

Cry of the Poor Cry of the Earth



**What has spirituality
got to do with
social justice and ecology?**



*A shared exploration hosted by
Canadian Jesuits International
Ignatius Jesuit Centre
Jesuit Forum for Social Faith and Justice*

Seminar Participants

Dora Arce-Valentin, Presbyterian minister, Havana, Cuba
Coordinator of Faith, Economy & Society program
Latin American Council of Churches.

Saju Bastian sj, school principal, Hazaribat, South India

Jenny Cafiso, director, Canadian Jesuits International

Tony Clarke, executive director, Polaris Institute, Ottawa

Bishop Douglas Crosby omi, bishop of Hamilton

John Dillon, coordinator of the economic justice program
KAIROS: Canadian Ecumenical Justice Initiatives

Mark Hathaway, co-author of *The Tao of Liberation*

Anne-Marie Jackson, program director
Jesuit Forum for Social Faith and Justice

Rosella Kinoshameg, Diocesan Order of Service
Wikwemikong First Nation, Manitoulin Island

Fratern Masawe sj, Tanzania
former moderator, Jesuit Superiors of Africa and Madagascar

Jim Profit sj, director, Ignatius Jesuit Centre

Yvonne Prowse, spiritual director, Loyola House, Ignatius Jesuit Centre

Bill Ryan sj, special advisor, Jesuit Forum for Social Faith and Justice

Stephen Scharper, associate professor of environmental ethics,
Centre for Environment, University of Toronto

Cristina Vanin, associate professor of religious studies,
St. Jerome's University

***We are very grateful to all our participants.
Many thanks to Bishop Crosby for hosting us at his house.***

Cover design by Trevor Scott
Cover photo by Iyer.Taracad: Nomads in the Sahel desert of Mali.
"This is the life that we know. We like it."

Introduction

We believe, as many do now, that spirituality, social justice and ecology should be integrated into a holistic approach or vision. Thus far, we tend to relate ecology to spirituality and/or social justice to ecology more readily than we interrelate the three together.

We believe we need a new paradigm or new way of seeing or understanding the complex reality of today. We need to do this in order to overcome both the narrower approach of particular academic disciplines and subconscious ideologies.

Spirituality can give us the freedom and openness to go beyond these limits, as well as the staying-power, enthusiasm and motivation for the long haul.

Therefore, a seminar was held in Hamilton, Ontario, June 9-10, 2011 to help us to:

- ◇ better understand the integration of spirituality, social justice and ecology, by bringing together people from these sometimes separate sectors
- ◇ find new language and ways to communicate these ideas
- ◇ make a contribution to the struggle for social and ecological justice by developing some tools to share what we learn
- ◇ develop strategies for collaboration and future work together
- ◇ foster hope in a time of many crises

The following, taken from *Open Space* (summer 2010), may also help explain the purpose of our gathering:

In his foreword to *The Tao of Liberation* (Mark Hathaway and Leonardo Boff) Fritjof Capra, physicist, systems theorist and author, suggests that ecology seems to be the ideal bridge between science and spirituality because both emphasize connectedness, relationship and interdependence as fundamental concepts. We are interwoven with each other and with the whole web of life by the One whose loom holds all of creation.

That is why the option for the poor and the option for the earth are inseparable in a new, compelling conception of sustainability as liberation.

**In the following pages, we offer summaries of the presentations at the seminar, as well as edited excerpts of the conversations.
Please come and listen in...**

Canadian Jesuits International, Ignatius Jesuit Centre
Jesuit Forum for Social Faith and Justice



Mark Hathaway

Mark's reflections echoed the rich theme of the book he co-authored with Leonardo Boff, *The Tao of Liberation: Exploring the Ecology of Transformation*. For Mark, the ancient Chinese word Tao evokes "unfolding wisdom" in the midst of the cosmos.

In his ecological framework he took us immediately into the heart of Christian spirituality by suggesting that Tao represents the unfolding of the Kingdom of God symbolically. He personally finds the English translation of the original Aramaic word "Malkutha" used in scripture as "kingdom" too static and speaking of power and control. Tao, on the other hand, evokes energizing, empowering unfolding wisdom. It opens up the potential for the Earth's story. And it fits well with the new cosmology, which offers us an opportunity to understand the cosmos as evolving "living" matter – not dead stuff. There is no place for materialism here.

Ecology echoes and reinforces spiritual solidarity and community with its own emphasis on the interconnectedness of everything in creation. And spirituality brings the reality of dynamic interrelationships beginning with the Trinity, to

interconnectedness. Creation is ongoing living evolution.

We are all in this together. We are never acting alone. We include here not only all humans but the whole of creation. We have much to learn from science and cosmology, but we must go beyond rational analysis to other more intuitive insights that come from social imagination, feelings and the sense of wonder.

In other words, the solution has to be spiritual, not just economic and political. What's destroying the earth is the anti-ethic of consumerism. We have to change our ethical compass. Most spiritual traditions and world religions can help us discover a more vibrant ethics of relationship.

Mark would say that from the perspective of cosmology, we might call God not only Wisdom but Energy – at once supreme, organizing and loving. We find in Acts 17:28, "In God we live and move and have our being" – in our web of dynamic relationships we can embrace and experience God not only in ourselves but also in all creation.

We must reconceptualize liberation from a cosmogenetic view. We move toward

liberation to the extent we deepen community relationality, which will include greater differentiation. Being creative is part of our subjectivity. How do we create? How do we rethink technology?

Mark was impressed with the way the Incas created things of beauty that resulted in greater diversity – like developing hundreds of varieties of potatoes, for example. We, on the other hand, are heading towards monocultures. How can we use our creativity to cooperate more with the processes of evolution? It involves listening to natural systems. The need to be creative is central to our spirituality and a lot of creativity is needed to heal the earth.

It seems difficult for us living in the centres of power to imagine a transformation of consciousness – a turning point so drastic and radical – happening any time soon in the western world. But we can take hope from what we are now witnessing, unexpectedly, in countries such as Bolivia, Egypt, Libya and other countries in the Middle East. The possibility for change is not so dependent on our power, but on the wisdom with which we undertake action.

***What's destroying the earth
is the anti-ethic of consumerism.***

The conversation...

Saju:

In the developed world we have a lot of power and control – it is harder to have a sense of the miracle of life. How do you move people into another way of being?

Mark:

Intuitive action means moving beyond discursive analysis alone. Such analysis tends to break things into bits, so how do we develop other ways of hearing, thinking, learning...? We need to sit in silence, to dream – allow. How do we awaken the dreamer in us? Dreams allow for the creative play of things. A spiritual journey leads us beyond ourselves.

Cristina:

Children are born to that sense of wonder – how do we parents sustain that sense? What is it that happens that we lose it? And what does it mean to have joy in response to the world – it awakens the divine in us. How do we extend those special moments of awe in nature to other times?

Stephen:

There is a great need, especially for men, to learn to express relationality - whether men with men or unspoken relationships with nature.

Dora:

In 1977, the Presbyterian Church in Cuba issued a declaration on the importance of people working in community and on the value of work – in being able to create things. Capitalism removes that senses of being creative. And yet

creativity is part of the way we are like God in the world. Consumerism kills that sense of wonder and emphasizes work before creativity

Mark:

We need to deepen community relationality – creativity, self-organization, mindfulness. The need to be creative is central to our spirituality.

As we move forward, connection to our food may be a key – we're co-creators with nature in producing food...

Jenny:

On the concept of the unfolding... there was a Colombian journalist at a recent mining conference saying that in the face of adversity, we have to remember the struggle is long and, when we're no longer here, others carry on.

Another thought... unfolding truth has to co-exist with the rigidity of elections/institutions, etc. etc. Social movements and religious communities, for example, seem to have more flexibility than corporate and traditional church structures. And global social movements are different again – they thrive without seeming to have any real leadership or centre. How do we rationalize the rigidity and the unfolding?

Stephen Scharper

Stephen began by giving us a telling example of how he, like the philosopher Jürgen Habermas, sees a steady process of colonization going on in our life world.

In the records of the University of Toronto their undergrad students are listed as BIUs, Basic Income Units. It is part of the gradual corporatization of universities and beyond. It's a whole world-view. Students are seen as consumers or clients and treated as objects rather than as subjective persons.

Our hubris in dominating or conquering nature makes us deaf to the natural world. We are in desperate need of ecological consciousness. Indeed, we are not even aware of how our technological approaches are clouding our awareness.

He cited the example of a Canadian engineer who could not understand why Tanzanian women preferred to carry water for two hours each day rather than accept his pipeline

proposal. He could not see the simple reality – it was not about water but about these women using their walking time to chat and get some respite from their endless tasks and worries at home.

We need humility – we need to fall in love with nature. It teaches us much about our Creator. And love is related to that trust we need to build movements and group action. Love is a social investment. And it is abundant. As Pope Benedict reminds us in *Caritas in Veritate*, divine love is the most powerful force in human history present, penetrating and acting in everyone and everything in nature.

And we can share hope when we consider that over the last few years more than a million ecological NGOs have sprung up in every part of the world thanks to the rapid revolution in ecological awareness and communication technology. We can also take heart when we consider the example of Rachel Carson, who helped

to launch the environmental movement significantly by simply writing her widely read *Silent Spring* in response to her personal love of birds.

And we can take some satisfaction too from the case of Lois Gibbs who blew the whistle on the tragedy of the Love Canal that runs through the Niagara escarpment. The shore of Love Canal was originally the location of what William Love planned as “the most extensive and beautiful park in the world.”

He failed and later it became a kilometer-long pit for Hooker Chemical to dump its waste. It was later sealed and a school innocently built on top of it. Gibbs blew the whistle on what was happening when her son and most other children at the school were found to be regularly sick.

One good thing to come out of this callous disaster was the creation of the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act, in USA.



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The conversation...

Mark:

Gustavo Gutierrez says – creation is the first act of liberation... the divine wanted to be in loving relationship – the whole force of the universe is love.

Bill:

The force of love in the world is the central idea in the encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate*.

Stephen:

The experience of growing a tomato plant gave a young person – at risk of being drawn into a gang – a

close connection to life and earth – the primordial connectivity with nature – to help form identity.

Bill:

The opposite force of love is fear and lack of trust.

Stephen:

How do we live in love – in terms of distribution of resources – we need a new moral compass – climate change is palpable for people in the South Pacific Islands while we're driving SUVs...

John Dillon

We are challenged to weave together economy and ecology for a holistic response. Poverty persists in Canada amidst apparent wealth generated in particular by the oil and financial industries. The 'wealth' being created is not real in this bubble economy. Inequality in income distribution is increasing to the detriment not only of those who are impoverished, but also of our entire society.

Citizens of societies that have achieved a high degree of material wealth also experience rising anxiety, depression and other social problems. The work done by Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett in their book, *The*

Spirit Level: Why Equality is Better for Everyone, shows that in 'affluent' societies with wide gaps between rich and poor:

- The incidence of mental illness is three times higher
- Obesity rates of twice as high
- There are eight times more prisoners
- There are ten times more teenage pregnancies
- Higher use of illegal drugs
- Higher rates of infant mortality
- More school dropouts
- Higher rates of homicides
- More health problems

Meanwhile, the booming petroleum extraction industry,

centred on the Alberta tar sands, generates wealth for corporations but has harmful social consequences.

Canada has been 'blessed' with the resource curse, which is prone to high levels of income inequality. Half the oil wealth goes to foreign shareholders, with most of that remaining going to the richest 10% of families. The nominal income growth of those in the middle is due to longer working hours, while low-wage families have had a dramatic reduction in real incomes.

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John Dillon (continued)

The tar sands have brought widespread ecological damage with the loss of boreal forest, huge water use and toxic tailings ponds. And the tar sands have had harmful consequences for indigenous peoples.

The massive exploitation of the tar sands exacerbates ecological destruction and is incompatible with the urgent need to fight climate change.

Unless we substantially reduce our greenhouse gas emissions, we risk extremely dangerous climate change which would displace millions of people due to coastal flooding, deny adequate water to billions of people with the disappearance of glaciers and risk extinction for up to 40% of the Earth's plant and animal species.

The current trajectory of the world economy is socially and ecologically unsustainable. We must reorient the economy to live within the limits of the Earth's ecological carrying capacity. But how?

The Brazilian economist Marcos Aruda is quoted as saying: "The tsunami of unreal wealth that has inundated the planet is destined... to ebb." Mark Hathaway and Leonardo Boff, in their book, *The Tao of Liberation*, explain: "the money accumulating... through debt and more sophisticated financial manipulations... is not real wealth at all – it is simply a kind of lien against future production that, by social agreement, can be redeemed for real wealth at a later time."

However, from an ecological point of view, it is not conceivable that real wealth grow fast enough to redeem all the fictitious financial wealth being created by manipulating nothing more tangible than zeros and ones on computer chips. This phantom wealth will either disappear when the speculative bubbles burst, as happened during the sub-prime mortgage crisis, or be eaten away by inflation.

Hathaway and Boff observe that "the financial economy's quest

for profit concentrates wealth in the hands of investors while impoverishing the poor and the wider Earth community. On the one hand, to meet the ever mounting lien against future production, the world is forced to continue its obsession with unlimited growth – depleting the natural wealth of the planet in the process. At the same time, inflationary pressures particularly impoverish the poor who do not earn investment at exponential rates.

Understandably, the people of the Global South are continuing to challenge us in the North on our growing ecological debt to them. The Dar es Salaam Statement Linking Poverty, Wealth and Ecology in Africa calls on churches in developed countries to "acknowledge the privileges derived from complicity – through their production and consumption patterns – in systems of domination and exploitation that dehumanize and destroy life in Africa."

"The tsunami of unreal wealth that has inundated the planet is destined... to ebb." (Marcos Aruda, Brazilian economist)

The conversation...

Bill:

Today, even conservative economists are admitting that the growing gap between rich and poor was a cause of the 2008 financial crisis. The financial economy has outgrown the real economy with most new money going to the small group of wealthy at the top. And yet in Canada there is still hesitation about even raising the question of taxing the rich proportionally.

Abuse of money power is creating greater cynicism in Canada daily. The generation of income is being separated from work. Central tenets of our Catholic social teaching are being undermined.

Stephen

Teaching the statistics of inequality to undergraduates is probably less effective than exposing them to groups who are actually doing something.

A suggestion one might give to communities and churches is to commit themselves to the Kyoto Protocol, even if our government does not. They have the properties and land where they can exemplify what they are asking others to do.

Jim:

Our systems of denial are so deeply in place. The ecology retreats we offer are a chance to reflect on the state of the planet and what we are doing.

Mark:

Presently we are at 130% of the earth's carrying capacity, with 100% being consumed by the richest 20%.

Sustainable technology could help, but we need to reduce our consumption – we need to know the truth.

Business as usual leads to ecological devastation.

We have to begin to think about how we can live more modestly and enjoy it. We can imagine a future way of life where we live modestly but still have rich relationships, joy and happiness, because we have changed our basic goal in life – from accumulation of things to a fullness of life.

Bill:

Any country, historically, that's depended on oil as its primary development resource has been a disaster humanly. We should also note that the Atlantic Monthly recently had a very positive article on the greening of the Vatican. And we can take some hope from the fact that 85% of the world's people still operate from a religious place. This is significant as we see the correlation between religious belief and consciousness of ecological concerns steadily increasing.

Stephen:

An invitation to a new relationship is not all dreary, but can be a beautiful experience. Falling in love means I might get kicked around, might get hurt, but who would avoid it? Today we have an opportunity to fall in love with creation.

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Saju:

Some disasters or emergencies produce hope – the Arab Spring shows how power is shifting – the Japan nuclear near disaster is causing Germany to go non-nuclear.

We need to address the issue of power.

Jenny:

Addiction research says, steps to change are 1) information 2) attitude 3) behaviour. Behaviour is the last to change... knowledge doesn't necessarily affect behaviour.

We have to address the issue of power and inequalities of power at all levels.

And we need to turn every question on its head. A Peruvian woman friend told me she was working two jobs – which I was sorry about because of the long hours – but she was very happy! How do people on the margins look at these issues?

Dora:

We have to be honest – those of the South say countries of the North need to do something. For people of the South, it's not immediately about the long haul – it's a survival issue, it's life and death now – we have to do this now. Justice is the container for love.

Yvonne:

Help people acknowledge the stark reality that they have been enriched through complicity and ecological debt. However, trying to motivate through fear or guilt will backfire.

Like Joanna Macy says, we need to motivate through love, through people's care of creation. And we have to give people the God of Abundance. So many parishes want this piece of Catholic teaching. The documentary "Is God Green?" might be helpful.

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Rosella Kinoshameg

Everyone is given a gift and a purpose in life. The Creator has given us special instructions to be followed. It is everyone's responsibility to listen with their ears, eyes and heart. When we lose sight of our purpose, go astray and do not follow the instructions we have been given, we become unbalanced and things do not go right and fall apart.

There was a time when the Creator called all the birds together to give them instructions for building a nest. So all the birds came, some eagerly, some grumbling about how busy they were and really couldn't stay long. As the Creator gave the instructions, some were busy talking and laughing among themselves and did not pay attention. Some did not stay at all and others left throughout the instructions.

The crows were the first to leave. The hummingbirds stayed right to the end. It seems they have followed the instructions and make perfectly round nests. The crows cannot make good nests – the twigs are haphazardly put together and cannot withstand the wind and the rain.

As we go through experiences in life, we must learn from them, cherish this knowledge and use it to help others. In my language, we call this kind of knowledge from experience "nibwaakaawin" or in English, wisdom. This is one of the seven sacred teachings, also known as the seven grandfather teachings. The others are: respect, humility, honesty, bravery, truth and unconditional love.

In the traditions of my people, we have teachings about balance of spirit, heart, mind and body as a way of life – living the teachings of the Medicine Wheel that give direction and strength to accept our responsibilities, striving to live in balance and harmony every day. The teachings foster physical, mental, social and emotional/spiritual well-being.

The circle is the sacred symbol of wholeness, interdependence and strength. The teachings focus on walking in balance and moving along life's pathway overcoming obstacles. The teachings show how things are connected with oneself, others and the Creator. Each of the four directions with its many symbols gives guidance,

nourishment, strength and helps to understand the meaning of life.

The most important thing is that everything is joined in that circle, everything is in that circle, and everything unites as one to give energy, vitality, healing and strength. To achieve balance and healing, each person must try to be in every area of the Medicine Wheel and not only in one quadrant or direction, otherwise the person is not in balance and the circle cannot turn smoothly.

Our people who lived in harmony with nature, depended on the sun and migratory patterns of birds and animals to know when to do things. The concept of time was intuitive, personal and flexible and stemmed from activities that were regulated by the seasons. People waited patiently for the cycles in nature which allowed time to prepare emotionally and spiritually for the activities ahead. They developed the concept of doing certain things when it was the right time. Today, time is more important for harmony in interpersonal relationships.

The most important thing is that everything is joined in that circle, everything is in that circle, and everything unites as one to give energy, vitality, healing and strength. To achieve balance and healing, each person must try to be in every area of the Medicine Wheel...

The conversation...

Mark:

People are more easily convinced by stories than by concepts. There's wisdom in stories, convincing wisdom. Stories capture the imagination, touch the head, heart and hands. We need to be convinced in a positive way that any change that is necessary is going to be better for me, and that it will be better for the world as well.

Bill:

Interestingly, John Ralston Saul, in his *Canada as a Fair Country*, claims that Canada began initially to build itself into a country after the native democratic tradition of simply adding newcomers to the circle, letting each one bring and share their gifts and skills with the whole circle. He believes we should go back to that model today.

Fratern:

Stories help to change behaviour. For children up to age of five, tell them stories and when they're older this will help make change. In Africa, it's good to tell stories, even as you take children to visit their relatives dying of AIDS. Hopefully, it will help to change their adult behaviour.

Jesus used parables regularly as stories in his teaching. Thomas Berry believed the story of the universe well told can bind us – it can motivate us “the dream drives the dreamer!”

Rosella:

Stories don't tell people what to do. In native culture our approach is don't tell people what to do – let them learn through stories. “It's up to you” to make choices – this is an expression...

Jim:

I learned about trusting from native peoples and how they trust in God.



Fratern Masawe

Fratern took us back to Mark's opening comments about his personal preference in using the name, Tao, for its unfolding dynamism of relationships as opposed to our English use of Kingdom [of God], which is static and speaks of power and control. In Kiswahili, his own language, it is best translated by "Milki" which captures the dynamic relationship, the role of becoming as well as the feminine qualities of love and care at the centre of interconnectedness. One can belong to it but it cannot be possessed.

On this quality of gift, being able to let go in entering the "Milki", Fratern recounted his recent rich personal experience of accompanying four younger friends – ages 25-39 - who were dying of cancer. He was amazed to find in all four of them this purity of freedom, readiness to let go, to possess nothing. Free to forgive, free to reconcile, free to love. Though dying they seemed to have a special gift akin to compassion – that selfless outward looking passion which is a combination of external suffering and inner pain, the kind that is hope and life-giving, joy and beauty

enhancing fire. At the same time, they seemed to have only the desire 'to be with' – to be with us, even beyond their physical existence. He believes they have qualities to enter the Kingdom – the "Milki".

He suggests that we can learn much about seeking wisdom from stories, that is, from myths, allegories, wisdom sayings, parables and fables, including those of Jesus.

For example, the Swahili saying "***The one who does not know this, knows that***" can be taken to a deeper and richer level of meaning – 'If you do not know this thing, you know another. The one who knows this thing, does not know what you know. It is a saying that, at the same time, acknowledges our strengths and our weaknesses, appreciates our specialization and points out our human limitations.

It also goes beyond this side of knowledge or lack of it to a call of virtues – listening to one another; appreciation of one another; acceptance of our human condition – humility of humanity (we know a part and not the whole of

knowledge); unity in diversity (connected together we know more, and indeed are better off); peaceful co-existence (we belong to something greater which we do not possess).

Fratern went on to recount a remarkable story told at the Story-Telling Festival last May at the University of Manitoba (see page 15) about a young man who meets, falls in love and marries a spirit woman and has two children with her. But she and her children disappear once he begins, apparently, to contain, control or possess her.

He ended by citing a passage from Isaiah [2:1-2] "Come let us go to the mountain of the Lord...that he may teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths."

For Fratern, it evokes his experience of the snows of Kilimanjaro and the beautiful trees which grow there, as well as our need to plant trees, since each of us needs ten living trees to be symbiotically alive to let the earth breathe freely. Trees live much longer than we do and help us recall our past history.

...we can learn much about seeking wisdom from stories, that is, from myths, allegories, wisdom sayings, parables and fables, including those of Jesus.

The conversation...

Jenny:

I was struck by Fratern's reference to the feminine centre of creation and the Kiswahili term for the reign of God, the Milki, and how this feminine aspect has been lost in our culture.

Fratern:

Europeans tried to make sense of African stories. Sometimes they succeeded. Rembrandt portrays the father of the prodigal son as having one masculine hand and one feminine. I see the feminine in the gospels... perhaps we might listen to the Spirit speaking about the feminine through the parables.

Fratern was asked to speak to the freedom required to hear God speaking to us and about the reign of God among us. Here is generally what he said:

Fratern:

Freedom is letting go to love. You have to be free to let the Spirit lead us. When we seek or look for something, we are open to freedom. When we are dying there's a special grace for freedom.

In my experience, I have witnessed the presence of freedom, especially

at times of crisis - for some, experience of prison, for others in their experience of dying. What is of God in us? The goodness and beauty of God in us? a person who is very generous is a person of God. The reign of God in us is that part of us that is God within us, Jesus breathing on us the Spirit of God.

Grace is what is God in us, that part of us that gives life to another. It's what gives us a feeling in the stomach, what make our heads shake, that makes us feel pain within us when we see pain in another. This is the dynamic grace within us giving us the capacity to do good, even if it means depriving myself of comfort.

The Aramaic term for kingdom is not just inside, but alongside, outside, next to.. it's not static - like yeast that comes alive in the dough, it needs a midwife in the world.

Mark:

The parable of the yeast and the dough came alive when my wife tried to make her own sour dough starter recently... It was not an easy process and took many attempts and false starts....



The Strange One

a story heard at the Story-telling Festival, University of Manitoba,
retold by Fratern Masawe.

A couple that had no child for a long time prayed for a child. And after praying to the Great Spirit, a child was given to them. But the child had very little in common with the parents. He worked hard providing the parents what they needed – firewood, water to drink and to bathe. But every morning, very early, he left for the prairies, leaving the tall grass swaying behind him. And he came back in the evening.

He did not communicate or so they thought. Since he did not speak they called him the Strange One.

In the forest, he laid on the green grass, the birds came around, the animals did and the butterflies covered his chest with dances. He could talk with all these creatures.

And one day the daughter of the chief who was always in his heart, approached him. And they had an intimate conversation. He expressed himself as one without words to explain what was in his heart. But she said what was in his heart was in her heart too. He wanted to marry her and she said yes. He then said, “But you died and you are a spirit woman, can you still be married?” She said, ‘yes’.

They eventually got married. They had a girl as a first child and then a boy. He thought of building a good

house for his beloved spirit wife. After consultation she said, “yes, but there are these Spirit conditions: no visitors during the day and the house must not be in the village but in the forest. And you must not lose your temper or shout at the children.”

But his mother back home noticed some changes in him. He was acting strangely. She told his father and his father said. “Yes. He is always very strange, my strange one”. “But that is not the usual strangeness, there must be something more.” She said. “He is in love, our strange one.” Women are very perceptive, they notice things even when they are not spoken of.

And sooner than later the strange one started working hard building a house for his family close to the village but within the boundaries of the forest.

His mother kept watching for changes and noticed that the changes indicated that the grandchildren were there and she brought gifts, and clothes for them.

And one day she saw him coming through the tall grass, his spirit wife behind him with the little ones, one on her back and one in front. She hurried and took all her gifts with her to meet her grandchildren and no sooner had she given the gifts, the spirit woman vanished with her children.

Cristina Vanin

Cristina asked the telling question that goes to the heart of our discussion, quoting Thomas Berry: “Why do we not respond to the earth in the same way we would spontaneously respond to the cries of a human child?”

What is it about our understanding of ourselves, about our understanding of the natural world, and the divine, that we don’t really hear the cries of the earth – as species are sick or lose their habitat, coral reefs die, oceans warm up and glaciers disappear? We are the species that has the role and responsibility of reflecting on the reality of the world, of understanding it, accepting the truth of it, and choosing to respond. What is going to help us respond as we need to?

She recalls a passage from Willa Cather’s “Song of the Lark”, quoted by Jerome Miller, where a little girl, Thea, runs joyfully out into the world of nature on a Saturday morning in May. We delight in the image and recall that experience in our own younger lives and how impatient we were to get things done so that we could run out there. Miller suggests that Thea experienced the world as waiting for her, beckoning her. Our running out into the world is our ‘yes,’ our ‘amen’ to

the gift of the natural world, our primary experience of sacrament.

Cristina wonders how her own daughters will reflect on their early experiences, but the questions she raises apply equally to us. What meaning do we put on our past experience of delight in running out into the natural world? Are we able to relate those experiences to a God who has created this world, who is revealing Godself in and through this world, who is a Lover of Life, who also is beckoning us, seeking intimate relationship with us? Who desires that we have deep intimate relationships with all beings in the community of life?

The difficulty is that in our experiences of church and Catholic education, we still mostly get the message that we are significantly separate from the earth and all the other beings. We are learning to care about the earth and how not to abuse its limited resources, but Thomas Berry challenges us to realize that more is needed, namely, a profound shift in our understanding that goes beyond appreciation of the natural world. What is needed is a new spirituality that permits us to experience and truly understand that we are intimately related to all other beings, that we share in a community of life with all other

species, and that we share a common story of where we came from and how we got here.

It is amazing and disheartening to find many believers who still think we must choose between evolution and faith. It would be great to have opportunities, such as retreats, to experience the same sense of the wonder of the world that we had as children, a world that beckons us into relationship. It would be important to understand these are profoundly religious experiences; God beckons us into an intimate relationship with the natural world.

The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius can help us find the spiritual vision and energies needed to really know, in our hearts as well as our heads, that we all form one community of life with the planet.

Ignatius’ Contemplation for Divine Love, for example, which asks us to contemplate God present and dynamically active in all creation, can transform our early joyful experience of running out into the natural world into a love affair with God and nature. This experience may have the potential to bring about in us that drastic shift in consciousness and understanding of our being and acting as one community with all creation and its Creator.

What is needed is a new spirituality that permits us to experience and truly understand that we are intimately related to all other beings, that we share in a community of life with all other species, and that we share a common story of where we came from and how we got here.

The conversation...

John:

Sacrifice – may be a negative term in the dominant society, but it could also be a life-giving thing. The universe itself has sacrifices – for life to be, there involves giving – an explosion – we’re not living within the limits of earth and we need to learn how we give things up. We need to hear cries of all the children

Saju:

For the Global South – sacrifice??
Sacrifice what? Need vs greed.
Sacrifice in the South needs to be discussed in a global way...

Tony:

Our own Judeo Christian tradition is to subdue the Earth – it’s so woven into western civilization of how we develop the world – it’s at the heart of colonization. We have to address this – lift it up and deal with it. It’s a huge barrier to overcome. We need to be self-critical.

Rosella:

How have we treated our mother Earth? How do we make her well? We thank creation for all the things around us. We only take what we need and not the first plant we see, we look for another batch for fear

it is the last one, before taking and offering tobacco and thanking God. We have to look to the future and we have to depend on each other.

Cristina:

Ignatius spirituality – should be as Rosella says. If we engage in these ways of prayer we should come to a response of intimacy of relationship, which means we have to give.

Bill:

Caritas in Veritate starts with the requirement of personal conversion. We need the freedom and disposition to change and be open before we tackle big issues.

Stephen:

Remember Toronto the Good? It’s changed and today we have disposable people - the poor, refugees...

Listen to the Earth crying in you - it could be a spiritual practice - (Thich Nhat Hanh). We can’t have something new without sacrifice - giving up to give space...

Anne-Marie:

We need to listen so we can see.



Tony Clarke

How do the rights of Mother Earth relate to the spiritual quest of our time? Many years ago, I began to learn through the 'theology of liberation' what it meant to come to know and commune with God or the divine through participation in the struggles for justice of the poor, the marginalized, the oppressed. Now, in more recent years, the scope of that spiritual challenge has broadened and deepened.

Today, I find myself also coming to know and commune with God or the divine through listening to and participating in the struggles of the environment, the Earth itself, and ecological justice. In other words, my work these days is focused on listening to and bringing together, both the cries of the Poor and the cries of the Earth, in terms of concrete issues and challenges.

Through my work at the Polaris Institute, for example, I've been actively engaged in building public resistance to the mega tar sands development in northern Alberta. Recognized as perhaps the most environmentally destructive development on the planet today, the tar

sands project is responsible for huge carbon emissions, water contamination and depletion, plus the strip mining of the boreal forest.

It has also become a socially destructive development by generating high rates of cancer for First Nations people living downstream, increasing our dependence (if not addiction to) an oil-based energy future, and a contributing cause of large scale unemployment in the manufacturing sector of Canada's economy. Here, the cries of the Earth and the Poor meet.

At the same time, building 'resistance' has also given rise to the need to develop 'alternatives.' If our current industrial model is increasingly unjust and unsustainable, then the challenge is to build a new economic model that is much more just and sustainable.

Over two years ago, Polaris began to bring together a new alliance of labour unions, environmental organizations and social justice groups to form something called the Green Economy Network. Together, we've since developed a vision statement,

working groups, and a common platform for a new sustainable economic agenda.

Our platform includes strategies for transitioning to renewable energy, building retrofits and energy efficiency, plus expanding public transit and high speed rail. Over a 10-year period, this plan alone would create over 400,000 full time jobs and reduce carbon emissions by over 100 million tons (per year).

We are now living in a very special historical moment, one which Thomas Berry describes as the transition from the Technozoic to the Ecozoic era. During this moment, humanity will have to undergo a 'Great Turning' if we as a species and the planet itself are to survive. More specifically, there are three kinds of 'turning' that need to take place:

Cultural Turning: --- and/or 'spiritual' turning, a fundamental transformation of values ['care, spare, share'] and priorities, starting with overcoming our 'anthropocentrism';

continued next page

***Here (in the tar sands of northern Alberta)
the cries of the Earth and the Poor meet.***

Political Turning:

a transformation in the purpose/processes of political life, emphasis on ‘participation, diversity, sustainability’ and a new understanding of ‘power’ as relational;

Economic Turning:

a transformation from an industrial to an eco-economy - new models for extracting resources, producing products and transporting goods and people, with priority on equity and sustainability.

As I see it, this is the monumental challenge of our times - all three ‘turnings’ must be undertaken simultaneously.

The conversation...

Stephen:

We have to come to grips with anthropocentrism, looking at the world through human eyes – we can change the centrist part - to see ourselves as related to all that is.

How do we nourish a sense of radical inter-relationship, a sense of larger responsibility? Narrative is important and what matters is who gets to tell the story – but storytelling on a wide scale is needed.

Mark:

The anthropocentric vision of the world is about power. How much is it related to patriarchy?

Jenny:

Refugees in camps are victims of abuse of power...

Dora:

There is also the issue of violence being addressed in Latin America.

Tony:

People and the Earth are treated as disposable goods – this is in the vision statement of the green jobs coalition - related to the issue of planned obsolescence. This notion of treating people and the planet as disposable goods is important to grasp. The cycle itself is vicious - a vicious circle of violence.

Question about the strategy of working with unions.

Tony

If we want to transform the economy, we have to have access to the means of production, ie: the unions. So - connect with unions ... I was amazed at what was happening – for example: some have Earth Stewards (as well as shop stewards). It’s not easy, but each union has good advocates

Fratern

I like the term, Mother Earth – it’s a living thing and a global thing - not just one country.

Tony:

The Pachamama movement brings together social justice, ecology and spirituality (not organized religion). It started in Ecuador where there is a culture of dreaming. When oil was found in the land, people had nightmares and they decided to leave the oil in the ground. Through that story we can discover the cultural and spiritual values of the Pachamama movement.

Fratern – Transnational corporations are setting the agendas and we need to re-vitalize government to do its work on the common good.

Yvonne Prowse

Walter Brueggemann says that consumerism has become a demonic spiritual force among us. Yvonne said this is revealed by such realities as the growing inability to distinguish between needs and wants as well as increased individualism and isolation in our society.

We have to be able to talk about that in our faith communities and move against it and towards God. Ignatius was very keen on naming the enemy spirit and moving towards God.

Yvonne's years of working with people in poverty showed her it is about right relationship – not a dominating approach, but equal, mutual, cooperative

and healing – and so too must be our attitude to nature.

God is so present in creation, making Godself available to us despite deep mystery, that our relationship to nature can't be separated from our relationship to God. This is the approach taken by many great Christian writers and thinkers, such as Meister Eckhardt, the apostle Paul, Julian of Norwich and Thomas Aquinas. Ignatius said God dwells in nature, actively loving us there and seeking our love. The divine is going to such lengths to connect with us through nature, to show us we are all part of one diverse community.

God is life and is about relationship. The conversion we desire is one of relationship with God, with people and with the Earth.

Yvonne urged everyone to preach from the book of nature and to use the scriptures to help discern what is being revealed in nature, saying we have a responsibility to help people – especially in our faith communities – to understand this deep connection and hope. And we need all our traditions, cultures and disciplines to bring about the change needed.

A discussion opened up briefly on the nature of sin today. It has to be probed both individually and socially. We have to remember that God's love remains open to us in all conditions. Fratern was somewhat uneasy about talking about sin being a disconnect from God. In African culture, to tell another person that you are not part of us implies that person can die.

Jim:

I liked the reference to discernment of spirits, which can help correct possible misinterpretation of Genesis, for example.

Saju:

Much is said about Christianity being responsible for ecological devastation. It needs to be balanced

with an awareness of the many simple Christian communities around the planet who live very close to the Earth.

We used to have celebrations of the diversity of food in my childhood, but we've lost that tradition.

Jim:

It was easy to preach from the book of nature on Manitoulin Island, but people could not connect with it in Jamaica.

Rosella:

Our people were always very close to nature, but then went astray. I've been discovering places where I can connect with my ancestors. We have our own cathedrals - tall trees, birds... There is the native idea of two sins - against human beings and against nature.

Conclusion

All the participants were firmly convinced of the depth of the present global economic and ecological crises we face. And we were all convinced that spirituality is intimately related to ecology and social justice. In fact it reveals to us the presence and action of the divine in all creation. Indeed, spirituality can be a dynamic force in each of us, freeing us from ideology and opening our social imaginations to see and experience how the divine permeates all human and natural activity, unfolding the kingdom of God – of love and justice – among us.

Our seminar was trying to get a deeper feeling, a higher awareness and understanding of how we can integrate this spiritual force as inspiration and motivation into our global and local justice and ecological concerns. We were looking for ways to keep the option for the poor and the option for the earth together.

All expressed gratitude for this rich sharing experience in this setting so conducive to friendly honest conversation. The other strong theme in the final reflections of the participants was the power of telling and listening to stories as an excellent way to discover and express the wisdom we are seeking. Here are a few other reflections:

- Dora (Cuba) said she was amazed to see different people from different parts of the world sharing the same or similar thoughts on how to face and transform our present global crises.
- Saju (South India) realized there is a great search all over the world on these questions and he was convinced we need to progress in right relationship.
- Jenny felt this was a great experience of belonging, in not feeling alone. We were together and felt a sense of hope.
- Fratern (Tanzania) was energized by the seminar, felt connected and given a kind of spark that he hoped could grow into a collective bushfire.
- Tony felt that the issues dealt with are game-changers. Reading the signs of the times shows us how integrating social justice, ecology and spirituality is crucial. There are many starting points to address our unprecedented challenges, but connectedness is very important.
- Jim left with a much greater sense of the importance of storytelling, as well as the importance of love and intimate relationships.
- Bishop Crosby was also struck by the importance of storytelling in helping us to make the huge 'Copernican' shift in our ways of thinking and perceiving without promoting fear.
- Rosella insists that the story is always an invitation not a command.
- Cristina continued to ask the question how can we recover our childhood experience of wonder as we run out of the house into the welcoming arms of nature – realizing it is an encounter with the Divine.
- Bill. For him, the sustained energy in our sharing was clear evidence that the Spirit was present and active among us.

In sum, we believe we have made some progress towards the daunting goals we set ourselves and perhaps especially in realizing the power of stories as a way to stimulate our social imaginations to see nature and ourselves differently. We are not alone. And we are now challenging ourselves and all our participants to find suitable follow-up.



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416-927-7887