Search For A Common Language

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Preliminary Reflections on Matters Environmental

Carolyn Tanner Irish

Carolyn Tanner Irish returned to her native state in 1996, having been elected as bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Utah. She was the fourth woman in the United States, and sixth in the worldwide Anglican Communion to lead a diocese. She thinks of her return in the terms described by the poet T. S. Eliot:

We shall not cease from exploration
and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive
where we started
and know the place for the first time.

“Utah has been both fulcrum and culmination in my spiritual journey,” she said. “There is a special sense of belonging for me here—both historically, as my ancestors were part of settling this territory, and in terms of landscape or place.”

Bishop Irish studied philosophy at Stanford University, the University of Michigan, and Oxford University. After teaching some years in Washington D.C., she received her master of divinity degree from the Virginia Theological Seminary, the largest Anglican seminary in the world. Ordained first as deacon and then as priest, she served congregations in Washington, Virginia, and Michigan and was the first woman to serve as an archdeacon in the United States. Bishop Irish has spoken and written extensively on the theology of creation, and the moral implications of its care.

I.

I am delighted to be here and honored to be asked, once again, to participate in a Tanner Symposium. I do so not only as the daughter of one of its principal benefactors but also because of my own deep concern for and commitment to matters environmental. That is my own catchall phrase: matters environmental. It includes just about everything, doesn’t it?
I wondered how I might introduce our theme, given that it has no clear boundaries. I begin, as so often, with the title: “The Search for a Common Language: Environmental Writing and Education.” Titles are important because they give us the governing theme or the rubric around which we gather. In this case, I am not altogether clear about the search part of the title—the search for a common language. As broad and pervasive as our subject is, I’m not sure quite what a common language would look like, actually, if we found it. What the title does suggest is that we already share a common interest and concern about the environment, arising from our thoughts and feelings, experience and disciplines, and from an aesthetic appreciation and other spiritual feelings such as thanksgiving, too. So the convivial discussion in this symposium invites us to bring together richly diverse ways of encountering and considering this world.

We may be seeking a more inclusive appreciation of the many ways we may address our interests and concerns through the disciplines of literature, science, economics, sociology, geopolitics, ethics, and religion, to name just a few. Whether that counts as a common language remains to be seen. But the common referent of our work—the environment, the natural world, creation, or whatever we choose to call it—that is the crucial thing. I tend to think that it is this conversation among a whole variety of languages and disciplines that is the most valuable to us rather than a common language transcending them all.

One of my dad’s favorite phrases was “walking around something.” If he had something on his mind, he’d often say, “Come and walk around this with me for a little while.” So I had that image of us here, gathered to walk around this wonderful theme—to let it give us its own methodology—its own surprises and ways of connecting. For besides our common interests and concerns, we also share the fact and the experience of being an integral part of the environment, the natural world, creation; we are not simply independent or objective observers, but we are subjects, objects, and agents within this world.

II.

Let me now invite your attention to two general and prelinguistic kinds of human experience, which I think have a bearing on how we encounter the world and are learning to encounter it in new ways. This approach may even be a bit simplistic, but it gets us started, and I like starting with experience, even raw experience, rather than verbal assumptions or premises. The first kind I’m going to call the experience of wonder.

Wonder happens in a vast range of times and places: lying under the stars at night; giving birth to a fully formed and living baby; or, as a gardener, say, noticing the connection between light and the growth of
plants, or the connection between the death of plants and good soil. Often our wonder is a kind of awe, simply that something is the case, even that we exist. This perception may form the basis of what we later call a religious or spiritual experience.

I recall once hiking across a mountain meadow in England—actually it was a moor; it was untilled ground, but it was a meadow because amazing little flowers were all about. There were no roads, no telephone poles, no signs of people or civilization anywhere. I would expect that in the American West, but it surprised me to find it in England! And as I thought about that, I was suddenly overcome with amazement and delight—that I was there and alive, part of that setting for even an hour or two. I actually sat down and cried for a while, and then (much to my surprise) I thanked God. Even though I was in a period of rabid atheism in my life, I felt a need to give thanks, and it didn’t seem quite right to thank anyone else. Such an experience of wonder and appreciation often creates a sense of peace or at-one-ment with the divine.

It may also give rise to aesthetic expression: to the desire to capture, record, or even witness the experience of a giftlike encounter with the world. We do that through writing and painting, through poetry and storytelling, music and photography. All of us have been beneficiaries of such aesthetic responses, and I believe we’ll hear some examples later in this symposium.

Finally, though, the experience of wonder may produce a desire to figure things out, to understand natural processes, even to control them or use them, which is sometimes good. Surely much of science and applied science must have begun in wonder, in curiosity about the how of things or the why (in the sense of cause and effect). Thus, wonder is a seminal human experience as well as the basis of many, varied responses to the mystery of our existence on this earth.

Another such elemental experience is what I’m going to call, for want of a better word, the experience of judgment. This is a feeling—perhaps equally as powerful as wonder at times—that we are responsible for much of the damage, degradation, and, yes, desecration of our environment, the natural world, God’s creation—its waters, atmosphere, soil, forests, and other creatures. And again, I offer an example of this experience from my own life, cautious, as I do so, that judgment is a word nobody likes to hear.

About fifteen years ago, I was on my way to church one ordinary Sunday morning. I had the sermon all prepared, the liturgy and program in hand. As I left home I glanced at the front page of the Detroit News, which pictured a large number of dead dolphins washed up on a beach somewhere. I felt devastated, absolutely devastated. I had no specific knowledge about how they had died—no one did at that time. But I nonetheless sensed that we human beings had had something to do with it. I didn’t want to preach
good news that morning at church; I didn’t want to celebrate. Rather, I felt pain, and anger, grief, guilt, sorrow, repentance, lamentation—all of those ways the sense of judgment comes to us. I was impassioned and a bit garbled in the pulpit that day. But the congregation knew exactly what I was talking about, and they understood why I felt as I did.

This experience of judgment seems to be relatively common to many in our generation; at least in this country, many of us have had a dead dolphin or “silent spring” kind of experience, even if we don’t necessarily think of it as judgment. Again, a variety of responses may follow: thinking that it is a result of our ignorance, we want to master the problem and fix it; thinking that it’s an effect of the greed and overconsumption in our culture, we want to withdraw from it, to “live simply and lightly on the earth,” as the Quakers and Native Americans say; thinking it a consequence of unregulated individualism in our society, we may press for changes in public policy.

But no matter how we think of it or act on it, it is our moral sensibilities that have come to life here. And this is a part of this whole conference as well, and why I use the word judgment. The sense of environmental responsibility has been most painfully poignant in our generation. It is not that moral sensibilities were absent earlier in the twentieth century, but they were focused on wars, economic depressions, various ideological battles, and other social issues. When it comes to matters environmental, it seems to me that both science and religion were “asleep on their watch” during the first two-thirds of the twentieth century. Individual thinkers and writers woke us up and got us engaged in all this. I’m thinking now of people like Rachel Carson, Barry Commoner, Wendell Berry—you can name others—and you know what that feeling of waking up is like. Indeed, it has only been in these last few years that the words environment and ecology have come to signify what they do to us today.

So learning to live more responsibly on this planet; the theologian Sally McFague offers three “house rules”: “take only your share, clean up after yourself, and leave the place in good repair for others.” Easily said. How do we get there? And how do we get other people there?

I’m aware that fear is a very powerful incentive, and it is rapidly becoming a part of this whole issue in our lives. Tragedy and disaster are also powerful, as we all know. But to me the energies that fear and pain unleash are often passing. We forget them. Also they sometimes lead us to just hunker down and take care of ourselves. I’m not sure they leave us wiser—and that really is what we’re seeking at this conference, a kind of wisdom that is beyond just information or data. So I look to positive motivations, the spirit of thanksgiving, dedication, hope. I find myself thinking often of this earth and my life on it as a gift. And, for me, that evokes more lasting motivations and responses.
We are not apart from this world. We are not masters of it, as we so often think of ourselves. And guess what: we’re not exactly stewards, either. That is the religious term for much of what this care and responsibility are about, but I remember Russell Train saying one time to a group of us who were on a committee in Washington, “I don’t know why you keep wanting to talk about stewardship. It seems to me that creation was doing really well until the stewards came along.” So I always have to think about that when I use the word. In any case, we are not apart from this world, nor are we simply masters or stewards—but we are response-able creatures. We have a capacity for response and maybe for care, for foresight, for planning. And so, being response-able, we can also be accountable, responsible.

III.

Let me now point out just one or two cautions about our search for a common language. I don’t think there’s much danger of them in this program, but I mention them because sometimes when we seek commonality in something, we ignore certain diversities or polarities or tensions that we actually need. These exist between what is particular and what is general, what is personal and what is communal, what is wild and what is cultural. Trying to rid ourselves of the tensions, paradoxes, or conflicts that these opposing realities present is not actually a great help because it (a) encourages denial and pretense, and (b) discourages creativity and imagination of the kind that such tensions often lead us to discover if we’re patient. The fact is that we share a living world—a living world—where parts and places and processes change constantly, generation after generation. So I hope we will always be open to the surprise and mystery in that, even as we also value our common knowledge and expertise.

Also I think we should maintain a little modesty and humility in our endeavors. Annie Dillard recalls the comment of an old black farm woman, who said to her, “Seem like we just set down here. Don’t any of us know why.” I find a certain truth and goodness in the humility of that remark. It comes back to me frequently because I often get the big “why” questions on my doorstep, as in “Why is there suffering? What is the purpose of my life?” Don’t any of us know why. Humility can abide, even with all the sophistication of our various disciplines. Wendell Berry commented to the effect that, “we act on the basis of our knowledge but must also learn to act on the basis of our ignorance, that is, what we don’t know.” It may be that only environmentalists understand what he meant, but that only highlights the wisdom of the remark.

Thank you. Let the conversation begin!
The Poets

Ken Brewer is professor emeritus at Utah State University, where he won several teaching awards. He is the current poet laureate for the state of Utah. Among his many books of poetry are The Place in Between, Lake’s Edge, Hoping for All, Dreading Nothing, To Remember What Is Lost, The Collected Poems of Mongrel, Round Again, Sum of Accidents, and Places, Shadows, Dancing People. His poems are interspersed throughout this book between other contributions.

Keith Wilson, a native New Mexico writer, is professor emeritus at the University of New Mexico. His books include Graves Registry, Homestead, Bosque Redondo: The Encircled Grove, Desert Cenote, While Dancing Feet Shatter the Earth, and Stone Roses. Forthcoming are To the Cause of Rite: A Compendium and Collected Poems of Keith Wilson. His poems begin on page 164.