CHILD OF THE EARTH

Can a personal tragedy shed light on the state of the world? ALASTAIR MCINTOSH shares how the stillbirth of his son fostered unexpected hope in his work on the spirituality of climate change.
As we moved into the autumn of 2006, I rapidly found myself becoming a spoiler at green-leaning dinner parties. *Soil and Soul* had been such a hope-filled book — a spiritual Trojan horse, less about land reform than about the spirituality of rekindling community. But I was at a loss to see where the hope could come out of climate change. Sometimes I’d find people listening to me with an air of disbelief. It felt like I myself was part of the problem we were talking about. And they were right. That was precisely my unsettling point. We’re all so deeply complicit. The drivers of climate change go to the heart of modern society. Unable to counter this confession of complicity, people sometimes glanced at Verene’s filling belly and asked: ‘How, in that case, do you feel about bringing a child into the world?’ It was a fair question but not one I could fully answer.

**KNOW WHAT IN THE WOMB?**

More out of sense of duty to my publisher than from heartfelt enthusiasm, I soldiered on with the book. It was profoundly uncomfortable. There was a truth that had to be told and I wasn’t enjoying being the messenger. Privately, every well-informed leader of the environmental movement to whom I spoke, both in the UK and internationally, shared much of my pessimism. ‘But we can’t say that in public. It would be like giving up, and what hope then?’ was the typical reply. And yet by holding on to optimism for the good of the cause, we were denying the reality of the cause. They say that legislation happens in prose but campaigning is done in poetry, and the brutal statistics made for dismal eloquence. Worldwide the rate of growth in consumption was continuing to outstrip net efforts at mitigating climate change. Britain’s emissions of greenhouse gases had dipped slightly during the 1990s, mainly thanks to the cheap and easy (but temporary) shift from coal to gas. But since then, there had been a slight rise in emissions. And with road traffic set to increase by 40 per cent to 2025, and a planned doubling of airport capacity starting with the new runway at Heathrow, it was clear how the politicians were reading the electorate’s entrails. With economic growth always top of the agenda, environmental targets were safely kicked into the long grass of NIMTO.

**SeriouSly, in a United Kingdom that meets only half its UN obligations to alleviate world poverty, when were the poor ever a big voting issue?**

The sheer injustice of it all was so galling. As usual, endangered species and the poor would pay the price. The earth could perhaps no longer afford the rich, but they’d just relocate to somewhere that still had a bit of environmental credit left. It was all ‘buy today’ and not ‘pay tomorrow’, but ‘gone tomorrow’. In November 2007 Paul Vallely ran a column in this magazine that made an interesting distinction between optimism and hope. ‘I am not an optimist,’ he quoted Martin Luther King as having said, ‘but I still have hope.’ This was one of the things that started working on me. I picked up Bruggemann’s *Hopeful Imagination* and wondered where the likes of Jeremiah might have stood in these troubled times.
Remember Jeremiah? There are large parts of the Old Testament that I think could have been written by a good editor, but much of Jeremiah is a living fire that burns from the spiritual heart. Here’s somebody in the sixth century BC who made no pretence of optimism that his people could be saved from Babylonian captivity. He was an ecologist who saw that inversion of the social order had led to inversion of the environmental order too. He asks, ‘How long will the land mourn, and the grass of every field wither? For the wickedness of those who live in it the animals and the birds are swept away.’

But he never let go of hope. When things were at their bleakest with Jerusalem under siege, Jeremiah goes out and buys a field for posterity. With a bit of theological licence we might suggest that he started the world’s first nature reserve! Ah, Jeremiah! That ‘fountain of living water’ of whom God said, ‘Before I formed you in the womb I knew you.’

Is it possible to know a child before it is born? That question was also in my mind. It was Hogmanay 2006 — the last day in the year. Vérène was seven months with child now and she’d spent the afternoon playing music to him, convinced that he was responding in his movements. We had delighted to watch his little heart beating on the scans and to see his bones knitting into shape. Who knew what this child might become or, for that matter, what might become of him? The problem in the wider world is not so much too many children, but too many who haven’t been loved in a way that teaches empathy. That’s the root cause of the narcissism of hubris, its violence, and its impact through consumerism that destroys the earth’s life support systems. To care for the earth we must start with its children. At least, that’s how we saw it, and it was such a happy time; a time of wide open possibilities. January and February would see me finishing off the book on climate change. March would be all change at a family level. And who knows what then?

A BIRD FLOWN
We went to bed early that night on Hogmanay 2006. We thought of him as our love child, this little life that we were carrying in our marriage. And we spoke a lot together about ‘sacred marriage’ — as if there are three persons in a marriage, and the third is the source of life as love made manifest. Only such depth of relationship can fearlessly face the shadow sides of life. This is the grounding in the Godspace. This is what sets all of life in perspective as it renews what is worn out and restores what is broken.

And when Vérène and I awoke the next morning, on New Year’s Day 2007, our child was not moving.

When the doctor turned on the scan, I could see his little backbone. It was like it was before, but fully formed now. There was no pulsing from his heart.

And I just assumed the doctor’s sorry job for her. I quietly said to Vérène: ‘He has left us, my dear. The bird has flown the nest.’

A complication with the placenta forced the team at Glasgow’s Southern General Hospital to carry out a rare and difficult caesarean procedure. A considerable blood supply was on standby, an array of specialist staff in reserve. We were blessed to receive such care. As the surgeons operated, the words ‘holy, holy, holy ... glory, glory, glory,’ rang uncontrollably through my mind. Vérène’s heartbeat monitor was starting to race and the senior surgeon had to take over from his understudy. I had to stare into death: not just of our child, but also, the small possibility that my wife too could go. They had warned me that I might be asked to leave the theatre. Thankfully that, at least, was not called for.

Our love child was being born. In a vision in my mind’s deranged eye I could see what looked like a wedge-shaped column of descending figures. At their head was a huge, solid, compassionate being with wide open arms. ‘Vérène,’ I whispered, as if with inner knowing, ‘The ancestors are here to receive him into their number!’ And the only place to go was onwards and inwards — deeper and deeper into the Godspace.

These were the words that came to me:

\[ \text{ashes to ashes} \]
\[ \text{dust to dust} \]
\[ \text{life to life} \]
\[ \text{love to love} \]

And the midwife said: ‘You’re never unaffected, no matter how often you see it.’ And after what seemed like ages she came round from the other side of the screen. ‘It’s a baby boy,’ she said. ‘And he’s a beautiful baby! He’s really beautiful.’

OSSIAN’S LAMENT
A little being like a teddy bear was laid on Vérène’s breast. We wept without inhibition. We cried and cried because we loved him so much. How strange it was. I never expected such an instant sense of connection, of knowing. I felt I would have given my own life for him. He was our love child. Our firstborn. Our son.

The doctors could find no reason why he should have died. These things just happen.

According to the support group, SANDS, 17 children die before or soon after birth in the UK every day.\(^5\) He looked so perfect. His hands were like my own — broad and with long fingers. Huge feet too. His face made me think of Vérène’s the first time I ever saw her. It made me think of the wonder of a line that we’d read together in a book about Christian mysticism: ‘The bond between a man and a woman is God himself, as is seen in the face of their child.’\(^6\)

And we knew we would only know him again in God. And we would only ever have known him in God. Two days later we wrote to friends:

*Our little son was born absolutely beautiful. We have named him Ossian Nicolas McIntosh. Ossian was an*
ancient Irish/Scots Gaelic bard who spent most of his life in fulfillment of love and art in the Celtic otherworld. His name means ‘little deer’ because his mother was turned into a deer and he was found on top of a mountain. We are pronouncing the name in a way that sounds like ‘ocean’—o-sh-e-an.

We are both astonished and heartbroken at the love we feel for this child. We have always seen our work with human ecology as being profoundly spiritual work, as it concerns the foundation of the human condition, and somehow we feel that his short and unborn life will carry that work forward in a world where so many people experience suffering.

Today I share this story both in its own right and because climate change, like so many other threats to the world, confronts us with the need honestly to face death. As long as we refrain from looking at death we deny ourselves the potential grace of being able to see through it. We may think we avoid pain, but we do so at the cost of blocking off hidden sources of joy. In our case we had expected to go home with a cradle. Instead, our child lay in a little white coffin. But we found grounding in a love that transcends death. Some weeks later a few lines that came to me captured this. It’s called Ossian’s Lament—for his Mother:

It’s not your breasts that fill tonight but your eyes.
God alone has solace for the mother’s heart that cries.

And it felt like Ossian would always be spiritually with us—flying round the world, holding hands with us, like the little boy in Raymond Briggs’s Snowman—wisely and laughingly present as we go about our work. That is our hope for our child and this world.

ROOTS OF CHANGE

The reason why political, economic and technical fixes alone will never be enough to tackle climate change is that the root causes do not lie in these realms. The problems of our world are not just ‘out there’. They are at least equally ‘in here’. My book has ended up as another Trojan horse. It is only superficially about climate change. It is actually an historical, philosophical and theological study of how the inner life has come to be eviscerated and this has left the soul open to colonisation by consumerism. If we want to tackle climate change, we must do all the ‘outer’ things, for sure, but they’ll all just add to the hubris unless matched in step by inner transformation.

To rekindle the inner life means to regenerate creativity, to open to the capacity to appreciate things, and to find empathy, vision and ultimately, anchorage in however we might understand ‘God’—the metaphysical ground of reality. The suffering of the world will still be there, but we can hold it better—for perhaps in the spirit, as it were, of planetary hospice workers who remain spiritually present come what may through the travails of troubled times. Only those who are resource in such ways—resource by grace to enjoy—can circumvent the nihilism by which we either sell out or burn out. That is what makes hope, alongside faith and charity, one of the three foundations of the spiritual life. And that’s why, at the last minute, I changed the title of my book.

Originally it had been, Hell and High Water: Climate change and the human condition. Now the subtitle includes the word hope. That’s the transformative difference that facing death has mysteriously made. The dedication, of course, is to Ossian Nicolas McIntosh.

Hell and High Water: Climate change, hope and the human condition by Alastair McIntosh is published by Birlinn on June 23. www.alastairmcintosh.com

2 Jeremiah 12:4, NRSV.
3 Jeremiah 12.
4 Jeremiah 2:13; 15, NRSV.
7 Corinthians 11.