



# Prophetic and Mystic Voices

Craig Potton

"Francis! Don't you see my house has collapsed? Go and repair it for me."

St Francis heard this calling from God when praying in the Church of San Damiano. This earth, God's house, is on the verge of ecological collapse right now.

Initially, Francis got it slightly wrong and thought his calling was to rebuild the rundown church he was in. Then he really understood the call and went out into the world clothed in holy poverty, helping poor people, talking compassionately to animals, taking on politics with the Pope and the Sultan of Jerusalem in an open and relatively non-dogmatic way. His life became a struggle against evil in the world.

And that can clearly be our task too, at whatever level of intensity we wish to engage. There is no choice now, if we want to stop the collapse of our house, the biosphere. We can aid in the repair of what is left but sadly we have already consigned many species to extinction and that can never be redeemed.

I am going to take it as read that all the participants at this conference accept that humans are causing an ecological crisis manifested in global warming, mass extinctions, and the destruction and pollution of much of the beauty of the natural world - our world.

My focus today is solely what it will take for us to repair that which is left.

We restore nature largely by protecting it from ourselves. Beyond that, we cannot go much further, for the earth, its atmosphere and its inhabitants are not something humans made. Life began some 4.5 billion years ago without us, and the theory of evolution is the most reasonable explanation for how life has developed into today's biosphere. Of course, there is a wonderful, poetic and inspirational concept expressed in Jewish and Hindu mysticism, in which creation is constantly re-made in every moment, and because we inevitably participate in every moment we can affect it profoundly. I would not however, over-emphasise the pragmatic or political value of that insight - nature is mostly beyond our human powers of creation. Remember, all Solomon's glory doesn't equal a flower. Furthermore, we can live without Solomon's manufactured wonders but we cannot live without the oxygen of flowering plants and our world is so much less without their beauty. Kabir, a Muslim/Hindu mystic, said it clearly 500 years ago ...

"Without living beings, beings can't live  
Life is the basis of life  
Be kind to beings  
Take care of them  
Pandit, think it over"

To return to St Francis's image of a wrecked house, as with so much of St Francis's speaking, there is an innate appropriateness in the metaphor of our home. We must learn to see the earth and all other creatures as something homely, something intimate that we are proud of, where young and old, male and female share life-sustaining food and comfort and, most of all, care and love. When he wrote the Canticle of Brother Sun, he said "I wish to compose a new hymn about the Lord's creatures of which we make daily use, without which we cannot live and with which the human race greatly offends."

It is a new hymn (a song, not a thesis) which we must create urgently if we are to encounter this world in its fullness and protect it.

Two major seismic shifts have to occur in our behaviour and understanding if we are to halt further collapse. Firstly, we must act collectively and individually in the political arena to protect the untrammelled integrity of ecosystems, and secondly, we must individually and culturally become more compassionate, intimate and sensual with all nature. Both calls to action are not only foreshadowed in the Torah, but I would maintain they are two grand central rivers running through it. I also believe these two rivers, one prophetic and angry, the other poetic and mystical, run through each of us individually, even though they may be subterranean or simply blocked up. Our spiritual task is to urgently release both flows within us to the surface to correct our relationship with nature.

In the second river, there is a stream of constant wonder, at times stupefying and bewildering, at times delightful, sensual and intimate, before the given natural world. This also includes long epiphanies on the eros between man and woman as one of God's great delights. But it is the dark river of heartburning anger at the way people treat each other and the given world, the prophetic call for justice that I will turn to first.

For reasons that can only be touched on obliquely in this address, most religious traditions have failed us in the prophetic call for our societies to address the injustices we mete out upon other humans and other creatures. Isaiah, St Francis, Gautama Buddha, Baal Shem Tov and Gandhi, to name some exemplars, have been isolated voices in placing justice, love and compassion for the earth and other creatures at the core of their faith, along with their call for justice and love to other humans.

None of the major faith systems, with the exception of Jainism, have made sufficient ethical and theological grounds for impelling political action from these wise men's injunctions. It is hard to comprehend why two cultures -- European Christianity that produced a St Thomas Aquinas, who concluded that intelligent, social and pain-feeling animals have no soul; and India, that produced a subtle metaphysics which is so sensitive to the soul of animals -- should both end up with an equally appalling record of abusing nature. The environmental crisis as delineated by global warming, pollution, species extinction and habitat loss, cannot be ignored until tomorrow without irreversible damage occurring.

Thus, although important, we can put poetic or philosophic questions of Gaia, personal growth and understanding aside and the sun will still rise much the same tomorrow (unless, as some Jewish mystics believe, enough good men force the Messiah to come ... but that's a long shot to bank on and has a history of failures!). But the sun will not rise the same without immediate political action.

A *'sea of faith'* is worse than useless (because you might kid yourself you are doing something when you aren't) without an ocean of politics. There is a very real sense that only involvement in politics, and not just focussing on matters of self purity or good intentions, or hoping for the destiny of the great mother Gaia to wreak some vengeful, self-righting action on humans, will bring about ecological stability again. The insistent prophetic spiritual call is for the individual to act alongside others in our political arenas to bring about justice (love can even take a back seat on this one) to enact procedures and legally binding agreements to restore ecosystems. Nothing else will do it. As St Francis said in his call to action, "let us begin, for until now, we have done little or nothing."

In historic and mythic terms it was during the Axial period (600-400 BC) that people found they had free will, also saw that evil existed alongside the good, and realised that they had to learn individual responsibility for their actions. Gradually, people came to see that religious practice of ritual obedience and cultus were useless without a conscious moral compulsion to do good; an imperative to act. It was the voice of Hebrew prophets that first attempted to tear the people from their altars and send them out into the world.

I hate, I despise your feast days,  
And I will not smell in your solemn assemblies.  
Though ye offer me burnt offerings and your meat offerings,  
I will not accept them:  
neither will I regard the peace offerings of your fat beasts.  
Take away from me the noise of your songs;  
for I will not hear the melody of thy viols.

(Amos 5.21-4)

For I desire mercy, and not sacrifice;  
and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings

(Hosea 6.6)

To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices unto me? saith the Lord:

I am full of the burnt offerings of rams,  
and the fat of fed beasts;  
and I delight not in the blood of bullocks  
or of lambs or of he-goats ...  
Bring no more vain oblations;  
incense is an abomination unto me;  
the new moons and Sabbaths  
and your appointed feasts my soul hateth:  
they are a trouble unto me;

I am weary to bear them.  
And when ye spread forth your hands,  
I will hide mine eyes from you:  
yea, when ye make many prayers, I will not hear:  
your hands are full of blood.  
Wash you, make you clean;  
put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes;  
cease to do evil; learn to do well;  
seek judgement, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow  
*(Isaiah 1:11-15)*

The environmental crisis requires no different a response than that needed to deal with social justice.

That God acts in history was a seminal breakthrough in the insight of Jewish faith. Every event in history throws its weight in the scale of God's balance, and as time is linear, events only happen once. Thus every deed, irrespective of whether a person performing it is aiming at the right goal, or is pure in heart or not, is potentially meaningful and uplifting. Here in the world of practical decision-making and alleviating action, I find myself at odds with the emphasis that Eastern and Middle Eastern spiritual paths place on the intention being more significant than the deed. This is certainly a strong strand in Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam and Christianity. One must be of pure heart. It is an impossible injunction! Our minds, all the time, are fraught with impure motives, procrastination and good and evil intent. We are simply called upon to make decisions and act on them. I have been involved in many local and national authorities, environmental groups and other political forums and, in this process, been party to decisions about which I have had huge doubts. Nonetheless, the forests have been saved and much good has been done as a result of our impure means. The Jewish faith stresses it is the deed, not the intention or the motive that really counts. Rabbi Akiva said, "All depends on the preponderance of good deeds." It is the weight of good deeds that bears down on the balance scale.

The Christian theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer took this notion one step further by asserting that success is not ethically neutral. He, a pacifist priest who was involved in a plot to kill Hitler, recognised that there are times one must simply go for it and go for it hard, without too many scruples, to achieve a favourable outcome, because our history is the record of what happened, not what didn't happen. As in Bonhoeffer's extreme situation, and each day in a lesser way too, the imperative is to act and do good and thus combat evil. Rabbi Herschel said "evil explains everything and settles nothing". It's our spiritual duty to settle things - we may realise on the way that we will make mistakes, but the fear of mistakes is no reason not to go on acting to the best of our conscience. Each action, freely made, will create a new situation so there is no predetermined destiny to our lives, or the planet's survival. It is in our hands. Rumi puts it thus: "Trust that God has intelligence enough to use you appropriately." He also said, "Cautious people say 'I'll do nothing until I can be sure.' Merchants know better. If you do nothing you lose.... you must set fire."

The Jews have always recognised the imperfection of man; David made a wonderful kingdom despite his appalling lust for Bathsheba and his consequent unforgivable treatment of Uriah. In Hasidic faith there is the gem of a thought that we all have a number of small things in life that we should do, and that only we can do, and though in themselves they will not change the world, we still have to do them, as collectively they will help.

Andre Gide observed in 1940 in his journal, "When a certain stage of history is reached, everything appears in the guise of a problem, and people's responsibility increases as that of the Gods decreases. It devolves upon people alone in the final reckoning, to solve all these problems which he alone has presumably raised." It is we humans who are destroying nature; it is we humans who must save it.

But political action alone is only one movement of the spirit. There is some kind of double movement required of the soul, on the one hand to set out and help realise God's Kingdom on earth through fighting injustice, and yet also on the other hand to realise that the Kingdom of Heaven is already within you. God is not only found in deeds of justice but also in the great eros-imbued warm, whirling, unstoppable stream of creation. So if it's Hosea on one hand, it's also the Song of Songs on the other. We need regular doses of both and finding the balance is an important discipline. How many hours should I surf and how many hours should I work for Amnesty International? I have found an ally for the surfing urge in the words of Thomas Merton who said, "God rises out of the sea like a treasure in the waves." In the Talmud, it is said that in the world to come, a person will have to stand judgement for every legitimate pleasure in this life that was renounced. Caring for and pleasuring the body is a vital part of the re-souling process of the day, just as one should make a big effort to have sex with one's wife on the Sabbath. It's a sad, melancholy fact that too much time spent on the affairs of humankind can embitter the mind, unless you are some kind of selfless saint. W B Yeats spoke of those who fought hard, without any time off, for political freedom in Ireland. In *Easter 1916*, a wonderful poem that does not judge but simply bears witnesses, he suggests....

"Too long a sacrifice  
can make a stone of the heart."

Yeats himself understood the need to be politically involved. He was in the Irish Senate and socially active on many fronts, but he also believed much time should be spent watching the wild rituals of swans on Lady Gregory's estate at Coole. No one should try to save the world without having an inner life.

St Francis looked at flowers, spoke to animals, loved St Clare's garden. The Buddha preached a sermon for one hour by simply holding up a flower and saying nothing. The Baal Shem Tov used to take the village children to school each morning to make sure they got there safely. Often he was late delivering them because he took them through the forest, for God was in the trees. A Rabbi questioned one of the boys and said "isn't God everywhere, and isn't he the same everywhere?" "Yes," said the

boy, "but I am not." Jalal-ad-Din Rumi was ecstatic in the rose garden: "What was said to the rose that made it open was said to me here in my chest." We face an urgent need to open to nature as these wise men did. We know in our heads and now we need to know in our guts: "the force that through the green fuse drives the flower - drives my green age" as Dylan Thomas said; or

"to see a world in a grain of sand, and heaven in a wild flower,....  
...for everything that lives is holy"

as William Blake enthused.

And we know if the doors of perception were cleansed, everything would appear to man as infinite, for man has closed himself up, till he sees all things through narrow chinks in his core. I can never get over a certain amazement that things are as they are, that the physical world is so wonderful. I have spent a week in Varanasi going to the river before dawn so that, along with many other people, I can greet the sun rising over the waters - surya namaskar. It seems the most fundamental and basic prayer of gratitude, for at the centre of all life is the sun. St Francis and Rumi also made special prayers to the rising sun.

"If your heart feels numb and metallic, walk out into the sun."

(Rumi).

We are at odds with our own nature when we neglect our feelings to animals and plants, for the world is full of charm and sensual pleasure, as the poetry of the 'Song of Songs' so deliciously evokes, and we should treat the earth and its creatures as our best friends. And a basic morality can be drawn from the fact that cruelty to others destroys something within us. Time and again, the sages state it -

*"Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.  
...As a man sows, so shall he reap."*

(New Testament, Christian text)

*"Hurt not others with that which pains you yourself"*

(Udanavarga, Buddhist text)

*"That which is hateful unto you, do not do unto others"*

(Rabbi Hillel, Jewish text)

*"Do not unto others what you would not they should do unto you"*

(Analects, Confucian text)

*"This is the sum of duty: do nothing unto others which,  
if done to you, would cause you pain"*

(Mahabharata, Hindu text)

*"A man should wander about treating all creatures as he himself would be treated.*

(Sutrakritanga, Jain text)

*Treat others as you would be treated.*

*What you like not for yourself dispense not to others."*

Abdullah Ansari, Islamic Sufi text

One day in September 2002, a small solitary pygmy right whale stranded near Farewell Spit. A few of us with experience of whale strandings kept him wet and cool and because there were no signs of his family or friends at sea, quickly concluded he would stand a better chance of escape to open water if we took him away from the tidal flats to launch him in deeper water at Pakawau Beach, twelve kilometres away.

He lay before us, exuding enormous slow, seemingly peaceful breaths, as we gently poured water over his back, my wife trying to quietly comfort him in every language she knew. No doubt he was listening, but what did his big heart feel? It was imperative to try making all possible contact to alleviate his stress. To us he was so beautiful and bewildered in his loss, his smooth, soft flesh quietly pulsing. He never flapped his tail nor uttered a sound as we dug a trench around and under him to take the straps we used to haul him onto a mattress on a trailer. I sat in the trailer alongside the whale as we drove slowly down the road. I put one hand on his big, cool, wet neck and tried to see the world from his wide-open eyes.

There was an incomprehensible gap between us, but I like to think he was amazed by this alien world, and at least experienced some of the empathy I was feeling for him, a lost boy too far from home.

Finally, at dusk, we launched him into the ocean. He hesitated, wobbling out of balance for a while, then determinedly swam along parallel to the shoreline. It turned out that in the encroaching night I was the last helper with him and finally, he seemed to intuit where the safe open ocean was and turned abruptly to swim away from the shore and me. I watched joyfully as his dorsal fin disappeared into the darkening sea and sky. Five hours of effort by all of us was consummated by his disappearance.

However, when almost out of sight, he turned and straight-lined back to me. Surely to God I thought, he's not going to beach again? But he stopped beside me, nudged my thigh with his huge face, turned and swam back out to sea. Even then in the cold, dark water, I remembered my mother dying of cancer a few years before, turning to walk back from the car to her brain surgeon, who had just informed her that her tumour was inoperable. She simply said to me, "I forgot to thank the doctor."

Perhaps that whale had as much gratitude as my mother. Certainly I shall carry that touch on my thigh, which I believe was one of gratitude, as a memory like no other, until I die. Animals have rich emotional lives. Some mate for life. They have a sense of humour, are intelligent and feel pain, and can anticipate and suffer loss. As my friend, the philosopher Peter Singer argues, we shouldn't have to have intelligence as a signature of how much we care for living individuals. We will love our mentally retarded child or accident-idiotized friend as if they were our equals, but in our desire to suppress our feelings for animals that we confine, torture and then eat, we don't like to know that they are very thoughtful, loyal, emotional and loving. They know we are

torturing them in confined cages; they know when their child or partner is taken away and they don't forget the pain easily. But we have closed our hearts to animals and our minds have followed.

So, for the record: parrots can learn up to 400 words, have a good memory, a grasp of grammar and symbols, a degree of self-awareness and can think ahead of time in planning their actions now; they get bored with repetitive learning and make fun of their teachers. Sheep recognise faces and remember them for at least two years. I saw a ewe once nearly knock its head to a bloody pulp trying to get to its lamb that a farmer had just separated from it. I've seen a little golden fish on the Great Barrier Reef that sometimes stops eating and dies of grief when its lifelong partner dies. You have probably read about the understanding and emotional lives of apes and dolphins and elephants.

It's not enough to be a vegetarian but it's a very good start. The enormity of killing and most likely torturing and causing pain to the animal has sat heavily on individuals and cultures since early times, as the cave paintings of Lascaux record. When the killing is made the Gods have to be propitiated; something in your soul is hurting as the life drains from the animal you kill. I sensed it early in life and then felt it acutely in adolescence when I shot a fantail and it twitched as it died slowly. The Jews have always had in place humane killing methods and a strong concern for animals' welfare. Many Rabbis such as Rabbi Kook (quoting Genesis 1:29-30; Isaiah 11:26-7) maintain that vegetarianism is the logical outcome of Jewish compassion to animals. Gandhi taught that in the Hindu tradition, as certain teachings of Buddhism and Sufism are intent on compassionate behaviour to animals -- Islam, Christianity and the secular world less so until recently. Surely, the processes of perfecting the world and perfecting humanity go side-by-side and reinforce each other. We must find God everywhere. I hope we are on the cusp of a change.

Firstly, our understanding of animals has greatly expanded and we can no longer deny they have full emotional and thoughtful and social lives, much as we do.

Secondly, because of the energy required to raise the billions of animals we send to slaughter, being vegetarian will do more to halt global warming than reducing our output of carbon into the atmosphere from transport and industry.

Now I come to the question of this conference: **Is Gaia the new God?** It's hard to get a clear retrospective view on the teachings, rituals, and power bases that emphasised the Earth Mother in the pre-Axial religious period. We bring to that perspective, feminist, literary, psychological and New Age idealisms that are mostly anachronisms, dreamed up in the heat of optimism for a golden age which is often seen as the historic and social equivalent to the joy of childhood. The only problem is that just like childhood, it most certainly was not all joy and light. We do now know quite clearly from the work of palaeontologists such as Tim Flannery (*The Future Eaters*) that with minimal technology humans wrecked whole ecosystems (the forests of Saharan Africa and Lebanon for example) and drove many large animal species to extinction -- at the very time when the Mediterranean cultus centered around an Earth



Mother. It is now clear that obeisance to her may have helped the crops grow and a pregnancy succeed, but all the reverence, sacrifice and ritual for the Mother, all the shamanism, totemism and mystical stories of animal ancestral paths did nothing to stop a wholesale slaughter of other creatures and the destruction of large areas of forest. If the Gaia theory was intended to offer any hope from, or nostalgia for, historic or prehistoric models of a closer, more tender, connection to nature, that hype and hope is forlorn.

However, equally, if the word Gaia is to carry the new meaning attributed largely to James Lovelock's notion of the earth as a self-regulating super organism that, despite our abuse of it, may still right itself because it is much more resilient than contemporary scientists and middleclass doomsayers predict, then I would say it is a fool who sits in his or her own sewerage waiting for a superpower intervention. We have already reached that grand metaphoric moment William Burroughs called "the naked lunch" when everyone sees - or is about to see - what is on the end of their fork. And it's not always pleasant.

There is a Jewish parable about God addressing three Imams of three different faiths...

A Christian priest, a Buddhist monk and a Jewish Rabbi. God says to them all, "the world will end in one week in a terrible deluge; waters over your head will cover the whole earth. Go prepare yourself and your people."

The Christian priest says to his flock "you must pray to your personal saviour our Lord Jesus Christ that his blessing will come upon you and lift you to sit at the right hand of God, the Father."

The Buddhist monk asks his followers to meditate in equanimity because all transient reality is an illusion anyway and if they gain sufficient merit they may escape rebirth or be reborn as a fish.

The Rabbi stops his people from arguing amongst themselves and declares "You have six days to learn how to swim and swim real good."

**Craig Potton** is a noted New Zealand photographer and conservationist. Born in Nelson, he gained degrees in Eastern Religion and English, then, after a brief teaching career, began working full-time for the conservation movement. He remains actively involved in conservation work more than 20 years later. During the 1980s Craig wrote and produced a number of national park handbooks and established himself as one of New Zealand's leading photographers of wilderness landscapes. In pursuit of his photography he has travelled, tramped and climbed extensively in New Zealand, its sub-Antarctic Islands, the Dry Valley and Ross Sea areas of Antarctica, Sabah, the Pacific Islands and the Nepal Himalaya. Craig Potton, *Moment and Memory* exhibition listing Craig has had numerous exhibitions of his photographic prints over the last decade. He is most widely regarded for his book publications and as one of New Zealand's foremost landscape photographers.

Craig is the founder and owner of Craig Potton Publishing, a company based in Nelson where he lives. His previous photographic publications include *Images of a Limestone Landscape*, *Yesterday's New Earth*, *Tongariro – A Sacred Gift*, *New Zealand Under the Southern Sky*, *Above New Zealand*, *Offerings from Nepal*, *Wearable Art – Design for the Body*, *Classic Walks of New Zealand*, *Moment and Memory – Photography in the New Zealand Landscape*, and *The Southern Alps*. He has recently completed the major publication *New Zealand's Wilderness Heritage* with Les Molloy.