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KATE WALTERS *The Saint and the Oystercatcher*

Book page and pen

This work was made during one of three artist residencies I had on the Isle of Iona. I was researching St. Brigid and the oystercatcher which came to protect her. I was also beginning to practise a process of tuning into my body in a deep way, and using it to help me sense things around me, in the great beauty and clarity of Iona.

Alastair McIntosh

God Carry Me

It was one of those strange conversations that happen during winter on the islands of the Scottish Hebrides. In the past, looking back beyond the 18th century, winter was when the bardic schools gathered. Taking advantage of the loss of outer light, they would deepen to the inner light, to scry into and speak unto the condition of the people.

We were coming down a rocky little gully in the west. She was of the Iona Community, one of many who, each year, conduct the plainsong daily chores that help sustain the ancient abbey. And she had been worn smooth from all the season's labours. A senior figure, mid-fifties, ordained in one of the mainline churches, she had known both sheer exhaustion in her job and perhaps what the military call 'the loneliness of high command'. The loneliness of what it means to see a complex situation from vantage points unavailable to others.

'Our calling', as one of her predecessors had once told me, 'is to carry a burden of awareness. But to come to know it as a *precious* burden of awareness.' Such a calling to vocation is – as the word suggests – vocal. Whether from outwith or within, it is something that is heard to be understood. And this is the challenging bit: it is something that it may not be our shout to call.

Think about the source of calling in our lives. Pink Floyd lyricised it thus: 'An echo of a distant time / Comes willowing across the sand.' Donovan, too, in the title of his 1968 album, 'Like It Is, Was, and Evermore Shall Be'. Hailing from Glasgow, he may have known the origin in Psalm 133, and in its gritty old Scots version: 'As it wes in the beginnin', is nou, an' aye sall laist.' Who would have believed that even back then, they were into definitions of 'sustainable development'?

I too am concerned with sustainability, with the depth that is called on us in these times, so that for as long as the Earth in its own rhythms and ways endures, 'aye sall laist.'

*

The Very Reverend Dr. George MacLeod, who founded the Iona Community in the 1930s, was a pioneering figure in green politics. In 1989, by which time he was into his nineties, he became the first peer to represent the Green Party in the House of Lords.

The first time that I met him had been almost a decade earlier. I was queuing for a railway ticket at Waverley Station in Edinburgh. There were about six lines, each with a dozen or more people waiting, and immediately in front of me stood a man of commanding frame and presence.

On hearing his aristocratic accent – family circumstance had led him to possess the articulation of the English landed classes rather than a clergyman of Highland provenance – I peered around his shoulder. The chequebook that he held announced: *Lord MacLeod of Fuinary*.

'Excuse me,' I said, touching a hand on his shoulder as the clerk processed his ticket. 'Would you be Lord MacLeod, the anti-nuclear man?' He was, at that time, battering the Church of Scotland at its General Assembly each year, eventually succeeding in getting them to declare nuclear weapons ungodly.

He turned a full 180 degrees, to face me directly, before delivering his answer. 'I most certainly am Lord MacLeod, the anti-nuclear man,' he boomed, right across the station.

Work stopped at every kiosk. Everybody turned and froze, their attention galvanised, as if onto a pop-up pulpit.

'And have you heard the latest news?'

'What is that?' I asked, self-consciously.

'The Americans have just named their latest nuclear submarine *Corpus Christi*. The Body of Christ. Now, *that is blasphemy!*'

He turned back round, and carried on writing out his cheque.

Twice decorated for bravery in the Great War, George's emergent pacifism was all the more cogent because he had engaged first-hand in death. 'How does it feel to be returning once more to Iona?' a journalist had once asked him on the pier at Fionnphort, hoping for a jubilant feel-good response.

He answered grimly: 'It feels like getting back into the trenches.' George knew the cost of battle, both materially and spiritually.

He was not alone with such experiences on Iona. Around the year AD 698, Saint Adomnán, the eighth abbot after Saint Columba, mentioned that a book he had just finished had been written 'in what I admit is a poor style, but I have done so in the face of daily labour coming from all sides: the sheer volume of ecclesiastical concerns seems so overwhelming.'

Columba himself, Adomnán tells us, 'often brought spiritual refreshment to certain of his monks who felt that he came in spirit to meet them on the road.'

They'd reach the halfway point across the island after spending all day at the harvest, when 'each of them seemed to feel a wonderful and strange sensation.' As one described it:

In the last few days and even now, I am conscious of a wonderful fragrance like all flowers gathered into one; and of heat like fire, not the fire of torment but somehow sweet. And I feel too a strange, incomparable joy poured into my heart. In an instant it refreshes me wonderfully and makes me so joyful that I forget all sadness, all toil. Even the load on my back, though it is not light, none the less from this point all the way to the monastery – I know not how – feels weightless so that I cannot tell I am carrying it. (Adomnán, *Vita*, 1:37).

*

So there we were. She of the modern-day Iona Community, and me, in the second decade of this Third Millennium. She had led us in a pilgrim group down to Saint Columba's Bay. Now, we were heading back, picking a way down through a fissure between the rocks that opens to the broad Atlantic beach. From there, there is nothing until Newfoundland. We had slipped back from the rest, just out of earshot.

'So how's it been?' I asked her.

'It's been better this year,' she confided, 'but at its worst, angels carried me.'

'Angels?' I said, a little nonplussed (but only a little – it's not uncommon in the Hebrides to hear such stories).

'Yes, angels of a sort,' she smiled.

'It was very simple, really,' she continued. 'Disarmingly so. I was coming down this little valley, weighed down by the burdens of the year, struggling with how to carry on with each next step.'

'I was coming down, just as we are now, a little apart from the rest of the group, when I became aware that George MacLeod and Saint Columba were at my side. And they were carrying me.'

*

She and I hadn't been in contact for some years. In the writing of this essay, I enquired to find a recent email address and dropped her a line. Might I use her story? Had I remembered it correctly? She answered warmly in the affirmative, adding:

That descent of the brae has stayed with me as a moment of such deep reassurance – those two great men gently and powerfully came either side of me and carried me down the brae. And so I carried on.

*

I am not asking you to believe that Saint Columba literally reappeared, in person, with his good pal George Macleod, to aid my friend through times of trouble. That would be to misplace focus onto the small question. It would be to frame a greater truth inside a limited understanding of space and time and consciousness such as can only handle smaller truths. It would be to try to trump the mythos – the inner imaginal realm (which is not the same as make-believe imaginary) that sustains the meanings of reality – with the realm of the logos, the outer reasoning powers, by which we order and interrogate the world.

In an essay called 'The Religion of the Future', the late Indian-Spanish and Hindu-Christian scholar, Raimon Panikkar, examines the difficulties that the modern Western mind faces in finding itself compelled to conduct 'an intense reading of the signs of the times'. The essence of the difficulty, he suggests, is that we approach the future by extrapolating from the present. However, 'not everything is fully contained in the present', and so, 'Ultimately, the answer to this question belongs to

prophecy.' In particular, prophesy that addresses the pressing issues of our time, whether in the microcosm of a movement like the Iona Community, or the macrocosm of such 'wicked' global problems as poverty, war and ecocide, from the vantage point of mythos, as well as logos.

[It] open[s] up a fundamental reflexion into contemporary man's self-understanding. What is going on here is a particular example of the inter-dependency between the *mythos* and the *logos*. The human *logos* can only function within a concrete *mythos*, but this *mythos* in turn is conditioned by the interpretation the *logos* gives to it. In our day, definitions of religion, most of them of Western mint, cannot avoid presenting the content as well as the function of religion, from within a given perspective basically conditioned by history. Therefore, if today the myth is undergoing a mutation, our fundamental understanding of religion must also undergo a modification. This is not so much a matter of 'new religions' of the future as of a new experience of the religious dimension of existence.

The daily problems with which the carriers of spiritual life on Iona had wrestled, from the monks of Columba's time, through Adomnán, all the way on to my friend and others like her today, were of the realm of logos; but their seeing through came from the depth of mythos.

The West has tended to speak of God in terms of logos – translated in John's gospel through a Greek perception plane as 'the Word'. The East counterpoints this with the mystery of mythos. These, like the Yin and the Yang both held within the wholeness of the Tao, are interdependent, as Panikkar points out. A Hindu term that expresses that underlying wholeness is the *dharma*. Dharma is often translated as the 'truth' or 'law', but literally the Sanskrit means 'that which sustains'. Stretched out through space and time, from out of all eternity, it is the ongoing opening of the way of God. In Christian teaching, 'I am the way, the truth and the life' (John 14:6) perfectly expresses this dynamic sense of dharma.

There is an intriguing overlap of both sound and meaning between the proto-Indo-European *dher-* as the root of 'dharma', and *dhe-* as the root of 'doom'. Sanskrit scholars tell me this is probably just

coincidental. But in the mischievous etymologies of the mind, to conflate them serves to hint that in our doom is our dharma. When Private Frazer used to say 'We're a' doomed' in the British comedy, *Dad's Army*, he was speaking (as a Scotsman should) the deepest spiritual truth.

The mistake of some faith traditions is to approach doom too rationally, and to miss the insight of the mystics – both of East and West – that we are integral participants in the whole. Says the *Isa Upanishad*: 'Who sees all beings in his own Self, and his own Self in all beings, loses all fear.' Says the Second Letter of Peter, 1:4 in the King James translation: '... that by these ye might be partakers of the divine nature'.

It is not that we are handed down our doom, or that we have it dumped upon us by some higher authoritarian power. Rather, our doom or destiny read as opening to the dharma is the deep unfolding of our nature, our authenticity, our self-realisation – and note the Upanishad's remark that there is no fear in doom, so understood.

Uncivilisation, the Dark Mountain manifesto, speaks of doom in the way that folks involved in movements such as Extinction Rebellion do:

Secretly, we all think we are doomed: even the politicians think this; even the environmentalists. Some of us deal with it by going shopping. Some deal with it by hoping it is true. Some give up in despair. Some work frantically to try and fend off the coming storm.

Am I in danger here of confusing categories of doom? Only if we fail to see that the relative doom of our daily lives is held within the greater hand of absolute doom – the dharma – that opening of the way of God. It is noteworthy that in Scotland there are 'doomster' hills, places where the laws as 'doom' were handed down. Here tribal right relationships, or dharma as it might be said, were set in place.

To survive spiritually in coming times, we have to operate within both space and time, with the practicalities of the logos. But we also have to operate outside of space and time, in the prophetic realm of visioning that is the mythos. We have to get on with both the daily grind on 'Tona' – or acting on the world's ecological plight, or whatever is our calling – *and* we have to learn to see the wider picture that sustains it all as we – with Blake – become the builders of 'Jerusalem', what Martin Luther

King spoke of as 'the beloved community'. Again, in our doom is our dharma.

'And so I carried on,' said my friend.

*

God carry me was the expression – the mantra or the prayer, one might say – that came to me when I reflected on this and similar experiences of struggle against the odds. These days, weighed down with demands, or when walking into situations that I'm not sure how to handle, I repeat those words: *God carry me*. Let go into the dharma – the way, the truth and the life.

*

But *how*? I hear the persistent question. *How* do we ground all that?

In 1990, after Raimon Panikkar had delivered his Gifford Lectures at the University of Edinburgh (now published as *The Rhythm of Being*), a small group of us, headed up by Alastair Hulbert, invited him to come to Govan, the hard-pressed former mercantile ship-building area of Glasgow. At the end of a scintillating lecture titled 'Agriculture, Technoculture, or Human Culture?' I asked him:

'Panikkarji, you have given a brilliant exposition of what is wrong with the world. But *how* can we...'

I hardly needed to finish. He replied, 'It is not for me to tell you the how. You must work out the how for yourself.'

I was left slightly unsatisfied. Afterwards, Professor Frank Whaling of Edinburgh University took him upstairs to conduct an interview. It fell on me to deliver a pot of tea.

I poured it out and offered milk. Panikkar reached out for the sugar. One spoon. Two spoons. Three heaped spoons.

He was about to dip into the bowl for a fourth time, when he paused, looked up at me, and realising that he'd just been talking about culture and cultural differences, asked, 'How many...?'

It came to me quick as a flash. 'Panikkarji! It is not for me to tell you the how. You must...'

The great soul, *mahatma*, that he was, roared with laughter. I can't

remember if he took the extra spoonful, but the question never goes away. *How* can we birth – or rather, be birthed by – processes that are beyond our ken, into the deepening journey that gives life?

We cannot prescribe the *how*. Panikkarji was right in that. But we can accompany, witness and testify. It is for this reason that my wife and I are involved with the GalGael Trust in Govan, where we live. Outwardly our people build traditional wooden boats and, with them, connect to the natural environment. Inwardly, we hold open a space where people who have been through crushing times can rebuild their lives; by opening the doors of creativity, holding spaces for conviviality, and learning how to be community.

For each of the past four years, we have made a weekend pilgrimage to Iona – in March, before the tourists turn up. With the help of a Quaker trust and benefactors who appear by magic, we hire a couple of minibuses, John at the Iona Hostel gives a friendly rate, and we head up on a Friday morning by road and two ferries. There, we settle into a very loose exploration of what ‘spirituality’ may, or may not, mean for us. On the Saturday we’ll visit the medieval abbey, the Celtic knotwork on the ancient stones a testament to our people’s creativity. We’ll take a pilgrimage down to Saint Columba’s Bay. In the evening, we’ll have a deep sharing around what gives folks meaning, perhaps down on the beach or in one of the abbey’s side chapels. On the Sunday, we’ll have a final sharing round the hostel table and then climb the hill and have a splash in the Well of Eternal Youth, before taking the ferry home.

In the outer sense of logos, it is about creating a container for experience. But what happens inwardly? One of our folk left us with a streetwise answer to the question *how*?

Pain is the touchstone of spirituality. That’s what speaks to me. In the darkest spaces of my life, I know there’s somebody with me. I never went looking for that in Iona, but on Iona you could feel the life you were created for. I felt alive, looking at the stars, you could touch them. That, in a nutshell, is spirituality. If you don’t go within, you go without.