

WITNESS STATEMENT OF ANDRE AUGER

I don't normally get much involved in the political debates that form the heart of our democratic system. I am usually content that others seem to enjoy the public process and take stands on issues. I have watched this unfold in particular with respect to the Wal-Mart debate. I have been saddened by the misunderstanding on the part of those who support unbridled commercial development. I have been disappointed in our elected civic leaders who have chosen to ignore past decisions that favoured "smart growth".

What has alarmed me more than anything is the inability of the pro-development faction to have an appreciation for what is involved in using land as "sacred space" in a quest for a deeper understanding of our role as sentient beings on this planet.

I have used the land and facilities of the Jesuit property for over twenty years in one capacity or another, much more so in the past three to four years. I have sought spiritual direction, companionship, skill development as well as peace and solace from the people, the facilities and the land. I have come there for silent retreats; I have taken workshops on spiritual direction; I come monthly for meetings with fellow spiritual directors. In fact, I have come over the past while to consider Loyola House and its surroundings as my "spiritual home." I know I can always return when I am wounded, hurting, confused; when I need time and space to think things through; when I need to reassess what I think God is calling me to be. I can walk the Labyrinth, I can walk the trails, I can spend a few nights at a hermitage on the property, I can spend time in the chapel. And all of this in respectful silence.

Over time, I have come to realize that Guelph is blessed with a world-renowned centre of spirituality. Rather than treasure this place, many Guelphites are annoyed that there seems to be some issue up there in the north part of town, stirred up by some marginal bunch of religious fanatics. I, on the other hand, have come to see the Jesuit land and its facilities for spiritual growth much the way Kyoto treats its Zen gardens: as an oasis of peace and seclusion in the middle of a bustling, busy, commercial secular city.

Thus It is not only a matter of the land - the space. That in itself brings comfort to those of us who wish to reconnect with the holiness of the world around us, as we begin to awaken to the ecological damage that we humans are inflicting on our planet.

It is also a matter of silence. Almost every religious mystical tradition demands of its practitioners that they find a silent place where deep meditation can occur without the disrupting din of commerce. Yes, that silence was already compromised when Canadian Tire was built. It has been further eroded when Home Depot was erected. What is now proposed will continue the erosion of that much-needed silence. To those who retort that Loyola House has lived quite well with the shopping development on the north-east corner of 6 & 7, I would respond that we are on a slippery slope, and with each further development in that area, the precious silence gets that much more eroded.

I have come to understand that this battle might just be a “war of religions.” There is something of a religious fervour connected with the strident arguments in favour of more and ever more

shopping possibilities, as if shopping were what humans were created for. I for one require the space and the silence to work out, at the depths of my being, a different understanding of my place on this earth. I don't want to be reminded, through the din of trucks and SUVs and vans and cars pulling in and out of an increasing number of commercial venues, that I am struggling against a discouragingly strong current of materialism and commercialism.

For me, silence is a key ingredient in the meditative process. Loyola House itself works hard to create that silence - during retreats all is silence all the time, even at mealtimes. And the healing power of that silence in community is beyond words. The land has been able to provide that extra dimension of silence outdoors. During our prayer times, we walk, we sit, we meditate, we pray, we give thanks, we reflect, we listen... And the silent response of nature echoes the silence within our hearts as we pay attention to "the still small voice within."

Somewhere, at some point in time, someone has got to stand up and say a loud "No!" to a further erosion of our capacity to find silence in our urban centres. Someone has got to have the courage to tell the developers who control the destinies of our cities that "enough is enough," and that money, profit, consumption and materialism are not the prime purposes of humanity. Someone has got to defend the right of those of us who value reflection, contemplation, and meditation, to find those places within our urban centres.

Silence is golden. Silence must be protected. Silence requires space. Humanity needs silence in order to meditate. Humanity needs to meditate in order to take stock of what matters. The Earth needs us to meditate in order for us to wake up to the damage we are doing. We need to preserve

those places where silence reigns.