

REFLECTIONS ON A LIVING PLANET



CHERISH THE EARTH

Mary Low

Some sample pages

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REFLECTIONS ON A LIVING PLANET

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CHERISH THE EARTH includes contributions from writers, poets and liturgists old and new, including:

R.S. Thomas	Hugh MacDiarmid
Barbara Kingsolver	Sibilla Aleramo
W.H. Davies	Mary Oliver
Michael Leunig	Jonathon Porritt
Ruth Burgess	John Agard
Kate McIlhagga	Charles Darwin
Admómán of Iona	George Campbell Hay
Albert Schweitzer	Iris Murdoch
Gerard Manley Hopkins	Kenneth C. Steven
Kathleen Raine	Derick Thomson
Malvina Reynolds	Thich Nat Hanh
Thomas Merton	Leo Tolstoy
John Burnside	Neil Paynter
Waldo Williams	Sallie McFague
Chaim Potok	
Alan Spence	<i>and many others</i>



INTRODUCTION

FROM A DISTANCE, the earth looks blue and green, and the snow-capped mountains white.' It seems no time since this was one of the songs of the moment, but apparently the earth does not look as green as it used to. I heard this over the breakfast table one morning, courtesy of the BBC. The interviewer was speaking to one of the crew on board the International Space Station and the line fizzed and beeped as they chatted amiably about food and weightlessness and, inevitably, the view. We could all picture it, our jewel of a planet in an ink-black sky. He was talking about weather. They could see storms and droughts, he said. At night they saw cities: 'It's quite amazing how many people actually live down there and how much effect they are having on the environment.' Suddenly, it was as if he had remembered something he really wanted to say. Things had changed, he announced, since his first flight in 1990: 'I have seen changes in what comes out of some of the rivers, and in land usage. We see areas of the world that are being burned to clear land, so we are losing lots of trees. There is smoke and dust in wider-spread areas than we have seen before, particularly as areas of

Africa dry up in certain regions. We have to be very careful how we treat this good Earth we live on.’ⁱ

Less than a fortnight later, violence erupted in the United States, Israel and Afghanistan and ‘this good earth’ slipped down the international agenda yet again. How do you keep your mind on a long-term problem when every day brings more immediate ones? Unless you are one of the millions of people who already live in a badly degraded environment, it is easy to feel remote from the issue, enjoying the fruits and the beauty of the earth while at the same time contributing to its problems.ⁱⁱ

Maybe the truth is that we cannot and will not change. Perhaps the disaster envisaged by Ted Hughes (p.63) is already under way. At the time of writing, it has proved impossible to get all the governments in the world to agree to the small reduction in greenhouse gas emissions which might, just might, slow down the present rate of climate change by the year 2050. Perhaps, as my auntie says, we will ‘invent something’ but in the meantime change depends on political will, and this is in turn supposed to depend on the will of the people. What we want, our desires, are central to the problem – and also to the solution. For years, organisations like Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth have been urging us to make changes in our lifestyle. They have not always been popular or one hundred per cent right, but their high-profile campaigns have kept the issues in the public eye, to the point where governments are beginning, very slowly, to take action. Some have set targets for renewable energy and are looking at alternative transport systems, water conservation and other measures. Others seem locked into destructive policies, determined to gobble up resources for as long as possible in the name of national interest, though in the long term even this requires change. For people of faith, there is another dimension to all this. What we do to our environment, and to other creatures, is influenced, for better or for worse, by what we believe about God’s way for the world and its human and non-

human inhabitants.

I get some revealing responses when I tell people that I am interested in beliefs about nature. ‘Oh, you mean druids?’ said a famous journalist from the Western Isles. A woman from Greenpeace found it difficult to understand why anyone should be interested in the Kyoto Protocol *and* Christianity. A local justice and peace organisation told me, with obvious regret, that they had recently had to cancel a one-day conference on the environment due to lack of interest. Perhaps, they suggested, green Christianity was ‘still a bit rarefied for Scotland’. When I mentioned eco-theology to a farming friend, he was appalled. ‘Dear God,’ he said, ‘can they not leave anything alone?’ It’s possible that he meant ecologists, but I’m pretty sure he meant theologians. He has little time for either, and does not usually expect religious professionals to have any understanding of his situation, or any area of competence outside the pulpit. In all of this, the perception seems to be that Christianity has little or nothing to say about the relationship between God, humans and the non-human natural world; and that when it does try to speak, it has little grasp of the realities of the situation.

Christians might respond that this is a new subject and that we have simply not had time to come to grips with it. There is an element of truth in this. Ecology is a relatively new subject for everyone, but the churches do seem to have been particularly slow to take an interest in it at parish level. It is as if we simply do not see it as part of our tradition. But, of course, it is. Ecotheology may be a new discipline, born of the present crisis, but there have always been people who wondered how the *oikia* (household, family) of nature related to the *oikia* of God, and what this might mean for human behaviour. It is one of the oldest questions in the book. It is there in primal religions and was too important to be dropped when people moved on to other more universal faiths. This is why Canaanite festivals underlie Judaic ones and pre-Christian festivals underlie

Christian ones all over Europe: because life and fertility were understood to be given by a power or powers beyond ourselves, and while faith in that power remained, people wanted to work with it, rather than against it. At the same time, Christians have been keen to distance themselves from ‘paganism’. Some have even attempted to cut themselves off from nature altogether, as from a seductress or a wicked uncle. This kind of spiritual escapology has never attracted much of a following, but it has certainly had an influence. Even allowing for the more earthy, compassionate Christianity which pre-dates it, it seems that for much of our history Christians have been so busy thinking about heaven that we have become like the dancers in Chinua Achebe’s perceptive poem (p.118) ‘Beware Soul Brother’, levitating skywards and abandoning the earth to ‘the long ravenous tooth’ of self-interest and voracious consumerism.

There is no obvious support for this in the Gospels. True, there are apocalyptic passages in which worldly action of any kind seems futile, and there are glimpses of another world, and a desire to go there.ⁱⁱⁱ But the Hebrew Bible views creation as a community of creatures before God; the Law and the prophets are about living fairly and happily in this world; and Jesus associates himself with both of these traditions, as we shall see. I grew up with the Bible. We read it Sunday by Sunday and sang about the wonders of creation, but it was never much more than a backdrop to the drama of salvation. Not that we were alone in this. I do not remember even hearing the word ‘environment’ till about 1970, though ecology had arrived as a science by 1953.^{iv} By the end of primary school, however, we knew about animal extinctions. A group of us once clubbed together to buy Armand Dennis’s *Animal* magazine, mainly for the picture of a lynx on the front cover, but what we found inside was a feature about Rachel Carson’s recently published *Silent Spring*.^v I struggled to understand it, but it left an enduring mark on my childhood consciousness.

Making this anthology has been a learning experience for me: getting

to know the literature, speaking to theorists and to people who live and work with non-human nature from day to day. It has been impossible to do this without reflecting on my own attitudes to nature and my own unfinished journey towards ecological awareness, and perhaps that is what I can most usefully share with the reader at this point, since I am not an ecotheologian by trade. Some introductions simply describe what is to come in a book. This keeps the subject safely at arm’s length and allows the editor to remain anonymous and uninvolved. But there is no one who is uninvolved with nature. As Kathleen Raine says, ‘we ourselves are part of the earth we know’ (p123) and if we are serious about cherishing it, then each of us needs to begin exploring our own relationship with it, not just as an intellectual exercise but as something which impinges on our everyday lives. We need to think about it collectively as well as individually (p.123), but I have decided to follow the example of many good women before me and ‘get personal’ since, in the words of Kathy Galloway, ‘the political only becomes real ... when it is grounded in the personal’ and the same can be said about religion.^{vi} Below, then, you will find three memories each followed by a short reflection. I am not trying to set myself up as spokesperson for a very diverse group of people. I am simply trying to recapture how it seemed to me at the time. Some of the details are imaginary, but not the basic outlines. My hope is that this will evoke answering or contrasting memories in others, so that we can begin to bring this supposedly ‘rarefied’ subject down to earth.

(Introduction continues ...)



SOME EXTRACTS

Let us not be in despair over human sin

Merciful God, let us not be in despair over human sin.
Help us to love one another even in our sins
for that is already the semblance of your love.
Help us to love all of your creation,
the whole of it: every grain of sand,
every leaf, every ray of your light.
May we love the animals, the plants, everything.
Help us to perceive your mystery in things
and to understand it more and more each day.

Help us to love the animals.
 You have given them the rudiments of thought
 and untroubled joy. Let us not trouble them,
 torture them, or deprive them of their joy.
 Let us not go against your intent.
 Let us not exalt ourselves above the animals:
 for they are without sin, while we, in our majesty
 defile the earth by our appearance on it
 and leave traces of our defilement behind us.
 Help us to love children especially,
 for they are a sort of guidance to us.
 Woe to the man or woman who offends a child.

Help us to see that everything, like the ocean,
 flows and comes into contact with everything else.
 We touch it in one place and it reverberates
 at the other end of the world.
 Let us be consumed by your universal love
 as though in a sort of ecstasy.
 Help us to set great store by this ecstasy
 however absurd people may think it.
 Let us be glad as children.
 Let human sin not trouble us in our work.

—*After Dostoyevsky*

Glorious Lord

Hail to you, glorious Lord!
 May church and chancel praise you,
 May chancel and church praise you,
 May plain and hillside praise you,
 May the three springs praise you,
 Two higher than the wind and one above the earth,
 May darkness and light praise you,
 May the cedar and the sweet fruit-tree praise you.
 Abraham praised you, the founder of faith,
 May life everlasting praise you,
 May the birds and beasts praise you
 May the stubble and the grass praise you.
 Aaron and Moses praised you,
 May male and female praise you,
 May the seven days and the stars praise you,
 May the lower and upper air praise you,
 May books and letters praise you,
 May the sand and the earth praise you,
 May all good things created praise you,
 And I too shall praise you, Lord of glory,
 Hail to you, glorious Lord.

—*Anon. Welsh*

God's grandeur

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
 It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
 it gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
 crushed. Why do men then now not reckon his rod?
 Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
 and all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
 and wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil
 is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And for all this, nature is never spent;
 there lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
 and though the last lights off the black West went
 oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs –
 because the Holy Ghost over the bent
 world broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

—Gerard Manley Hopkins

O taste and see

Leader: God, you have given us all kinds of plants
 those that bear grain and those that bear fruit.

All: *O taste and see that the Lord is good*

You have given us your Word and Law sweeter than honey
 sweeter than honey dripping from the comb.

O taste and see that the Lord is good

You have given us manna in the wilderness of our wandering
 and our daily bread to sustain us.

O taste and see that the Lord is good

You have given us:
 the heavenly smell of roasted coffee
 and the green, rooted scent of gardens dripping rain;
 the rush of sugar and the smack of saltiness
 the touch and feel of summer breezes
 and the warm embrace of close friends;
 the sound of song thrushes and herring gulls
 pianos and choirs, tubas and skirling bagpipes
 playing drunken reels at parties

O taste and see that the Lord is good

—Neil Paynter



Canticle of Creation

Most high, almighty, good Lord,
to you belong praise and glory and honour
and every blessing.

To you alone do they belong, O Most High
for no one is worthy to pronounce your name.

Praise to you, Lord, through all your creatures,
and especially through our noble Brother Sun,
through whom we have daylight and illumination
for he is beautiful and radiant and dazzling
and he reveals to us something of yourself.

Praise to you, Lord, through Sister Moon and the stars
which you have set in the heavens,
bright and precious and beautiful.

Praise to you, Lord, through Brother Wind
and air and clouds and stillness and every kind of weather
by which you uphold creation.

Praise to you, Lord, through Sister Water
who is very useful and humble and precious and pure.

Praise to you, Lord, through Brother Fire
through whom you light up the darkness
for he is beautiful and cheery and vigorous and mighty.

Praise to you, Lord, for Sister Earth, our mother
who feeds us and governs us
and produces all kinds of fruits and colourful flowers and herbs.

Praise to you, Lord, for all who forgive each other through your love,
and who endure illness and tribulation.

Blessed are they who endure it peaceably
for you will honour them, O Most High.

Praise to you, Lord, for our sister Death
for no living body can escape from her.
Wretched are they who die in mortal sin.
Blessed are they who are found doing your will
for the second death will not harm them.

Praise and bless my Lord and give thanks to him
and serve him with great humility.

—St Francis of Assisi

Jesus, worthy of praise

It would be as easy for Jesus
to renew the withered tree
as to wither the green one
if he so wished.

Jesus, Jesus, Jesus
Jesus, worthy of praise

There is not a plant in the ground
but is full of his fruitfulness
There is not a living thing on the beach
but is full of his blessing

Jesus, Jesus, Jesus
 Jesus, worthy of praise

There is not a creature in the sea
 there is not a fish in the river
 there is nothing in the heavens
 but is proof of his goodness
 Jesus, Jesus, Jesus
 Jesus, worthy of praise

There is not a bird on the wing
 there is not a star in the sky
 there is not an element under the sun
 but tells of his goodness
 Jesus, Jesus, Jesus
 Jesus, worthy of praise

—Anon.

All the world arose with him

Every material and every element and every nature which is seen in the world were all combined in the body in which Christ arose, that is in the body of every human person. Firstly there is the matter of wind and air. This is how respiration came about in human bodies. Then there is the matter of heat and boiling from fire. That is what makes the red heat of blood in bodies. Then there is the matter of the sun and the other stars of heaven, and this is what makes the lustre and light in people's eyes. Then there is the matter of bitterness and saltness; and this is what makes the

bitterness of tears and the gall of the liver and much anger in human hearts. Then there is the matter of the stones and clay of the earth; and this is what joins together to form flesh and bone and limbs in human beings. Then there is the matter of the flowers and beautiful colours of earth; and this is what makes the different complexions and whiteness of faces and colour in cheeks.

All the world arose with him, for the nature of all the elements was in the body which Jesus assumed. For unless the Lord had suffered on behalf of Adam's race, and unless he had risen after death, the whole world, together with Adam's race, would be destroyed at the coming of doom; and no creature of sea or of land would be reborn, but the heavens, as far as the third heaven, would blaze. None would remain unburnt except for the three heavens of the great Heavenly Kingdom. There would be neither earth nor kindred, alive or dead, in the world, only hell and heaven, had not the Lord come to ransom them all. All would have perished in this way without renewal.

—Anon. Irish

Creation and evolution

It is interesting to contemplate a tangled bank, clothed with many plants of many kinds, with birds singing on the bushes, with various insects flitting about, and with worms crawling through the damp earth, and to reflect that these elaborately constructed forms, so different from each other in so complex a manner, have all been produced by laws acting around us. These laws, taken in the largest sense, being Growth and Reproduction; Inheritance, which is almost implied by reproduction; Variability from indirect and direct action of the conditions of life, and so as a

consequence to Natural Selection, entailing Divergence of Character and Extinction of less-improved forms. Thus, from the war of nature, from famine and death, the most exalted object which we are capable of conceiving, namely the production of the higher animals, directly follows. There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed by the Creator into a few forms or into one; and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been and are being evolved.

—Charles Darwin



Circuit

I make my circuit
in the fellowship of my God
on the machair, in the meadow
on the cold heathery hill,
on the corner in the open,
on the chill wind dock,

to the noise of drills blasting,
to the sound of children asking.

I make my circuit
in the fellowship of my God
in the city street
or on spring-turfed hill,
in shop-floor room
or at office desk.

God has no favourite places.
There are no special things.
All are God's and all is sacred.
I tread each day
in light or dark
in the fellowship of my God.

Be the sacred Three of glory
interwoven with our lives
until the Man who walks it with us
leads us home
through death to life.

—Kate McIlhagga

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