

COMING DOWN TO EARTH: ECONOMICS, ECOLOGY AND SPIRITUALITY

*Deep peace of the running wave to you
Deep peace of the flowing air to you
Deep peace of the quiet earth to you
Deep peace of the shining stars to you
Deep peace of the Son of peace to you*

This Gaelic blessing, often used on Iona, comes from a time when people could believe with all their hearts in the deep peace of the creation. Humankind might rage and contend across borders and continents, empires might rise and fall, men and women might flower and die, to be blown away like grass in the wind, but the running wave, the flowing air, the quiet earth, the shining stars, these things would endure unchanging, promising deep peace in their stability, their beauty and their purity. Even further back are these words from St Patrick's Breastplate, that great hymn of encompassing.

*I bind unto myself today
the virtues of the starlit heaven,
The glorious sun's life-giving ray,
The whiteness of the moon at even,
The flashing of the lightning free,
The whirling wind's tempestuous shocks,
The stable earth, the deep salt sea
Around the old eternal rocks.*

The Celts used to talk about the little book-that was the Bible- and the great book -that was creation, and they read God in both.

The Scottish journalist Kenneth Roy once described a visit he made to an island in the Outer Hebrides of Scotland, to a remote village where daily life was hard, if not any longer as grinding as it had been, and where the local history had been marked by a number of fishing tragedies of the kind that desolate small, close communities. He joined the local Free Church congregation for worship, and here, in a liturgy bereft of any relief of colour, movement or visual imagery, plain in the extreme, he found himself addressed by what he termed 'the unbearable fact of God.' The austerity of the worship reflected that of the landscape itself; barren, rocky, battered by Atlantic gales, where little grows in thin soil and the harvest of the sea is hard-won, and yet with a stark beauty in its simplicity and quality of light.

It is for me a powerful image of the way in which our environment interacts with our self-understanding. Does a particular habitat create its own meaning, predisposing its inhabitants to interiorise and signify their external surroundings; could such an austere religious landscape exist in a similar way in the gentle wooded slopes and fertile valleys of Southern England, for example? Or is meaning sought to make some kind of sense of the particularities of place. The inhabitants of an even bleaker island, St Kilda, many miles off the north coast of Scotland, believed that the illnesses, poverty and hardship they suffered, and the tragic loss of so many babies at birth (actually caused by bad midwifery practices) was punishment from God because they were 'a wicked generation.'

A sense of place is one of the most profound human experiences. For many people, it is stronger than their attachment to other human beings. It is part of what motivates

patriotism, nationalism, artistic expression, religious devotion, and personal and political identity. And the last thirty years or so have seen an increasing ecological awareness worldwide. We have begun to realise that our habitat is indivisible, that what affects one part ultimately affects all parts, that 'when one part of the body suffers, all the other parts suffer with it.' No longer tied to old concepts of dead matter, we know that we inhabit a living earth.

Attitudes to the earth

This increasing awareness is changing our maps. Our geography is in constant transition. And our interior geography is also shifting. But the maps are not all the same. There are many attitudes to what we call 'nature', or our habitat, our earth with its universe.

They can include: nature as a resource to be managed, an opportunity to be exploited, a potential to be developed, an aesthetic to be appreciated, as the stage on which human destiny is worked out, or simply as a nice surrounding in which to take exercise, conquer mountains or escape the pressures of modern living. All of these are attitudes of **extrinsic worth**. That is to say, they add value to nature in terms of its desirability to the human race, though some of them may seem more benign than others, and may include a love or enjoyment of nature.

Others are attitudes of **intrinsic worth**. These have different names; the Green movement, deep ecology, creation spiritualities. They have different origins and different expressions. But they share a dominant common characteristic. Their profound motivation is one of respect and reverence for the forms and elements and species of the earth because they have intrinsic value, and because we are connected to them, a species among species, programmed to adapt and survive.

A species among other species. Though we may have an intellectual awareness of this in our society, it's still somewhat difficult to take it on board. Even with a deep conviction of intrinsic worth, we still have problems of perspective, and the pressures to disconnect are acute.

We recognise the fact that indigenous or aboriginal cultures often have highly evolved ways of living in right relationship with their habitat. But such cultures who have been torn up by the roots from the land on which they grew by the forces of what is sometimes rather misleadingly called 'progress' or 'development' are forced at an accelerated pace into a brutal differentiation which is almost unimaginable for us in our highly individualistic culture. Western cultures have had centuries of this brutalisation. We have been torn up by the roots so often. This is part, for example, of what it means to be Scottish.

Our geography shows our history. The map of Scotland, with its 19th century patterns of emigration and exile, simply shows on a smaller scale what is still going on today; the destruction of older forms of community, deforestation and the degradation of habitats, the introduction of cash-cropping on to formerly food-growing land, brutal land-clearance, population growth and the movement of people who had previously lived by land and exchange to urban centres in search of waged work.

Uprooted, displaced, it is harder for us to know ourselves as a species among species. And if one part of religion is the attempt to conceive of the universe as humanly meaningful, there is also the temptation to interpret that as meaning that humankind is what the universe is for.

And thence, it is only a small step to the arrogance of believing that the universe is for us-of making us the value adders to creation. So it may be a considerable struggle to affirm that, on the contrary, we are for the universe. But I think it is a change we have to make.

To be creature, one among many, is to come face to face with our limitations. We are not God, and God is not just an idealised version of us. God is other, and speaks to us in other voices. Our judgement of the world, sometimes expressed as if we had a monopoly on divine truth, is in truth, that which holds us most to account. In Micah 6, the prophet calls the people as if to a court of law to listen to what God is saying, and this is what God the plaintiff says:

Arise, plead your case before the mountains, and let the hills hear your voice.

Hear, you mountains, the controversy of the Lord, and you enduring foundations of the earth; For the Lord has a controversy with his people, and he will contend with Israel.

There can be no clearer indication anywhere in Scripture that to be creature in the covenant is not only to be required to be in right relationship with our own human kind, but with the whole creation. Justice is also eco-justice. And how then, will the mountains judge us? Will the enduring foundations of the earth find in our favour?

And we are discovering that the earth is making its own judgements. Now, scientists have mapped the human genome code. It may be no exaggeration to say that we are at a *kairos*, a defining moment in human history. In the midst of a hugely accelerated pace of change, we are confronting in equal measure unparalleled opportunities and unparalleled threats. Significant parts of the human population, particularly in the West, are healthier, wealthier and enjoy greater opportunities for self - realisation than ever before. At the same time, the gap between rich and poor is growing, huge parts of humanity live on the margins of destitution, uprooted peoples number tens of millions and wars and pandemics devastate dozens of countries. Social and political institutions everywhere are changing and once - powerful ideologies have lost their hold. The fabric and future of life itself is facing commodification and one on hand the wealth of consumer nations and on the other the poverty of energy and resource - poor countries have caused an ecological holocaust which threatens the continuation of the planet. In the last 25 years alone, the human species has destroyed one -third of its non-renewable resources. Our actions have consequences; the destruction of rainforests leads to global warming; the pollution of lakes destroys localised eco-systems, the earth resists soil erosion and the loss of bio-diversity with floodwater; but the floods drown and bring diseases in their wake. How will the mountains judge us? I think we are beginning to hear the answer.

Being a species among species, recognising our connections, also means recognising our finiteness, our contingency. This presents huge problems to Western economic and political ideologies. We live in societies that entice with limitlessness, promise escape from finiteness. Both personally and politically, on the left and on the right, we are invited to disengage from the demands and limitations of history, of geography, of bodies, of relationship. We distort and deny our history, the hurts done both to us and by us. We attempt to transcend geography in our cars and planes, cause carnage on the roads, accelerate global warming. We systematically demean, armour and hurt bodies. We pay lip service to community, live out of individualism, and pay to find ways of recreating spurious community.

Jonathan Porritt, searching for the reasons why people do not take ecological issues seriously enough, said,

'Simply, not enough people are dying yet in our countries: of skin cancer, of UV rays, or from pollution toxification illnesses. Nor are enough coastal communities drowning yet from rising sea levels due to global warming. The visible, tangible, avoidable consequences of eco-

disaster are not yet powerful enough to persuade sufficient people to change today's priorities.'

Is this what we are headed for in the West? Is our denial of our finitude and the planet's finitude so strong that, having rolled back our boundaries so firmly over other people and species, having externalised our costs to such a degree, we have lost the ability to self-limit, and must wait for the limitations laid upon us by catastrophe and tragedy. Certainly, the failure of some of the world's richest countries to reduce greenhouse gas emissions seems to suggest so.

'Free thinker, do you think you are the only thinker on this earth, in which life blazes inside all things? Your liberty does what it wishes with the powers it controls, but when you gather to plan, the universe is not there.'

If our earth, our habitat, is precious to us, both personally and politically, both globally and locally, what does it really mean to look after the home, to be environmentally friendly.

'The land' is a powerfully evocative term for Scots, as it is for all cultures. It holds many meanings and resonances for people. Perhaps its three most commonly held meanings are: first, political; land as nationality or nation-state, as in homeland, native land; second, economic; land as property, utility, resource, commons, as in land-owning, landless; third, cultural; land as countryside, nature, as in landscape

I want to think about how significant numbers of people are excluded from current debates and decision-making about the environment because of the kind of understandings we carry about habitat or land. This exclusion cannot, I believe, be easily categorised into a rural/urban split. Many, perhaps most 'green' campaigners in our society live in urban contexts. We all live on the land, we all place our feet on ground, terra firma, whether urban, rural, or suburban. We all breathe the air. We all need water to live.

Environmental concern is not, for many people, first and foremost about the countryside, about wilderness areas and de-forestation and marine protection. That does not mean that they don't care about the countryside. It **does** mean that they are concerned first about **their** environment, the land upon which **their** children will grow up, and which will shape their well being, aspirations and responsiveness to change and challenge. They too are concerned about jobs, energy use, pollution, transport policies, housing policies, and the nature of democracy. In all of these issues, people are struggling with questions of value.

We take care of what we value. But **why** do we value what we value? To a great extent, we value what in turn values us-what meets our needs, what affirms us in our life and aspirations, what gives us enjoyment and delight. It's not usually easy to tell, and probably it doesn't matter too much anyway, which comes first, the valuing or the being valued. They reinforce one another. If our environment is friendly to us, we are friendly back. We take care of it. We invest time, energy, skills and often money in it-all of which makes the environment even friendlier.

But what if your environment is not friendly? What if your environment is deeply and implacably hostile? What does this mean for notions of value and care? The extraordinary thing to me is not how few people care about that land whereon they live-but how many still do, against all the odds.

The cultural/spiritual meaning of land is often identified with 'nature' 'the wild'; places unspoiled by development and urbanisation. It is the scent of pine, the cry of birds, open skies and not a building in sight. It is deep in our psyche-back to nature, head for the hills, down to the sea. But in Scotland, this meaning is largely fictitious. There's very little of our environment that is actually as 'nature' made it. In truth, the stable earth and the deep salt sea has always been something of an illusion.

This identification is, I think, a problematic one. It leads ecology to be seen as an aesthetic. There are many communities that are neither rural nor beautiful. So they are considered to be ignorant or uncaring about the environment. They in turn think that 'greens' care only about the countryside, and have no interest or concern for those whose habitat is urbanised, or not picturesque.

The tragedy of this mutual exclusion is that it fails to realise the extent of environmental activity actually going on in these communities. Here, energies are tied up in trying to befriend their own hostile environment, seeking respect from it in the shape of better housing, schools, public transport, policing, rubbish collection; reconnecting person to person in the struggle to re-evaluate not just the physical environment but the social one also, building, or rebuilding a sense of worth within and among communities. It is often the despair of such local neighbourhoods that the media stigmatise them, see only the dilapidation, the drugs, the problems, and are blind to the care, the pride, the problem-solving that actually also goes on.

If people are to value the environment, their environment, they need to know it values them. To care for a habitat that is not valued for its political power, that is not economically profitable, that has a negative cultural aesthetic, is to be on the very frontline of environmental activism. Such frontline campaigners have already made a spiritual re-evaluation. They have refused the definition of their land in terms of extrinsic worth. They value it as having intrinsic worth. This is an enormous, and largely unnoticed investment of value. It should be recognised, affirmed and supported to the hilt. Such recognition might go some way towards healing the dangerous splits in environmental campaigning. Far from being the villains, or even the passive victims of environmental destruction, poor people and communities are often the greatest source of education, resistance and creativity in combating it.

Across the world, in the material and spiritual struggle to be homemakers, it is the poorest who suffer most. It is also the poorest who are the most careful - who reuse rubbish, who don't drive cars or flit around the globe in energy-extravagant jet planes, who drain the least resources, who go on affirming the intrinsic worth of life-because, given no extrinsic worth, they have no alternative to living hopefully.

One of the insights of the Christian story, demonstrated unceasingly in word and action by Jesus, is the necessity of working to get economic and political systems off the backs of people living in poverty, of valuing their immense courage, of learning humility from their resourcefulness. The extent to which we participate in creating an economic, political and cultural environment that is friendly to the poorest people in our society and our world will be the extent to which all of us can befriend our own environment, our own place. Ultimately, unless we all have a place of belonging, all of our belonging is endangered.

George MacLeod, the Founder of the Iona Community, who sat for the Ecology party in the House of Lords, once said that the question that the wise men and shepherds, the seekers after truth and the followers of stars are asking us now is: how far above the things of earth is Christ at God's right hand. And he quotes Studdert Kennedy, Woodbine Willie, in reply.

As far as meaning is from speech; as beauty from a rose

As far as music is from sound; and poetry from prose

As far as love from friendship is; as reason is from truth

As far as laughter is from joy; and early years from youth.

As far as love from shining eyes; as passion from a kiss.

So far is God from God's green earth; so far that world from this.

It is, he said, an incarnate word that must be spoken. We must come down to earth, as Jesus did, in our faith and in our practice. Theologian Kosuke Koyama, writes: *Faith, hope and love are not vital except in what is seen. Religion seems to raise up the invisible and despise what is visible. But it is the 'see, hear, touch' gospel that can nurture the hope which is free from deception.*

We may know our own design, have mapped it - but we still have to choose what it is for! In the face of human hubris, pride, which conceives itself as creator rather than created and which has come to threaten life on earth, can communities of faith and goodwill affirm and practice a more self-disciplined ethos of reverence and respect for cultural, spiritual and bio-diversity alike, in which criteria for the good life are invested less in possession, sensation and speed and more in appreciation, substance and a sense of the mystery at the heart of life? Can we truly learn to practice voluntary self - limitation, in order to model the kind of economic, political and cultural exchanges and possibilities we might hope for ourselves and therefore expect from others; whether that is self - limitation in consumerism, in militarism and arms trading; in cultural and spiritual imperialism or in the use of whatever power we have.

To do this, we need to build new alliances, to sit lightly to our own agendas and desire to control outcomes, to rediscover the hidden resources and gifts for resistance and re-creation in our own faith and culture. Above all, we need a radical re-evaluation.

We alone can devalue gold

by not caring

if it falls or rises

in the marketplace.

Wherever there is gold

there is a chain, you know,

and if your chain

is gold

so much the worse

for you.

Feathers, shells

and sea-shaped stones

are all as rare.

This could be our revolution:

To love what is plentiful

as much as

what's scarce.

(Alice Walker, in Horses Make a Landscape Look More Beautiful, pub. Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovitch, 1984)

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