

Brother Cactus: Walkers in a wild place

by [Gordon Atkinson](#) in the [September 23, 2008](#) issue

For the last couple of years our church community has been burrowing a path through the dense brush of our land. We've not been in a hurry; we don't even know for certain where the path is going. We've tried to be as gentle as possible, avoiding more permanent plants and taking the direction that nature seems to be offering. So our path winds its way whimsically through the woods, three feet wide and bordered with limestone rocks that we found lying around. Most of the time its surface is nothing more than the packed earth beneath our feet. Occasionally the juniper trees lay down a soft mulch made of their shedding evergreen, and we walk on that.

This path is as gentle and nature-friendly a thing as can be imagined, and yet Mother Nature seems to hate it and is doing everything in her power to destroy it. Along with a vacuum, Mother Nature abhors trails, pathways, walls, slabs, roads, landscaping, parking lots and buildings. My friends and I have been trying to impose the order of our path on Mother Nature, but she is having none of it.

And we picked a bad spot for the fight. The South Texas version of our ancient mother is a tough lady. Summers are brutally hot, and we have months without rainfall. The trees and other plants that thrive here have earned their right to exist. They are tough and often bristle with thorns. Their leaves are small, olive-colored and leathery, and can easily weather months of drought. They turn dull and dry, entering a dormant stage, then come roaring back to life when the rains come again.

We humans, on the other hand, have not earned the right to live on this land. We will always be annoying guests. We make forays into the woods but then run back to our air-conditioned buildings. We like landscaped areas, grassy lawns and little paths, but even a rock border is an affront to Mother Nature. No sooner do we lay down these stones than she begins to destroy our artificial symmetry.

In this ancient war against humans, Brother Cactus and Sister Armadillo are fighting on the front lines.

We own the deed to this property, but Brother Cactus doesn't recognize our paperwork. He plays the ownership game like a gangland turf war. If you encounter a 400-square-foot patch of prickly pear cactus, you stop, acknowledge that someone else rules this neighborhood, and back away. Once a year the cactus gangs flash their colors, sprouting gorgeous flowers of yellow, red and orange. Then we say to each other, "Let's just leave those areas alone; they are pretty, after all." It's a kind of primitive détente.

Sometimes Brother Cactus practices guerrilla warfare. Tiny spearlike cacti leap out of the bushes and embed themselves in your trousers, then work their way into your skin. Their needles are like fine hairs that are almost impossible to see but hurt like the dickens when you rub your hand over your skin. I have spent dozens of hours over the years sitting in my bathroom with a magnifying glass and tweezers, trying to find these needles and pluck them from my hide. I don't know what the official, Latin name of these cacti is. I call them li'l bastards. They are a constant, painful reminder that it costs something to claim this land.

We Texans have a reputation for being stubborn and arrogant and we probably deserve it. After a decade of battles with Mother Nature, our church has managed to establish an outpost of two buildings and our path. After our stone-lined path was completed, I began taking a morning stroll on it. I noticed that most mornings one or two stones would be overturned and lying in the pathway. At first I suspected the children of our church, whom I have long thought of as secret agents of the enemy. (They share Mother Nature's hatred of order.) But then I noticed that the stones were out of place almost every morning, even when no children had been around.

After a closer inspection revealed signs of rooting and grubbing, I knew what we were dealing with: armadillos. I was irritated. “Those damn armadillos are tearing up our prayer path.” The damn armadillos, of course, have no idea that humans are working against them. They do what they are programmed to do, which is grub for insects. It’s nothing personal. They move the stones; we put them back. It’s an ongoing process and another strange détente.

At some point I stopped being irritated and started being amused. I began to enjoy thinking of the armadillos at night, innocently grubbing about without a care in the world except to find a meal. I realized that putting a few stones back into place now and again was a small price to pay for the honor of using this fine land. About that same time I stopped plotting strategies for eradicating the cactus and began wondering what it would look like if we respectfully left the cactus alone to blossom and bloom in its own time and place.

Taking an idea from St. Francis, I began referring to them as Brother Cactus and Sister Armadillo. Though their work is often inconvenient for us, I admire the faithful way they carry out their simple callings. I also began thinking of us humans as short-term visitors in this place, soft and fragile creatures who have purchased our rights of occupation instead of earning them with millions of years of evolution. The least we can do is try not to disturb things any more than is necessary.

We live in a wild place, and we have learned to love the wildness. If you were to frequent our path and pray there, you might find your prayers growing wilder as well—less structured, less demanding, more patient and humble, more filled with listening. You might even begin to count the walking itself as a prayer, and the submitting to nature as a prayer, and the acceptance of your small place in the world as a prayer.