

The gospel in the Anthropocene:

Letters from a Quaker naturalist

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Note: Translations herein are by the author, unless otherwise noted. Translations from the Jewish Scriptures ("Old Testament") and the Apocrypha are from the Septuagint (abbr. LXX), the version most often quoted by the Greek Scriptures ("New Testament"), unless otherwise noted.

## A note to the reader

The ecological, social, and political crises of the Anthropocene are multitudinous and pervasive: They already are affecting every corner of the world, and at every level of organization, though in some cases the effects are barely perceptible.

Your response must grow authentically out of your situation, your worship, your love, and your learning, and according to your measure of preparation and of faithfulness. This book, therefore, is not a "how to" book. It is intended to support, encourage, and perhaps goad you as you pray, observe, and act — and learn from the doing. In writing, I have sought to do my work in such a way as to leave space for you to do your work. I am speaking as a Christian, to other Christians, not to make barriers against those of other faiths or none, but to help individual Christians to see that the challenges of the Anthropocene require us to live up to the gospel of love we profess to follow. But I mind William Penn's comment, based on the confidence that the Spirit we call Christ is at work in all times and places:

*The humble, meek, merciful and just are everywhere of one religion; and when death hath taken off the mask they will know one another, though the divers liveries they wear here make them strangers.<sup>1</sup>*

In what follows, you will find several elements which have grown integrally together. Each needs its own kind of time. You, reader, are similarly a compound — heart, soul, strength (body and action), and mind (knowing and willing). Try to bring each of these in as view-ports and also as sensors in your exploration of these materials.

1. Meditations. These, mostly vignettes from nature or the boundary between human life and the rest of nature, are not optional or superfluous to the message. Indeed, as I suggest below, they are theology, because they reveal God's truth in ways that words can only paraphrase.

Though they are written in words, they will, it is hoped, move beyond words. Sit with each of them first as an exercise of the imagination, in quietness and reverence of mind and body: give them time. Bring to bear all your senses as you enter the scene. Be also alert to responses from your heart (emotional self), your soul (your spiritual commitments), as well as your mind. As with meditation on the words of the Scriptures, try to see the scene from more than one point of view. Do not fret because you do not know all the details. Let ignorance, like reverence, beauty, fear, and delight, be one of the frontiers of wonder.

Make sure not to leave any of these times of meditation without seeking beauty and for love, for these are closely allied with knowing.

When some idea or image arises in your meditation that arrests your attention, stirs emotions or other reactions, sit with that for a while, until you feel released. So does *contemplatio* arise from *meditatio*.

This kind of seeing must be part of our spiritual practice in the Anthropocene, and you are surrounded by an infinite host of materials. So think of these as samples, to which you will add your own.

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<sup>1</sup> and Origen teaches "God is always giving a share of his Spirit to those who are able to partake of him." *Contra Celsum* vi : 70.

2. Drawings. The drawings are additional material for meditation and experience, helping to support the sense of immersion in the world.

3. Letters. I have written a series of letters to you, not a systematic treatise. The introductory letter explains the intent behind them all, and the reason I wrote letters. The "Aphoristic spine" or "Overview of main points," may help make the underlying framework clearer.

In the searching that these letters draw from, I have read things. Short notes about references on particular themes appear at the end; a full bibliography is available on request. In addition, there is an appendix briefly explaining the twin crises of climate change and biological extinctions.

4. Reflections. These are offered as seeds for reflection and discussion privately or in your community, as you seek and follow your own path forward, your own work.

## Overview, or an aphoristic spine: The gospel in a time of desolation

1. The Creation is incarnation; incarnation is revelation, and revelation comes as Nature, as the living Word experienced as the active Holy Spirit, and as words, in Scripture and other reports of encounter with the Holy One, no matter what the language, the faith, or the culture .
2. Life is process, including healing and growth, whether in individual organisms — in body or in spirit — or in communities.
3. Worship is founded on encounter with the divine Presence. In it, we can find an increasing integrity among heart (desire and love), soul, strength (will and action), and mind (will and understanding).
4. The Presence is the love active in creation, transformation, and reconciliation; and it is also the truth and justice that dwell with love; and the suffering that love knows.
5. Encounter with this Presence leads to knowledge, to grief, and the taste of joy, and through them to *metanoia*.
6. We are always acting, taking action, *Metanoia* leads to clearness and whole-heartedness in action.

7. For Christians: If we are in Christ, we are one body, a body with diverse members and always in process. So that each and all can stay attuned to the Presence, gospel community requires embodiment in forms and processes that facilitate that tuning and re-tuning.

8. God in Christ is reconciling the world to Godself, and all creation waits for our reawakening into this wholesome, holy work. We are to participate in heart, soul, strength, and mind. Wonder, and the reverence that follows it, are to be cultivated, as indispensable roots of Christian witness. Wonder, delight at the givenness of the world and each individual, are sources of love, and love sharpens the sight and casts out fear.

9. Reconciliation is a re-ordering of relationship, and a kind of healing. It is thus an intentional, loving, and truthful transformation of understanding and of valuing. Reconciliation with nature and with other humans requires also our own inward reconciliation. This inward work of Christ includes our daily living in the Cross.

10. In this time of desolation, hope *is in, and takes the shape of,* this work of reconciliation. In this choosing of life, we receive power to act or to wait, to forgive and be forgiven, to mourn truthfully, and to discern the springs of joy. How and what we worship give formation for our actions on behalf of life, and bread for the journey. In true worship we can feel the common life that all humans, and all creatures, share, and learn how we may act in love to support that life.



## Meditation<sup>2</sup>: Devil's Hole Pupfish

You move across a semi-arid landscape, sparsely vegetated, punctuated by rocky hills and outcrops. You pull off the road at a sign, and then climb up to an outcrop through warm March mid-day sun, till you reach a simple metal platform, from which you can look down into a cleft in the rocks. There's water a few yards below, much of it shadowed by the steep walls of the cleft. Sunlight happens to fall on a rock shelf that lies about a foot below the surface, about 3 yards wide by 5 yards long; beyond the edge of the shelf the still water is black, the depth unguessable.

On the shelf, there is green algae fuzz, and a few dozen small blue fish, perhaps an inch in length. They do not dart and school, like some little fish do in the sun, but each moves about, foraging for tiny things according to its own preference. Sometimes a fish swims off the rock, and over the depths, but it does not dive, nor stay there long, soon returning to the shelf and the sun.

You are seeing at a glance the entire population of the Devil's Hole pupfish. For them, the landscape, the subterranean water bodies, and the whole supporting earth are focused on the fluctuating conditions of water and sun as experienced on that 15 square yards of rock, suspended over an inhospitable abyss.

Since you do not cast a shadow on their shelf, you don't exist for the pupfish. Though we are ignorant about fishes' mental powers, it is likely that their future, the time beyond sundown, casts no shadow on them, either.

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<sup>2</sup> See appendix N for some suggestions about how to use these meditations

## 1. An introductory letter

Dear friend,

We have entered a time when global warming, the destruction of biological diversity, and other ecological crises are intensifying (and mutually reinforcing) in ways that will make the earth we have always known increasingly hostile to human society and human life. Even though many refuse to accept what's happening, climate anxiety, even despair, are becoming widespread, and young people are especially affected. There is still time to avoid the worst futures, but even the less dire future will be transformational, dismaying, and grievous.

How can we live in this era, the Anthropocene, in durable compassion, prompt in doing well, steady in truth-telling, patient in disorientation or desolation, willing to serve, to wait, to suffer, and to enact mercy? How shall we seek and receive, childlike, what we need to grow towards liberation, and become ever clearer (to ourselves and others) where our hope is founded; ever more aware of and grateful for our place in Creation, and harmony with the Creator?<sup>3</sup> How shall we — you and I — remain spiritually tender in the years that are coming towards us? How shall each of us recognize what action is next called for from us, and how does our acting — and our *way* of acting — draw from and enrich our worship?

We humans are as subject to the laws of nature as any slime-mold, fish, or oak-tree; yet we have fashioned cultural tools that, combined with our great numbers, make us a world-shaping force. Unlike the jet-stream or the landscaping beaver, we know and see in part what we do, and how we choose, and what the consequences may be. In our knowing and

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<sup>3</sup> I use "Creator" and "Creation" to indicate the world as experienced in prayer, poetry, or other states of wonder: direct encounter, with some of its transformations.

choosing, we can feel grief, judgment, and remorse. These can embitter and dishearten, to the point that simple survival in a harsh competition becomes the sole imaginable prize.

The desolation of the Anthropocene is harder to bear as we come to see how we humans have inflicted it on ourselves and others of our kind; across several centuries, we have prepared a different and less welcoming world for future generations of humans and other species, most of which remain unknown. Our culture, despite clear opportunities to take a different path, has helped ensure fear and loss for millions now alive, and millions more to come. If we live in the arrogance of cultural amnesia which is a principal product of our economic system, we will see nothing instructive in wisdom, and in the resources that human experience and memory can offer for times of desolation.

I ask myself, and you: Does your worship, your spiritual practice, equip you to see truths like this, to accept the failure of conventions and systems that have been foundations of your world view? Does it support you in a time of catastrophe to respond reverently, constructively, advisedly, with an enlarged charity? We shall have ever more need of such love!

Though every witness or story teller 'sees' meaning-rich events in their own way, we humans have enough in common that we enjoy or benefit from hearing or seeing what others make of things.

This at least in part is why I am writing to you: I feel compelled to make something out of my experience of the early Anthropocene, in case it may be of help to others. This event, still unfolding and gathering momentum, is so comprehensive and intense, so full of unrealized meanings, as to challenge our minds, our emotions, and our ethics or morality — our decisions and judgments about our doings and our relationships, now and in future. Beyond this, the

Anthropocene and its implications present a disturbing spiritual challenge — and, I have come to believe, a very great spiritual opportunity.

These letters are a report from my response to this challenge. They do not constitute a treatise, but reflect my here-and-there search for the opportunity. I did not seek to create a "how-to" manual, with recommendations for specific actions to take. Rather, as action is urgent, I am concerned to understand how recognizing our calling, and taking action, are today inseparable from becoming a more faithful follower and companion of Christ, alive and teaching among us.

Perhaps if I explain my title you can get a glimpse of me as a companion, my point of view and my intent.

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*The Anthropocene.* By the middle of the 20th century, human activities began to leave a distinctive signature in the geologic record. The atomic bombs that devastated Hiroshima and Nagasaki opened this new epoch by initiating our ever-growing radioactive signal. As the century went on, however, the sheer number of individuals, the nature and scale of our environmental impacts, altered almost every aspect of earth's systems. We have worked lasting (and continuing) changes to the land, to atmospheric chemistry, and the distribution and abundance of species. As our use of fossil fuels and of the land altered the earth's temperature regime, the durable ice on seas and land began its march towards effective extinction, weather patterns have begun to change radically; so also the chemistry of oceans and of fresh water.

As I am writing these letters, people on the whole have not changed their behaviors in ways that could prevent the world that supports us from becoming far less hospitable to *Homo sapiens* and many other species that it has been for all of human history so far. It is true that many individuals understand what's happening, and are working to respond, but large-scale action is so far wanting. After all, "behavior" includes politics and policy, commerce and agriculture, and all the other organized activities whose designs include the protection of participants from individual responsibility for negative effects that might be caused (note the use of the verbal voice that might be called "the impersonal of avoided culpability" so common in our public discourse). We have powers now that we cannot really control, and that influence overwhelming natural processes that we hardly understand, like a child that learns to use a match, a sliver of wood that makes a tiny fire, then applies it to light a fuse that will eventually ignite dynamite. We have only a dim idea of what the next few centuries will be like, but science tells us that we have ruled out most comfortable scenarios, and it is very likely that we stand at the dawn of an epoch of upheaval, instability, and impoverishment.

*A Naturalist.* Just as a good cook is led by the flavors, textures, and meaning of food to take an informed interest in their craft, so a naturalist, out of delight and curiosity pays increasingly informed attention to organisms and the lands or seas they inhabit. With this attention, this allowing oneself to be involved, come emotional and spiritual costs. As Aldo Leopold wrote:

One of the penalties of an ecological education is that one lives alone in a world of wounds. Much of the damage inflicted on land is quite invisible to laymen. An ecologist must either harden his

shell and make believe that the consequences of science are none of his business, or he must be the doctor who sees the marks of death in a community that believes itself well and does not want to be told otherwise.<sup>4</sup>

I can tell you from my own experience: A naturalist, watching and loving the natural world, holds this anguish alongside the deep, renewing experience that comes from wonder and an engaged curiosity. A naturalist knows, indeed, the complexity of the world, the opening flower, the darting flight of bird and dragonfly, the wonderful contrivances of life and the grandeur of landscapes and heavens — and the dying prey, consumption, decay, the processes of generation and regeneration.

It is part of the naturalist's practice, also, to become familiar with unknowing, with waiting, with anomaly, with being wrong, and these are among the tools needed to riddle through the book of nature.

*The Gospel.* Many who have some awareness of the earth — farmer fisher bird-watcher hiker hunter landscape-painter gardener — are sharing in the dismay, and feeling the wounds in the world. Treebeard speaks for them, for us, when he says, as he takes leave of two representatives of wisdom, , "...the world is changing: I feel it in the water, I feel it in the earth, and I smell it in the air."<sup>5</sup> The wounds and the fear of what is coming are the more bitter in the face of human indifference, misguidedness, and evil that are shaping the dawning epoch. Grief and rage are already abundant fruits of these times, and the burdens are falling most

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<sup>4</sup> *Round River.* New York: Oxford Univ. Press 1993, pg. 165.

<sup>5</sup> In JRR Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, "Many partings."

heavily on the powerless, and on those whose power is not yet come — our children and grandchildren.

To mitigate the worst versions of the Anthropocene will require massive changes from us willy-nilly — changes in expectations, self-image and values, as well as ways of life. But the challenge of living with the world we have reshaped (in our own image?) will require of us resources of mind, emotion, will and orientation. Here is where "gospel" enters the picture.

Now, I know that some people, perhaps including you, will have been put off at first by the word "gospel" in my title, because you belong to another faith community, or to none. Others may take reassurance from it, at least at first; but the gospel is not a comfortable matter, though comfort can be found in it. Both the comfort and the discomfort stem from the demanding constraint of love, the love whose momentum is towards wholeness, hoping "to outlive all wrath and contention, and to weary out all exaltation and cruelty, or whatever is of a nature contrary to itself."<sup>6</sup> It is a love that cannot exist apart from truth, and from courage. It means a recognition of woundedness, of failures and of sin, as well as a growing experience of healing and power.

For the gospel is not a *thing*, but a living process, a workshop, a place — God working within us for our liberation, so that we are more and more available to that Spirit whose effects are joy, courage, peace, truth, and the heart and works of compassion. It is the continuing work of creation, and therefore before and beyond any expression in words.

Through it, we come to understand that our own wholeness is not separate from the wholeness of the world. Just as the Anthropocene is an epoch that has to do with the state of the whole earth, not just the human part, so we must recognize that our own wholeness or

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<sup>6</sup> James Nayler *Works* vol 4, pg. 382

liberation is connected with that of the systems we depend on, and have been reshaping. To put it another way, we now need to recognize that Christ's business is not now, and never has been, solely focused on human affairs, (nor only on those who call themselves Christians). The Incarnation gave the cosmic Lord a human face, but God did not thereby cease being Sustainer of Creation.

This realization entered Christian thought and piety from the beginning of the movement, and a central element of Christian apostasy has been the denial of this understanding. Here and there, from time to time, little groups or individual souls have been rooted in that broader understanding, but doctrine and worship have focused almost entirely on the "divine-human" relationship.

Now is the time to reclaim the early insight, the felt knowledge, that the work of Christ in *me, or you*, so intimate and individual, is continuous with the power that created and sustains the cosmos. In so doing we can (must) learn to live in the spirit of love and justice that Christians call the spirit of Christ, in the Anthropocene, which otherwise seems more and more to be an insuperable challenge, for that Spirit is against despair and indifference, or wrath and contention.

*A Quaker.* I am not writing about Quakerism, but as a Quaker I will, from time to time, draw out some discoveries from Quakerism's traditional interpretation of Christian faithfulness, which has been described as "ethical group mysticism," and also as a kind of "nonverbal Christianity." It has led us to some specific practices and understandings of worship and its consequences in community and action that I believe offer resources to these times. Actually,



some of what I write will be as unfamiliar to many Quaker readers as to nonQuakers, and this, I think, is a good thing, if surprise encourages renewal.

Further, if anything I write can encourage open dialogue among groups, or within groups (such as churches or Friends meetings); and if that dialogue opens any one towards a way of living more truthfully, justly, and hopefully in the Anthropocene, I will be very grateful.

Christianity in many forms, including Quakerism, has bred disunity within itself, with other humans, and with the earth; and in its perversions of the gospel has perpetrated great evils. It has thus often shown itself to be anti-Christ. Yet that despised and rejected One continues to call us to acknowledge our derelictions, and come back to our right mind. It is still not too late.

*... so far as [our gracious Creator's] love influences our minds, so far we become interested in his workmanship and feel a desire to take hold of every opportunity to lessen the distresses of the afflicted and increase the happiness of the creation. Here we have a prospect of one common interest from which our own is inseparable — that to turn all the treasures we possess into the channel of universal love becomes the business of our lives. John Woolman<sup>7</sup>*

**Reflection.** What are you afraid of, when you think of the next 50 years? For what do you grieve? How does your worship relate to these fears and griefs? Does your worship, your spiritual practice, equip you to see truths like this, to accept the failure of conventions and systems that have been foundations of your world view? Does it support you in a time of catastrophe to respond reverently, constructively, advisedly, with an enlarged charity?

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<sup>7</sup> *A Plea for the Poor.* in Moulton, P.P. *Journal and Major Essays of John Woolman*, OUP 1971 . pg. 241.