

Planetary Emergency: how to have hope

One hundred and seventeen people attended the Eco Congregation Ireland Web Conference on Saturday 3<sup>rd</sup> October 2020 to hear three excellent speakers explore the topic: *Planetary Emergency: how to have hope*

Unlike optimism which is passive, hope is active. Anyone familiar with Joanna Macey and Chris Johnstone will know the definition “*Active Hope* is about finding, and offering, our best response to the crisis of sustainability unfolding in our world.”

John Barry, Professor of Green Political Economy and Co-Director, Centre for Sustainability, Equality and Climate Action, Queen’s University, Belfast, in his talk “*Radical hope in turbulent times: imagination, activism and the planetary emergency*” started with a quote from James Baldwin:

“Not everything that is faced can be changed but nothing can be changed until it's faced.”

Carbon capitalist growth has brought the world to the brink of disaster. This is ecocide. Societies have been clinging to myths, myths which, in John F. Kennedy’s words, were “persistent, persuasive and unrealistic.” What happens when we stop believing in our cultural stories and myths? When the structures of meaning that have shaped our identities break down?” Milton Friedman, an American economist who received the 1976 Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences said “Only a crisis – actual or perceived - produces real change.” John spoke of the redemptive and transformative potentials of crisis. Social innovation and individual agency has been evident since the outbreak of COVID. Populations adapted quickly. Solidarity and collective care is evident. Finance was found for neoliberal responses by the state. Flattening the curve was the aspiration to avoid overwhelming the health system and in the first wave of the virus this objective was achieved. Is global temperature really perceived as a crisis? Could the curve be flattened through climate protective measures to avoid overwhelming the planet? While the pandemic may be a one-off event, coping with the planetary crisis means endlessly adapting to a dynamically unstable climate, enduring, thriving and surviving as best we can. We need to future proof important issues such as having a Constitutional law to Stop Fracking. We need to think seriously about Climate Justice. We need to have an intergenerational view, to leave a habitable earth for our children and grandchildren.

Sister Nellie McLaughlin, who works in cosmology, ecology and sustainable living, is a member of the Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy. In her talk titled “*Life’s delicate balance: challenge to promote and protect*” Sister Nellie spoke of the living fabric of planet earth and our oneness with biodiversity in all its forms, the Sun being the source of all life. Humans account for only 0.01% of the planet’s species. We need a loving awareness that we are not disconnected from other species but joined in splendid universal communion.

Our self-image of humans having right to use the earth has to be adjusted to one where we realise we're in the earth.

Sister Nellie outlined some alarming facts including:

- One third of all food produced goes to waste.
- One eighth of plant and animal species are threatened.
- 20 percent of people own more than 80 percent of all wealth.
- Plastic waste reached 300 million tonnes of plastic in 2019

Global overshoot in 2018 occurred on 1st August and in 2019 on 29th July. Global overshoot occurs when humanity demands more than what the biosphere can renew. Globally, humanity's Ecological Footprint exceeds what the planet can regenerate and currently uses 1.7 earths. Ireland's ecological overshoot happened in April. If everyone lived like we do in Ireland three planet earths would be needed to sustain us all. Integral ecology, in Pope Francis' view, in *Laudato Si*, is an understanding that "today's problems call for a vision capable of taking into account every aspect of the global crisis. Sister Nellie spoke about establishing relationships and connections and listed organisations, individuals and movements who are working towards a better world, including Green Sod Ireland (*An Fóidín Glas*) founded by Sister Nellie in 2007. Green Sod aims to preserve habitats, vital for biodiversity unique to different localities, by allowing gifted land to thrive and flourish.

Denise Gabuzda, a member of Cork Quaker Meeting, teaches Physics and Astronomy at University College Cork. Her scientific and spiritual lives converge on learning to live in harmony with Creation. In her talk "*Looking to the Future with Hope*", Denise sees hope as factually and spiritually grounded in reality, and not based on an unrealistic optimism. A multitude of possible paths lie before us. Hope affirms that some of these possible paths lead to positive outcomes for the environmental crisis. Hope helps create the space for such paths to come into being. Our mental and spiritual energy influences the world around us, and actively cultivates realistic hope. Praying hopefully for the future helps open space for a sustainable future to grow into.

A key component is the ability to envision an environmentally sustainable and spiritually rich future, in which we feel interconnected with all of God's Creation. In Denise's vision of the future, we will work together with Nature rather than allowing our perceived needs dominate those of all other creatures on Earth. We will realize that our lives have been out of balance. Having to work harder to maintain a basic standard of living, at the expense of families and friends, time in Nature, and time for relaxation, contemplation, reflection and connecting with the Divine, is not progress. Denise outlined a myriad of life changes which would lead to a creative, peaceful and joyful future. There is no denying that much irreparable damage has been done to the Earth, and many

species have been lost forever. In this vision, we will willingly let Nature take her course on a large fraction of our planet's surface, giving Nature time and space to heal and to thrive. As our planet heals, so will we become spiritually whole, and rediscover our instinctive understanding of the interconnectedness of all living things, and feel our deep spiritual connection with the Earth.