

Alastair McIntosh talks to **Susan Wright** about climate change, spiritual growth and facing the future

Alastair McIntosh is a man of many labels – author, poet, social justice and environmental campaigner, spiritual activist, Scotland’s first professor of human ecology, owner of the most densely packed individual’s website ever. That’s what makes him so interesting and his books so curiously difficult to describe. They combine rigorous scientific analysis and biographical tales, with spiritual insight, psychological pondering, and references drawn from a wide range of sources, including Plato, Eisenhower and Deep Purple. They are immensely readable.

His first book, *Soil and Soul*, told of his successful campaigns to take back the island of Eigg from Laird control (which contributed to implementation of the Land Reform Act (Scotland) Act 2003), and his role in the fight against a corporate conglomerate that wanted to blow the top off a mountain and scoop out a super quarry on the Isle of Harris. *Hell and High Water: Climate Change, Hope and the Human Condition*, published last year, examines the science of climate change and argues the importance of spiritual growth and redress in meeting the challenges ahead. Like his latest work, *Rekindling Community: Connecting People, Environment and Spirituality*, it urges moving to a post-consumerist, ecology bound, community focused world.

‘We need to re-program the software of the collective psyche,’ he writes, and that includes ‘strengthening people’s connection to place’ and ‘aligning our consumption to a path with heart’. This isn’t the stuff of psychobabble but the only realistic path that McIntosh can see to offer any hope. ‘I struggle in a losing battle to remain a green hopeful. To retain optimism that the world can dig its way out of this hole,’ he admits.

His writing is grounded and honest, showing him to be alive to new ideas while being only too aware of the realities of life and human nature. ‘We need spiritual growth but not at the expense of these other things we need to do – recycling, energy efficiency, looking at what we eat, how we travel



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Author and activist

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and so on,’ he says in the book. ‘Even if these are not enough to make much difference now, they may become invaluable patterns of and examples of some post-apocalyptic future.’

Alastair McIntosh's RECOMMENDED READING

‘Herman Hesse’s *Siddhartha* and Kahlil Gibran’s *The Prophet for spirituality at an introductory level.*

Alice Miller’s *For Your Own Good: the Origins of Violence in Child-rearing for helping to understand the psychological forces that damage children and push us into dysfunctionality.*

Stan and Christina Groff’s *Spiritual Emergency, for spiritual development in troubled times.*

And Walter Wink’s *Engaging the Powers for a heavy duty theological guide to spiritual activism.*

Alastair, who do you hope will read your books?

AM: My books are not written for everybody. I write for a particular kind of person, the one who’s engaged in the world and trying to be more effective in a practical way but who also senses that practicality alone is not enough. I’m interested in trying to nourish readers who want to explore deeper levels of meaning, levels at which outer life and the inner life start to integrate.

There’s a lot of research crammed into *Hell and High Water*. What findings most surprised you along the way?

AM: What most surprised and disturbed me was just how deep in the doo-doo we actually are. I wrestled with writing *Hell and High Water* because I knew that my analysis would upset the kind of people who like to think that small change is all it takes to make a big difference. They need to do their sums. The sums are just colossal.

If the mainstream scientific models of climate change are right, then we in Scotland need to cut our carbon

emissions by 80 or 90 per cent. Our fair share in this world would be to burn the equivalent of about half a ton of coal a year for all our needs, and that includes our share of social infrastructure and not just what we might burn personally.

At the moment we burn the carbon equivalent to three or four tons. Renewables can plug some of the gap, but not much because we’re just consuming on such an industrial scale. I don’t actually see how, in the time left, we can make the shift that would be needed and not have social breakdown. And to be honest, I’ve not yet met any informed scientist or politician who does see how it’s possible. And so, if the science is right, then in my opinion long-term we’re stuffed.

How would you sum up your book to someone down the pub?

AM: Well, you can imagine how well that message would go down in the pub - ‘then we’d better just have a few more pints and fiddle while Rome burns...’ But I don’t leave it at that. Humankind has been stuffed many times before. It doesn’t mean it’s the

end of the show. It just means we’re in for a bumpy ride. That’s why, to sum it up, I’d tell the person in the pub that it’s about ‘learning how to face the come-what-may of the come-to-pass. And the next round has come-to-pass to you!’

In what ways can spiritual growth help those who are already doing what they can practically to recycle, lower carbon emissions, and live within the environment’s means?

AM: Spirituality is about facing truth and learning to love and be loved. It requires ever-deeper empathy with the rest of life, and so our sense of what we’re responsible for expands. You see, when faced with any challenge in life you’ve got to ask what you’re about – what you are and what’s the source of your courage. In my experience, basing activism on such higher purpose is the only lasting way to avoid sell-out or burn-out.

Do you think people need to have things to realise that they don’t need them? It’s difficult to tell people who are poor or haven’t had things not to bother aspiring to have new things because that’s not the way to happiness.

AM: I think our main target with climate change needs to be the rich much more than the poor. The problem is that the Earth can no longer afford the rich, and we need a lot more courage in saying that loud and clear.

What experiences have most informed you in your life to get you to the point where you are today?

AM: There are so many things. Growing up in Lewis gave me a deep understanding of the properties of matter and how community and ecology works. University at Aberdeen taught me about the mind, and how there’s so much more to life than what we consciously see. Doing VSO in Papua New Guinea gave me practical competence with things like setting up small-scale hydro-electricity schemes in the villages, and also taught me about the importance of land and culture. That’s what I brought back to Scotland when I got involved



Alastair’s book *Hell and High Water: Climate Change, Hope and the Human Condition*

in the 1990s with land reform and community empowerment.

How did you get involved in the Eigg land reform and the Harris super quarry resistance?

AM: In Papua New Guinea, 98 per cent of the land was community owned, and yet logging, mining and commercial fisheries often violated it and caused the local culture to break down. I realised that the same had happened to us in Scotland in the Clearances and so on. And that to live with dignity and sustainably on this Earth, then we must reconnect people, place and the spiritually that underpins both.

Finally, what keeps you hopeful? In the book, you describe people’s behaviour as disappointing and disturbing. Is love the answer?

AM: Of course love is the answer! But we need to shift from our small conceptions of what love’s about and progressively step into a beauty that’s nothing less than cosmic. You see, that’s my bottom line: come-what-may whatever comes-to-pass can deepen us into love. Climate change is fundamentally a spiritual issue because it’s driven, in substantial degree, by the addictive urge to consume in excess of sufficiency. Such consumerism a symptom of inner emptiness, and the only lasting solution is for us to connect with the things that really give life.

→ Find out more

Alastair McIntosh will be appearing at the Edinburgh Book Festival on 17 August and the Inverness Book Festival on 7 October. Catch his Thought for the Day on BBC Radio Scotland (scheduled times published on www.alastairmcintosh.com)