

Alastair McIntosh

Hope



The doorbell went, but nobody was there. Just a handwritten note wedged between the storm doors. It was from a neighbour, up the far end of the street. I didn't know her, but she set it out so tenderly upon a scrap of paper.

She said there'd been a posting on *Acumfaegovan*. That's the Facebook page 'I come from Govan'. Somebody had mentioned that we keep a black-and-white cat. There'd been an accident. The white transit never stopped. As the note had it: 'The wee soul passed away minutes after being hit. I'm so sorry if you are this wee gorgeous cat's owner.'

Mabelle – a name that means 'My beautiful' in French – had first turned up nine years ago. We'd see the odd dead mouse deposited out the back, a gift and visiting card. Soon she took to meowing for attention, day and night. We'd chase her off. But in the morning, she'd be sleeping on the window sill, tail dampened in the rain. She started to befriend my wife Vèrène when at her morning

meditation in the garden. Then one day, I found her inside sitting in an armchair. That was it. We were adopted. Our adopting her just took a little longer. We checked she wasn't microchipped or on a local missing list. Next stop, was the cat flap.

But now, this neighbour's note. Vèrène was out, thank goodness, and I clutched the scrap of paper like a death certificate as a new and harsh reality took shape, and I dashed around the house and called her name already half-lamenting. There was no sign.

I dashed on up the street. The neighbour was so kind. There seems to be an informal neighbourhood cat watch. Another woman, several streets away, had taken the body to her home for identification and to be claimed.

What struck me, was how part of me observed my own reactions. I had a sense I've known before, as if the greater self from far away watches the machinations of the smaller self. Alongside the emerging grief was a sense of letting go into the Godspace. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust, life to love.

I asked to see where the accident had taken place. A pool of blood dried darkly in the sunshine.

'That's odd,' I said. 'Mabelle doesn't usually venture this far along the road.'

'It might not be yours!' the woman said, hopefully.

'But it will still be somebody's,' I said. I felt the odd dilemma. On the one hand, my small self: 'Let this cup pass.' On the other hand, my greater self: 'Not as I will, but as Thou wilt.'

For if it wasn't ours, who else's? Perhaps a child's dear friend? Perhaps an old folk's sole companion? And those lines in *Four Quartets*, so challenging and pertinent: 'I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope/For hope would be hope for the wrong thing.' The cross did not deflect the violence of the world. The cross *absorbs* the violence of the world.

I went back to the house to get a box. I'd take it round to where the dead cat lay in rest. But there

was still, in the ordinary sense of the word, hope. I checked the house more carefully. And there she was! Our dear Mabelle, curled up fast asleep in a cupboard.

It turned out that the pet that had been killed had ventured from another street. It was a 15-year-old tom. And who knows? At such a ripe age for a cat, maybe starting to go deaf or blind or worse, a speedy passing can be a blessing in disguise.

When Vèrène came home, she said she'd seen it being tended as she'd left the house. There was nothing to be done. But the image settled in her deeply. It brought home the compound tragedies of human beings in such localities as Palestine or Ukraine. Our concern was with a cat. But for other folks? Imagine!

Where, then, is God in such times? 'God,' as the poet Hugh MacDiarmid said, 'if there is one'? What does God survey, from the cross on which the broken world was laid? In times of grief, perhaps we get a glimpse.

'Keep your spirit in hell, and despair not,' said Saint Silouan of Mount Athos. How is that possible? Because, said the Orthodox theologian Paul Evdokimov, 'As deep as the hell in which we find ourselves, it is even more profound to find Christ already there waiting for us.' And he added: 'We can only fall into God and it is God who never despairs.'

Thus, the acceptance. Thus, the ground of deeper hope. 'Be still, and know ...'

One of the most ecological passages in the Bible is chapter 12 of the Book of Job. If you want to make sense of suffering and injustice, advises Job, then ask of the beasts of the field. Or the birds of the air. Or the fishes of the sea.

'Or speak to the earth, and it shall teach thee!' For the hand of God 'hath wrought this'.

God, 'in whose hand is the soul of every living thing, and the breath of all humankind'.

Aye, ask of the beasts, and birds, and fishes, and of the Earth. And might we add: stray alley cats? ●

Alastair McIntosh's most recent books are *Poacher's Pilgrimage: An Island Journey* and *Riders on the Storm*, on the science and spirituality of climate change. He will be leading the 'Pilgrimage of Life' Week at Iona Abbey, 5-11 October, 2024.

Mabelle in the sun. Photo: Verene Nicolas

Coracle Poetry contest 2025

Announcing – the 2025 *Coracle* poetry contest, on the theme of hope.

Judges: Kathy Galloway (*This Is Who We Are, The Dream of Learning Our True Name, Love Burning Deep*), Rosemary Power (*The Gift of Stillness, Refugees from Eden, Image and Vision*), and Jan Sutch Pickard (*Pocket Full of Crumbs, Between High and Low Water, Out of Iona*).

Winners will be published in *Coracle*.

More information to follow. ●

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