

ENDURING LANDSCAPES OF THE SPIRIT

A REFLECTION

BY THE VERY REV. CANON HERBERT O'DRISCOLL

ON THE OPENING OF

THE STAR OF THE SEA CENTRE

FOR SPIRITUAL LIVING AND PRACTICE

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A very long time ago, at least 4000 years ago, a young man ran away from home. He did so because he had good reason to believe that his twin brother might kill him.

Jacob – that was the youth's name – had deceived his blind father. Pretending to be Esau, his own twin, he accepted from his father a blessing. In that long-ago world, that paternal blessing could be given only once. In this case it belonged to Esau as the first-born twin. Confronted by Esau, Jacob realized the enormity of what he had done. He realized his life was in danger. So he ran away.

On his first night in the desert, Jacob has a dream. In the dream, he sees a ladder between earth and heaven. Up and down the ladder, shining beings move between the two worlds.

Jacob wakes and cries:

VOICE:

“Surely God is in this place and this is the gate of heaven.”

Four thousand years later, Carl Jung will give us a word to describe such dreams. He will call them archetypes. They are not individual dreams, so much as universal dreams.

Jacob's dream tells us something about our human condition: that the world of materiality and the world of spirituality are not just linked, not just interconnected. They are interwoven, interpenetrated. Remember those shining beings going both up and down in Jacob's dream?

**Staying in the dream, what might the rungs of this ladder be?
I suggest that they are all those elements in human
consciousness that make us human.**

**A very partial list might include: nature; friendship; beauty;
wonder; sorrow; joy; wisdom; goodness; sexuality; art;
suffering; music; relationships; love. These are the things that
make it possible for us – sometimes at great cost – to have
deeply spiritual experiences in our physical lives.**

**You see – we humans are creatures of both materiality and
spirituality. That has been the natural understanding of who and
what we are ever since we became human. And it is still the
understanding of the vast majority of humanity. We hear Pierre
Teilhard de Chardin, a spiritual giant of our own time, telling us:**

VOICE:

***“We are not human beings on a spiritual journey; we are spiritual
beings on a human journey.”***

**This understanding of our human journey through time I call:
“The Enduring Landscape.”**

[PAUSE]

However, about 500 years ago – a very short time in the long span of human experience, and only in a small area of the world usually referred to as the West – some people came to a different understanding of the human situation. It was a shift that would, for both good and ill, radically change the whole world. That change of direction would bring into being Western culture as we have known it. In terms of our image of a landscape, this was a choosing of a different path, a different landscape.

We have names for this half millennium. From the late 17th Century, we celebrated its first exciting discoveries as “The Enlightenment.” We named the resulting new branches of human endeavour, “The Sciences.” When we applied some of those wonderful sciences, they created something we called “The Industrial Revolution.” Then we found a name for the society that we had begun to form. Of course, it was already forming us. Indeed, for good and for ill, it would form much of the contemporary world. We called it “Modernity.” And then, to characterize our new understanding of our human situation, we chose a very old word. We defined the context of human life and experience as “Secular.”

From the late 1600’s to the middle of the 20th Century, the idea of reality as merely secular was deeply contested by many voices. But then, beginning in the 1960’s, assumptions and attitudes we had long taken for granted began to be challenged in a much deeper way, and in almost every aspect of life. We began to realize that the period we thought of as the Enlightenment was changing. We weren’t sure exactly how or why, but there was no denying it was changing. So we began to use a groping term for the second half of the last century. We began to speak of the culture becoming “Postmodern.” [PAUSE]

That brings us to our own small archipelago of islands in the Salish Sea, and to this occasion. We are still not sure what is going to come of this postmodern period, but I suggest that we are increasingly sure of one big thing.

That one big thing is this: In spite of the Enlightenment and its Industrial Revolution giving us some wonderful things that we would not wish to lose, it is becoming more and more clear that the price we and our children and grandchildren are beginning to pay for them is chillingly high. Many initiatives are forming in response to that realization. One such response is this modest venture we are launching here today: the Star of the Sea Centre for Spiritual Living and Practice.

[PAUSE]

FROM COPERNICUS' BEDSIDE TO NEWTON'S APPLE

I think it's worth our while to trace the path of change in the cultural journey of the West from the first quarter of the 16th century to the middle of the 20th century. First, let's look at four great conceptual leaps taken from the mid 16th to the late 17th century, basically the first century of this period.

#1: Sometime in the year 1543, a Canon of the Cathedral in Cracow in Poland lay dying. His name was Nicholas Copernicus. Hours before his death, someone put into his hands a small book he had written a few years previously. Copernicus had not dared to allow it to be published, because he knew he would be condemned by the church, and probably burned for heresy.

The title of the small book in his dying hands was *On the Movement of the Heavenly Bodies*. What it showed would change forever the way humanity understands its place in the universe. Put at its most devastatingly simple, the Sun does not revolve around the earth. The truth is that the Earth revolves around the Sun.

#2: Sixty years later, a brilliant mind living north of Rome heard from a friend in Holland of an invention that intrigued him. It involved arranging various pieces of glass to bring distant objects near. In 1609, Galileo got his hands on this invention, and for the first time humanity saw the moons of Jupiter. For this, Galileo almost lost his life to an all-powerful church.

#3: In 1637, about five years before Galileo died, a brilliant young French mathematician and philosopher named Rene Descartes published a book entitled *A Discourse on Reason*. In its introduction, he insisted that the basis of all philosophy is thinking based on reason, observation and experimentation.

Our fourth and last set of examples takes us across the English Channel. A quarter-century after Descartes' book, the Royal Society was founded in London in 1662. Another quarter-century after that, in Cambridge in 1687, Isaac Newton published his great work entitled *The Principles of Mathematics*.

It's important to remember that all of these great breakthroughs were made against a backdrop of the most vicious wars in the history of Europe to that time: the thirty-year long wars of religion between the old Catholic tradition of Rome and the new Protestantism of northern Europe, from 1618 to 1648. *[PAUSE]*

Now, let's consider some of the consequences of these scientific breakthroughs, and of the religious conflicts that raged alongside them. We see a process of Western thought steadily withdrawing itself from the enveloping womb of traditional religion – in this case, of course, Christianity.

- As early as the Renaissance, the great commercial empires of the Italian cities insist that the brutal ethical struggles they engage in as they build their commercial empires cannot be reconciled with the world of the Catholic Mass.
- In the 17th century, political life decides that if it wishes to release itself from religious warfare, it must become a realm of rational thought rather than of religious dogma.
- Succeeding centuries see this insistence on rational thought and pragmatic, fact-based experimentation continuing in the growth of the sciences, and later of medicine.
- By the 20th Century, all aspects of human life in the West are regarded as secular rather than sacred. The transformation of Western thought is complete. No longer is Creation understood as emanating from a divine source that is forever a mystery. It can now be approached as a vast, magnificent mechanism, potentially comprehensible to human thought and calculation.

To hear what a huge difference this made to human self-understanding, we have only to listen to two reflections on the nature of our humanity: one written nearly two millennia before the Enlightenment, and the other as that Enlightenment was beginning. First, the great poet of Judaism, the Psalmist:

VOICE:

When I consider the heavens, even the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained; what is man that thou art mindful of him, and the Son of Man that thou visitest him?"

Now, another familiar voice. Sixty years after Copernicus published his book on *The Movements of the Heavenly Bodies*, and six years before Galileo looked into his telescope, Shakespeare gives these words to his character Hamlet:

VOICE:

*"What a piece of work is Man.
How noble in reason, how infinite in faculty;
In form and moving, how express and admirable;
In action, how like a angel:
In apprehension, how like a god . . ."*

To express all this in the archetypal images of Jacob's ladder, we might put it this way: in the West, we had decided three transformative things. Some decided that we did not need the ladder anymore. Others decided that the ladder was an illusion and had never really existed. And still others decided that we could make a better ladder ourselves.

The irony is that we did, indeed, build a wondrous Western construct – not so much a ladder as a highway. And while it did not take us to heaven, it took the West into every part of the world, and gave it immense power and influence. For many years, the West became the wonder of the rest of the world – sometimes to the great benefit of those whose lives were affected, but at other times at great cost to them.

I think that word “cost” is significant as we look at the world we have now. I am a member of the generation whose life has been lived in the decades following the First World War until now; a generation shaped by the world both before the sixties and after them. Our generation bridges from modernity to postmodernity; and having been shaped by those experiences, I find the word “cost” helps me to understand what I think we have been struggling with since the sixties, up to the present day.

We have been made to realize the cost of the centuries we call “Modernity.” We are very much aware of the powers Modernity has bestowed on us: the marvels it enables us to achieve, from medicine to space exploration. Things seemingly miraculous to our forbears all too easily become mundane to us.

Yet we are also aware of an enormous cost – whether we are speaking of the alienation among peoples in society; the gap between generations; the difficulty for young people to find meaning and purpose in life . . . or if we are thinking of the seemingly intractable economic inequality that is ravaging the fabric of society . . . or the ecological despair over our troubled relationship with the planet that is our only home. In all of these things, we are realizing a formidable cost.

To me, this is the overriding reason why you and I are gathered here today. Hence also the growing spiritual quest of our time.

[PAUSE]

LAMENT, QUESTIONING, PROTEST

There is a drama that is played out again and again in our media. It has become very familiar. Somewhere, there are people in hard hats laying a pipeline. Not far away, people with placards are shouting their protest against that same pipeline. The scene doesn't have to include a pipeline. It can be a high-rise building, a hydroelectric dam, any technical construct.

Protest and questioning take many forms. Organizations will form such as Greenpeace, or the Green Party. There will be an article or an address by a David Suzuki or an Elizabeth May. Countless others, of course, but I name only familiar examples.

We can think of the period of the Industrial Revolution in much the same terms. The huge, relentless changes taking place in the world as people knew it were met by much determined protest and questioning.

Depending on your attitude to massive technological change, consider how exciting or appalling it must have been to read the *Times* of London in the course of a single decade: the 1860's.

- **In 1860: The first internal combustion engine appears.**
- **In 1862: R. J. Gatling invents the ten-barreled gun named after him, a weapon that will mow down the soldiers of many countries like falling wheat.**
- **In 1863: The National Academy of the Sciences opens in Washington, DC. That same year, the first steel furnace is built in France, and the first railroad is laid in New Zealand.**
- **In 1865: The first Atlantic cable is completed. Joseph Lister conducts the first antiseptic surgery. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology opens in Boston. The first oil pipeline is laid in Pennsylvania – all six miles of it.**
- **In 1866: Alfred Nobel invents dynamite. Robert Whitehead invents the torpedo.**
- **In 1867: Marie Curie begins research on radium. The Brenner Pass tunnel opens between Austria and Italy. Vast diamond fields are discovered in South Africa. All this time, huge European empires are forming.**

[PAUSE]

In the midst of all this – in fact, in that same year of 1867 – one of the most respected minds in England voices an eloquent protest, perhaps even a lament. Matthew Arnold walks on the beach near Dover at night:

VOICE:

*“The sea is calm tonight.
The tide is full, the moon lies fair
upon the straits
The sea of Faith was once, too, at the full,
and round Earth’s shore
lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.
But now I only hear
its melancholy long withdrawing roar,
retreating to the breath of the night wind,
down the vast edges drear
and naked shingles of the world. . . .*

*And we are here on a darkling plain,
swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight
Where ignorant armies clash by night.”*

Notice what Arnold is lamenting. He describes it as the rolling back of the Sea of Faith. He sees religion in retreat before the new secular forces of the mid- and later 19th Century.

But there was already developing a new reality that Arnold did not grasp. Long before he walked that night on Dover Beach lamenting the decline of Faith – a faith that he thought of in terms of the institutionalized religion of his time – that same institutionalized religion was taking its first steps to become what we would today recognize as personal and societal spirituality.

Beginning as far back as the early decades of the 17th Century, we begin to witness a great wave of creativity, not so much in religious institutions themselves, but in extraordinarily committed men and women emerging from them.

Many of the leaders of these movements are themselves involved in church life, but they very often find the churches mistrustful and even opposed to the new tides that are flowing. The reason I believe this is very significant, is that it is remarkably like what is happening today, as movements and communities form around the quest for spirituality.

These waves of spirituality that began to permeate English society – often in the face of opposition from the established religion – included: new forms of community; new forms in the arts and music, and in the return of poetry; new commitments to social reform; new concepts of women and children in society; new concepts of indigenous people; even early nuances of what we would today call ecological awareness.

A couple of examples of spirituality through new forms of community:

- In the 1640's, George Fox begins to found communities that come to be known as the Society of Friends, or Quakers.**
- In the 1730's, John Wesley starts a movement of personal and social reform that will sweep the country. Its converts are called Methodists.**

And here are three examples of spirituality tackling social injustice:

- In 1807, William Wilberforce, with the help of others, uses his wealth and political influence to help abolish the slave trade.
- In 1817, Elizabeth Fry visits Newgate Prison. Appalled at what she witnesses, she campaigns to transform the English prison system, and founds an organization that still bears her name.
- In 1854, Florence Nightingale challenges society to stop regarding the role of a nurse as little more than a prostitute. In the midst of the carnage on the Crimean Peninsula, she transforms forever the treatment of those wounded in war.

Finally, some historical examples of the new spirituality in the arts:

- As early as the 1630's, George Herbert and others, known as the Metaphysical Poets, begin to move the expression of religious faith beyond academic thought into a new depth of the lyrical and the mystical.
- In 1678, John Bunyan is jailed by the official religion of his time. He pleads for paper and pen in his cell, and writes the manuscript of *The Pilgrim's Progress*. It transforms religion from an abstract intellectual system into a compelling story of a personal, yet universal, journey.

- In 1808, William Blake composes his great poem *Jerusalem*. It condemns the “dark Satanic mills” of the new cities, with their reliance on child labour.
- In 1818, Mary Shelley publishes *Frankenstein*. It gives us an indelible, archetypal image of technology and science slipping out of human control, and becoming something monstrous.
- In 1824, Beethoven composes his *Ninth Symphony*. The next day, the Vienna press reports that Herr Beethoven’s music “speaks to anyone whose heart beats warmly for greatness and beauty.” In other words, his music responds to the new longing for an experiential sense of the transcendent.

One more example. In 1798, William Wordsworth goes for a walk in the hills above *Tintern Abbey*. As you listen to his poetic record of that experiential moment, you hear nature being transformed, from something to be merely used by humanity, into a source of deep spirituality in human life.

VOICE:

*“ . . . I have felt
 A presence that disturbs me with the joy
 Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
 Of something far more deeply interfused,
 Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
 And the round ocean, and the living air,
 And the blue sky, and in the mind of man . . .
 And rolls through all things.*



*. . . Therefore am I still
A lover of the meadows and the woods
And mountains; and of all that we behold
From this green earth . . . well pleased to recognize
In nature and the language of the sense,
The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,
The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul
Of all my moral being.”*

In all of this, we see the secular world of the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution being deeply challenged by the new spirituality.

And from where is this new spirituality emerging? From an institutionalized religion that doesn't yet even realize that it is being transformed! Does that sound a little familiar?

It is as if, banished from its central place in the western mind, institutionalized religion began to explore the western heart. Religion, marginalized from what we would call today the public square, began to find other ways of igniting a kind of fire in the human heart, and in the society of the time. In a mysterious way, Religion, with all its perceived (and sometimes imagined) faults, became midwife to the new Spirituality. Does this also sound a bit familiar?

[PAUSE]

THE RE-ENCHANTMENT OF THE WORLD

This counter-wave – this push-back, if you will – against the assumptions of the surrounding culture continues into the 20th Century. We see it not so much in actions taken as in events experienced. Terrible blows are suffered that shake the confidence of the project of modernity.

Actually, far earlier than this, on November the 1st, 1755, the city of Lisbon is shattered by an 8.5 level earthquake that kills up to 100 thousand people. The quake becomes far more than the event itself. It deeply challenges the arrogance of the early Enlightenment, with its aspiration to understand and control all aspects of the natural world.

The first such event of the 20th Century is in 1912, when the supposedly unsinkable *Titanic* hits an iceberg in the North Atlantic, sinks, and becomes an indelible icon of modernity's vulnerability.

Within two years, a World War begins that will in various stages continue until 1945, and bring with it the double obscenities of Holocaust and Hiroshima. Once again, it is the voices of the poets that name the fears, the longings, the desperate hopes – in other words, the spirit of the times.

The First World War is barely over when, in 1919, W.B. Yeats creates, in *The Second Coming*, a chilling evocation of apocalypse:

VOICE:

***“Things fall apart, the centre cannot hold.
 Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.
 The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
 The ceremony of innocence is drowned.
 The best lack all conviction, while the worst
 Are full of passionate intensity.”***

Fifteen years later, in 1934, as the final solution is already being prepared in Hitler’s Germany, T.S. Eliot evokes another vision of a despairing society, in *The Rock*:

VOICE:

***“Endless invention, endless experiment,
 Brings knowledge of motion but not of stillness. . . .
 All our knowledge brings us nearer to our ignorance.
 All our ignorance brings us nearer to death.
 But nearness to death, no nearer to God.
 Where is the life we have lost in living?
 Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?
 Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?”***

The post-Enlightenment tide is now flowing and deepening. After Yeats and before Eliot, the German sociologist Max Weber points to the increasing cost price of modernity. His book has a haunting title: *The Progressive Disenchantment of the World*.
[KEEP GOING ONTO NEXT PAGE]

In the image of disenchantment, Weber was very likely echoing the great 17th Century mathematician and mystic Blaise Pascal. Pascal died about 20 years before Newton published his *Principles of Mathematics*, but he was aware of the new cosmology, and of Newton's work.

Pascal did not oppose the new learning, but he did warn of its consequences. And he did so in lyrical language. Referring to the ancient classical understanding that the stars sing their own music – the music of the spheres – Pascal, realizing that the calculations of the new cosmology would silence that music, said:

VOICE:

“I am terrified at the silence of these infinite spaces.”

Yet by the 1960's, as we've said before, other voices began to be heard. They went beyond diagnosing the ills of secularism, to prescribing spiritual antidotes to it.

I well remember how exciting it was, in 1969, in the midst of all the talk of “God Is Dead,” to pick up a book by a Columbia University sociologist and theologian named Peter Berger. (By the way, Berger died earlier this year at age 88.)

His book had an explicit and provocative title:

A Rumour of Angels: The Rediscovery of the Spiritual.

Not long after that, in 1981, Morris Berman, American cultural critic and historian of science, echoed, and yet re-framed, Weber and Pascal when he named a volume of his trilogy:

The Re-Enchantment of the World.

And here is another such voice of our own time: Ursula King, Professor Emerita of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Bristol and author of *The Search for Spirituality*. She deserves to be heard at some length.

VOICE:

“The great interest in spirituality today stems in part from the general awareness that we live on a planet torn apart by much suffering and violence. . . . A profound crisis of meaning has arisen, whose roots can be traced to a loss of vision, commitment and faith – what is, in fact, a deep spiritual crisis.

An immense spiritual hunger exists to find a life of deeper significance than that of material goods, consumerism and exploitative capitalism. The current global situation, with its deep injustices, numerous wars, and threat of ecological disaster, calls for . . . transformative ways of living [and] a more reverent attitude towards people and the planet. It also calls for a spirituality that will lead to the reorganization of world economics, politics, education, business and governance.”

Ursula King’s prescription may seem impossibly ambitious. Yet these are the terms in which a new generation is beginning to understand spirituality – nothing less than world-transformative.

And you know, even as this present generation searches to discern and express a spiritual dimension to human experience, that very human experience is facing even more transformative fields of discovery.

Recently, in a moment of indulging in that dangerous activity called prophecy, I found myself moved to say to some other friends that I think I can see at least six great new realities that will drive future searching for a spiritual dimension in human experience. In no particular order, here they are:

Environmentalism. Feminism. Cosmology.

The Anthropocene Epoch in which we now live.

The Neuro-Sciences. And Artificial Intelligence.

Every one of these realities forces us to reflect on the nature of our own humanity – to ask the question, “What does it mean to be Human?” I can’t think of a question more certain to send us on a spiritual quest.

So here we are in 2017. And here we are at the opening of the Star of the Sea Centre for Spiritual Living and Practice.

It's not by any means the end of our journeying in search of a contemporary spirituality, but it is a beginning, and in such modest beginnings, there is a wonderful realization.

The fact is that on this pilgrimage we are joining a countless multitude of seekers. We and they form a vast company on a great pilgrimage. Our quest is to discover an enduring landscape, where we may live as fully human, at peace with ourselves, with one another, with our Mother the Earth, and with that Source of our Being for whom there is a Name in every language.

A contemporary poet named William Berry has written a poem called *A Vision*. It's become something of an anthem for the new spirituality. As we close, let's share some lines from it, as a form of blessing on this day, and on this place, and on all the good things that will, please God, happen here in the future.

VOICE:

***“If we will have the wisdom to survive,
To stand like slow-growing trees
On a ruined place, renewing, enriching it . . .
Then a long time after we are dead,
The lives our lives prepare will live
Here, their houses strongly placed
Upon the valley sides; fields and gardens
Rich in the windows. The river will run
Clear as we will never know it;
And over it, birdsong like a canopy. . . .***

***On the steeps where greed and ignorance
Cut down the old forest, an old forest will stand,
Its rich leaf-fall drifting on its roots.
The veins of forgotten springs will have opened.
Families will be singing in the fields.
In their voices they will hear a music
Risen out of the ground. . . . Memory,
Native to this valley, will spread over it
Like a grove, and memory will grow
Into legend, legend into song, song into sacrament.
The abundance of this place,
The songs of its people and its birds,
Will be health and wisdom and indwelling light.
This is no paradisaal dream. Its hardship is its possibility.”***