The Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature

Bron R. Taylor
Editor-in-Chief
The University of Florida

Jeffrey Kaplan
Consulting Editor
The University of Wisconsin Oshkosh

Executive Editors

Laura Hobgood-Oster
Southwestern University
Austin, Texas

Adrian Ivakhiv
University of Vermont
Burlington, Vermont

Michael York
Bath Spa University
Bath, United Kingdom

P The Rotting Tree Faerie

What is it that keeps faerie traditions alive? One answer, suggests Alastair McIntosh, is numinous experience. The stories keep reasserting themselves, as he suggests with this account adapted from his article, "Rainforests and High Finance," in *World Rainforest Report* 26 (October 1993), 18–20.

It was our last day deep in the Australian forest. And there, like out of a child's picture book, in an arched door-like entrance to this hollow rotting tree, was quite the most exquisitely beautiful mushroom any of us had ever seen.

It had a slightly bulbous, pristine white stem, and a perfectly circular, mottled grey cap with a ring of white spots as crisp and fresh as God in the morning light.

We gazed in wonder. And I said for a laugh – for the kind of laugh that you need when wrestling with the pain of nature undergoing destruction – "What kind of a faerie lives here?"

Everyone smiled. I mean, it's kind of ridiculous, to be enquiring after . . . faeries!

The other protestors from John Seed's Rainforest Information Centre gradually move on. But I stay, alone. And again, the question, burning now: "What kind of a faerie lives here?"

In the back of the tree lay some termite-eaten wood. It was annoyingly distracting me, for I could vaguely make out in it the face of a grim old man staring, motionless, down at the soil, like a New Guinea spirit mask. This was not what I was looking for.

Again, my question. But this time, the old man spoke. Yes, he actually spoke! Clearly, subjectively objective in my mind's ear.

In a big, empowered, booming voice, he spoke. He said: "I am the faerie who lives here."

"No, no," I replied, bemused. "You're just a sour old face I'm imagining in rotting wood. I'm looking for flower faeries. You're not that!"

"Oh," he responded, quizzically. "But I thought you were the one who's always going on to your students about radical feminist theology?"

"What's that got to do with it?"

"Just that you're always telling them about calling one-another into being; that a person becomes a person in community inasmuch as they're heard, listened to, and *allowed* to be visible."

Well! I tell you . . . he had me by my own ideals! To deny his reality would have been to deny one of the insights that I most value.

"Fair enough," I said to him. "But if I accept that, I'm going to start seeing faeries all over the place!"

He laughed and laughed. He said that faeries *are* all over the place! God has many masks and I was presently face to face with one of them.

"Tell me then," I enquired. "What kind of a faerie are you?"

He swelled with pride and delight at being asked. "I," he said, "am the Rotting Tree Faerie!"

"But," I protested, "I always thought faeries looked joyful. You look like an undertaker. So what kind of things give *you* joy in life?"

This was the question he'd been waiting for and his voice shook the forest. "Rotting trees give me joy in life! This mushroom," he said, "is at my door precisely because I AM the Rotting Tree Faerie."

And as he said it, he let me feel the great processes of death and decay going on in this old tree, indeed, in the whole forest. He let me feel the mushroom's mycelia reaching from the roots into every part of that dying tree, and beyond. I could even feel the molecular processes of rot taking place, composting what had reached the fullness of its time and had died to create new soil and therefore new life.

The mask and the mushroom were, indeed, his Janus face. One side expressed decay and death. The other, in its beauty, was his veritable flower faerie self.

Alastair McIntosh

See also: Re-Earthing; Seed, John.

Rainforests and High Finance

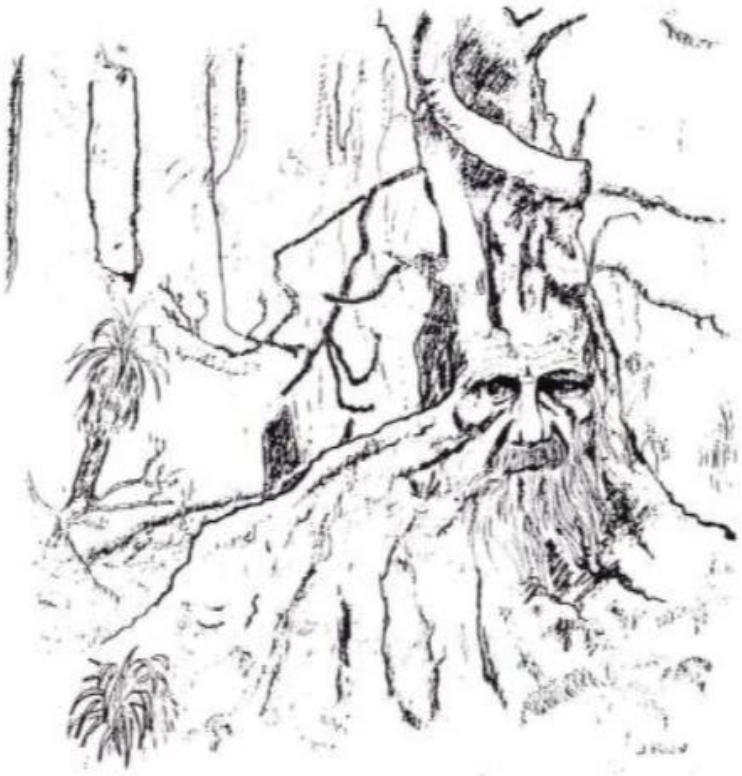
A Faerie Tale and Open Letter to Alice Walker

by Alastair McIntosh

A faerie story that gives an insight into the workings of the Rainforest Information Centre and reveals what some believe the forest is all about.

We had been nine days together. It had been a busy time, difficult at times, but a good time. John Seed had asked me to spend ten days with the Rainforest Information Centre (RIC) in New South Wales, Australia, helping some twelve of his fellow directors - "green extremists" as ex-President Bush would have it - to learn to run their organisation more effectively.

We'd hatched the idea in Edinburgh after making music. John's an international eco-rock star. I play celtic heart music on the penny whistle. We'd been talking deep and visioning. He about RIC. Me about the MSc course in human ecology which I direct at Edinburgh University.



"This was intended to make environmental workers into more than just rebels without a clue"

I was describing our "Ecological Ethics and Education" module. It includes a feminist reappraisal of the denial of feeling which Plato set going, liberation theology, eco-psychology, creativity and consciousness raising. But these were not primarily what RIC was in need of. They lived all that. Ten years previously they had played a lead role in helping prevent the logging of Australia's Terania Creek and forming the Nightcap National Park. Now, with new battles against logging in New South Wales and internationally against Mitsubishi, they were in need of rather more conventional organisational skills to hold themselves together for the long-haul.

So it was that John zeroed in on my "Organisational Finance and Management" module. This was intended to make future environmental workers into more than just rebels without a clue. And I told him that it had a hidden half to its title. An extension, which I hadn't bothered worrying most of my academic colleagues with: "Organisational Finance and Management - as a Far Out Spiritual Experience"!

He rolled about laughing. I explained how something as potentially boring as finance and management can come alive by drawing out both the beauty and perversions of the underlying spiritual psychodynamics. This can be done even while teaching accountancy! You end up getting under the skin of money, seeing how it can both affirm and destroy the lifeforce. Management itself is twin-bladed. It can be an instrument of control and exploitation, or a caring discipline capable of combining organisational goals with individual fulfilment.

John booked me on the spot. He'd find the fare, I'd give the time.

• • •

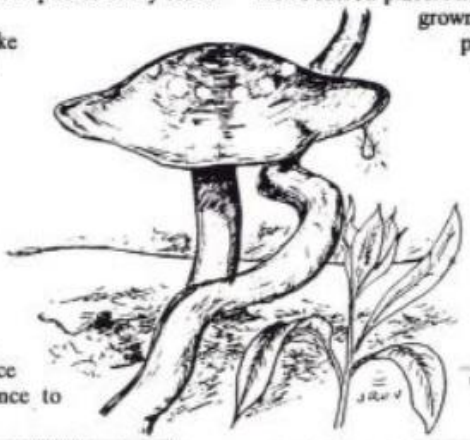
"Of course, such high finance cannot be taught without using Alice Walker's poetry to balance the books"

Of course, such high finance cannot be taught without using Alice Walker's poetry to balance the books. I mean, Alice Walker the great alternative economist, who sees that "We alone can devalue gold by not caring if it falls or rises in the marketplace". Alice, who tells us to Resist! because "Violence does not work except for the man who pays your salary ... if you could still weep you would not take the job". And Alice, whose eyes see that "The diamonds on Liz's bosom are not as bright as his eyes the morning they took him to work in the mines".

And so - Alice Walker, dear black American prophet of what it means to come alive to life...Let me tell you a story from the last day of my training course in Australia. You see, nine years ago I gave some organisational finance and management advice to your friend, Efua Dorkenoo. It was when she was setting up Forward, the movement against female circumcision. Later I lost touch. But then I saw her on TV featuring with you on the South Bank Show. The programme ended with those words which made me whoop aloud, about resistance being the secret of possessing joy. Efua symbolised resistance; you, joy. I knew that I must look her up again.

We met in London's Africa Centre earlier this year. Efua insisted I write to you, even transcribing your private address into my copy of Horses Make a Landscape Look More Beautiful. She said, and I question if I'm worthy of this, to say to you that I'm a "long lost brother". She wanted me to tell you how I use your poems in my teaching.

I said you must get letters like that all the time. But she made me promise to tell you anyway...like how I'll draw Horses or Revolutionary Petunias out of the pockets in my Harris tweed smock, and YELL out a poem in the middle of a lecture. And then, maybe read another, this time, ever so tenderly. And perhaps further articulate the point by pulling out my whistle. Plaintive grace notes leading to elation. Resistance to joy.



"The diamonds on Liz's bosom are not as bright as his eyes the morning they took him to work in the mines"

All this, Alice...and this will make you smile...to students of forestry or resource management or MBAs...engineering, veterinary science ... divinity ... even, animal production! And there'll be tears, and rage, and melting of hearts (maybe some hardening too, but it's all about whole living and sometimes the crust has to harden before it flakes). Half of them doubtless think I'm crazy, but the Africans and Indians usually love it. And I do get invited back, well, quite often.

But back to Australia, and to your poem, *Rage*. It just captured the dynamic with those amazing folks at RIC. 'Twas like I was trying to press them to order, and they were serving anarchy, but more interwoven than that. At first we'd seemed so far apart. I felt like in a psychological three-piece suit, telling them what they didn't always want to hear and maybe wasn't right for them. But then we got on to using Quaker business practice. And Alison invoked the Goddess (there being, of course, no male and no female in your "good friend" Jesus Christ. I just love that poem!) And we danced round the fire. Took turns with childcare. Made music: in short, made love in so many of its colours.

By the ninth day, the anarchy and order came into relationship. Just like you half-promised it would, Alice, when you wrote for me, for RIC, for everyone that:

In me there is a rage to defy
the order of the stars
despite their pretty patterns.
To see if Gods who hold forth now
on human thrones
can will away my lust
to dare
and press to order the anarchy
I would serve."

And so to the tenth and last day. We were all swimming skyclad in Protesters Falls. Would you believe, this hundred foot waterfall was officially named that by the government in honour of those who had saved Terania Creek from being logged! The falls are the Aboriginal men's sacred place. Afterwards, we walked along an overgrown forest path to the women's sacred place, the Circle Pool. Single file we stepped, mindfully, taking it in turns to carry the baby.

Leeches. Brightly coloured birds calling. The scent of flowers. Trees. Grass. And someone upfront calls out, "WOW!". Each woman and man goes "Wow!" as they reach the same spot. Me too.

"What kind of a faerie lives here?"

And there, like out of a child's picture book, is this hollow rotting tree. It has an arched door-like opening overhung with dusty old cobwebs.

At the entrance, the en-trance as Mary Daly might say, was this mushroom. I tell you, Alice, it was quite the most exquisitely beautiful mushroom I have ever seen.

It had a slightly bulbous, pristine white stem. And a perfectly circular mottled grey cap, around which was a ring of white spots. It was just so lovely! As crisp and fresh as God in the morning light. Even these - especially these! - seasoned ecologists gazed in wonder.

And I said, "What kind of a wizard lives in this house?" Then I corrected myself. It was too small for a wizard's house. So I said: "What kind of a faerie lives here?"

Everyone laughed. I mean, here was me, the relative straight in the group, enquiring after faeries!

After a while the others moved on down to Circle Pool. But I stayed, Alice. I stayed for me and you and all the people I love like I love you.

I stayed. And staring far through the arched door, I spoke so deep within myself that it rang aloud through the whole forest. I asked, again, "What kind of a faerie lives here?"

John Seed's *Extinction* song echoed back to me. (John! You old shaman!) *Sap coursing through a mammal branch/ Touches you, a trembling human being/ Send your roots back through the tree of life/ Shedding false humanis-*



tic beliefs/ You fall to your knees/ In some still natural place/ Embrace the trees/ Feel ecology pierce your heart.

"You fall to your knees!" - "go on," I felt, "fall to your knees". I did. On the reddy-brown earth. A bit self-consciously, but never mind.

And again the question. Bursting in me now. "What kind of a faerie lives here?"

Repeated. Half thinking that if there were such things as flower faeries, one might dash past just on the edge of my field of vision, through the cobwebs and up into the tree. If faeries were real, now was the time to see one, or never.

"A person becomes a person inasmuch as they're listened to, allowed to be visible"

In the back of the tree was some termite-eaten wood. As I dwelt on my question, I was half-blocking it out from my mind. It was distracting me. I could vaguely see in it a face like a grim old man. He was staring, motionless, down at the earth, rather like one of those New Guinea spirit masks. Not what I was looking for.

Again, my question. And this time, the old man spoke. Yes, he actually spoke! As clear and subjectively objective as you could want!

In a big, empowered, booming voice, he spoke, and said: "I am the faerie who lives here".

"No, no," I replied, "You're just a sour old face I'm imagining in rotting wood. I'm looking for a flower faerie. You're not one of them".

"Oh," he responded, quizzically. " I thought you were the one who's always going on to your students about radical feminist theology?"

"What's that got to do with it?"

"Just that you're always telling them about calling one-another into being. That a person becomes a person in community inasmuch as they're heard, listened to, allowed to be visible."

Well! I tell you Alice. He had me by my own ideals! To deny his reality would have been to deny part of what I most value.

So I said to him, "Fair enough, but if I accept that, I'm going to start seeing faeries all over the place."

He laughed and laughed. He said that there are faeries all over the place if we'll only acknowledge them! And I saw that when mythologist Joseph Camp bell talks about "Masks of God", there's really no limit on the numbers or forms of these masks. Here I was, face to face with one of them.

"There are faeries all over the place if we'll only acknowledge them!"

"Tell me then," I asked, "what kind of a faerie are you?"

He swelled with pride. He smiled the smile of one who knew he was about to give another big laugh. "I," he said, "am the Rotting Tree Faerie!"

As he said it, I could feel from him the great processes of death and decay going on in this old tree. And not just that tree, but all rotting trees. It was the liberation theology principle of the preferential option for the poor applied in nature; God, the nature spirit at work. Grafting away at what most people would dismiss as one of the world's less glamourous occupations.

"So tell me," I asked, "I always thought faeries looked joyful. You look like the undertaker I suppose you are. Tell me then, what kind of things give you joy in life?"

Again, a great expectant smile. This was the question he'd been most looking forward to. His voice boomed out: "Rotting trees give me joy in life!"

And I laughed and laughed with him as he pointed out that even the cobwebs over his door were falling apart. Everything about his house was decaying. He just loved it this way. It was the same pleasure I saw in John Seed when he told me about his house in the forest. He'd made it out of a scrapped double-decker bus. He took pride in using only materials so old that nobody else would recycle them. I'd asked if that didn't compromise beauty, but he said it *was* the beauty. I agreed when he took me there. It was magical. A wizard's house; big enough too.

"One last question," I begged. "If you're the Rotting Tree Faerie, and if you're totally into rot and death and all that side of life, how come that at your door is quite the most sublime mushroom I've ever seen?"

"One side of his Janus face was the mask of death in wood. The other, the mushroom"

More great laughter. The whole forest joined in. I mean, we human beings are just so funny sometimes. "The mushroom," he said, "is at my door because I AM the Rotting Tree Faerie".

And he let me feel the mushroom's mycelia reach down into the roots. And up through every part of that dying tree. I felt the molecular processes of rot taking place. I felt what Walt Whitman called the "procreant urge of the world"; the joyfulness of that lovemaking between fungus and tree, together recycling nutrients and biomass for new growth.

I saw the direct connection between the mushroom and the faerie. It was his Janus face. One side was the mask of death in crumbled wood. The other, the mushroom - a veritable flower faerie. I ran down to Circle Pool to tell everyone what had just happened. Steve, with the long blond hair and the Aboriginal soul, just beamed joy back into my face.

"Now you know what the forest is really about," he said.

And I realised I had just graduated from a training course in organisational finance and management. That, as a far out spiritual experience.

Alastair McIntosh is director of the Master of Science course in the Department of Human Ecology at Edinburgh University.

Search Wikipedia Search

Alastair McIntosh

1 language

Article Talk Read Edit View history

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

Alastair McIntosh is a Scottish writer, academic and activist.

He was brought up in Leurbost on the Isle of Lewis and is married to Vérène Nicolas. He is involved with Scottish land reform especially on Eigg and campaigned successfully against the Harris superquarry in Lingerbay. He is a fellow of the Centre for Human Ecology, an Honorary Fellow of the Schumacher Society, and helped to set up the Govan based GalGael Trust of which he is Treasurer and a non-executive director. In 2006 he was appointed to the honorary position of visiting professor of Human Ecology at the University of Strathclyde (Department of Geography & Sociology)[1] – the first such post in Human ecology in a Scottish university.

Alastair also features on Nizlopi's mini album 'Extraordinary' on the track titled 'Homage To Young Men'.[2]

Alastair McIntosh



Alastair McIntosh, in 2010.

Born	1955 (age 70–71)
Education	Universities of Aberdeen (BSc), Edinburgh (MBA), Ulster (PhD)
Occupations	Writer, academic and activist
Spouse	Vérène Nicolas

Education [edit]

He holds a BSc in geography, submajoring in moral philosophy and psychology from the University of Aberdeen (1977), a financial MBA from the University of Edinburgh (1981), and in 2008 the Academy of Irish Cultural Heritages (of which he is a Visiting Fellow) at the University of Ulster approved the award of PhD by Published Work based on *Soil and Soul* and twelve supporting publications presented with a short linking thesis, 'Some Contributions of Liberation Theology to Community Empowerment in Scottish Land Reform 1991-2003'.[3] Parts of this were published in 2008 as Schumacher Briefing No. 15: 'Rekindling Community: Connecting People, Environment and Spirituality'.

Publications [edit]

His best-known work is his 2001 book *Soil and Soul: People Versus Corporate Power*. In 2006 he published his collected poetry, *Love and Revolution*. His 2008 book on the psychology and spirituality underlying climate change "Hell and High Water: Climate Change, Hope and the Human Condition" was described by Michael Russell MSP, Minister for the Environment in the Scottish Government as "a profoundly important book, just as *Soil and Soul* was a profoundly important book."[4]

Bibliography [edit]

- *Healing Nationhood: Essays on Spirituality, Place and Community*, Curlew Productions, May 2000, ISBN 1-900259-95-8
- *Soil and Soul: People versus Corporate Power*, Aurum Press, October 2001, ISBN 1-85410-942-1
- *Love and Revolution: Collected Poetry*, Luath Press, September 2006, ISBN 1-905222-58-0
- *Hell and High Water: Climate Change, Hope and the Human Condition*, Birlinn, June 2008, ISBN 1-84158-622-6
- *Rekindling Community: Connecting People, Environment and Spirituality*, Green Books, September 2008, ISBN 1-900322-38-2, Alastair McIntosh and colleagues in association with WWF International and the Centre for Human Ecology
- *Spiritual Activism: Leadership as Service*, by Alastair McIntosh and Matt Carmichael, Green Books (UK), September 2014, ISBN 9780857843005. Published in North America by UIT Cambridge Ltd., October 2015, ISBN 9780857843005
- *Poacher's Pilgrimage: an Island Journey*, Birlinn Books (UK), ISBN 9781780274683.
- *Riders on the Storm: the Climate Crisis and the Survival of Being*, Birlinn Books (UK), August 2020, ISBN 9781780276397