

“THE PEACE OF WILD THINGS”

Philip Pinto, cfc

When despair for the world grows in me
 And I wake in the night at the least sound
 In fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
 I go and lie down where the wood drake
 Rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds,
 I come into the peace of wild things
 Who do not tax their lives with forethought
 Of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
 And I feel above me the day-blind stars
 Waiting with their light. For a time
 I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.¹

In 1959, a hundred years after Darwin published *On the Origin of Species*, the University of Chicago brought together a number of leading evolutionary pioneers to commemorate the occasion. Perhaps one of the most famous of the invited speakers was Julian Huxley, a brilliant scientist, humanist and world-renowned intellectual. Huxley's talk was called "The Evolutionary Vision", and he delivered it with an almost religious passion. He suggested that religion, as we knew it, was dying, that "supernaturally centred" faiths were destined to decline, to deselect themselves out of existence like non-adaptive species in a hostile environment. *"Evolutionary people can no longer take refuge from their loneliness in the arms of a divinised father figure whom they themselves created,"* Huxley claimed, *"nor escape from the responsibility of making decisions by sheltering under the umbrella of Divine Authority, nor absolve themselves from the hard task of meeting their present problems and planning their future by relying on the will of an omniscient, but unfortunately inscrutable, Providence."* Huxley's words were strong, spoken with the conviction of one who had worked his whole life to free the human spirit from belief systems unsuited to the modern world. But before proclaiming the death of religion altogether, he added a notable line. *"Finally,"* he concluded, *"the evolutionary vision is enabling us to discern, however incompletely, the lineaments of the new religion that ...will arise to serve the needs of the coming era."*²

We are somewhere between the initial visions of what's possible and established, and accepted cultural truths. We are still in the Wild West phase of development, between the earliest pioneers exploring virgin land and homesteaders looking to settle down and build a new life on secured territory.

Evolution is, at its heart, an inquiry into who and what we are as a species. Simply put, it is our origin story. Evolution tells us where we've come from; it explains the historical roots and context of our very existence.

At the centre of any worldview is a core conviction or set of convictions about the nature of what is real, true, and important. William Halverson suggests that at the centre of every worldview is what might be called the 'touchstone proposition' of that worldview, a proposition that is held to be *the* fundamental truth about reality and serves as a criterion to determine which other propositions may or may not count as candidates for belief."

¹ Wendell Berry, *The Peace of Wild Things*

² *Evolutionaries*, Carter Phipps, p. 15

I believe that the touchstone proposition for an evolutionary worldview is best captured in a passage by Teilhard de Chardin.

It is a pleasant and dramatic spectacle, that of Mankind divided to its very depths into two irrevocably opposed camps – one looking toward the horizon and proclaiming with all its newfound faith, “*We are moving*,” and the other, without shifting its position, obstinately maintaining, “*Nothing changes. We are not moving at all.*” (*The Future of Man*)

We are moving. I keep coming back to that fundamental insight, and appreciating how profound it really is. The things that we think are fixed, static, unchanging, and permanent are in fact *moving*. Reality is part of a vast process of change and development. We are not just being; we are *becoming*. That’s part of the revelatory power of an evolutionary worldview. It’s an ontology of becoming. We do not just exist in this universe; we are caught up in its forward movement, intrinsic to its forward intention, defined by its drift forward in time.

We are part and parcel of a vast process of becoming. The very structures that make up our own consciousness and culture are not the same as they were one thousand years ago, and in one thousand years they will be substantially different from how they are today.

Evolutionaries are those who have woken up, looked around, and realised: *We are moving*. And rather than bury their heads back in the sands of seeming stasis, they are ready to pick up the paddles and help steer that raft that Teilhard envisioned toward a more positive future.

As the fog of fixity lifts, we are finding ourselves much more than observers and witnesses to life’s grand unfolding drama. We are influential actors, newly aware of the immense tides that are shaping the world within and without, just becoming cognisant of our own freedom – and immense responsibility.

The focus has shifted from salvation for the immortal soul (divine rescue) in a world beyond, to liberation for all life forms through more empowering mutuality within the entire web of life. In several contexts, formal religions have tried to adopt this more expansive, engaging view, while still clinging to dualistic categories, ideologies of power, and out-dated ideas like original sin and the end of the world. Those lured by the new spirituality detect too much baggage in the attempts at religious revival; they seek new wineskins rather than trying to patch up the old system.

The more religion clings on to dogmatic certainty and religious officialdom, the reactions characterise all great evolutionary shifts. We feel safer with what we know, with what we presume has stood the test of time. The new makes us feel scared and undermines our need for clarity and certainty. “*The problem is that many of the people who need saving are in churches, and at least part of what they need saving from is the idea that God sees the world the same way they do.*”³

Evolution is more likely to favour those who will venture out into broader horizons and embrace more risky endeavours. The lure of the future is already strongly endorsing the unfolding spirituality rather than formal religion. The Spirit who blows where she wills is certainly shaking up our staid foundations, and paradoxically not indicating one clear-cut alternative. It is time to befriend the breakdown of the old, and the ensuing chaos.⁴

Twenty years ago, Carl Sagan both chided and encouraged us in this way:

How is it that hardly any major religion has looked at science and concluded, “This is better than we thought! The universe is much bigger than our prophets said, grander,

³ Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith*

⁴ Diarmuid O’Murchu, *God in the Midst of Change*

more subtle, more elegant. God must be even greater than we dreamed." . . . A religion, old or new, that stressed the magnificence of the universe as revealed by modern science might be able to draw forth reserves of reverence and awe hardly tapped by the conventional faiths. Sooner or later, such a religion will emerge.⁵

How grateful we must be for this magnificent gift of life and all we have needed to sustain it over the last hundreds of thousands of years! Yet, today it is under threats never felt before in its entire unfolding journey.

"We are presented with the chance of an awakening from the deceptive dream of a righteous way of how things are working. We have the opportunity to recognize that in the end what counts are only the recognition and practice of the joy of living and the love of life! However, this life as it is possible on this earth – unique in our cosmos – is incredibly endangered today. If we manage to recognize this, then paradoxically we can grow toward the ability of perceiving and experiencing this joy and this love anew, or maybe for the first time in its full dimension – and this time without any naivety, but rather as an answer to the question about what we can actually do to face this fear-provoking threat towards life and the earth: Namely to stand up for them – beyond feelings of fear and anxiety – what else!?"⁶

We need a deep spiritual conversion to the Earth. This involves several discrete turnings at once.

Intellectually, it entails moving from an anthropocentric, mostly androcentric view of the world to a wider theocentric one that has room for other species to be included in the circle of what is religiously meaningful and valued. It means letting go of a philosophy shaped by hierarchical dualism that prizes spirit over matter in favour of one that also intensely values physical and bodily realities as God's good creation. Rather than setting up a contrastive either/or relation between God and the world, this intellectual turning grasps the presence of the Giver of life in, with, and under the ecological community of species. Moving from denial that allows us to slack off under the weight of ignorance, it opens our eyes to the global impact of our everyday actions.

Emotionally, being converted to the Earth involves a turning from the delusion of the separated human self and the isolated human species to a felt affiliation with other beings who share in our common status as creatures of God. In the beautiful words of Albert Einstein, *"Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty."* With this turning, comes an experiential grasp of how deeply humanity is embedded in the evolutionary processes of life on Earth. In the depths of our being we recover a capacity for subjective communion with the natural world, to the point where brother sun and sister moon, brother fire and sister water, brother wolf and little sister birds are more than poetic ways of speaking but felt truths, as with Francis of Assisi.

Ethically, ecological conversion entails the view that in our day a moral universe limited to human persons is no longer adequate. We need to widen attention beyond humanity alone and re-centre vigorous moral consideration on the whole community of life. As Larry Rasmussen argued in his prize-winning *"Earth Community, Earth Ethics"*, *"ecological degradation is not just one more issue to be addressed along with the misery of racism, poverty, domestic violence, and other human ills. It embraces all these and more, insofar as our ecologically destructive actions are depleting and degrading the very conditions that make human life possible at all, to say nothing of jeopardizing the rest of life in fundamental and unprecedented ways: one particularly powerful and errant species is overwhelming the earth."* Coming to terms with this new wild fact requires a responsible ethical stance in which we learn

⁵ Carl Sagan, *Pale Blue Dot: A Vision of the Human Future in Space*

⁶ Claudia von Werlhof (*Two Years Of Planetary Movement for Mother Earth: The Fear and – What to do?*, 6th Letter of Information of the PMME, June 2012)

to do with less in view of the good of the whole. Healing our moral paralysis, conversion opens ways for reciprocity rather than rapaciousness to mark our relationship with the earth.

In the closing lines of *"Life on Earth"*, his wonderful documentary on the history of the natural world, David Attenborough says: *"No species has ever had such wholesale control over everything on earth, living or dead, as we now have. That lays upon us, whether we like it or not, an awesome responsibility. For in our hands now lies not only our own future, but that of all other living creatures with whom we share the earth."*

We are invited to re-write what we understand by evangelisation and the call of the Gospels. No longer are we concerned with the afterlife and trying to get there. Our efforts are about living this life as fully as possible and taking Jesus seriously – not the Jesus created by religion, but the Jesus as spoken of in the Gospels and early writings. We know that even before the end of the First Century of Christianity, much of the Jesus vision had been subverted by those unable to grasp his vision.

We cannot live Easter without entering into the mystery. It is not something intellectual, something we only know or read about... It is more, much more!

To enter into the mystery means the ability to wonder, to contemplate; the ability to listen to the silence and to hear the tiny whisper amid great silence by which God speaks to us (cf 1 Kings 19:12).

To enter into the mystery demands that we not be afraid of reality: that we not be locked into ourselves, that we not flee from what we fail to understand, that we not close our eyes to problems or deny them, that we not dismiss our questions.

To enter into the mystery means going beyond our own comfort zone, beyond the laziness and indifference which hold us back, and going out in search of truth, beauty and love. It is seeking a deeper meaning, an answer, and not an easy one, to the questions which challenge our faith, our fidelity and our very existence.

To enter into the mystery, we need humility, to come down from the pedestal of our "I" which is so proud, of our presumption; the humility not to take ourselves so seriously, recognizing who we really are: creatures with strengths and weaknesses, sinners in need of forgiveness.

To enter into the mystery we need the lowliness that is powerlessness, the renunciation of our idols... in a word, we need to adore. Without adoration, we cannot enter into the mystery.⁷

Journeying God,
Pitch your tent with mine
So that I may not become deterred
By hardship, strangeness, doubt.
Show me the movement I must make
Toward a wealth not dependent on possessions
Toward a wisdom not based on books,
Toward a strength not bolstered by might,
Toward a god not confined to heaven.
Help me to find myself as I walk in others' shoes.⁸

⁷Pope Francis, Easter Vigil Service 2015

⁸ Prayer Song from Ghana