S.C.

BIO

Introduction

In my previous article on “The Ecological Spirituality of Elizabeth Ann Seton,” I used the collection of Elizabeth’s correspondence and journals from 1793 to 1808 found in volume one of Elizabeth Bayley Seton: Collected Writings. From these personal, intimate communications with family members and lifelong friends, I drew out four constitutive characteristics of Elizabeth’s ecological spirituality:

1. Nature as the space where Elizabeth encountered her friends and God;
2. Nature as the source of consolation when she experienced suffering and abandonment;
3. Her awareness of ecological balance;
4. Her focus on the present, on moderation, and harmony.

In order to best illustrate the ecological character of these qualities, I compared her spirituality with four contemporary philosophers who initiated ecological movements: Arne Naess and his deep ecology, Aldo Leopold and his land ethics, Murray Bookchin and his social ecology, and Anthony Weston and his postmodern communicative ethics.

In this paper, I will explore Elizabeth’s vision of ecological community using volume two of Elizabeth Bayley Seton: Collected Writings, which includes her correspondence and journals from 1808 to 1820. These conclude just before her death on 4 January 1821. This volume covers thirteen years of her public life (from age thirty-four to forty-six) as an educator and founder of an apostolic community. Having accepted the invitation of Rev. William Dubourg, P.S.S., endorsed by Archbishop John Carroll to open a Catholic school for girls, Elizabeth left her hometown of New York City. She arrived at Baltimore on 15 June 1808, and on 15 March 1809, pronounced private vows to Archbishop Carroll. Joined by several other devout women she moved to Emmitsburg, Maryland, a small village in Frederick County. There they became the first members of the Sisters of Charity of St. Joseph’s, the apostolic community Mother Seton founded on 31 July 1809.

Within eight months, the Sisters of Charity established St. Joseph’s Academy and Free School (1810), the first free Catholic school for girls staffed by religious women in the United States. The Common Rules of the Daughters of Charity were the model for two documents: Regulations for the Sisters of Charity in the United States, and the Constitutions of the Sisters of Charity in the United States. Both were approved by Archbishop Carroll on 17 January 1812. After Mother Seton and the first sisters completed their novitiate, they

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made their annual vows for the first time on 19 July 1813. When Elizabeth died in 1821, she left behind fifty-nine sisters who would succeed her in living a consecrated and apostolic religious life.

Although the formation of this first American apostolic religious community required much of Elizabeth Seton’s energy, she also continued to nurture relationships with her five beloved children, her sisters-in-law, and her friends, while maintaining social connections with benefactors, church leaders, students’ parents, and graduates. In so doing, Elizabeth was forming three communities simultaneously, one of apostolic religious life, one of family, and one of social and ecclesial ties. These three communities were interconnected, in her words, like a “spider web of earthly weaving.” Moreover, I propose that Elizabeth perceived these three communities through her innate ecological lens. I say this because her vision included the qualities of ecological community as described by noted philosophers Peter Kropotkin (1842–1921), Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862), and Murray Bookchin (1921–2006).

Peter Kropotkin was one of the first to promote the concept of “ecological community.” Ideas of natural interdependence among humans and between humankind and the environment are essential to Kropotkin’s theory. He believed that a set of fundamental ecological principles can be derived from nature: mutual aid, solidarity, cooperation, self-governance, harmony, balance, and community. These same principles repeatedly appear

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in Elizabeth’s writings in reference to her threefold community life with the sisters, her children, and her social acquaintances.

I. Elizabeth’s Ecological Vision of Apostolic Religious Community

Two months after her arrival in Baltimore, Elizabeth wrote a letter to Cecilia Seton, her sister-in-law who also longed for a deeper spiritual life. They shared a dream of living in religious community: “It is St. Clara’s day—What did she not suffer in opposing the World - how tender and faithful was the love of her Agnes who followed her—shall we one day be so happy my dear one. He only knows who holds us in his hand.”6 It was clear that Elizabeth intended to start not only a school, but also a religious community like St. Clara of Assisi and her sister Agnes. About a month later, she wrote to Cecilia describing her regular life in Baltimore, “in the Chapel at six until 8. school at nine - dine at one - school at 3. Chapel at six 1/2 examination of Conscience and Rosary [...] so goes day after day without variation.”7 Soon thereafter Elizabeth announced the good news to Cecilia that the first candidates for religious life were coming. “It is expected I shall be the Mother of many daughters. a letter received from Philadelphia where my Blessed Father [...] has found two of the Sweetest young women, who were going to Spain to seek a refuge from the World [...] now wait until my house is opened for them.”8

Elizabeth announced her small five-month-old school to longtime friend Julia Scott with great satisfaction: “From half past five in the morning until 9 at night every moment is full, no space even to be troubled—ten girls three of them almost women, keep the wheel going continually [...] but in the present state of my family we are so happy and live so much as a Mother surrounded by her children that I cannot resolve to admit a stranger, yet it must be eventually.”9 Including her own three daughters, Elizabeth had ten girls to teach. She was extremely busy and tired, but also happy, and tried to maintain this trusting and affectionate atmosphere in her family life, her religious community, and in her ministry. This, in fact, is the basis of an ecological community, wherein people can enjoy the freedom to be themselves and the contentment of friendship.

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6 Letter 5.6, “To Cecilia Seton,” 12 August 1808, CW, 2:25. Elizabeth arrived at Baltimore on 15 June 1808, and this letter was written on 12 August of the same year. The footnote clarifies that this letter is written on the feast day of St. Clare of Assisi (1193–1253), who is a friend of St. Francis of Assisi and founder of the Poor Clares, a religious community of women. Agnes was a sister of Clare and also a founding member of the Poor Clare Order. Editor’s note: Elizabeth liberally used a variety of punctuation, including dashes of varying lengths that give a poetic effect to her prose, and her capitalization was not always consistent. This article reproduces the punctuation and capitalization of the original text, except capitalization at beginnings of sentences will be changed silently to avoid distracting the reader. Ellipses added to the original will be bracketed.


8 Letter 5.10, “To Cecilia Seton,” 6 October 1808, ibid., 2:34.

A. The Sisters of Charity of St. Joseph’s: An Apostolic Religious Community

The community Elizabeth was establishing in St. Joseph’s Valley was bordered by woods, meadows, and mountains. She described their surroundings to Julia with cheerful intimacy: “Our mountains are very black, but the scene below bright and gay, the meadows still green and my dear ones skipping upon them with the Sheep.” Yet Elizabeth was concerned for Eliza’s health. In a letter, she described a Sunday picnic with her community, wishing that Eliza could “breathe our mountain air and taste the repose of deep woods and streams. Yesterday we all – about twenty Sisters and children dined, that is eat our cold ham and cream pies in our Grotto in the mountain where we go on Sunday for the Divine Office.[...] my heart feels as bright as the Sun now setting and wants to share with you.” She always felt the presence of her friends and God in nature.

Elizabeth was now taking on the responsibilities of Mother or leader in forming her community, and she described this role in a letter to another close friend, Catherine Dupleix: “Your poor little shipwrecked friend is finishing her career under the strange and ill placed title of Abbess of a convent; I say ill placed because it is as much so as it would be to call me by any other name than that of Seton as the little community I have the charge of are bound by no obligations and are united only with the view of schooling children, nursing the sick, and manufacturing for ourselves and the poor, which to my disposition you know is the sum of all earthly happiness.”

The Sisters of Charity of St. Joseph’s did not take vows until 1813; thus, when this letter was written, they were following the primitive document, Provisional Regulations for St. Joseph’s Sisters, which outlined the order of the day. They were united by their apostolate in teaching and serving the poor, but what bolstered their works was the happiness of a loving community. Elizabeth saw the value of the rules in maintaining the order of their house: “You will know the rule of our community in a Word, which amounts only to that regularity necessary for order and no more—You may conceive my content in such a situation, it is almost inconceiveable [sic] to myself that I possess it.”

Writing to another friend in New York about the simple practicality of the rule, Elizabeth said, “Our community increases very fast, and no doubt will do a great deal of good in the care of the sick and instruction

10 Letter 6.14, “To Julia Scott,” 27 December 1809, ibid., 2:95. Elizabeth’s letters from Emmitsburg are full of descriptions of rocks, sunsets, insects, birds, and other animals. She also describes plants, such as a willow tree, spring wildflowers, jasmine, lilacs, roses, and green fields. She has memories of the great ocean. She summarized this capacity to appreciate nature to her letter to Julia: “The nearer a soul is truly united to God the more its sensibilities are increased to every being of his creation” (Letter 6.7 “To Julia Scott,” 20 September 1800, ibid., 2:82).
of children which is our chief business. the rule is so easy that it is scarcely more than any regular religious person would do even in the world.”

She understood the value of the rules in safeguarding true freedom, providing the boundaries or guidelines of living in community: “What an extravagant ideal it is that piety creates gloominess and disgust - unaquainted with the anticipation of a soul whose views are chiefly pointed to another existence [sic] it is inconcievable [sic] what liberty it enjoys - the cares and troubles of life surround it to be sure as others but how different their effect—human passions and weakness to be sure are never extinct - but they cannot triumph in the heart which is possessed by this friend of love and Peace.”

Elizabeth wished to preserve the liberty of everyone living a life of faith. She considered her role to be as a friend to the other sisters, saying, “They will only find in me a friend to admonish and it will be in the hands of Mr. Dubourg either to rectify or dismiss them.” Of course, her role as head of their community became more complex after the Constitutions were approved. Nevertheless, her desire to be a friend and loving mother to the sisters continued throughout her life.

Elizabeth appreciated the experience of life in religious community, the wisdom gained from it, and the affectionate bonds it created:

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I assure you 6 years experience of our daily duties and way of life has made many of
our good Sisters as much old women as I am [...] their care and attention to save me
every trouble would appear even ridiculous to others who not living with us, do not
know the tie of affection which is formed by living in Community. perhaps you have
no idea of the order and quiet which takes place in a regular way of life – every thing
[sic] meets its place and time in such a manner that a thing once done, is understood
by the simplest person as well as by the most intelligent.17

These strong ties of affection were demonstrated by their respectful care for dying sisters. As
death approached the presence of Elizabeth was often requested, “she [Sister Mary
Elizabeth Wagner] was struck with Death between 3 and 4 in the morning and cried out
directly for ‘Mother,’ and I was with her till long after her last moments to give time for the
*Solemn Silence.*”18

**B. The Apostolic Ministry of the Sisters of Charity of St. Joseph’s**

Mother Seton’s community at St. Joseph’s Valley consisted not only of the sisters
but also the boarding students they taught. Their number increased from fifteen sisters and
thirty boarders in 1811 to a total amount of sixty in 1816. By 1818, there were one hundred
“precious souls,” sisters and boarders, under her care.19 Elizabeth’s apostolic ministry was
open and inclusive, embracing the Protestant girls in Emmitsburg as well as black children
for first communion class.20 When students misbehaved, Mother Seton disciplined them.
She wrote to one of their parents, “She improves considerably in every respect except the
high haughty temper which I am sure for her own happiness you would wish controuled
[sic] but I treat it very gently, unless when she dares us all, which sometimes happens, then
indeed I could only insist on her taking bread and water for her dinner and asking pardon.”21

Elizabeth sometimes had to handle complaints from students’ parents. As she described
in a letter to Archbishop Carroll, “I have a cruel letter from a parent of one of the children
with us [...] charging me with ‘the wages of iniquity’ etc,” and Elizabeth added, “But such
foolish words will not prevent our continued care to fulfill the Providence of God to them.”22

19 The numbers of fifteen sisters and thirty boarders were reported to Catherine Dupleix, see Letter 6.70, “To Catherine
Dupleix,” [date outside February 4th, 1811], *ibid.*, 2:172. The total of sixty is found in Letter 7.65, “To Catherine
Dupleix,” [December 7 or 8], *ibid.*, 2:452. Finally, the growth to one hundred is noted to Antonio Filicchi in her Letter
7.175, “To Antonio Filicchi,” 8 August 1818, *ibid.*, 2:573.
She was very honest with Carroll, reporting the worst incidents and noting that “[her] heart sickens at every word of it.”23 Yet, at the same time, she knew how to find balance in the trials the apostolate faced.

Instead of resenting the harsh words of some parents, or falling into despair, Elizabeth moved on calmly, trusting that she was doing what God asked her to do. This ability to preserve balance in the midst of trials is an ecological virtue, and because Elizabeth was able to practice it, her community maintained an ecological character of harmony, stability, and solidarity. Of course, because of her fundamental conviction that “the grace and the trial [she faced would] be proportioned,”24 she found strength in knowing that God would reveal the good through such “interior and external trials.”25

In her lifetime, Elizabeth began two missions, one in Philadelphia in 1814 and another in New York City in 1817. She wrote a former student about the joy found in spreading the ministry, “Our establishment increases continually I have the happiness to see a good settlement of Sisters in New York who have the charge of a multitude of Poor children—what joy to me—Sister Fanny [Jordan] has charge of the orphans in Philadelphia and succeeds admirably.”26 This growth of mission not only reflects the openness of her community, but the close cooperation and mutual aid among the sisters that made it possible. In a letter to Eliza, Elizabeth vividly depicted such mutual aid in religious community with a metaphor:

Next May to look at our mountains you will find my plants in lovely order - the parent root to be sure is almost sapless and appears quite decayed but when the wind blows hard the little ones surround and bear it up—indeed it is true Eliza when I am so weak as to suffer vexations and cares to press upon my mind only the look of these dear ones who seem to say Mother live for us acts like a main spring—but yet it is not the main spring or if it was no higher I should be worse than ungrateful.27

This beautiful image of young trees surrounding an older one in order to preserve it echoes how Elizabeth saw herself energized by the younger sisters surrounding her. Mutual aid supported by the bond of love is the energy that maintains a religious community through generations, and its ecological quality can be seen here.

23 Ibid.
26 Letter 7.128., “To Mary Diana Harper,” 9 December 1817, ibid., 2:518. Elizabeth reported further development of the community’s mission activity with a Dutch settlement and educating them “so as to extend their usefulness whenever OUR SWEET PROVIDENCE may call” (Letter 7.265, “To Antonio Filicchi,” 19 October 1820, ibid., 2:670).
27 Letter 6.26 “To Eliza Sadler,” 8 March [dated 1809 but content indicates 1810], ibid., 2:110.
C. The Ecological Value of Elizabeth’s Apostolic Religious Community

Elizabeth’s ecological vision of religious community might best be considered in light of Russian geologist and philosopher Peter Kropotkin, who presented utopia as an ecological community. In his magnum opus, *Mutual Aid* (first published in 1902), he wrote that his geographical explorations of Siberia revealed that mutual aid and support played a prominent role among animals. He realized that this could be vital to the maintenance and evolution of a species, and concluded that because the vast majority of animal species live in communities, they have the best chance of survival. Mutual struggle is detrimental to a species; therefore, the fundamental law of nature is one of mutual aid. Kropotkin wrote, “In proportion we ascend the scale of evolution; we see association growing more and more conscious. It loses its purely physical character. It ceases to be simply instinctive; it becomes reasoned. With the higher vertebrates it is periodical, or is resorted to for the satisfaction of a given want—propagation of the species, migration, hunting, or mutual defense.”28

From the prehistoric age onward, humans have formed societies in which they cooperate to provide for the community’s basic needs. From these first beginnings, mutual aid has dominated over individualism and egoism. Kropotkin believed that the development of humankind is a direct result of the cooperative spirit inherent to human nature: “It is a feeling infinitely wider than love or personal sympathy—an instinct that has been slowly developed among animals and men in the course of an extremely long evolution and which has taught animals and men alike the force they can borrow from the practice of mutual aid and support, and the joys they can find in social life.”29

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29 Ibid., 8 and also refer to De Geus, *Ecological Utopias*, 88–90.
In cities of the Middle Ages, Kropotkin saw the culmination of the practice of mutual aid and support, especially in guilds. As far as internal affairs, the guilds were sovereign, and decisions were made in general meetings. In this way, guilds were organized based on mutual aid principles, self-jurisdiction, and sovereignty. This spirit of federation permeated all spheres of life as the elements of freedom, mutual aid, and organization grew from simple to complex. In this ecological, libertarian society three principles were implemented: decentralization, self-government, and free agreement. The goal of society was not enforced unity or order, but organic and natural harmony. Kropotkin even argued for the abolition of private property in order to secure well-being for all.\(^{30}\)

Kropotkin rejected the state, believing it to be a triple alliance of military chiefs, judges, and priests. However, he recognized that at their earliest stages Buddhist and Christian communities possessed the principles of mutual aid. Other religious movements also often appeared to practice the best aspects of mutual aid early on in their communities.\(^{31}\) Elizabeth’s apostolic religious community possessed all the ecological qualities Kropotkin praised: harmony, mutual aid, respect for freedom and free agreement, self-government, and equality without private property. One notable difference, though, was that Elizabeth’s ecological community was based on and strengthened by faith in the Providence of God.


\(^{31}\) Kropotkin, *Mutual Aid*, 190.
II. Elizabeth’s Ecological Vision of the Family as Community

A. Simple Joy of Family Being Together

In her “Dear Remembrances,” Elizabeth recalled the first time she and her five children gathered in her beautiful little home on Paca Street in Baltimore, experiencing the joy of being together as a family. “First Charities of Mr. Dubourg and his excellent Sister Madame [Victoire Françoise] Fournier to the Stranger and orphans!!! My lovely good sweet Boys at Georgetown—after two years absence in their Mothers arms—let the children of prosperity rejoice, but they can never guess the least of our joys who possessed nothing but in each other.”

Elizabeth was well aware that her five children had neither a father nor prosperity; yet she not only accepted this reality, but also found in it the unique value and happiness a poor family could enjoy. Because Elizabeth saw that poverty helps us to appreciate the most essential part of family, i.e., each other, she was able to teach her children to live with dignified simplicity.

When Elizabeth sent her ailing daughter Rebecca to Dr. Chatard in Baltimore for a remedy, she wrote to Mrs. Chatard, “Well she is yours and your sweet charity may overflow. the success is left to our adored with the most peaceful perfect confidence,” adding, “She is poor you know and must not mind the wardrobe.” Accepting poverty as a part of their lot in Divine Providence, Elizabeth taught her children to value each other and family. In another incident, after her friend Julia’s visit to Emmitsburg, Elizabeth expressed her gratitude to God that she was not rich: “Oh when the beautiful coaches and horses went off so grand and gay how Mothers Soul darted through the blue heavens to bless and praise that we

are not numbered with the rich in this world.”

She valued life’s simplicity as the basis of ecological living for both family and religious community. While she was forming her religious community in Emmitsburg, she tried to gather her five children together outdoors at least once a week. Elizabeth described one such bright spring day to Julia:

What would I give if at this very moment you could see your own friend with the five playing all sorts of fancies and round her in a bright sun, and as merry as the larks skipping over the meadow before us.[...] I sit on the porch, visit the young calves, pigs and chickens, etc, with as much interest as the children, who are wild with pleasure when the two Brothers, three sisters and old Mother set out together ... do sometimes think how truly happy your friend is and it will repay you for the many anxieties she has given you.

Another time, Elizabeth detailed a similar experience when the family was together, actively enjoying each other and the animals around them:

Since the weather is more mild and settled I am stronger. The children are all health [sic], spirits of course.[...] I have the five together, which is always once sometimes twice a week, [more] than I ever could have even hoped for.[...] my Anna. my William. my Richard. my Kate. my Rebecca especially if you could see her on her knees milking her little white cow and afterwards loaded with a little tin pail in each hand running

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34 Letter 6.206, “To Rebecca Seton,” 25 September [1815], *ibid.*, 2:343. See footnotes one and two on page 343 for the reasons behind Julia’s visit.

35 Letter 6.72, “To Julia Scott,” [dated outside March 9], *ibid.*, 2:176. At the time this letter was written, Elizabeth was thirty-seven years old. Two boys were studying at Mount St. Mary’s in Emmitsburg and able to come to join the family.
over and her eyes glistening with the delight of the wonders she can do. Kits greatest pleasure is feeding the lambs with salt from her hand Annas in decking the graves of dear C[ecilia] and H[arriet] and the Boys in asking Mother increasing questions about all their friends and connections and their hopes and prospects in life—how often is poor Mother obliged to point upwards.\footnote{Letter 6.75, "To Eliza Sadler," 12 May 1811, \textit{ibid.}, 2:182–83.}

At the end of this letter, Elizabeth invited her friends to come to the mountains to visit. The world that she wanted to share with them was filled with natural wonders, “the beauty of its shades in the setting sun, the waving of the wheat fields, our woods covered with flowers, and the quiet contented look of our habitation and its inhabitants.”\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}} It was this simplicity of life, surrounded by nature and its occupants, which made her family happy.

It is noteworthy that in spite of her abundant love for her five children, Elizabeth was aware of their limitations and valued them for who they were. She also recognized her own limitations in understanding and nurturing them. In a letter to Antonio Filicchi, Elizabeth described her two sons, saying, “They do not seem to have either talents or application which is a great cross to me but they are innocent in their conduct and do not show any bad dispositions in other respects, and I must be patient.”\footnote{Letter 5.14, "To Antonio Filicchi," 16 January 1809, \textit{ibid.}, 2:47.} In another letter to Dué, Elizabeth expressed resignation as to their ordinary quality: “The talents of neither of them are distinguished, which does not disappoint me, knowing well they often ruin their owners.”\footnote{Letter 6.45, "To Catherine Dupleix," 4 June 1810, \textit{ibid.}, 2:137.} Even though Elizabeth confessed difficulty understanding her adolescent daughter Anna,\footnote{Letter 6.7, "To Julia Scott," 20 September 1809, \textit{ibid.}, 2:83.} she was happy with the fine qualities her three daughters possessed. She said of one daughter: “Kit rules books, sets copies, hears lessons and conducts herself with such grace that girls twice her age show her the greatest respect.”\footnote{Letter 6.45, "To Catherine Dupleix," 4 June 1810, \textit{ibid.}, 2:137.}

**B. Elizabeth’s Maxim to Her Family Members: See the World as It Is**

The constant lesson Elizabeth tried to impart to her children was that they should see the world as it is. She wished that her oldest daughter Anna, in love with a young man from another country, would learn this: “She will be much better in the mountains than in Baltimore or any where else, all I have to wish for her is that she may see the world in
its true colours.”42 Elizabeth repeatedly asked her son William to see things as they were, saying, “Now as a man you will see things in their true light I trust knowing well that in every situation and place on earth we must find contradictions and difficulties.”43 She herself saw everything that way, as part of a whole, as she noted to her spiritual director Reverend Simon Bruté, S.S.: “Not even little acts for obtaining fear or anxiety about this Death can move that strong hold of peace, thanksgiving and abandon of every atom of life and its belonging to him—even William I can see but in the great Whole.”44

In order to remain calm in facing disappointments, Elizabeth had to distill and rely upon her love for her children, especially for William, her first son. She expressed these feelings to Antonio after having sent William to him to learn the family business in Leghorn, Italy: “I cannot hide from our God, though from everyone else I must conceal the perpetual tears and affections of boundless gratitude which overflow my heart, when I think of him secure in his Faith and your protection—Why I love him so much I cannot account, but own to you my Antonio all my weakness. pity and pray for a mother attached to her children through such peculiar motives as I am to mine. I purify it as much as I can, and our God knows it is their Souls alone I look at.”45

When Antonio wrote her saying William did not have the requisite qualifications of a merchant,46 she calmly accepted the disappointment. Then, she wrote William and assured him it was all right, and that she was happy he could be honest with her: “The more I think of it the happier I am you have spoken your dear heart out.”47

Even when writing her daughter Catherine asking her to come back to Emmitsburg for the summer, Elizabeth was careful not to force the issue. Respecting Catherine’s freedom, Elizabeth tried to give her room to choose: “I fear almost to press your dear heart too much by telling you mine that I do wish you so much to be again with your poor Mother at least for this summer—you will be able to return to New York with little Burns and Manghans family in the fall if you wish it.”48 She treated her children respectfully and with sensitivity, attempting to persuade rather than command them. This dialogical approach is ecological, for while family members care for each other, they have to respect individual freedoms and differences in order to form a harmonious community.

A good example of how she treated her family, and how we might best treat ours, can

42 Letter 5.22, “To Cecilia Seton,” Easter Tuesday 3 April [1809], ibid., 2:64.
46 Letter 7.81, “To Antonio Filicchi,” 1 April 1817, ibid., 2:471.
47 Letter 7.82, “To William Seton,” 4 April 1817, ibid., 2:472.
be found in Elizabeth’s advice to Reverend John Hickey, S.S., whom she knew from his days in the seminary:

When you ask too much at first you often gain nothing at last - and if the heart is lost all is lost, if you use such language to your family they cannot love you, since they have not our Microscope to see things as they are. Your austere hard language was not understood by Ellen, who dear Soul considers your letters as mere curiosities, she loves and venerates you but do not push her away [...] gently gently my Father in God and son in heart, do you drive so in the tribunal [confessional], I hope not - the faults of young people especially such faults as Elenors must be moved by prayers and tears because they are constitutional and cannot be frightened out.49

We must employ gentle language toward everyone, but especially with our family members as we frequently see each other’s faults. It is amusing to read how Elizabeth advised her two daughters, Catherine and Rebecca, when they quarreled: “The fault of quarreling you have so often confessed and declared you would not do so again, that it hurts my very heart to find you have been guilty of it,” and she added, “Tell Rebecca I did not think she would so soon forget her good promises.”50 Elizabeth begged the Lord to pardon them for all their faults. Although this advice likely did not stop them, Elizabeth’s approach was gentle, asking her daughters to take responsibility for what they did and guiding them to mature. It is no wonder that Catherine remembered her as “the best of Mothers.”51

Elizabeth believed her responsibility to her children came first, before her own rights or dreams. “The thought of living out of our Valley would seem impossible, if I belonged to myself, but the dear ones have their first claim which must ever remain inviolate.”52 She was willing to make every sacrifice in order to fulfill her first duty as a mother.53 She was faithful to this duty to the end, trusting her unmarried daughter Catherine to lifelong friends.54 It is moving to read Elizabeth’s letter to her dying daughter Rebecca, assuring her that the bond of love in family will continue through eternity: “My Rebecca we will at last, at last unite in his eternal praise, lost in him You and I closer still than in the nine months so dear when as I told you I carried you in my bosom [...] then no more Separation.”55

51 10.3, “Catherine Seton’s Little Red Book,” [after 1816], ibid., 3a:489. At the beginning of this notebook, Catherine Seton wrote, “O may it be my daily study to follow the advice of the best of Mothers.”
55 Letter 6.206, “To Rebecca Seton,” 25 September [1815], ibid., 2:343. Elizabeth had Rebecca in her arms for “9 weeks nights and day” until Rebecca “gave the last sigh” (Letter 7.61, “To William Seton,” St. Martin’s 11 November 1816, ibid., 2:447).
C. Thoreau’s Ultimate Simplicity and Elizabeth’s Ecological Family

Henry David Thoreau lived alone in the woods from July 1845 to September 1847. He resided in a self-constructed cabin on the shore of Walden Pond, near Concord, Massachusetts, his birthplace. Thoreau wanted to test how living an independent life might lead to a higher form of personal happiness. He thought people became their own slave drivers, unaware that there was an alternative to their never-ending quest for affluence. Thoreau hoped to escape this conventional desire for abundance and luxury, and he chose a life of simplicity, independence, magnanimity, and trust. According to him, most luxuries and many of life’s conveniences can be done without, as they hinder the moral uplifting of humanity.\(^{56}\)

The crux of his argument was simplicity: “Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity! [...] Simplify, simplify. Instead of three meals a day, if it be necessary eat but one; instead of a hundred dishes, five; and reduce other things in proportion.”\(^ {57}\) What is noteworthy here is that Thoreau connected simplicity of life with elevation of human purpose. Elizabeth regarded the poverty her family faced after the bankruptcy and death of her husband similarly. It was because her family did not possess anything except each other that they were able to value each other in pristine clarity.

Most of Walden consists of fine, often lyrical descriptions of the hills, woods, meadows,

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\(^{56}\) De Geus, “Henry Thoreau: The Utopia of Ultimate Simplicity,” chap. 4 in Ecological Utopias, 73–77. Also refer to Henry David Thoreau, Walden, ed. J. Lyndon Shanley, 150th anniversary ed., (1971; repr., Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 14–15, where he describes a true philosopher: “To be a philosopher is not merely to have subtle thoughts, nor even to found a school, but so to love wisdom as to live according to its dictates, a life of simplicity, independence, magnanimity, and trust.”

\(^{57}\) Thoreau, Walden, 91–92.
ponds, animals, and plants surrounding Thoreau. He listened attentively to the sounds of nature, such as the sighs of the wind, the hooting of owls, and the croaking of frogs. He applied himself to an inner, spiritual contemplation of what stirred him personally, the real objectives of life and the true value of earthly existence. Elizabeth did the same in St. Joseph’s Valley, but accompanied by her five children, her sisters in religious community, and her boarding students. While Thoreau searched alone for simplicity of life, and Elizabeth found joy and contentment in community, both lives were ecological because they lived simply and wisely, well aware they were a part of nature and the harmony found within it.

III. Elizabeth’s Ecological Vision of the Social and Ecclesial Community and Beyond

Elizabeth’s “spider web of earthly weaving” was much wider than St. Joseph’s Valley, encompassing three groups in particular. The first group consisted of friends such as the Filicchi family in Italy; Matthias O’Conway, the father of Sister Cecilia O’Conway in Philadelphia; and George Weis, a carpenter and builder in Baltimore. Her three lifelong friends, Julia, Eliza, and Dué belong to this group too, as already discussed in Elizabeth’s

58 De Geus, Ecological Utopias, 78.

59 Thoreau, Walden, 70, where he concluded: “In short, I am convinced, both by faith and experience, that to maintain one’s self on this earth is not a hardship but a pastime, if we will live simply and wisely.” Marius de Geus wrote that Thoreau developed three central ideas in Walden: 1. The necessity of protecting nature, for throughout the book Thoreau expressed his concern for the damage caused by current human activities to the natural environment; 2. The relationship and essential connection between humans and nature as the mother of humanity; 3. The importance of limiting consumption and leading a more simple life with the ideals of “satisfied with little” and “having enough” (Ibid., 78–82). I would agree that Elizabeth practiced the last two points, while the first point was not her concern because protecting nature was not the theme of her day, even though Thoreau lived in Walden only twenty-five years after Elizabeth’s death.
letters to them. The second group consisted of the leaders of the Catholic Church at the time, such as Archbishop John Carroll, Simon Bruté, and John Hickey, as well as other Sulpician priests like Louis William Dubourg, John Baptist David, and John Dubois. The third group was comprised of the graduates of St. Joseph’s Academy, and the parents of those students, notably the Harper Family with whom Catherine Seton went to live after Elizabeth’s death. Elizabeth nurtured relationships with these three groups, which proved mutually enriching. They were maintained and strengthened with an ecological character, with heightened sensibilities of one another without need for domination, like the “ecological society” Murray Bookchin defines and which will be explored in a later section.

A. Elizabeth’s Ecological Relationship with Her Friends

Elizabeth Seton met her husband’s business friends Filippo and Antonio Filicchi and Amabilia, Antonio’s wife, in Leghorn. After William’s death, Elizabeth and her daughter Anna stayed in Antonio’s house for several months. It was here she was first attracted to the Catholic devotion to the Eucharist, and she continued a close relationship with the Filicchi family throughout her life. She respected their faith life, as she noted in commending Filippo to her son William: “I rejoice that you have known him and had the opportunity of seeing a true gentleman in a true Christian, and wealth sanctified by Religion.”60 Since Antonio not only encouraged her conversion to Catholicism, but also accompanied her and Anna in their return to the United States as well as her entrance to the Catholic Church, Elizabeth was convinced that their relationship was ordered by Divine Providence. She wrote, “How great that attachment is, and with how much reason can only be known by one who once was what I have been, and can conceive how great the contrast of past and present is—this is understood by him alone who gave you to me and us to you—for which I trust we will love, praise and adore thro’ eternity.”61

Each year Antonio sent four hundred dollars for Elizabeth’s two sons,62 which freed her from the financial burden of the boys’ education. This enabled her, with additional donations from Julia, to separate her family’s finances from that of the religious community. Eventually Elizabeth sent her two sons to Leghorn so that Antonio could teach them business. Even though this did not work out as she had hoped, it is evidence of the trust, mutual respect, and interdependence between Elizabeth and Antonio’s family. Elizabeth wrote her conversion journal to Amabilia63 describing all the spiritual struggles and sorrow she

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63 3.31, “Journal to Amabilia Filicchi,” 19 July 1804, ibid., 1:367–78. This journal continues until 14 April 1805, when Elizabeth finally converted, had the first communion, and Easter communion.
had endured, finally ending with the joyous exclamation “GOD IS MINE and I AM HIS.”  
To the end of her life, Elizabeth reported to Antonio on how the religious community she founded was flourishing, and she frequently assured him of her gratitude to and prayers for the Filicchi family.

Another layperson with whom Elizabeth built a firm, mutual, and spiritual relationship, was Matthias O’Conway. He had emigrated from Ireland, served in the United States Army, and worked as a Spanish and French interpreter. His daughter Cecilia became the first woman to join Elizabeth in forming the Sisters of Charity. After Cecilia was sick for some time on Paca Street in Baltimore, Elizabeth wrote to her father, “Your or rather our dear Cecilia Veronica [O’Conway] has had one of those suffering turns of pain in her breast [...]. She is now perfectly recovered and both yesterday and this morning has received with me Our adored daily Bread. Oh my dear friend if we are not happy who is?” Approximately one year later in Emmitsburg, Elizabeth wrote again, sharing how precious Cecilia was: “Oh happy happy Father of such a precious child Virgin Modesty and grace personified and yet always a proper confidence when necessity commands a true pattern of Innocence and piety = think what a true and solid comfort she is to me.” It is obvious Sister Cecilia was the bond between her father Matthias and Elizabeth.

However, their trust in each other was much deeper than in any ordinary relationship. In the same letter of 1811, Elizabeth confided her deepest feelings to Matthias on the conflict between Father David and herself regarding the adoption of the French Rules of the Daughters of Charity:

We are to have a retreat in July, and then it will be settled, final Rules proposed, and our yearly Vows made. You will laugh at me when I tell you I have seen more real affliction and sorrow here in the ten months since our removal than in all the 35 years of my past life which was all marked by affliction.—You will laugh, I repeat, because you will know that the fruit will not be lost - at least I hope not, tho’ indeed sometimes I tremble. it is not needful to tell you this is SACRED.

Elizabeth was ready to leave the religious community if her maternal responsibility for her children contradicted the requirements of the French Rules. Both her Sulpician superiors and Archbishop Carroll were ambiguous in their position and only asked that she be patient. Elizabeth trembled, not knowing whether her dream of religious life would dissolve, but also confident this suffering would be fruitful and that her perseverance was holy in the

64 Ibid., 1:376.
65 Letter 5.27, “To Matthias O’Conway,” [postmarked 16 May 1809], ibid., 2:70–71.
66 Letter 6.46, “To Matthias O’Conway,” 5 June 1811, ibid., 2:141. Despite the date on the letter, the footnote says its contents indicate that it was written in 1810.
67 Ibid., 2:140.
eyes of God. It is wonderful to see their deep friendship, evident in Elizabeth’s willingness to confess such a sacred part of her heart to this layman.

Elizabeth not only trusted but provided spiritual direction to another layperson, George Weis. He was a carpenter who lived in Baltimore and built the chapel of St. Mary’s Seminary in Baltimore and Mount St. Mary’s Seminary in Emmitsburg. When Elizabeth left for Emmitsburg in 1809, she formed a deep friendship with his family. Elizabeth wrote twenty-five letters to George, many of which dealt with her request that George bring furniture, or buy oysters for Anna, who was dying. When George’s business failed and he faced financial difficulties, Elizabeth accompanied him through every trial: “I can never forget the kindness you have shown us but my mind and body have both suffered what God alone can tell since I left you but he knows how truly I am attached to you and how fervently I beg His blessings may be with you forever. If in this world he gives them to you as to me in crosses and contradictions let us live by faith since we know it is much better to suffer for a time that we may afterwards partake of His glory.”

After Elizabeth heard that George’s financial situation had worsened and that sickness burdened him even more, she encouraged him by using herself as an example: “If I could inspire your dear soul with as much indifference as is in mine, provided his adorable will be done during the few remaining days of my tiresome journey.” She continued, “Let all be in the order of his providence neither asking nor refusing” and added, “George, George; be

69 Letter 6.57, “Copy to George Weis,” 9 August 1809 or 1810, ibid., 2:156.
a Man but a supernatural man crucified in Christ—Eternity.” As his suffering continued, Elizabeth focused on the hope of eternity, “look only forward to our long long Eternity [...] my poor poor George take courage—sow in tears to reap in joy, look to the master Carpenter you follow after.” Faith is the primary difference between Elizabeth’s beliefs and those of contemporary secular ecologist Murray Bookchin, whose theory we will review later.

**B. Elizabeth’s Ecological Relationship with Church Leaders**

Elizabeth wrote twenty-eight letters to Archbishop Carroll, the first of which was before her conversion and after being introduced to him by Antonio. Out of those letters, nine concerned conflicts with superiors who had direct authority over the newly formed community before the Constitutions were approved. Two letters deal with problems with the first superior, William Dubourg. This conflict, however, was nothing compared to what she faced with the second superior, John Baptist David. Father David tried to rule the community, and the school, strictly and without consultation with the sisters. Elizabeth revealed her confusion to Archbishop Carroll:

> Circumstances have all so combined as to create in my mind a confusion and want of confidence in my Superiors which is indescribable. if my own happiness was only in question I should say how good is the cross for me this is my opportunity to ground myself in patience and perseverance [...] but as the good our Almighty God may intend to do by means of this community may be very much impeded by the present state of things it is absolutely necessary You as the head of it and to whom of course the Spirit of discernment for its good is given should be made acquainted with it before the evil is irreparable. 

The issue was very clear. Elizabeth believed God wanted her to form a community for the good of everyone. She objected to David’s hierarchical idea of community, commanded by the superior without consultation or agreement of members, ruled without human warmth and sensitivity. Being honest, Elizabeth told the bishop that her heart was closed and that she was paralyzed by the now stifling atmosphere of this community that discouraged every creative action and desire to serve God.

Carroll delayed in answering, eventually advising Elizabeth that the community would succeed only through her sacrifice and complete trust in God. Elizabeth endured this

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70 Ibid.
conflict for one-and-a-half years, until the Archbishop finally approved the Rule with an adaptation for Elizabeth’s children. He said, “I am exceedingly anxious that every allowance shall be made not only to the sisters, generally, but to each one in particular [...] provided that this be done without endangering the harmony of the community,” and he added, “I read the constitutions to consult in the first place the individual happiness of your dear Sisters and consequently your own.” In short, Carroll agreed with Elizabeth that the Sisters of Charity of St. Joseph’s should have a community concerned with individual happiness, which took into account the diversity of its people and situations. They sought an ecological community, where equality, diversity, and spontaneity were nurtured.

We also find an ecological quality to Elizabeth’s relationships when we consider how she nurtured both John Hickey and Simon Bruté until her death. Rev. John Francis Hickey, S.S. (1789–1869), was the first priest ordained at Mount St. Mary’s, and the first American member of the Sulpicians. When he was a young priest, Elizabeth reprimanded him for a careless sermon: “O Sir, that awakens my anger do you remember a priest holds the honor of God on his lips do you not trouble you to spread his fire he wishes so much enkindled, if you will not study and prepare while young, what when you are old - there is a Mothers lesson [...] yes prayer and preparation too.”

Previously, we have noted how Elizabeth helped Father Hickey gently treat his younger sister Ellen. In every letter, Elizabeth wrote to Hickey she expressed her concern for him and always asked his prayers for her: “Pray for one who remembers you always. All your concerns mine.” She signed these “your little Mother,” or “your poor little St. Joseph mother,” or “Your Poor little bad devoted Mother EAS.” Elizabeth’s motherly heart nurtured, sometimes with admonition, but always with gentleness and sensitivity.

Born in France, Rev. Simon Gabriel Bruté de Remur, S.S. (1779–1839), became a physician and was then ordained to the priesthood. In 1810, he came to the United States, bringing an extensive library of several thousand books that he shared with Elizabeth. In Emmitsburg, he developed a deep spiritual bond with her, becoming her spiritual director for the remaining ten years of her life. Bruté helped Elizabeth widen her spiritual scope to reach new heights of spirituality, and she helped him with his English homilies and growth in his priestly vocation. Father Bruté called Elizabeth “my mother” when he asked her to

correct his homilies: “I pursue, my dear Mother, the useful task which our father imposes upon me, but I cannot succeed without many corrections, or even compositions anew. Be so good as to give hands for that to your brother.”

Once, he confessed how much Elizabeth meant to his missionary life in the United States: “You whom I like to call a mother here as I call one in France my mother you add not indeed, but you have so well helped me better to know, yes better still, a priest of his as I was, to know my happiness and desire.” It is clear that Elizabeth appreciated his sacrifice as a missionary and his total resignation to Divine Providence: “You would never believe [...] the good Your return does to this soul of your little Mother - to see you again tearing yourself from all that is dearest—giving up again the full liberty you lawfully and justly possessed—exchanging for a truly heavy chain, and the endless labyrinth of discussions and wearisome details.”

Bruté began serving as president of St. Mary’s College in Baltimore in 1815. Elizabeth recognized the freedom of heart within him, having left his home country behind. They encouraged each other in the progress of their spiritual path: “Do you read well your Mothers whole heart in this Resignation [...] but you know the only Security and heavenly Peace in that point so dear rests all on this essential abandon - so at least you taught me.”

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Elizabeth’s letters to Bruté also provide insight into her views on the Islamic faith, as well as other religions. Her attitude toward people outside the Catholic Church, which she called “the Ark in the world,” was open, trusting them to the mercy of God: “All the heathens, savages, sects etc were only in my heart for prayer, but never in my brain for what became of them, or to trouble my Faith in his wisdom and mercy, the Father most tender Father of all my immense God, I his alone.”81 One particular mention of Muslims in her writings connects to the universal importance of pardon.

God has taken his symbol of Reconciliation a bow [rainbow after the flood] without arrows says St. Ambrose to instruct us that his divine Majesty is Sweet and Peaceful—

= will not pardon? - oh worse that [sic] Turks or Moor for Turks have their feast called Behiram wherein all injured are pardoned, so then go out from God’s church if thou wilt not pardon or at least open not thy mouth before the Wounds of Christ which bleed against thee.82

Elizabeth’s relationship to people of other faiths was summarized succinctly in her own words, “tho I sincerely love and respect Individuals of other Faith, yet the Faith of the Catholic church is the only one I can teach or advise to any one committed to my charge.”83

C. Elizabeth’s Social Relationship with the Graduates and Parents of St. Joseph’s Academy

Elizabeth maintained relationships with the graduates of St. Joseph’s Academy through letters. These demonstrate her interest and deep concern for their lives following graduation, and in them she often offered appropriate advice. Regarding married life, Elizabeth advised a former student named Ellen Gottsberger: “I wish very much to know if you make a good Obedient wife studying the happiness of your husband, and you wish him to study yours, and as a true Christian setting him the first example of a humble heart and forbearing temper, if you take care of the Soul As well as the body of your servants who must find a Mother as well as a mistress in you.”84

Elizabeth’s lesson was that husbands and wives should concern themselves with what constitutes the happiness of each other. Humility and even temper, then, would serve to realize their happiness. In addition, she focused on the whole household, asking Ellen to take care of the physical and spiritual needs of the servants who worked for them. Always seeing the picture as a whole, Elizabeth had an ecological concern for everyone’s happiness.

To Mary Diana Harper, Elizabeth strongly recommended controlling her temper. “The first step to happiness is to subdue our feelings [...] and mind my Mary I repeat you my old prophecy if you do not give religion its proper place in your heart, you will be truly wretched since any one of your passions [...] are enough to destroy your peace.”

Elizabeth repeatedly warned Mary to control her quick temper not only for others, but also for her own sake, writing that “unless they are subdued you can have no rest with yourself or others.” Then Elizabeth assured Mary that whatever pain she experienced because of this direction was simply due to a wish for her true happiness.

Another graduate, Mary Smith, entered the Carmelite Monastery. Elizabeth wrote to her advising, “Let us trust in his dear mercy, and let not our hearts be so much troubled about our sins as to forget to trust in him [...] I told my Jesus this morning when I had the happiness of receiving him, I said, ah could I say with St. Paul ‘it is not I who lives [sic], but it is Jesus [who] lives in me.’”

Robert Goodloe Harper was the parent of three students, including Mary Diana, and served as financial and legal advisor to Elizabeth. As a lawyer, he helped incorporate the Sisters of Charity of St. Joseph’s in Maryland. When Mary Diana died in France, Elizabeth consoled him and his family as she would members of her own:

I hesitate much my dear sir in daring to say a word to you at this moment yet your Mary was my own, more than you can imagine, and in her particular turn of temper had made her lovely Soul known to mine, more perhaps than even to her own parents—therefore my tears will flow with theirs and my heart feel as if I too was losing again a dear + darling child. But I am sure my dear Mr. Harper you will look at the consoling side of this deep affliction, and the painful uncertainties of our life of trial.

In a letter of Elizabeth’s to Julia, we find how deeply she trusted the close relationship between herself and the Harper family. The Harpers had invited Catherine Seton to stay with them if Elizabeth should not recover from illness: “You know my own beloved friend I see all in the order of Providence, and wish only to use the generosity of others as far as it enters in that beautiful order, therefore we have never yet in any way taken advantage of the goodness of Mr. and Mrs. H to us.”

In her friendship with the Harpers, as well as in all other relationships she nurtured in her life, Elizabeth saw the beautiful order of Providence. Because her social relationships were always rooted in such order and harmony, we recognize the ecological character of Elizabeth’s social community.

D. Murray Bookchin’s Social Ecology and Elizabeth’s Social Community

The concept of social ecology constitutes the basis of Murray Bookchin’s theory, and the starting point of his major published work *The Ecology of Freedom*: “I cannot emphasize too strongly that such a two-fold definition of ‘nature’ is one of the most important distinctions I tried to make in this book[...]. Social ecology, in turn, is a philosophy of evolution, not a mystical restatement of Saint John’s apocalypse. Humanity, in turn, is both an extension of ecology’s insight into social development, from a biological first nature into society’s second nature. *The Ecology of Freedom* tries to synthesize these two natures into a third nature. It tries to transform both nonhuman and human-made natures into a more complete nature that is conscious, thinking, and purposeful.”90

The primary goal of social ecology is to provide us with a holistic analysis of relationships in nature and society.91 Since Bookchin concluded that the social hierarchy of humans produced our domination over nature, it is of paramount importance to establish nonhierarchical relationships and organizations within political and economic systems. Therefore, Bookchin proposed that “hierarchy, in effect, would be replaced by interdependence, and consociation would imply the existence of an organic core that meets the deeply felt biological needs for care, cooperation, security, and love. Freedom would no longer be placed in opposition to nature, individuality to society, choice to necessity, or personality to the needs of social coherence.”92 Bookchin also hoped that ecocommunities

would establish a new era in face-to-face relationships, and democracy itself, so that the split with nature created by our hierarchical society ages ago would be healed and transcended.93

It is interesting to find in the social networks of Elizabeth Seton examples very close to Bookchin’s social ecocommunity, woven by face-to-face relationships of interdependence, care, equality, and freedom. Bookchin was largely opposed to religious institutions, writing that “rarely, as the history of all the great world religions attests, have they created an ecologically humanistic society.”94 Contrary to Bookchin’s judgment, though, Elizabeth nurtured her social relationships as a Catholic religious woman and the founder of a community. This can be seen in her friendships with the Filicchi family across the ocean, the Matthias O’Conway family, the George Weis family, the many graduates, her friends, and with Archbishop Carroll and the Sulpician priests. Their relationships were deepened by honest dialogue, healthy interdependence, mutual appreciation, and trust in the order of God’s Providence, all of which fostered social ecology.

Conclusion

Learning from nature, Elizabeth lived her community life ecologically based on her insight that “all must take its course in this world,”95 because “the hand that allots always proportions.”96 Since it takes time for fruit to grow, we have to be patient for a child to mature. Elizabeth once wrote to a parent, “I think you are too anxious for the fruit of your dear little tree, which is ripening very fast.[…] But we must wait for these fruits; for, if there is a true danger for one of her turn, it would be to push her too fast, and force an exterior look without the interior spirit.”97 Elizabeth valued moderation and “the peace and safety of a mortified spirit” in daily life.98 When she had enough money to pay for her children’s emerging independence, Elizabeth wrote to Antonio, “I rejoice to draw no more from Messrs. Murrey.”99 Elizabeth knew when enough was enough, an ecological virtue, and she was grateful to her friends. She once wrote to Julia, “Do not think of me dearest but under the line of my beautiful Providence, which has done so well for us so many years - you keep me out of debt.”100 The social network that Elizabeth fostered provided the basis for an ecologically rounded and balanced family and community.

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94 Bookchin, Ecology of Freedom, 63.
We see how the three communities Elizabeth was nurturing—her apostolic religious community, her family, and her social community—were as interwoven as a spider’s web. Elizabeth helped her children interact with students in St. Joseph’s Academy in various ways. Once, Elizabeth wrote to Julia of her daughter Catherine, “I have told Kit that I fear some of the children of our school with all of whom she has been such a favorite may be troublesome calling to see her.”

Through another letter, Elizabeth introduced Mr. and Mrs. Harper, who were travelling in Italy, to Antonio and Amabilia Filicchi: “To tell you the boundless kindness of Mr. and Mrs. Harper for my Individual family as well as our Community would be impossible, and you may suppose how anxious I am that your beloved Amabilia should meet so elegant a woman from our country.” Elizabeth connected Sister Margaret George with her friend Dué in New York: “It delights me so that you love my little Margaret [George], it is a heart so truly made to be loved and I am sure will not disappoint you.”

Tellingly, Elizabeth remained at the center of this spider’s web, connecting different corners of the three communities she nourished through caring, freeing, and responsibility toward one another.

To a former student Elizabeth wrote of her failing physical condition, “Three wheels of the old carriage are broken down, the fourth very near gone; then with the wings of a dove will my soul fly and be rest.” She embraced an ecological view of death and the conviction

103 Letter 7.221, “To Catherine Dupleix,” [21 August 1819], ibid., 2:622.
104 Letter 7.329, “To a Student,” [probably after 1818], ibid., 2:710.
that it is natural and the common lot for all human beings: “As to sickness and death itself if it comes to us again we know that they are the common attendants of human life they are our certain portion at one period or other.”105 On one autumn day she wrote to Julia, “The sun so bright, the country so to my mind all falling and [...] speaking the promise of the grave—the grave so—dark to [sic]—but so bright to the longing, desiring active soul of the prisoner looking beyond its narrow passage to the fields of everlasting Verdure.”106 Elizabeth saw two sides to death, and in the “everlasting Verdure,” she saw the promise of the fresh, life-giving energy known as the “viriditas.”107 Referencing nature, Elizabeth described her peaceful acceptance of death to Father Bruté:

now near death - O our Jesus!—

All as quiet as the still breeze over the little lake....108

In conclusion, perhaps the following quotation taken from a later piece of correspondence best portrays Elizabeth Seton’s mature personality. This woman, the foundress and saint, as demonstrated, lived as a loving mother to her three-fold religious, family, and social ecological communities:

Alone on a rock this afternoon, surrounded by the most beautiful scenery, adoring and praising Him for his magnificence and glory [...] the soul cried out, O God! O God! Give yourself. What is all the rest? A Silent voice of love answered, I am yours. Then, dearest Lord! Keep me as I am while I live; for this is true content,—to hope for nothing, to desire nothing, expect nothing, fear nothing. Death! Eternity! Oh, how small are all objects of busy, striving, restless, blind, mistaken beings, when at the foot of the cross these two prospects are viewed!!109

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Enamel after the famed Filicchi portrait of Elizabeth Seton. 
Artist: Paula Martin, D.C., Madrid, Spain.

Courtesy St. Vincent de Paul Image Archive Online
All this and Heaven, too.
Unsigned original watercolor in Daughters of Charity house, Emmitsburg, Maryland.
Artist: Rebecca Pearl.
Courtesy St. Vincent de Paul Image Archive Online
Portrait of Peter Kropotkin, circa 1890.

Public Domain
The Paca Street House, Baltimore, Maryland.

Courtesy St. Vincent de Paul Image Archive Online
Portrait of Reverend Simon Bruté, S.S.

Portrait of Henry David Thoreau, in 1861.
Public Domain
The tombs of William Seton and Antonio Filicchi, Livorno, Italy.
Courtesy St. Vincent de Paul Image Archive Online
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Elizabeth and student.  

Courtesy St. Vincent de Paul Image Archive Online
Murray Bookchin pictured in 1989.
Public Domain
Elizabeth Ann Seton stained glass window. 
Daughters of Charity Provincial House, Rome, Italy.

Courtesy St. Vincent de Paul Image Archive Online