

Another Way is Possible

Benedict Bowmaker explores the potential of soil, silence and service



In the vegetable garden at Turvey Abbey

Photo credit: Benedict Bowmaker

Whilst inequality and social division in the UK were brought to the fore by the Grenfell Tower disaster earlier this year, it is important to remember that the Earth teaches us all we need to understand about our interconnectedness and inter-dependence on all life. Too often we think of other humans as our primary teachers, but the Earth can teach us about change, about loss and grief, death and transformation, in a unique way. The soil scientist, Bruce Ball in his book, *The Landscape Below*, conjectures that “organic matter resembles our own energy and vitality. If these processes work in a healthy body they make us resilient to all kinds of stresses.” He writes “just as organic matter is what holds the soil together, perhaps there is an invisible ‘glue’ that holds people together in families and communities, such as the shared activities of work, eating and drinking, rituals and religion.”

For three years, we have been running a programme called Soil, Silence and Service at the Benedictine Monastery of Christ Our Saviour, Turvey in Bedfordshire. We welcome the powerful and the poor to come, to reconnect, both to themselves and one another through a deep engagement with

the land. We offer time to listen, a place for quiet, for activity and a still point for reflection.

Once a month, people arrive at the monastery from all over and share in a weekend of working off the land, growing food sustainably, sharing meals and learning to listen with their hearts. We meditate twice daily and each month new people are welcomed and regular guests increasingly feel they are joining a family. Around us are the unmistakable reminders that we are in a monastery. The regular Offices of the day provide balance and help in the deep re-rooting of our being to something undefined yet, to my way of thinking, profoundly sacred. However, no one is obliged to attend; this is an ecumenical project that welcomes all, faith or no faith.

It is clear that our way of life must change if we want our children and our children’s children to have a future. Yet, it is doubtful that the change needed can come solely through campaigning and protest, or politics as usual. There must surely also be a co-ordinated movement of people demonstrating an alternative way of living that is both effective and sustainable. We believe initiatives like ours,

rooted in the sacredness of friendship with each other and the Earth, could be the inspiration for such a movement.

Greater wealth and endless growth are not what is needed to reduce our inequalities and dividedness. Understanding that we are all homeless, we all suffer and we all are rooted in a poverty of spirit is an important level of awareness to reach in order to collectively find our way home. The illusion that we are somehow safe and protected from the wilderness, both metaphysically and literally, is just that, an illusion. Strip away many of our creature comforts and what are we left with: our humanity and our inter-dependence with all life.

In September 2008 my Cambridge-based business was about to be bought by a European manufacturing company for £15.5m. Then Lehman's Bank collapsed, the European partner pulled out, global markets went into freefall and within six months my company was in voluntary administration. From that point on, what I had believed was rock in my life, proved to be otherwise. My illusions and self-delusions were seen for what they were.

I had become accustomed to persuading anyone who would care to listen, that I was investible, credible and our technology was world beating. Yet two years later, leading group mediation sessions to homeless people at a night shelter in Hounslow, I saw in their brokenness, my own brokenness. I realised it is not just the poor and destitute who



Benedict Bowmaker

Photo credit: Andrew Fox



Brother Herbert, aged 96

Photo credit: Andrew Fox

are broken. We are all broken. We have become a divided society riven with inequality and loneliness.

Be you powerful or poor, we share the same brokenness and it is our ability to accept and recognize this and our willingness to re-connect to the thread that connects us all that truly frees us to start living more fully. The powerful need the poor as much as the poor need the powerful. We have so much to learn from one another.

And within the monastery's walled kitchen garden, we are starting that learning process, learning to live in harmony with the soil, with each other and to work the land as a sacred act. We teach people to become gardeners of their hearts. Consumerism and our endless need to satisfy daily desires and impulses are quelled for a short while and in its place, space emerges for community, for friendship and for the quiet work of deep listening. It is through, as St Benedict says in The Rule, the "listening with the ear of your heart", that we create a space for the powerful and poor to re-connect. From here, a shift takes place. This is the re-orientation of our whole being and transcends any one faith system or teaching.

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Now, as our monthly community grows and begins to attract the interest of mental health professionals and NHS Trusts, I suspect that we have barely scraped the surface of what could be achieved. Transforming rehabilitation and contributing to the delivery of public services with new models of co-operation and connection, offers one way to demonstrate that another way is possible.

Having led a life driven by creating and desiring wealth, I now see money and wealth creation as a distraction if not rooted in a purpose greater than ourselves. Some inequality is a natural and inevitable dynamic within a free society. What is not natural, nor inevitable, although it has come to be synonymous with inequality, is dis-connection, dis-engagement and indifference between those with huge wealth and privilege and those with nothing.

Pope Francis' echoes our vision in his encyclical, *Laudato Si'*:

"The urgent challenge to protect our common home includes a concern to bring the whole human family together to seek a sustainable and integral development, for we know that things can change. The Creator does not abandon us; He never forsakes His loving plan or repents of having created us. Humanity still has the ability to work together in building our common home".



Benedict Bowmaker founded Soil, Silence and Service, a developing community of individuals from all walks of life, who share in the desire to understand two things. Firstly, how and why we have become, as individuals, so disconnected from ourselves and the natural environment and secondly, how, by reconnecting to the soil, might we all be moved to take direct action in our communities to reduce the gap between the rich and poor.



Tidying up the strawberry patch

Photo credit: Andrew Fox

For enquiries about Soil, Silence and Service, email soilsilenceandservice@gmail.com or via Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/soilsilenceservice/>