

## Application Essay: Cedar Monroe

As I write this essay, I am watching and listening to a swarm of what I think are red-tailed bumblebees (*Bombus rufocinctus*) in the rhododendrons in front of my home in the suburbs, one of many declining species of native pollinators. I am grateful that today is cooler, more like the May weather I remember as a child in this region, a nice break from the heat of this last week, in what will likely be the warmest May in many centuries. I am missing the farms I have lived on throughout my life and I am missing my favorite grove of Western Red Cedar. Last time I visited them, on a tree farm near my own old home, the effects of rising heat were evident in the too dry soil, and in the increase in browning foliage and flagging in the warm spring. I am 41 now, with one career behind me, and wondering if I dare dream of a new one.

When I was very young, I wanted to be a scientist. My earliest science experiment was studying snails in my California backyard with my little “The Young Naturalist” book given to me by a grandmother. When we moved to a farm, I spent many hours outdoors on the Olympic Peninsula, identifying plants, following the stars, and raising chickens and dairy goats. While I was raised in an intensely anti-science environment as a homeschool kid, I found ways to educate myself, spending hours teaching myself algebra and livestock and plant science.

After I left home, and worked a series of low paying jobs, I paid my way through community college until transferring to Evergreen, where I excelled in literature and cultural studies. I was the first in my family to graduate from college and then graduate school. As I untangled my hyper religious upbringing, I encountered liberation theology in my classes and followed that path to divinity school and ordination in the Episcopal Church.

After ordination, I co-founded and ran a non-profit that offered chaplaincy, advocacy, and political education to people experiencing homelessness, incarceration, and addiction in Grays Harbor County. In that work, I was able to connect to many communities in the Pacific Northwest, from the poor white communities in which I was raised to the Native tribes doing frontline work in addressing climate change, salmon decline, and addiction in the region, from environmental groups to other homeless advocates. Recognizing that the issues faced locally were similar across the country, I organized nationally with the Poor People's Campaign, the National Union of the Homeless, and University of the Poor.

I was able to bring my love of the natural world into my work. In 2017, I helped found Harbor Roots Farm, which provides supportive employment to young people getting out of jail and off the streets. Together, we were able to grow three acres of vegetables and maintain a greenhouse, and then start a small restoration project, replanting native plants and trees on the property we acquired.

As I organized with my community, and wrote a book about my work, I was deeply aware of the intersecting crises that our world faces in this moment. Homelessness and climate change, rising poverty and species loss, systemic racism and environmental crises—all of these issues were connected and I wanted to be part of creating a world that healed land and people together. In post-graduate work, I took classes on Indigenous epistemology and understandings of land, attended Indigenous studies conferences addressing climate change and food sovereignty, and enjoyed cheering on friends on the Tribal Canoe Journeys.

I also realized that I needed a career change. As much as I loved my work in chaplaincy, I had lost my faith and I needed to leave the church. I resigned my ordination orders at the end of 2023. As I wrote and took classes, I rekindled my love of the natural world. I have spent long

hours in the woods and on shorelines, watching patterns, identifying plants and birds, and studying the effects of climate change here in the Pacific Northwest. I studied Lushootseed, sitting in on community classes.

So, I've decided to take a risk today, believe in myself, and apply for a second master's degree. I want to use a Master in Environmental Studies to further my advocacy work and to return to my first love, to the land. As the effects of climate change increase, and as environmental catastrophe looms, I want to be part of creating strategy to address these crises, to be part of creating hope for a future not based on exploitation, and to learn from Indigenous communities in the Northwest and around the world.

As giant red belted bees bumble through the bright pink flowers outside my window, I feel hope, hope that all is not yet lost in our world, and hope that I too can find new purpose.