Creatures in our Common Home

An Ecological Plea for Conversion

By Rachel Hughes

Last summer, I summited a mountain for the first time. I stood on top of Mount Eyak in Alaska, and I felt the stillness and the age of the mountains around me. No trumpets blared, no choirs sang, and I did not feel the Hollywood sense of triumph or conquering. Instead, I felt my own smallness, my own vulnerability. Here I was, on top of one relatively small mountain nestled between two older, larger ranges. As high as I had climbed, I was so tiny that someone standing at the mountain's base would be unlikely to see my body on its summit. And yet, I did not feel insignificant. I was a part of the landscape, and the mountains welcomed me with their indifference. For those few moments, I sensed a connection, a oneness with the world around me. It was the sensation of being a small piece of the puzzle, but a piece without which the puzzle is incomplete. This was the first time in my life that I had felt this overwhelming sense of invisible significance, of my intimate connection to the earth and her creatures. Opportunities like this have all but disappeared from our everyday experience, as most humans have become detached from our mother earth and desensitized to our intimate connection to her. Encased in apartments high above concrete streets, we forget that we depend on the earth for our air and our food. It's safe to assume that the average American worries more about prices at the supermarket than whether it rains enough for the crops to grow. We have separated ourselves from the earth, viewing interpersonal affairs such as economy and profits as things entirely outside of our relationship to the planet.

This separation mentality is not a recent development. In its search for the good life, Western philosophy has been traditionally anthropocentric, asking what distinguishes man from beast? Aristotle first sets human beings apart as rational animals, proposing that human souls "possess calculation and thought" (*De Anima* 415a.7-10). With the dawn of Enlightenment and the Scientific Revolution, we became fascinated by our ability to observe and manipulate the

earth, and humans championed this as proof of our otherness. René Descartes, for example, thought that practical philosophy, which grants us knowledge of "the force and the actions of fire, water, aire, the stars, the heavens, and all other bodies that surround us," would "render ourselves, as it were, masters and possessors of nature" (Descartes, 1998, p. 35). In 1785, Immanuel Kant attached moral value to rationality, claiming that only "rational nature exists as end in itself" (Kant, 2018, p. 41), while irrational natures can be used as means to an end. This legacy of "us" vs. "them" continues today in modern education. We think of ourselves as impartial observers of the natural world, watching "nature" like a child watches a snow globe. In research labs and science classes, we try to collect objective data, or apply treatments without bias, setting up a glass wall between us and the rest of the animals, plants, and soil.

In a way, we are different. As far as we can tell, we have the most advanced capacity to reason of all earthly creatures. We think critically, and bend natural elements to our need. But while this ability to consciously manipulate variables has led to medical breakthroughs and new ways of feeding people, it has also allowed us to lose sight of what unites us with the rest of the world: we are not our own makers. The pervasive image of the self-made man is a lie because human beings do not and cannot exist in a vacuum. As Pope Francis reminds us in *Laudato Si'*, "We have forgotten that we ourselves are dust made up of earth; our very bodies are made up of her elements, we breathe her air, and we receive life and refreshment from her waters" (Francis 2015, p. 3-4). Because our supermarkets make it seem like we depend only on the economy for food, on real estate for shelter, and on the human creation of social media for interpersonal connection, we forget that we, like our brother bird and our sister lynx, eat the food of the earth and bask in the sun's warmth. We, too, are creatures, and depend on our ecosystem for our continual being. Try as we might to shake the snow globe earth in front of us, the glass wall that

would separate “us” from “them” shatters because our creatureliness unites us with the mammals, reptiles, and even water and rocks of the earth. Any strict separation of human beings from our fellow creatures ignores our common ground of dependence.

Today, this separation poses a specific threat to the environment because it engenders an obliviousness to the consequences of our actions that we can no longer afford. In the midst of anthropogenic climate change and the sixth great extinction in the planet’s history, we find ourselves in a throw-away culture, marked with ignorance and/or carelessness about each of our individual contributions to a collective problem (Cooper, 1994). American consumers bring their groceries home in single use plastic bags and then throw them away, unconcerned that the bags will live on in the landfill long after we have died. A person can easily rationalize his or her specific decisions by saying that the actions of one individual will not have a large impact. Indeed, it is hard to argue that it is morally reprehensible for one person to use one plastic bag. It becomes a problem, however, when one person becomes 7.7 billion, and one plastic bag becomes one trillion (Kasidoni, Moustakas & Malamis, 2015). We act for our own individual, immediate good, ignoring our collective impact on other species or our own long-term interests.

This phenomenon is not unique to human beings. The individuals of any species, supplied with sufficient resources for reproduction and the elimination of threats, will take advantage of these circumstances for their own immediate gain. In the 1960s, Robert Paine famously described the effects of eliminating the limiting factors of a sea urchin population. He noted that human beings had effectively removed the population of sea otters from the ecosystem because of the high value of their pelts. The absence of this predator led to a population explosion in their sea urchin prey, who proceeded to devastate the kelp forests and eliminate important breeding habitat for fish. With their limiting factor removed and enough kelp to

sustain the initial population, the urchins abused their environment, and ate all of the kelp until there was nothing left. This devastated the entire ecosystem, including the urchin population, which crashed after they depleted their food source (Paine, 1980).

Like the sea urchins, human beings have experienced an extreme reduction in our own limiting factors. Due to advances in modern medicine, improved agricultural methods, and global trade among other things, we have greatly increased our survivorship and our life spans. The difference between us and the urchins, however, is that we have studied the sea urchins, and other systems like theirs. We have seen the havoc that the unchecked use of resources wreaks on others, and how one species can devastate entire ecosystems. Although neither population expansion nor resource utilization are morally reprehensible in and of themselves, we know the dangers of exponential population growth and the abuse of resources *because we have seen them before*. Our capacity to recognize our place in this pattern gives our decisions moral weight, and it is for this reason that abstraction of the human being from the realm of creation is so dangerous. Human beings are, as far as we can understand, different, but our difference carries with it not separation from creaturely nature but responsibility for our actions. We must remember that we, as creatures, are part of the global ecosystem and that our abuse of natural resources has repercussions for ourselves and for the rest of the world. Like any other creature, we have the capability to devastate our ecosystems, but unique to humans is the ability to recognize the pattern and predict its outcomes. Although our rationality has eliminated our primary limiting factors, in a way it should serve as its own limiting factor, safeguarding against our creaturely inclinations to act in our immediate, individual interests.

The question then becomes, is this earth worth protecting, or should we use available resources for our own immediate gain, knowing that this could lead to the destruction of many

other species and possibly our own demise? From a Christian perspective, it is not uncommon to say that God gave us "dominion over" the earth (Gen 1:28, NRSV), and her resources are ours to exploit. This was the view critiqued by Lynn White Jr. in 1967, when he condemned the Judeo-Christian tradition for propounding human beings' "limitless rule of creation" (White 1967, p. 1207). Another argument is that, from an economic perspective, the prioritization of job-creation and economic-growth are greater goods than protecting wilderness and wildlife. This, too, has its roots in the elevation of human persons over all other creation, prioritizing short-term, anthropocentric gains above the wellbeing of the planet as a whole.

A valuable, but insufficient answer to these arguments lies in the "ecosystem services" rationale. First cited by the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment in 2005, ecosystem services are the products, experiences, etc. that ecosystems provide for human beings (MEA, 2005). In this view, we should preserve the Amazon rainforest because its undiscovered plants may lead to future medical breakthroughs. This argument is appealing because it highlights how people benefit directly from the protection of natural areas, but at its core, it is also anthropocentric because it ties an ecosystem's value to its use. As soon as an area fails to be useful, we can dismiss it as a wasteland. If we protect the Amazon solely because it may provide us with services, and then we catalogue each and every plant and learn which are beneficial to us, why would we not cultivate those specific few, and forget about the fate of the forest as a whole?

Although it is unlikely that the Amazon will ever stop providing ecosystem services, we must recognize that the earth has an intrinsic value that extends beyond its use. Just because humans "can only perceive nature by 'human' senses, this does not mean that they cannot 'attribute' intrinsic value to it" (Kopnina, Washington, Taylor & Piccolo, 2018, p. 121). We can recognize the intrinsic value of something that is outside of our experience. For example, men

are capable of 'attributing' intrinsic value to women (Washington 2015). This in no way bestows value upon women because intrinsic value by definition exists without the necessity of recognition. It helps explain, however, how human beings might recognize the intrinsic value of things outside of our direct experience.

Superficially, interpersonal relationships may seem different than person-ecosystem relationships, but our creatureliness unites us both to other human beings and to the rest of the earth. The birds, the trees, our neighbors, and our very existence are all dependent. The glass wall that we would place around "everything else," separating "us" from "them," dissolves; human beings do not, and cannot, exist in a vacuum. We are made from atoms that have been circulating around the sun for a period of time many times longer than we can conceive. Our food is air modified by plants. It is impossible to deny our intimate connection to our brother tree and our sister grass, and this connection cannot but inspire awe and respect for our place in our ecosystem. "If we approach nature and the environment without this openness to awe and wonder, if we no longer speak the language of fraternity and beauty in our relationship with the world, our attitude will be that of masters, consumers, ruthless exploiters, unable to set limits on their immediate needs. By contrast, if we feel intimately united with all that exists, then sobriety and care will well up spontaneously" (Francis 2015, p. 11). If we are continually reminded of the beauty of our mother earth, and our place in it, we will begin to cultivate in ourselves a greater respect for our planet.

So, what can we do? How do we remind ourselves of our creatureliness? Perhaps the first step is to enter nature more frequently and more intentionally. In our experience of nature, we become more sensible of its value and its beauty. The white man who gets to know his black neighbor recognizes her value; we become sensible to our connection to the world by spending

time in it. Individual experience brings about what Pope Francis calls an "ecological conversion" (Francis 2015, p. 159), which fundamentally alters how we view our relationship with the rest of creation. Additionally, we can confront our habits of consumption with regulations concerning waste products, e.g., single-use plastics, that call attention to our interdependence with other creatures.

If we want to enact lasting change, however, and experience a true ecological conversion, we must reform our educational system. We must accompany our respect for human ingenuity with equal emphasis on our union with the natural world. The snow globe perspective of manipulating variables in a laboratory setting is responsible for advances in every scientific field, but we must recognize that we are also a part of the system. If we study Aristotle and Kant's theories about what separates "us" from "everything else," we must also read N. Scott Momaday and Louise Erdrich. In her essay "Big Grass," Erdrich recounts how her sense of self is woven into her experience of tall grass prairies. "All flesh is grass is not a depressing conceit to me. To see ourselves within our span as creatures capable of quiet and continual renewal gets me through those times when…[I] am lost to myself" (Erdrich, 1995, para. 10). Barry Lopez writes in *Arctic Dreams* (1986):

> A Yup'ik hunter on Saint Lawrence Island once told me that what traditional Eskimos fear most about us [European-Americans] is the extent of our power to alter the land…Eskimos, who sometimes see themselves as still not quite separate from the animal world, regard us as a kind of people whose separation may have become too complete. They call us,

> with a mixture of incredulity and apprehension, "the people who change nature" (p. 39).

We have much to learn from the wisdom of native peoples.

Human beings are, as far as we can tell, distinct. We are rational and can inhabit almost any environment on earth. And yet, this distinction is not a separation from our creatureliness. Instead of divorcing us from the rest of creation, our natures allow us to see the damage that we are causing, and place upon us a heightened moral responsibility for our actions. We have changed the ecology of the earth, and the changes that we have caused are dangerous, especially for the most vulnerable human populations. Caring for our human brothers and sisters is not so different from caring for our brother and sister bird, bear, and boulder; Pope Francis speaks of a social conversion as a part of our ecological conversion, "so as to hear *both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor*" (Francis 2015, p. 35). I add my voice to his, and to all those who call for the recognition of our role as creatures on this beautiful planet. Only by acknowledging our place within our ecosystem, by dismantling the conceptions of our separateness and superiority, and shattering the snow globe mentality, will we learn to live in harmony with our common home.

References

Aristotle. (2001). *The Basic Works of Aristotle*. R. McKeon (Ed.). Toronto, Canada: Random House, Inc.

Cooper, T. (1994). Beyond recycling: The longer life option. London, England: New Economics Foundation.

Descartes, R. (1998). *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*. (D.A. Cress, Trans.). (Original work published in 1637).

Erdrich, L. (1995). Big grass. *Heart of the Land*. Retrieved from https://sakailogin.nd.edu/access/content/group/FA19-SUS-20300-CX-01/Big%20Grass%20-%20Erdrich.pdf

Francis. (2015). *Laudato Si'* [Encyclical letter]. Retrieved from https://laudatosi.com/watch

Kant, I. (2018). *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*. A.W. Wood (Ed.). United States of America: Yale University Press. (Original work published in 1795)

Kasidoni, M., Moustakas, K., Malamis, D. (2015). The existing situation and challenges regarding the use of plastic carrier bags in Europe. *Waste Management and Research*, 33(5), 419-428. doi: 10.1177/0734242X15577858

Kopnina, H., Washington, H., Taylor, B., Piccolo, J.J. (2018). Anthropocentrism: more than just a misunderstood problem. *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics*, 31(1), 109-127. doi: 10.1007/s10806-018-9711-1

Lopez, B.H. (1986). *Arctic Dreams*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.

MEA. (2005). Millennium ecosystem assessment. Ecosystems and human well-being: Biodiversity Synthesis. Published by World Resources Institute, Washington, DC. http://www. millenniumassessment.org/en/index.html.

Paine, R.T. (1980). Food webs: linkage, interaction strength and community infrastructure. *Journal of Animal Ecology*, 49(3), 666-685. doi:10.2307/4220

Washington, H. (2015). *Demystifying sustainability: Towards real solutions*. London: Routledge.

White, L. (1967). The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis. *Science,* 155(3767), 1203-1207. Retrieved from www.jstor.org/stable/1720120