Faith, hope and ecology: A Christian environmentalism

by Garret Keizer in the December 5, 2001 issue

The only possible dialog is the kind between people who remain what they are and speak their minds. *This is tantamount to saying that the world of today needs Christians who remain Christians*. —Albert Camus

A Christian environmentalist can find herself in the difficult position of advancing an argument on two fronts. On the one hand, she must argue with those Christians who regard her solidarity with persons outside the Christian fold as suspect. On the other hand, she must contend with those environmentalists who regard her Christian faith as irrelevant. What follows are several considerations for making an argument as people of faith in opposition to both these points of view.

First of all, faith tends to presuppose certain absolutes in which creatures have an absolute right to exist. One problem with moral relativism is that we tend to forget that it too is a relative value. When we say, “Everything is relative,” we often seem to mean that everything is relative to our convenience. But faith places all things in relative relationship to the Ground of Being.

Some years ago I found myself on a Sunday school hike with my daughter. The climb was long and arduous, and the trail had not been groomed for some time. On that hike my daughter learned a new word: “nettles.” After several hours, she exclaimed to me in tears: “Daddy, why did God make nettles?” It was, of course, a profoundly religious question, and I did my best to answer in kind. I replied, “Because nettles give pleasure to God in a way that they will never give pleasure to us.”

My answer was nothing more than a thinly disguised plagiarism from the Book of Job, where God speaks to Job out of the whirlwind in praise of his own creatures, particularly those that might seem useless, absurd or harmful to human beings: the ostrich and the wild ass, the hippopotamus and the sea monster. Environmentalists sometimes argue that the tragic flaw of the Western religious tradition is that of not seeing nature as divine. I would respectfully disagree. I think that one of the crowning glories of the Western religious tradition is that it does *not* see the material world as divine, but as something good nevertheless, something besides God that is

also beloved by God. In other words, as Gertrude Stein tried to tell us, “A rose is a rose is a rose.” Its very existence testifies to the creative compassion and self-effacing courtesy of Almighty God. A rose—or a nettle—may exist for and because of God, but it exists *as* itself.

Second, faith cautions us against the dangers of making nature into an idol, and environmentalism into an identity. Let us consider each of these dangers in turn.

An idol, in Old Testament tradition, is any image put in the place of God, in whose image alone humanity was created. Accordingly, those who worship “graven images” are said by the prophets to develop “hearts of stone.” Varying this slightly, I would define idolatry as loading any object with greater adoration than it was made to bear. (My definition is similar to R. H. Blyth’s definition of sentimentality: giving a thing more tenderness than God gives it). In other words, I would say that idolatry not only dishonors God and demeans the idolater; it ultimately leads to the destruction of the hapless idol itself.

One need not look far to see such a principle at work. A parent who treats his child’s welfare as the highest value in the world eventually raises a neurotic and resentful child. A farmer who values his independence more than anything on earth loses his independence to the first loan shark who promises to make him more self-sufficient than his neighbor. The artist who espouses an aesthetic of art for art’s sake invariably winds up producing third-rate art. And the environmental activist who makes an idol out of nature, setting it above every other value, unwittingly authorizes the actions of the environmental polluter, who will tell you that in using all of his powers to fulfill all of his desires, he is simply “following his *nature*,” just as a hawk or a hyena follows its nature.

Idolatry turns the fear of losing into the cause of loss. If we care more about the burning of the Amazon rain forest than about the poverty of the people encroaching upon it, we shall add the fuel of indignation to their fires. And if Christians care about baptism but not about the quality of the water with which they baptize, they will turn one of their holiest sacraments into a kind of sacrilegious mockery, in which the sins of the world are washed away with the same poisonous filth that results from those sins.

Faith also cautions us against making environmentalism into an identity. By identity, I mean a specialized kind of idolatry in which a sense of belonging becomes a

substitute for individuality, on the one hand, and for the broadest kind of human solidarity on the other. When an identity becomes absolute, the little group to which I belong becomes my sole basis for self-understanding and the farthest boundary of my love. Identities are certainly good and necessary things (though they have become most good and most necessary to marketing experts), but an identity reveals itself as a danger if, for example, I find that I love thinking of myself as an environmentalist more than I love the environment, or if I love thinking of myself as a Christian more than I love Christ. (Bonhoeffer was certainly trying to find his way out of the latter trap in his speculations about a “religionless Christianity.”)

The advantage of a movement made up of people with different identities is that they can help each other be vigilant in avoiding that danger, which includes the danger of identifying oneself so exclusively with the success of one’s movement that one is willing to adopt the uglier methods of one’s adversaries. Thomas Merton tells the story of a Nazi officer who walked into a church, stood at the altar, cursed God and then, when no lightning struck him dead, strode from the church convinced that he had proven God does not exist. Merton’s comment was that all the officer had proven was that God is not a Nazi. In the same way we need to prove that environmentalism is not just another lifestyle or another “ism” in a world that is literally choking to death on the self-indulgence of lifestyles and the arrogance of “isms.”

Another thing that faith can bring to an environmental resistance movement is a sense of the redeeming value of small gestures and humble efforts. There is a story about a Jewish peasant who became so absorbed in his field work that he missed the sunset on the eve of Passover. Forbidden to travel after sundown, he spent the night alone by himself in the field. At dawn the next day his rabbi came walking through the field searching for him. “Your family missed you last night,” said the rabbi. With a poignant sigh the peasant explained what had happened. “This is indeed unfortunate,” said the rabbi, “but I hope you at least said some of the appointed prayers.” “That was the worst part of the whole experience,” said the peasant. “I was so upset that, try as I might, I could not recall a single prayer.” “Then how did you pass the holy evening?” said the rabbi. “I recited my alphabet,” said the peasant, “and I trusted God to form the words.” I know of few stories that better illustrate the meaning of faith.

Sometimes I wonder if lack of faith, even more than lack of restraint, is the great enemy of the environment. The devil has two horns: the horn of pride that says

there is nothing we *ought* to do, and the horn of despair that says there is nothing we *can* do. In this age of globalism and global destruction, it is especially easy to be gored by that second horn. On that hike where my daughter met nettles for the first time, she was the only member of our tiny Sunday school to show up, which meant that five adults ushered her to the top of the mountain. For me that very ratio bespeaks what it means to be a person of faith. A person of faith does not ask if it's worth his while to take one child on a hike or worth his while to turn off one unnecessary electric light or recycle one throwaway glass jar; that is indeed part of what defines him as a person of faith: the belief that little gestures are worth his while in spite of any evidence to the contrary.

The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed that grows into a great shrub; the kingdom of God is like an alphabet recited in a dark night by a man who cannot seem to remember his prayers. An imperial-style preoccupation with big gestures and grand schemes not only intimidates our spirits; it recapitulates the very attitudes that polluted our water and air to begin with. Faith, on the other hand, does not despise the smallest effort or the smallest gift, be it a widow's mite or a salamander's egg, be it a small boy's proffered lunch of five loaves and two fishes that eventually feeds a multitude of 5,000, or a children's parking-lot crusade that eventually changes the disposal practices of a fast-food chain where, we are told, over 99 billion have been served.

Faith also reminds us that a human relationship with the world amounts to a respectful negotiation with that world, a negotiation of trade-offs and boundaries, where some things are allowed and others forbidden, where some things are kosher and others are not. One may find fault with the specific terms of the contract that the Amish people have made with technology, or parts of the Islamic world have made with modernity, but who can call herself an environmentalist without recognizing the necessity of the contract itself? In this regard, the dietary laws of the Torah and the Buddha's Noble Eightfold Path can also serve as models. For example, is it "lawful" to eat veal raised on factory farms? Is it an acceptable exercise of what the Buddha called "right occupation" to turn wetlands into strip malls? Of course, some would argue that while proscriptions derived in this way might be interesting to imagine, they would prove almost impossible to enforce. But the negotiations that believers make with the world are never enforced so much as they are embraced. The dietary rules of Judaism, for example, are not the legacy of judicious rabbis so much as the legacy of observant homemakers.

Every negotiation that faithful people make with the world is also a demonstration to their neighbors in the world. Taken in its political sense, a demonstration is something much more than a mere protest; as the word implies, it is an attempt to demonstrate not only dissatisfaction with the thing protested, but an alternative to it. Thus, a peaceful antiwar demonstration demonstrates that there are ways to disagree without resorting to violence. Giving credit to British theologian Kenneth Leech, I sometimes tell my parish that our celebrations of the Holy Eucharist amount to a weekly demonstration against the prevailing world order. In contrast to a world that wastes its resources and its people, not so much as a crumb of the communion bread is allowed to go to waste. In contrast to a world where a few eat to excess, while many don't eat at all, everyone at the Lord's table has an equal share of the bread.

This is not to say that the church always demonstrates justice and a just use of the world. I think with some compunction about those days when we used to celebrate the ascension of Jesus by sending a bouquet of helium-filled plastic balloons into the sky, thus making the sky into a kind of trash can and the finale of the resurrection into a kind of circus stunt. Whenever a little voice inside me said, "This isn't such a good idea," I'd say, "Well, the kids like it." Then one day the voice took the shape of a kid at my elbow, and she was *my* kid, and she said, "Dad, this isn't such a good idea." (I'm reminded of Homer Simpson, who, when advised to listen to "that little voice that always tells you when you're doing something wrong," asks in all sincerity, "You mean Lisa?") I also think that the church gives a poor demonstration of both its faith and its environmentalism when it interprets "recycling" as making poor people into the bottom-feeders of the consumer culture. How many times does a church receive some cast-off piece of junk accompanied by the words, "Maybe you know some poor person who could use it." Jesus said, "Love your neighbor as yourself"—he didn't say love your neighbor as your garbage dumpster.

Finally, faith reminds us that there is something greater than faith.

"Faith, hope and love, abide in these three," says St. Paul, "and the greatest of these is love." In Wendell Berry's latest novel, *Jayber* Crow, his narrator says: "Young lovers see a vision of the world redeemed by love. That is the truest thing they ever see . . ." It is certainly the truest thing a lover of the environment could see. At the risk of being simplistic, I would characterize our environmental crisis as one of cosmic hatred, in which nature seems mysteriously and horribly turned against itself. People sometimes say, "Look at the mess we're in—if only nature had been

allowed to take its course.” But from a purely scientific point of view, nature has in fact “taken its course,” and as part of that course has evolved a creature capable of using nature to bring about nature’s ruin. Pollution, after all, is made of “all natural ingredients.” Our environmental crisis is very much a metaphysical crisis, a crisis in the secret places, perhaps a crisis in the very heart of God. And whatever got us into that crisis, only love will get us out—and keep us out. Indeed, what good would it be if we could clean up the whole earth tomorrow, only to foul it up the day after? American socialist and labor organizer Eugene Debs once said to his followers, “Do not imagine that I am the Moses who will lead you out of the capitalist wilderness, for if I can lead you out, someone else can lead you back in.” The same can be said for any environmental movement that is not a movement of the Holy Spirit, whom the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins described as brooding over the world “with warm breast, and Ah, bright wings,” and Dante called “the love that moves the sun and other stars.”

So whom and what should we love if we are to be faithful members of an environmental resistance? First, we ought to love those whom it would be too easy to dismiss as collaborators or as unavoidable casualties. I mean the farmers, loggers, miners, factory workers and indigenous peoples whom we have placed in untenable positions on the land. Environmentalism, like feminism, fails to the extent—or I should rather say that its detractors succeed to the extent—that environmentalists and feminists can be portrayed as elitists motivated by contempt. I realize this amounts to an ironic statement in light of the virulent contempt that is heaped on both. Nevertheless, we shall know that the environmental movement has come of age when the budget for every environmental organization in the land contains a fund for the relief and retraining of workers whose jobs are threatened by stricter environmental protections.

Second, we should love the city. Never trust a conservationist who doesn’t. You will know him by his smug assumption that people who live in rural areas are always more environmentally virtuous than their urban counterparts. In other words, I, who own no fewer than nine gasoline-powered engines, including three cars, a garden tiller, a lawnmower, a chainsaw, a brush cutter, a weed whacker and a wood splitter (with designs on a generator, if I can find one cheap), who live five miles from the nearest store, eight miles from my daughter’s high school and 21 miles from my church, am a more nature-friendly guy than my urban counterpart, who walks to work, who buys his food unpackaged at the corner market and who lovingly tends a

small grove of flowers and shrubs up on the roof where the air cries out for mercy. My relationship with nature may be more privileged than his; it is certainly not more respectful.

The same can be said in defense of the despised suburbanite. I never visit my wife's parents in the working- class town of Haledon, New Jersey, without remarking how much love goes into those little yards and sidewalk-bordered tomato gardens. In a similar vein, I recently drove through Lancaster County in Pennsylvania, where the Amish farms are bordered all around by narrow strips of suburban development. I found myself wondering if what I was seeing was encroachment or rapprochement—a reflection of Eden's loss, or the preview of a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness and peace are able to kiss, or at least wave once in a while over the fence.

Third, we must love nature, which we need to preserve both as an objective, biological reality, and as a vivid interior hope. To this end, we would do well to read the prophets of the Old Testament, who can be messengers of doom, but who are also great visionaries of hope and peace, of swords beaten into plowshares and lions lying down with lambs. Environmentalists need such visions to set behind those of belching smokestacks and toxic dumps. The radical feminist Andrea Dworkin has written: "There is one thing that is not practical, and it's the thing I believe in most, and that is the importance of vision in the midst of what has to be done, never forgetting for one minute the world that you really want to live in and how you want to live in it and what it means to you and how much you care about it—what you want for yourselves and what you want for the people that you love."

And the radical environmentalist Edward Abbey wrote in a similar vein: "It is not enough to fight for the land; it is even more important to enjoy it. While you can. While it is still here. . . . Enjoy yourselves, keep your brain in your head and your head firmly attached to the body, the body active and alive, and I promise you this much: I promise you this one sweet victory over our enemies, over those desk-bound people with their hearts in a safe deposit box and their eyes hypnotized by desk calculators. I promise you this: you will outlive the bastards."

Which raises one more point: that we must love the bastards too. Jesus said, "Love your enemies." And what is the first step toward loving our enemies? Admitting to ourselves that we have them. Cutting through the smug arrogance and pride that says we're too enlightened or progressive, too saved, evolved, self-actualized or

spiritual even to have an enemy. Love frees us to engage our enemies as fellow human beings in a battle to the finish. It proves the conviction that we are so committed to their defeat that we can already take pity on them, that we can say "God help you," and mean just that.

One might ask how we can best love the enemies of the environment. Well, how would we best hate them? Medea asks that question in the play bearing her name, and comes to the conclusion that the best way to hate an enemy is to destroy his children, and so she murders her cruel husband's sons, though they are her sons also. To love my enemy in the most extreme and radical way is to love his children—to fight his shortsighted policies and practices so that his children can enjoy a world of clean air and drinkable water and renewable land. The environmentalist who seeks to save her soul even as she fights to save the earth will answer, when asked what she is fighting for, "I am fighting for the children of my enemies."

Of course a Christian cannot speak of love for very long without speaking of God's love. For a remarkable glimpse of that, we might turn to the writings of an extraordinary English mystic known as Julian of Norwich. Some six centuries before our planet was photographed from outer space, she described a similar vision of its beloved precariousness.

"And in this vision [Jesus] showed me a little thing, the size of a hazelnut, lying in the palm of my hand, and to my mind's eyes it was as round as any ball. I looked at it and thought, 'What can this be?' And the answer came to me, 'It is all that is made.' I wondered how it could last, for it was so small I thought it might suddenly disappear. And the answer to my mind was, 'It lasts and will last for ever because God loves it . . .'"

Julian's vision leaves me with a question, which I shall in turn leave with you: If God loves that little hazelnut-sized creation so much, then why does he put it into Julian's hands? "God so loved the world," says a verse in the Gospel of John, "that he gave his only begotten son . . ." Apparently God so loved his sons and daughters that he also gave them his only created earth—but to what end? That they might abuse it, forsake it, put it to a shameful death? Why does God place the things he loves in our hands—unless he believes that we might eventually make our painful progress toward loving them as God does? We Christians talk a lot about faith, our human faith, but if Mother Julian is telling the truth, it would seem that God has faith in human beings. I almost wish he didn't. Nevertheless, we have arrived at an

unavoidable decision, one both timeless and very much of our moment: Will we prove worthy of God’s faith?