

“We lament what we love”

Why mourning is the beating heart of environmentalism, by **Matthew Stemp**



photo credit: Shutterstock

“We lament what we love.” Well-known poet Malcolm Guite offered this profound line at an event in September 2017 at Ely Cathedral, and I have found myself returning to it ever since. The event was called *Dark Reflections: Poetry, Environment, Lament*, and the participants that evening were treated to readings from Malcolm himself, as well as Fenland poets Kate Arthur and Mary Livingstone. In a year of climate disasters, news of depleting insect populations and the almost inevitable death of the Great Barrier Reef, the event provided much-needed space for grief and reflection on our disconnection from the natural world.

One of the themes of the evening was how we are losing the words that help us to attend to our fellow creatures. Writer Robert Macfarlane and illustrator Jackie Morris recently published *The Lost Words* as a creative response to the decision to remove fifty common animals, birds and plants from the Oxford Junior Dictionary.¹ It is a book of Macfarlane’s delightful acrostic “spells” for reading out loud, accompanied by Morris’s gorgeous watercolours, to help children (and adults) to “summon” the presence of the *bluebell* and the *cygnet*, rather than the omnipresence of *broadband* and *celebrity*.

Malcolm Guite shared with us his own poem, *A Lament for Lost Words*, full of sorrow for the environmental decline that brings us down with it:

To graceful names and lovely woods farewell
 To *acorn*, *adder*, *ash*, to *beech* and *bluebell*,
 Farewell old friends I name you in my sonnet
Buttercup, *catkin*, *conker*, *cowslip*, *cygnet*
 Farewell, your fields are brick, our books are barren
 No *dandelion* or *fern*, *hazel* or *heron*
 We’ll go no more alone, no more together
 The mountain *thyme* is gone and gone the *heather*
 The clinging *ivy*’s gone and soon to go
 The *kingfisher*’s blue bolt, the *mistletoe*
Nectar, *newt*, and *otter*, *pasture*, *willow*
 To their last rites my muse comes footing slow
 We’ll hear no more the heaven-scaling *lark*
 We’ll all go down together in the dark.²

Those of us who identify as environmentalists surely know this sense of despair at the diminishment of species, and with them our own humanity. But why, we justly complain, is our world so numb to the pain we feel and the groaning of Creation? Why the lack of outcry and the desperate level of inaction?

While the complaint is a just one, we must be careful not to diagnose the general population as apathetic and uncaring. There may be more than meets the eye. Recent research into people’s responses and feelings about the ecological crisis

suggests that the idea that most people are too emotionally detached from the natural world is mistaken. The social scientist Renee Lertzman has argued that we must beware of the “myth of apathy”, that if we could just get people to care more about the environment that they would change their behaviour.³

Instead, Lertzman says that most people do care a great deal about the damage we are doing to the planet, and are often even aware that their action and inaction is part of the problem. The issue is not that people don't care enough, but in a sense that we care too much (I say “we” because this is as true for the eco-warrior as it is for anyone else). The environmental crisis is huge and overwhelming, and the collective response required would affect every aspect of our lives. But we also worry about many other things, and the idea of upturning our daily routines and behaviours can feel like too much to deal with.

Drawing on the prophetic psychoanalyst Harold Searles,⁴ Lertzman explains that the result of all this is an ambivalence and anxiety about the environment that we need to resolve. On the one hand, we cannot but help be affected by the multiple traumas of climate change, species loss and pollution; on the other hand, we also care about maintaining the normality of our lives and the lives of our children and grandchildren. The environmental crisis fundamentally challenges our sense of identity, which depends upon the assurance that nature is stable and will always provide us with the resources we need. No wonder then that we find it difficult to focus on our unsustainable lifestyles for very long, and inaction becomes our default position.

Lertzman insightfully describes this as “environmental melancholia”.⁵ Melancholia could be briefly described as a kind of mourning-gone-wrong. Darian Leader, in his book *The New Black*, explains that melancholia takes place when mourning gets blocked in some way, often because of an inability to deal with what is lost in the person or thing we have lost.⁶ In the case of the world we live in and depend upon, losing our home means losing ourselves. So instead of openly expressing and working through our feelings of loss and grief, we bury them as a way of defending ourselves. It is not that the feelings have gone away, but that they are hidden and unconscious.

Once we understand this, we can begin to see why many of our attempts often fail to persuade or encourage others to live more sustainably. If we think that there is something lacking in the other person, that they don't know enough or feel strongly enough about the environmental crisis, we shouldn't be surprised to be met with a quick change of subject or the

accusation of being judgemental. These are normal ways of defending ourselves against emotions we don't want to face.

So what is the alternative? Here is perhaps where Churches and other religious and spiritual communities could have an immensely important part to play. If the real problem with society's environmental inaction is a desperate need for the expression of grief and the work of mourning, then communities of worship and prayer may already have practices and wisdom at hand to help people feel the beating of their own hearts. While lament is a neglected part of our own Christian tradition, the psalmists and the prophets already put into poetry what we can find so difficult to say.

The utter urgency of the crisis facing the natural world makes the patient process of creating space for mourning seem absurd. But the psalms and poems of the prophets teach us, from King David to Malcolm Guite, that accessing the deep well of emotion within us not only untaps our suppressed need to lament but also our desire to act meaningfully and purposefully in genuine connection with our broken world. By facing our collective depression and despair in the face of our self-destructiveness, we might find spiritual creativity and imagination to renew the face of the Earth.

The environmental crisis fundamentally challenges our sense of identity – no wonder then that we find it difficult to focus on our unsustainable lifestyles for very long, and inaction becomes our default position



Matthew Stemp is a William Temple Scholar at Goldsmiths College, University of London. His PhD research explores environmentalism and religion from a psychosocial perspective.

References:

1. Robert Macfarlane & Jackie Morris, *The Lost Words*, (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2017)
2. Malcolm Guite, *Parable and Paradox*, (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2016)
3. Renee Lertzman, *The Myth of Apathy*, in *Engaging with Climate Change*, ed. by Sally Weintrobe, (London: Routledge, 2013), pp. 117-33
4. Harold Searles, *Unconscious Processes in Relation to the Environmental Crisis in Psychoanalytic Review* 59 (1972), pp. 361-74
5. Renee Lertzman, *Environmental Melancholia*, (London: Routledge, 2015)
6. Darian Leader, *The New Black*, (London: Penguin, 2008)