

reverence for life



RICHARD GUSH MEMORIAL LECTURE

Shelagh Willet delivered the 2013 Richard Gush Memorial Lecture at Yearly Meeting in Cape Town.

To quote Susan Groves from CWMM:

it was powerful and the meeting responded. I felt the Spirit move in a palpable way in my body in a way I had seldom experienced.



Good morning Friends,

I feel privileged and happy to be speaking to you to-day. My topic is Reverence for Life and I would like to begin with a brief meditation on the miraculous diversity and wonder of life on this earth of ours. Of course, one could spend the entire time allocated for the lecture to doing just that but let us try, for a moment, to regain the sense of wonder with which a child looks at the world. As adults most of us have often lost the ability to see the tiny details noticed by a child... the scurrying ants... the minute flowers that appear so briefly after the first rains fall...the sounds of birdsong.... the rustling of the leaves. All newly experienced and to be looked at, touched, heard, smelt with undivided attention.

Since 1968, when mankind first circled the moon, it has been possible to actually view the earth from space and to

view from afar its breath taking beauty. In her 2011 Swarthmore Lecture, Pamela Lunn reproduces the first image, taken from the Apollo 8 spacecraft and entitled *Earthrise*. It vividly portrays the blue and white orb of the earth rising above the desolate surface of the moon.



A second photo taken in 1972 from the Apollo 17 Spacecraft and entitled *The Blue Marble* shows the whole round Earth with the outline of the African continent very clearly depicted. As Pamela Lunn reports:

The view of the world alone in the blackness of space touched something, touched a nerve.

This image was reproduced many times for a variety of purposes. Lastly is *The pale blue dot* photographed by the camera on the spacecraft Voyager 1, in 1990 and depicting our planet from the edge of our solar system around four billion miles away and barely visible, just a tiny dot alone in the darkness of the universe¹. And so far, nowhere else has any vestige of life been detected, either in our own solar system, or in the local galaxy or upon any of the other bodies discovered in space. How infinitely precious therefore is the living world in its myriad forms and how greatly it is to be revered.

Let us spend a few moments looking at its diversity and wonder. I am completely unscientific and have never studied biology so I can only present a few random thoughts on some of what I find most fascinating and almost unbelievable about the living world. As we return to the surface of the Blue Dot, we see, north and south, the polar regions – an apparent desert of snow and ice but awesomely spectacular and beautiful with its great cliffs of ice reflected in the bluest of blue waters, enormous icebergs shaped and sculptured by the winds and waves. Then, seen from close by, incredibly crowded with vibrant life. Sea birds by the million, seals, whales and in the sea itself the microscopic plankton on which so many species depend for life. In spite of the devastation caused by the human hunters on both seals and whales, they still exist. There is so much about their lives which is as yet unknown. Had we been able to communicate with them, as they do with each other, how much might we have learnt? Instead, so many creatures are fatally endangered and on the point of extinction owing to human greed and cruelty.

If we move to the tropical regions, there are the huge giants of the tree world in the tropical rain forests. The lungs of the world and vital for the oxygen they provide for all living creatures, their surroundings and the creatures that live among them are barely known yet they are being ruthlessly destroyed by mankind. Trees that may be thousands of years old should be regarded with the reverence I felt when looking up at the stately beauty of the redwood trees of California, which are now but a remnant of what existed when Western man first saw them.

Here in Africa we are privileged to live in one of the richest floral kingdoms on earth with so many rare and priceless species. Twice I've been to Namaqualand when the plants were in bloom and experienced the sight of hillsides ablaze with flowers while at one's feet are miniscule brilliantly

coloured blossoms on small succulent plants. How glorious they all are and in a desert landscape of rocks and stones! Flying across the expanse of the skies are the migrating birds, some of which, like the Arctic Tern, actually fly from Pole to Pole and never see winter. How they manage to fly the distances they do and how they find their way remains a matter of incomprehension but they seem to use certain landmarks on land, and some use the winds to drift along



and sleep on the wing. Coming down to earth again we see the various social insects such as ants and bees, and marvel at their complex methods of navigation and communication. It is so easy to destroy a tiny insect but do we ever consider the complexity of its eye, for instance, or how remarkable is the transformation of an insignificant looking caterpillar into a brilliantly-coloured butterfly or moth? The variety of insect life is beyond computation and so many of its secrets have yet to be discovered. Then there is the world of the microscopic. The teeming life to be observed in a drop of muddy water from a stagnant pool,

only visible by means of a microscope but richly diverse and complex.

Nevertheless, no matter how much we may admire and wonder at the beauty and mystery of the natural world, we also have to recognise its dark side. Species that prey on those weaker, birds like the cuckoo whose fledglings kill those of its hosts. I'm sure you can think of many more examples! As Albert Schweitzer put it:

*The world-view of reverence for life follows the world as it is. And the world means the horrible in the glorious, the meaningless in the full of meaning, the sorrowful in the joyful.*²

Having had this brief glimpse of the power and wonder of the earth upon which we live, and while acknowledging the contradictions a realistic view of it entails, we now have to consider the seriousness of the current situation caused largely because humankind is alienated from nature, feeling only the need to dominate and exploit it. I expect, Friends, that most of you believe that climate change is happening and faster than expected. In the words of one of the contributors to a very impressive book published in 2012 and entitled *Many Heavens, one Earth: Readings on religion and the environment*. I quote:

*It is probably safe to say that the present environmental state of the world constitutes the most serious threat to the biosphere since the origin of life on earth. It is also safe to say that the environmental crisis is not only a threat, but a situation that will not easily be overcome and that will haunt us for the foreseeable future.*³

It could hardly be stated more forcefully than that or, to mention another very potent comment by Senator Gaylord Nelson in the same book:

*The harsh reality is that no war, no revolution, no peril in all of history measures up in importance to the threat of continued environmental deterioration.*⁴

The authors of the above-mentioned book are of the opinion that environmental problems are, at their root, spiritual issues. Because modern man has become alienated from the earth and its creatures, we need a wider vision of reality in which we see ourselves as part of a greater whole. In other words, a “paradigm shift”. You will find this term appearing in several of the texts I will be quoting and Paul Brockleman, in his essay which also appears in *Many Heavens, One Earth*, comments as follows:

*Historians and scholars [...] have long been aware that human cultures also undergo such transformations in how they envisage life as a meaningful whole and how they picture the purpose and role of humans in it.*⁵

Examples include the change to Christianity by the Romans in the 4th and 5th Centuries and the transformation of the traditional Christian culture to the modern world in the 17th and 18th Centuries. A book entitled *Ecology and religion* published in India in 2003, points out that the world’s major religions include an inextricable connection between humanity and nature, and discusses this in relation to Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, Islam and Christianity.⁶

Reverence for life

I first came across this phrase in the writings of Albert Schweitzer and indeed, he lived his life as a powerful exponent of letting his own life speak in this regard. I expect that his name is well known to us older folk but probably not as familiar to the younger generation. He was an inspiration to many people worldwide and lived in Africa for many

years. A well-known musician and philosopher, he began training as a medical doctor at the age of 30 and came to French Equatorial Africa (Gabon) and opened a hospital for patients suffering from leprosy, sleeping sickness and other dread diseases. He read widely, including investigating the religions of India, in several of which the concept of reverence for life exists. It was while crossing a river in a canoe in Africa that the insight came into his mind that Reverence for Life underlies all true ethics. Thereafter he lived his life guided by that principle, and wrote a number of books and articles on the subject in which, as the compiler of an anthology of his writings comments: *he provides a message of mystical, reverent life-affirmation.*⁷

Friends bear with me as I conclude this short comment on Albert Schweitzer with an account written by my mother of the visit of a Johannesburg chemist who went to Lambarene to work with the great doctor:

*Dr Schweitzer is noted, of course, for his teaching on reverence for life. If possible he will kill no living creature. Mr Friedman showed us pictures of the doctor feeding his many pets, which range from dogs and buck to chimpanzees. He always has his pockets filled with grain or bread and the animals seem to know his step, and show themselves at once. When walking one day with Mr Friedman, he told him to be very careful not to tread on a trail of ants crossing the road.*⁸

That passage shows how a life of deep philosophical insights could be combined with the utmost simplicity and love. His analysis of the failure of modern thinkers to offer an ethical response to the challenges of a failed and dying civilisation is as relevant now as when it was written so long ago. His message concerning the need for humankind to be transformed by a transmutation of its value system and

attitudes towards all sentient life still speaks to thinking beings, but how few have heeded it.

Jainism and Buddhism

Although the concept of reverence for life does exist in other religions, it is in Jainism that it has been worked out in the greatest detail to become the cornerstone of the faith. Spiritual leaders in the religion are known as “Fordmakers” as they are believed to guide their followers across the waters that separate them from enlightenment. The last Fordmaker, named Mahavira was born in India, around 2,600 years ago and was more or less contemporary with the Buddha. His message was as follows:

*All breathing, existing, living, sentient creatures should not be slain, nor treated with violence, nor tormented, nor driven away. This is the pure, unchangeable, eternal law which the clever ones who understand the world have proclaimed.*⁹

I find this a very powerful message!

In his book *The Jains*, Paul Dundas comments that

Jain teaching included a thoroughgoing analysis of reality and a consequent emphatic relationship with its life forms.

Such life forms were believed to exist in earth, water, air and fire, which were also to be revered. In line with this teaching, Jains are vegetarians and have even given up farming lest they destroy organisms in the soil. An interesting sign of their concern for animals is shown by their setting up refuges in which sick and aged animals are cared for until they die a natural death.¹⁰

Both the laity and members of the Jain monastic orders practice non-violence which is regarded as the highest religious duty and which should result in personalities who

exhibit qualities such as friendliness, goodwill, gentleness and lack of passion. In the words of a Jain friend of mine:

*Suffice it to say that non-violence is one of the most significant gifts of Jainism to humanity. If this principle was followed in its true spirit and essence, there would be no wars, no civil wars, no domestic violence, no passion killings, no crime and bloodshed on our streets, no xenophobia and hatred of races.*¹¹

Like Mahavira, the Buddha also taught his followers compassion and reverence for all living creatures, and Buddhism has always regarded concern for nature as a most important element in the belief and behaviour of its adherents. In our own day and age Adam Curle, both a Buddhist and a Quaker, pointed out that, 'our work for peace is work for harmony among all beings.'¹²

Judaism

It is interesting to note that, while many Christians have seen one particular text in the Bible (Genesis 1:28) as giving mankind the right to dominate and subdue the earth and its creatures, this is not the belief of Jewish scholars. Indeed, in his essay *Nature as subject*, Eric Katz points out that

*Indeed, Jewish scholars throughout history have gone to extraordinary lengths to disavow any idea that Genesis 1:28 permits the subjugation of nature by humanity.*¹³

Instead, Jewish tradition regarded the role of humans as being stewards of the natural world but not its owner. In Judaism the earth belongs to God. Though there are different traditions within Judaism, regarding the relationship between God and nature, the perspective is that there is innate value in nature that is independent of human

interests because nature itself expresses the creative power of God. Further, Katz comments that:

*Compassion for all living beings is a moral obligation in Judaism but the context will determine the level of response.*¹⁴

Christianity

Initially the followers of Jesus were non-violent and did not become soldiers. In fact many of them were the poor, the outcasts and women, who would not have been eligible to join the Roman military. This changed however, when the Roman emperor Constantine became a Christian in the 4th. Century AD, and Christianity became the state religion of the empire. Many Christians became soldiers and Augustine, who died in 430 AD introduced the doctrine of “just wars” and the belief that wars could be “just” and might be waged to punish evil-doers at the command of God.

In the 13th Century, Thomas Aquinas developed the theory even further. The history of Europe is a history of constant warfare between states and against foreign invaders and even for religious reasons, like the Crusades and there was certainly no awareness of the sacredness of the life of either humans or animals. These wars resulted in untold suffering of both human beings and the unfortunate animals used in battle, such as horses. And all this went on in so-called Christian nations, so the track record of the Christian religion regarding the relationship between the Creator and the Creation has on the whole not been a positive one. Exceptions like St Francis, who valued and rejoiced in nature, existed throughout the ages but were usually in the minority and were frequently persecuted by the Church authorities.

As European civilisation moved into the modern age, great advances were made in the sciences and a split developed

between science and religion with science being seen as concerned with material matters which did not concern the religious. By many Christians, Heaven was seen as a purely spiritual realm, to be attained by the deserving only after their death but concern for creation was not encouraged. Industrialisation led to increasing alienation from Nature and its relentless exploitation. By the end of the 20th Century and in the current one, in many churches there has been a new awakening as thinking people become aware of the ecological crisis, largely caused by total lack of concern for the earth. One development is "Creation Spirituality", which seems to fit in with the suggestion in *Many heavens, One Earth* of the need for a paradigm shift. Matthew Fox, author of *Original blessing*, after being dismissed from his Dominican Order commented:

*I, with this dismissal, rededicate myself and my energy to the work of a viable creation centred spirituality and the contribution it can make to assisting the bringing about of an environmental revolution ... to deep ecumenism, to honouring the wisdom of women and of indigenous peoples; to new models of educating that include body, soul, and spirit; and to social justice and compassion.*¹⁵

A holistic vision indeed! This was quoted in *The Friend* of March 19th 1993 on page 368 and at that time, the facts about global warming and climate change were not so clearly understood, so Fox can be seen as a prophetic voice. He wrote many books on the topic and founded the Institute of Culture and Spirituality. Creation Spirituality lays emphasis on the interconnectedness of all life forms and the need to show compassion for them.

It is positive, joyous and life-affirming in contrast to what Fox calls the Fall/Redemption theology that sees both mankind and nature as fallen and in need of redemption.

Quakerism and reverence for life

Early Friends, though not using such terms as *Reverence for Life* or *Non-Violence*, had a vision of God in all creation that involved respect for and love of all life on Earth. In her two books on this topic, Anne Adams has made a close investigation of the writings of these early Quakers and she comments on them in *Is there not a new Creation?* by observing that

*Early Friends experienced a paradigm shift in their lives. All who were faithful could experience the same new life, so that a new community would be born in which there was peace, harmony, with the rest of creation. It was a holistic vision involving God, the whole of nature and humans. The whole of creation, being created by God, was sacred.*¹⁶

Sadly, as Anne points out, this vision faded and was lost, as Friends entered the Quietist period when the emphasis was on various external aspects of their religion, such as correct speech patterns, dress, and the disownment of those who married non-Friends. They no longer took their message to the whole community and the idea of the relationship between God and the rest of creation was forgotten for several centuries.

One exception was John Woolman, an American Quaker whose testimony against the Slave Trade had a powerful impact on his fellow worshippers in the 18th Century. He felt very strongly about all abuse and cruelty towards animals and believed they should be treated with kindness. His Journal contains many instances of this concern, and in one passage he comments:

We should feel a care that we do not lessen that sweetness of life in the animal creation

*that the Great Creator intended for them under our government.*¹⁷

What a far cry is this sentiment from the way animals are treated in factory farming today. In fairness to the early Quakers in the UK, it must be remembered that they were instrumental in starting several of the societies against cruelty to animals, and against vivisection and also spoke strongly against such cruel sports as bear baiting and cock fighting.

Thankfully, Friends world-wide are responding to the ecological crisis in a number of ways. In 2011, Britain Yearly Meeting committed Friends to becoming a low carbon community. In an excellent series of articles entitled *Quakers and Creation*, Stuart Masters quotes from the Minute reporting on this development to the effect that:

*this commitment is consistent with our historical testimony and we are renewing our commitment to a sense of the unity of creation which has always been part of Friends' Testimonies.*¹⁸

A number of powerful and *telling* statements have been made by Friends in various countries and I would like to quote from just two of them. The first is a short extract from a report by Welsh Friends that appeared in the publication *EarthQuaker* in 2001 reporting on discussions on Susan Finch's book *Testimony to the Earth*, and that reads in part:

*Our respect and love for all human life should extend to love for all life. We are the consciousness and voice of creation and must accept this responsibility.*¹⁹

Then there was the Quaker
Earthcare Statement by

Australian Friends in 2008
which includes these words:

We find delight in the grace of creation and are humbled by the richness of its gifts.....Our very existence depends upon us sustaining our intimate relationship with nature. Yet much has been harmed through our lack of reverence, our ignorance, denial, waste and ill-considered actions. We have set ourselves against the Spirit. We have ignored our interconnectedness with other living things, weakened our own well-being and we have diminished the opportunity for fair livelihood. [...] We commit ourselves to the demanding, costly implications of radically changed ways of life. Let us do so out of joy, celebration, reverence and deep love of life.²⁰

Both these statements are evidence of a sense of hope and even of joy, which is in contrast to the feeling of hopelessness many feel when they contemplate the realities confronting the world and the escalating rise in temperature that, if it reaches 4°C, will mean unspeakable devastation for all life on earth.



In addition to the written word, which includes several magazines such as, EarthQuaker, Quakers are making use of new technology by setting up networks such as *Quaker Earthcare Witness* intended to bring together Quakers and other like-minded people taking spirit-led action to address the ecological and social crises of the world. In the UK, Living *Witness* is a Quaker charity that supports Friends' witness to sustainable living and taking it to the wider community by means of gatherings, newsletters and shared resources including a website, www.quakerearthcare.org.

Sources of hope

The fact of our interconnectedness is evidenced by the increasing response of people to the serious threat global warming poses towards all life on earth. These threats can no longer be hidden when any events such as wildfires in Australia or floods in America can be shown on our TV screens almost as they happen. We are now connected across barriers that previously divided us so that a teenager in the US can share ideas with one in Kenya through Facebook, Twitter and the Internet. An outstanding example of global interconnectedness is the success of the AVAAZ network of 13 million or more users. AVAAZ has members in every nation in the world, and describes itself as campaign to ensure that the views and values of the world's peoples shape global decision-making. When a new threat to human rights emerges, users are able to record their protest and the results will arrive on the desk of the appropriate person or authority in the country involved. Has anything like this ever existed before? The name AVAAZ, by the way, means "Voice" or "Song" in several languages and it has been successful in affecting a number of outstanding cases of human rights abuse.²¹

Another positive development was the launching of the Earth Charter on 29 June 2000. According to the Wikipedia entry it:

seeks to inspire in all peoples a sense of global interdependence and shared responsibility for the well-being of the human family, the greater community of life and future generations. [...] The Earth Charter's ethical vision proposes that environmental protection, human rights, equitable

human development, and peace are interdependent and indivisible. The Earth Charter has been formally endorsed by organisations representing millions of people .It is an approximately 2,400-word do

cument divided into sections (called Pillars,) with 16 main principles containing 61 supporting principles. The four pillars are as follows:

- *Respect and care for the Community of Life*
- *Ecological Integrity*
- *Social and Economic Justice.*
- *Democracy, Nonviolence and Peace*²²

The first Principle is

Respect Earth life in all its diversity, and

the 15th is

Treat all living beings with respect and consideration.

I mention all this because these principles of the Earth Charter clearly match the theme of this lecture. Undoubtedly, the track record of mankind during the 13 years since the Charter was proclaimed has been appalling. Wars and terrorist attacks have escalated from year to year and caused thousands of deaths, so-called nuclear deterrents like Trident, continue to be renewed at enormous cost in times of economic crisis, while the problem of deadly nuclear waste poses insoluble problems that future generations will have as part of their heritage from those who have no concept that there is any alternative to the rule by the powerful over all aspects of life by the forces of nihilism. And yet, and yet ...opposition to these forces is being expressed all over the world by ordinary people who are willing to speak and act against what they see as wrong and to be punished for this belief but not to yield, who are

willing to accept imprisonment and even death for their beliefs. Such principles have been expressed and affirmed and they certainly represent a paradigm shift – a new way of looking at the world.

A country that might be an example of how change might come about is the tiny Buddhist state of Bhutan in Central Asia. Since 1971 Bhutan has espoused the idea of Gross National Happiness being used to replace Gross National Product as the criteria by which development and progress are measured. This is done by the government actively promoting the spiritual, social and environmental health of its citizens and natural environment. Particularly impressive is the fact that, according to an article in the Guardian Weekly in 2012:

Placing the natural world at the heart of public policy has led to environmental protection being enshrined in the constitution. The country has pledged itself to remain carbon neutral and to ensure that at least 60% of its land mass will remain under forest cover in perpetuity. It has banned logging and has instigated a monthly pedestrian day that bars all private vehicles from its roads.

The article comments further:

Now, in a world beset by collapsing financial systems, gross inequity and wide-scale environmental destruction, the tiny Buddhist state's approach is attracting a lot of interest. Last year the UN adopted Bhutan's call for a holistic approach to development, a move endorsed by 68 countries. A UN panel is considering ways for Bhutan's GNH model to be replicated globally.²³

Another country with unusual policies is Costa Rica in Central America, which, many years ago ceased to have an

army and thereby has improved its education system and infrastructure because of the money that has been saved in this way. Costa Rica is surrounded by much more powerful and aggressive states but manages to cooperate with them peacefully.

Embracing the earth charter.

Even though such a transformation does seem like a hopeless daydream in the world of today, let us not forget the abolition of slavery, which began when just a small minority faced with courage the implacable hatred and force of the rich slave owners, and succeeded! So what would a world that carried out the principles of the Earth Charter be like?

Human relations

Let's start with Inter-relatedness – the recognition that we are kin despite the differences between us of nationality, skin colour, language, religion and sexual orientation. Community life, especially where it had been broken down because of so-called development, would be restored. Friendliness and cooperation between neighbours would require assistance by all when climate change brings about catastrophes like floods. Smaller and closer communities working to produce food and to survive in unexpected circumstances brought about by the need to become carbon-neutral would result in greater happiness for all.

People everywhere would become aware of the challenge of accelerating temperature increase, and accept the need to make huge changes in lifestyle in order to become carbon-neutral.

Assistance to those countries most affected by increasing temperatures and loss of livelihood would be provided by

the countries that were most responsible for the environmental changes.

Armed conflict between countries would cease, and negotiation take its place. Money saved on producing the weapons of war would be used to promote conservation of the earth's resources.

Relations with non-human life

The Earth Charter Pillars Ecological Integrity, Democracy, Non-violence and Peace provide the principles that underlie these values. The changes required for humanity to survive also encompass their treatment of animals and the environment itself. If all forms of cruelty are to disappear, then factory farming has to be replaced by kindlier methods of rearing and treating animals.

Unrestrained permission to treat laboratory animals cruelly would no longer be given and would be replaced by the belief that all sentient beings deserve protection from pain and suffering.

Time?

Much of all this would take a very long time to effect, and time is something that we do not have if the increasing rise in temperature is not to make the earth uninhabitable. However, I think we must not despair but believe that the Power that has given mankind the ability to think, feel and understand, underlies our efforts to cooperate with what is creative and healing. Millions of our fellow humans are groping towards this new vision that can save the Earth and the life upon it. Here I'd like to quote from the last few verses of the First Sonnet in Kenneth Bouldings'

There is a Spirit: the Naylor Sonnets

*And yet some Thing that moves among the
stars,
And holds the cosmos in a web of law,
Moves too in me: a hunger, a quick thaw
Of soul that liquefies the ancient bars
As I, a member of creation sing
The burning one-ness binding everything.²⁴*

Isn't that a marvellous last line?

Personal response

Any meaningful response to all that I have said previously can only begin with the individual. I feel very strongly that we need to regain that awareness of the beauty and wonder of life and of nature, and that we also need, each one of us, to seek to understand the effect climate change is going to make in the place where we live, upon our own precious communities and upon our children and their children.

Living as the majority do in South Africa, Zimbabwe, Lesotho and Botswana, struggling in the face of great need and poverty, just to survive, what will these things mean to them? How much do they know about the challenges the whole human race is facing? Isn't it our bounden duty to let them know what we ourselves understand about all this and to help them to face it and to realise the need for change.

We are at a time when people are exposed daily to the sight of others having what they would like for themselves, bigger cars, new TV sets, fancy clothes. All the "goods" that advertising on TV and everywhere else constantly forces upon our attention encourages the desire to possess them and be thought modern and up-to-date! Only a major change in thought and behaviour can save what is so precious.

Now I'd like to end with some verses from the same collection of poems previously quoted. It begins with a thrilling evocation of the beauty of the earth

*I plunge, shouting, in the fecund tide
Of vast creation; lave myself in light.*

And ends:

*Seek first the Kingdom---- for thy joys are dim
Until thou findest all things new in Him.²⁵*

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