

**The
Integrity of
Creation**

by Kathy Galloway

THE 1996 ESSEX HALL LECTURE

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THE INTEGRITY OF CREATION

*Why, who makes much of a miracle?
As to me, I know of nothing else but miracles,
Whether I walk the streets of Manhattan,
Or dart my sight over the roofs of houses toward the sky,
Or wade with naked feet along the beach just in the edge of the
water,
Or stand under trees in the woods,
Or talk by day with any one I love, or sleep in the bed at night
with any one I love,
Or sit at table at dinner with the rest,
Or look at strangers opposite me riding in the car,
Or watch honey bees busy around the hive of a summer forenoon,
Or animals feeding in the fields,
Or birds, or the wonderfulness of insects in the air,
Or the wonderfulness of the sundown, or of stars shining so
quiet and bright,
Or the exquisite delicate thin curve of the new moon
in spring;
These with the rest, one and all, are to me miracles,
The whole referring, yet each distinct and in its place.
To me every hour of the light and dark is a miracle,
Every cubic inch of space is a miracle,
Every square yard of the surface of the earth is spread with the same,
Every foot of the interior swarms with the same.*

*To me, the sea is a continual miracle,
The fishes that swim — the rocks — the motion of the waves —
the ships with men in them,
What stranger miracles are there?*

Walt Whitman

I first read this poem by Walt Whitman when I was about fifteen. I loved it then, and I love it still. It struck me with all the force of recognition, that experience of seeing something expressed, and knowing instantly a great 'yes'. Yes, this is what I believe, this is how it is.

I think, on reflection, I was saying yes to three distinct yet referring principles. The first was a conviction of the goodness of the whole creation, not goodness in a moral sense, but ontologically, the goodness of being. All is good, not by virtue of its value to others, or by its resourcefulness or its efficiency, but simply in the fact of its being. It is a principle of intrinsic worth, the same principle that is celebrated in the first chapter of the book of Genesis. . . . **'and it was very good'**, and that is displayed in the foundational creation myths of so many cultures and faiths.

And this particular expression of intrinsic worth spoke to me as someone brought up in, and loving the city. This was not just a celebration of nature, but of the integrity of nature and culture. Here was someone who did not see any contradiction in loving a city skyline as much as the new moon, the flow of conversation as much as the hum of bees, who felt no necessity to place them in competition, opposition, or order of merit. All were good.

The second principle I was saying 'yes' to was the conviction not only of the intrinsic worth of the creation, but of its interconnectedness. Part of its goodness lay not only in its existence but in its relatedness — or rather, that existence could not be separated from that relatedness. In Whitman's poem, the whole universe exists in a delicate yet complex web of relationship, in which the very language by which we recognise and name relatedness is itself a component. We, all of us, exist in relationship with the very air we breathe, we are part of it, without it we have no existence; just as we have no

existence without the act of conception which brought us into being, which in its turn was contingent on billions of acts of conception of one kind or another. At the very end of the 20th century, we are much more aware of our interdependency with all other life forms — the discoveries of physicists, biologists, ecologists and scientists of every discipline have meant that we can no longer plead ignorance — but Whitman, writing long before Einstein, in a scientific world that was still static and dualistic, spoke out of the intuitive wisdom of the artist and lover — which is, of course, the same wisdom that very small children have just as a result of using their senses, before it is socialised out of them. I remember my daughter, aged about two years, going to bed with a nightly ritual that went something like **'goodnight Mummy, goodnight boys, goodnight teddy, goodnight sky, goodnight sea, goodnight sheep, goodnight birds, goodnight table, goodnight door'**. . . and on and on until my stamina ran out at the prospect of naming the universe.

This interconnectedness, this integrity of creation, has been recognised always by poets and prophets and by the true religion that takes care, that reveres and sees the sacred. It is what Jesus was expressing in John's gospel. . . . **'I am the vine and you are the branches. . . a branch cannot bear fruit by itself; it can do so only if it remains in the vine. . . '** Or, more lately, in these words of prayer by George MacLeod, the Founder of the Iona Community...

. . . **in You, all things consist and hang together:**

The very atom is light energy,

The grass is vibrant,

The rocks pulsate.

All is in flux; turn but a stone and an angel moves.

And the third principle I was saying 'yes' to in Whitman's poem as a description of truth for me was the conviction that nothing is more miraculous, more wonderful, more worthy of reverence, than the

ordinary. Streets and trees, buses and birds, eating dinner and sleeping with someone loved — all such ordinary, accessible, habitual things, and yet all extraordinary. I knew that this articulated for me an incredible frustration that people should be so obsessed with searching for something else, while ignoring, devaluing and desecrating what they had right under their noses. This frustration, I confess, was considerably exacerbated by years in an academic study of theology, listening to interminable arguments about the exact nature of the miracles of Jesus. It wasn't so much a disagreement with the answers, as an unhappy feeling that the questions entirely missed the point. What lack of imagination, insight, vision, blinded people to simply seeing what was there? Again, it was the poets who expressed it for me best.

George MacLeod, praying. . . . **'in all created things Thou art there. In every friend we have, the sunshine of Thy presence is shown forth. In every enemy that seems to cross our path, Thou art there within the cloud to challenge us to love. Show to us the glory in the grey.'**

Or the American writer, Alice Walker:

*We alone can devalue gold
by not caring
if it falls or rises
in the marketplace.
Wherever there is gold
there is a chain, you know,
and if your chain
is gold
so much the worse
for you.*

*Feathers, shells
and sea-shaped stones
are all as rare.*

*This could be our revolution:
To love what is plentiful
as much as
what's scarce.*

Looking back over my life, I see that it has been guided and shaped by these three distinct yet referring principles: the conviction of intrinsic worth; the conviction of the relatedness of all things: the conviction of the miraculousness of the ordinary, the glory in the grey. These convictions I know I share with people in every part of the world, of every background, race and religion, in every culture and condition. I am not alone in these convictions. They are a profound motivation, a spirituality, for everyone who seeks to care for the living earth. Obedience, by which I mean attentiveness, to them, is, I think, a pre-requisite, if our care is not simply to be another attempt to privilege our own agendas.

I want to think about some of the difficulties and challenges that we face in endeavouring to adhere to each of these principles, and then to speak about one challenge which is particularly important in my view.

We live in a society where the dominant economic principle is that of the free market. Our economic exchanges, transactions, and relationships with other societies operate by market forces. Now we could debate from now till next Friday about the effectiveness of market forces as an economic principle. But my concern here is with the spirituality of the market, with its relationship to our interiority, our profound motivations. You cannot have an ideology that is only external. You cannot have the outside of the cup without having the

inside. Market forces operate by value addition, by extrinsic worth. The market value of something is determined by its perceived desirability. It may be desirable because it is considered to be extremely beautiful, rare or useful. Conversely, something may have a lower market value if it is considered to be ugly or flawed, common, or useless. It's quite easy to see the operation of extrinsic worth, of value addition, in our culture's relationship to people. People who meet the conventional standards of physical beauty are more highly valued than those who do not. Judges are more highly valued than prisoners, able-bodied people than those who have an obvious disability. Abilities in business management are more highly rewarded than those in sewage treatment, nursing or parenting. Youth is more highly regarded than age, and the DSS offices are full of people considered to be redundant. Our values show up in what we do, not in what we profess. Looking at our society, our captivity to market forces is obvious in our treatment of people. There is no conviction of intrinsic worth in the market.

People are, of course, part of the living earth. But what about what is usually referred to as 'nature', or our habitat, our universe? What does extrinsic worth suggest here? I think it could suggest all of the following.

- nature as a resource to be managed —
- nature as an opportunity to be exploited —
- nature as a potential to be developed —
- nature as an aesthetic to be appreciated —
- nature as the stage on which human destiny is worked out —
- or simply, nature as a nice surrounding in which to take exercise, conquer mountains or escape the pressures of modern living.

All of these add value to nature in terms of its desirability to the human race, though some of them may seem more benign than others.

I do not wish to seem to adopt a romantic or naïve attitude towards the earth. We are a species among other species, programmed to adapt and survive. But as we struggle to articulate and practise right relationship with the earth, I wish merely to point out the difficulties, contradictions and, perhaps, the impossibility, of integrating a belief in intrinsic worth within an ideology of extrinsic worth, a difficulty which is illustrated by considering the extent to which that ideology pervades our language.

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

We recognise the fact that indigenous or aboriginal cultures often have highly evolved ways of living in right relationship with their habitat. These ways are highly unitive, deeply connective. They have lived in what anthropologists have termed a 'participation mystique' of undivided wholeness, in which even the term 'reverence for nature' is inaccurate because it conveys rather too much 'over-againstness' for a context in which such a degree of differentiation has not been conceived of.

But such cultures who have been torn up by the roots from the land on which they grew by the wonders of, what we charmingly call, 'progress' or 'development' are forced into a brutal differentiation which is almost unimaginable for us in our highly individualistic culture. Western cultures have had centuries of this brutalisation. We have been torn up by the roots so often. This is part, for example, of what it means to be Scottish. It seems to me to be one of the great gifts of being part of a religious tradition that there are scriptures,

ceremonies, music and stories that remind us of our roots, of times when we were not so disconnected.

Uprooted, it is harder for us to know ourselves as a species among species. In our religious faith there may also be a strong unitive, connective concern — self-consciously so; one we strive for, whether it be in an undifferentiated absorption into the divine or Godhead, or whether, as in Christianity, in the belief that the fullest realisation of selfhood or differentiation comes in union with God. But if one part of religion is the attempt to conceive of the universe as humanly meaningful, there is also the temptation to interpret this as meaning that humankind is what the universe is for. And thence, it is only a small step to the arrogance of believing that the universe is for *us* — of making us the value adders to creation. So it may be a considerable struggle to affirm that, on the contrary, we are *for* the universe.

Both in our relationship with our own habitat, and in our relationship with God, the sociological and historical pressures running against connectedness are acute. And though a scientific spirituality may have a clearer picture of our ecological interdependence, it is still subject to the pervasive and persuasive strategy of making the end justify the means, in a value-loaded, anthropocentric way — as conflicts about everything from animal testing to nuclear power demonstrate.

And then, even if relatedness to the creation and all its complex biodiversity is simply that of the passionate lover whose ultimate concern is the well-being of the beloved earth, there always and genuinely exists the claims of another, or other, loves. Sometimes the choices and demands seem irreconcilable. Perhaps this is seen most acutely in the dilemma of those who cut wood for fuel, in order just to survive, in the full knowledge that they are destroying part of the biological

foundation of their own life on earth. Anyone who has found themselves with apparently competing loves is aware of the anguish of this struggle.

Being a species among species, recognising our connections, also means recognising our finiteness, our contingency, our limits. This presents certain huge problems to Western cultures living with economic and political ideologies that are, after all, the logical conclusion of the Enlightenment — that movement which brought many gifts, some of them poisoned. Think again about our language and symbols. An end to history. The world's your oyster. No such thing as society. The right to economic growth. The right to spiritual growth. The need to stimulate consumerism. Retail therapy. A social culture that denies the giftedness of ageing. A sexual culture that drives young women to starve and vomit because it cannot value the confines and diversity of bodies. We live in a society which entices with limitlessness, and offers the promise of escape from the demands of finiteness. Both personally and politically, on the Left and on the Right, our society entices us to disengage from the confines and demands and limitations of history, of geography, of bodies, of relationship. We repress, distort, deny our history, the hurts done both *to* us and *by* us. We attempt to leap over geography in our cars, cause carnage on the roads and poison the atmosphere. We systematically demean, degrade, armour and hurt bodies. We pay lip service to community, live out of individualism, and pay to find ways of recreating spurious community.

Speaking recently, Jonathan Porritt, searching for the reasons why people do not take ecological issues seriously *now*, said, **'simply, not enough people are dying yet in our countries; of skin cancer, of UV rays, or from pollution toxification illnesses. Nor are enough coastal communities drowning yet from rising sea-levels due to global warming. The visible, tangible, avoidable**

consequences of ecodisaster are not yet powerful enough to persuade sufficient people to change today's priorities.'

Is this what we are headed for in the West? Is our denial of reality so great? Is our denial of our finitude, and the planet's finitude, so strong that, having rolled back our boundaries so firmly over other people and species — having externalised our costs to such a degree — we have lost the ability to self-limit, and must wait for the limitations laid upon us by catastrophe and tragedy?

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

If we want to care for the living earth, then we cannot have it all. And in the struggle to have it all, we lose sight of the value of what we actually *do* have. Because actually, there is no liberation where there is no recognition of limitation. We have to get away from the notion that limitlessness makes people happy. Is ours a happy, relaxed, spontaneous society? We have a lot of liberty, but precious little liberation, and not a lot of creativity. Look at the creative bankruptcy of our government. We live in a spirituality of fear, driving people, and that inevitably shows up in our attitude to the physical — including the earth.

I get really mad when I hear people say that we have to get away from materialism and get back to spiritual values. The two are one. The problem is not that we're too materialistic. The problem is that we are not materialistic enough. We do not love things enough; we do not love bodies enough; we do not love the ordinary enough, *for their own sakes*, for their intrinsic worth, not for their extrinsic utility. We need to love the stoneness of stone and the wateriness of water, the fleshiness of flesh and the bloodiness of blood. But spiritual and

material ideologies of extrinsic worth feed on profound motivations of fear, on the avoidance of struggle, on the denial of pain and on the imprisonment of the imagination. These grows fat on the manipulation of alienated desire, drag people out of the dance of life which flows between a healthy self-love and a delighted other-love, and step in to fill the void. These substitute the narcotic effects of addictive lust for real, loving materialism.

*For the sake of life, for that life is dear, the lust after life
clings to it fast.*

*For the sake of life, for that life is fair, the lover of life
flings it broadcast.*

*The lover of life knows her labour divine, and therein is at
peace.*

*The lust after life craves a touch and a sign that the life shall
increase.*

*The lust after life in the chills of its lust claims a passport of death,
The lover of life sees the flame in our dust and the gift in our breath.*

George Meredith

We take care of what we value. If we don't take care of it to the best of our ability it means that, whatever we profess, we don't really value it. As people of faith, our conviction of the intrinsic worth of the creation flows from our conviction about the value of the Creator, about the goodness of God. The creation is an expression of the creative love of God, who has created it, redeemed it and sustains it. As part of that creation, we know *ourselves* also to be valuable and valued — not perfect, not flawless, but precious and loved as we are. Intrinsic worth, the interconnectedness of all things, the miracle of the ordinary are not just about the value of other people, other species, other forms — they are about *our* value. These convictions affirm us in our life and aspirations; they give us challenge and promise and

delight. It's a kind of symbiotic process — we know it with our friends, with our children, if we are fortunate, we know it with our work, this mutual regard and respect and care. It's not usually easy to tell, and it probably doesn't matter too much anyway, which came first — the valuing or the being valued. They reinforce one another.

I live in a friendly environment, in the West End of Glasgow. I once heard an ecologist describe it as a paradigm of green urban living; energy efficient, built-to-last tenement houses, good public transport, excellent local shops, schools, services, hospitals, leisure facilities are all integrated in a multi-cultural environment. And indeed, it's a great place to live. Community responsibility and ecological concern are high. People are always cleaning up the River Kelvin, campaigning about the park use, and the maintenance of public spaces; each street has its active residents' associations. People value their environment, so they take care of it. Their environment is friendly to them, so they are friendly back. They invest time, energy, talents and often money in it — all of which makes the environment even more friendly.

But what if your environment is not friendly? What if your environment is deeply and implacably hostile? What does this mean for notions of value and care? I want to speak about people whose experience is this. I want to speak about very poor people.

We in Scotland live in an extraordinarily beautiful country. As Scots, we have a myth of the land, by which we symbolise our geography. It's an attractive myth — it removes us from a racist identification of nationality with ethnicity — it may include people, but only in the sense of those for whom it is habitat, not race. But almost unbidden, the images that come, and certainly those reinforced in media, advertising and both high and popular culture, are either of countryside — mountains, lochs, rivers — or of the acceptable face of urban Scotland — Princes Street, the Burrell, etc. They are less likely

to be of Easterhouse, or post-industrial North Lanark, unless we come from these places. It's understandable that when we want to make a positive identification with something — the living earth, for example — unconsciously, we select the positive images of it.

But what if you live in a place which has, for whatever reason, a negative image. The pull towards excision, exclusion, is powerful. We begin to exclude the peripheral housing schemes, for example, from the image of the land that we love. It is not valuable. It is harder to care about. The people who live there know this. They're not stupid. The homeless people in Glasgow who were excluded from George Square during the city's 'Year of Culture' know this. Their environment did not value them. They were a blot on the landscape.

These communities are also the ones where people are politically marginalised and economically redundant, both as labour and as consumers in the market. Their neighbourhoods are considered to have no aesthetic or symbolic value — quite the reverse, they have a negative value. They are seen as a blot on the landscape of politics, of economics, of culture, of aesthetics. Their environment does not value them — to the point where their children may be suffering from malnutrition — not because their parents don't know how to feed them healthily, but because they have neither the money nor the local provision to do so. Talk about a hostile environment!

Perhaps we are approaching a time when one of the endangered species in Scotland is, quite literally, the children of the poor — as they are on the streets of Rio de Janeiro. In such an unfriendly environment, the extraordinary thing is that so many very poor people go on caring so much about their communities, and about the living earth. They know, far more acutely than most of us, what it means to struggle for ecological survival. They are at the sharp end of it. This

is true all across the world. It is the poorest who suffer most. It is also the poorest who are the most careful — who recycle rubbish, who don't drive cars, who drain the least energy resources, who are resourceful, who go on affirming the intrinsic worth of life — *because, given no extrinsic worth, they have to*; who know their interdependence, who every day find the glory in the grey.

As people of faith and goodwill, a primary strategy for caring for the living earth might profitably be one of working to get political and economic systems off the backs of the poor, of valuing their immense contribution as the frontline environmental activists, of learning in humility from their resourcefulness and their spirit. The extent to which we participate in creating an economic, political and cultural environment which is friendly to the poorest people in our society and our world will be the extent to which they in turn can befriend their own natural environment. To do this, we need to build new alliances, to sit lightly to our own agendas and desire to control outcomes, to rediscover the hidden resources and gifts for resistance and recreation in our own faith and culture. Above all, we need a radical re-evaluation.

'This could be our revolution, this could be our ordinary miracle, to love what is plentiful as much as what is scarce. '

Kathy Galloway,
Glasgow, February 1996

About the Author

Kathy Galloway is a theologian and writer. She is a member of the Iona Community, and editor of its magazine, *Coracle*. She lives in Glasgow, and works with local churches and groups, encouraging theology in the community. As well as liturgical material, which has been widely anthologised, she has published the following books:

Imagining the Gospels, (1987, 1994) *Love Burning Deep: Poems and Lyrics* (1993) *Struggles to Love* (1994) *Getting Personal: Sermons and Meditations* (1995), all published by SPCK, and has edited a collection of new poetry, *Pushing the Boat Out* (Wild Goose Publications, 1995).

Her new book, a collection of poems and prayers, *Talking to the Bones*, will be published by SPCK in July 1996.