

# ECOLOGY AND THE SPIRITUAL EXERCISES

*Trileigh Tucker*

**T**AKE A DEEP BREATH. Notice how your whole body relaxes. Now take another deep breath. This time, notice that the air coming into your lungs through your nose is free and plentiful: even if you're in a large crowd, there's more than enough for everyone.

Finally, another deep breath. The atoms of air that you breathe in and out are a shared gift: shared both with other humans and with the creatures and plants in the immediate area. This air constitutes a radical physical connectedness with all other living beings. Statistically, it is extremely likely that several of the atoms you took into your lungs during that last breath also passed through Jesus' lungs: a direct and potentially profound physical connection.<sup>1</sup>

Because of our intricate interconnectedness with each other in and through the natural world, what has been called environmentalism—concern for that which is *around* us—becomes *ecological awareness*. The word 'ecology' comes from two Greek roots: *oikos*, meaning 'house', and *logos*, meaning 'reason' or 'discourse'. When we shift from speaking of the environment (that which is around us but does not include us) to speaking of ecology, then, we are thinking in a new way: not about a distanced object, but rather about the network of relationships within which we live: our own house, our home.

Why should someone interested in Ignatian spirituality care about its intersections with ecology and ecological awareness?

Creation is God's gift to us of home and context. It is one of the oldest of God's gifts, predating even our own existence according to both Genesis and modern science, and the largest in size and scope. Ecology (the science) and ecological awareness (our personal

<sup>1</sup> Guy Murchie, *The Seven Mysteries of Life* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1978), 320. Murchie presents a beautifully written and compelling analysis of this surprising statistic.

understanding of the roles of creation in our own lives) are two important ways of coming to understand the nature of this gift.

Many of us feel God's presence especially strongly through nature. We may sit under a tree for prayer; we may go for a walk to reflect on a problem; we may watch a sunset for inspiration; we may go to the beach to grieve. For spiritual directors, understanding the various potential dimensions of a retreatant's relationship with creation may provide fruitful insights and suggest new paths for spiritual movement.

Creation is also communal. When we use or misuse it, we affect others, both humans and God's other creatures. With whom, and how, should we share it? And how should we care for this loving gift of home? How should we avoid mistreating it?

***Ignatius offers  
wisdom to  
the ecological  
community***

Creation awareness can greatly enhance the experience of the Spiritual Exercises. But this also works the other way: the Exercises offer to the ecological community Ignatian wisdom of a kind much needed in our critical time. In structuring the Spiritual Exercises, Ignatius asks us gradually to broaden our awareness and understanding from physical settings ('compositions of place'), to self-awareness, to our wider community, and then to our responsibilities, both to that community and to God. In

this way, Ignatius demonstrates his intuitive comprehension of ecological principles of interconnectedness, and of the critical role of the individual in contributing to a whole. One of Ignatius' special gifts to Christian spirituality is his integration of the analytical, as found in the carefully structured progress of the Spiritual Exercises, with the imaginative and sensory dimensions of human existence. The wisdom of the Spiritual Exercises can offer new ways of entering into environmental concerns and of addressing our current ecological crisis.

In this article, I will address in turn each of the four 'Weeks' or movements of the Spiritual Exercises, showing how their approach and their content reflect insights from modern ecological thought and enable us to take those insights further.

***Ecology and Incarnation***

I begin, as Ignatius does, with a composition. Remember the first natural place to which you felt connected as a child, or another natural place to which you've felt a strong connection. Imagine you're in that place again. What do you notice with your senses? Is there

something particular in that place—a tree or a stream or an animal—to which you have a special attachment? How do you feel as you return there?

For most people, this ‘First Place’ comes back in full sensory detail, often with a strong sense of consolation. It seems to me that the strength of such feelings tells us something about who we are as human beings. Ignatius understood that our physical being-in-this-world is fundamental to who we are. Numbed in our own epoch by television and by the hours we spend daily in our cars, we forget that we are sensory beings, tied to the land, to place.

Ignatius reminds us of our connectedness to place through his frequent use of compositions; meaningful stories are often most deeply understood in the context of their landscapes. The understanding that human psychology and spirituality are intimately connected with landscape is particularly distinctive to Ignatian spirituality, and it has a unique resonance for those concerned with ecological well-being.

This interconnectedness occurs on physical as well as on psychological levels. Between five and ten billion years ago, the explosion of a supernova generated the heavier atoms that make up our bodies: we are quite literally made of stardust.<sup>2</sup> Or—to move closer to our home, the Earth—a geologist colleague of mine loves to point out that every atom of our bodies is borrowed temporarily from a rock. (Think of this next time you hold a rock: your relationship with it will be transformed.) God tells us over and over again in Genesis, that as God shaped creation, God saw that it was good. Our *oikos*, our house, is good from its creation: not because it is useful, not because it is the stage for the human drama, but simply because God made it.

Our lack of a sense of place means that we do not know our neighbours, whether human or nonhuman. We usually do not know where our most basic sustenance comes from: our water, energy, food. We are homeless while nominally living at home, because we do not *abide* there. This venerable word, with its Anglo-Saxon root, has its meaning of ‘remain’ deepened by an association with ‘wait for’. Jesus says ‘abide in me as I abide in you’ (John 15:4); ‘abide in my love’ (John 15:9). Psychically, we modern Westerners are always moving on to the next thing (task, place, meeting or goal), instead of developing

<sup>2</sup> Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry, *The Universe Story* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992).

roots in one place and coming to know its seasons through close and caring attention. Our homes and land become places where we pause briefly, instead of being our waiting-places for God. This rootlessness, I believe, is one source of our widespread loneliness and sense of disconnection.

### ***Lessons from the Book of Creation***

If we come to understand what it is to live in the flesh, as creatures dwelling in a place, we can also more deeply understand creation as an expression of God's nature. Augustine invites us into this understanding:

Some people, in order to discover God, read books. But there is a great book: the very appearance of created things. Look above you! Look below you! Note it. Read it. God, whom you want to discover, never wrote that book with ink. Instead, he set before your eyes the things that He had made. Can you ask for a louder voice than that? Why, heaven and earth shout to you: 'God made me!'<sup>3</sup>

Ignatius invites us to go deeper. He encourages us to make an 'exclamation of wonder with deep feeling':

Going through all creatures, how they have left me in life and preserved me in it ... [the Angels and the Saints] ... and the heavens, sun, moon, stars and elements, fruits, birds, fishes and animals. (Exx 60)

Ignatius recognised, and entreats us to recognise, how profoundly loved we are by God through God's creation, that both teaches and sustains us.

This understanding is amplified during the first day of the Second Week, when we are called to contemplate 'the great capacity and circuit of the world, in which are so many and such different people' (Exx 103.1), and,

... the various persons: and first those on the surface of the earth, in such variety, in dress as in actions: some white and others black; some in peace and others in war; some weeping and others

<sup>3</sup> *City of God*, 11.22.

laughing; some well, others ill; some being born and others dying, etc. (Exx 106.1)

Ignatius' appreciation of diversity echoes the insight of Aquinas:

Because the divine goodness could not be adequately represented by one creature alone, God produced many and diverse creatures, that what was wanting in one in the representation of divine goodness might be supplied by another. For goodness, which in God is simple and uniform, in creatures is manifest and divided. Thus the whole universe together participates in divine goodness more perfectly and represents it better than any single creature whatever.<sup>4</sup>

Aquinas emphasizes not only the diversity of divine goodness but also its interconnectedness: the whole represents God better than any of its parts. This insight is deepened by the discoveries of modern ecology. Imagine for a moment the three most different creatures you can—for me, a hummingbird, a cactus and a great blue whale come to mind. Biologists have distinguished about 1.7 million species on Earth—yet, as vast as this array of 'various persons' is, scientists estimate that there are at least as many yet undiscovered, perhaps as many as 30 million species.<sup>5</sup> Each of these represents a unique insight into God's complexity and divine goodness. And each species holds a unique place in the intricate web of life: each is a page in the book of creation.

### ***Sin and the Gift of Creation***

In the First Week, Ignatius calls us,

... to bring to memory all the sins of life, looking from year to year, or from period to period. For this three things are helpful: first, to look at the place and the house where I have lived; second, the relations I have had with others; third, the occupations in which I have lived. (Exx 56)

In an ecological context, we might focus especially on 'the place where I have lived' by making an inventory of our 'stuff'. In my sustainability

<sup>4</sup> *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 47, a. 1.

<sup>5</sup> William P. Cunningham, *Understanding Our Environment* (Dubuque: William C. Brown, 1994).

course, I ask my students to choose one room in their home, perhaps their college room, and briefly:

- List the things in that room: for instance, bed, desk, lamp, books, computer, CDs, clothes.

Then, for each item or category of items:

- Describe the original materials from which the item was made: paper from Pacific North West trees, metal from Australian ore, polyester and plastic from Middle Eastern petroleum.
- Estimate how long you will use it, and how long it will be used by others after you have finished with it.
- Determine where it will go after its useful life is over: will it become landfill, or be burnt in the incinerator, or be cast into the ocean?

After seeing each other's lists, students begin to realise the extent of their intricate interconnectedness with other parts of the world, simply through their belongings. Other appropriate inventories for all of us, along the lines of the example above, might focus on the use of energy or of water.

Later in the Spiritual Exercises, Ignatius places significant emphasis on thoughtfulness in food choices (Exx 210-217). It is in our relationship with food that our connectedness with creation, and with each other through creation, becomes most powerfully clear. For example, in our own times, production of a quarter-pound hamburger requires 600 gallons of water and 300 square feet of land, if one reckons not only with the cow's own direct needs, but also with the grain that feeds her. The grain that feeds the cow cannot go to feed people directly; a single quarter-pound hamburger, consumed in one meal, takes the place of two and a half loaves of bread.<sup>6</sup> Worldwide, 670 million tons of grain a year is fed to livestock. If this amount were

<sup>6</sup> Paul Hawken, 'McDonald's and Corporate Social Responsibility?', [www.foodfirst.org/media/press/2002/mcdresponsibility.html](http://www.foodfirst.org/media/press/2002/mcdresponsibility.html) (2002).

reduced by even ten per cent, that grain could feed 225 million people.<sup>7</sup>

An 'ecological footprint' is the total acreage of land required to produce an item or to sustain a person or group of people.<sup>8</sup> It includes land of different kinds: energy land (devoted to fossil fuel production and recovery); built-up land (developed land and roads); croplands and gardens; pasture; and managed forest. The ecological footprint of a person, therefore, includes all the land required to produce the food, material products, and energy that sustain that person. An average Chinese person's ecological footprint is four acres, and a Thai person's five acres. Were this the worldwide average, the situation would be sustainable. But a French person's ecological footprint is thirteen acres, and a US resident requires no less than 27 acres—more than five times the sustainable land allocation.

### ***Consumption and the Two Standards***

In the Second Week Ignatius introduces us to the Two Standards, that of Satan and that of Christ. In Ignatius' framework, Satan lures people to his banner through riches, worldly honour, and pride. Surely none of us reading this article would consider ourselves to be primarily motivated by these. But in our ignorance of the implications of our overconsumptive patterns, the effects of our actions and way of life are the same as if we were motivated by these things. The 21 per cent of the world's population who live in industrialised countries use:

- 86% of the world's aluminum
- 81% of the world's paper
- 80% of the world's iron and steel
- 75% of the world's energy<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Worldwatch Institute, 'United States Leads World Meat Stampede', Worldwatch Press Briefing on the Global Trends in Meat Consumption (2 July 1998).

<sup>8</sup> The concept was developed by Mathis Wackernagel and William Rees, in *Our Ecological Footprint* (Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers, 1996).

<sup>9</sup> Aaron Sachs, 'Eco-Justice: Linking Human Rights and the Environment', Worldwatch Paper 127 (Washington, DC: Worldwatch Institute, 1995), 35.

Such consumption not only depletes the earth's natural resources in an unsustainable way, but also creates other serious problems in the extraction, use and disposal of associated products. We have the problems of the hazardous waste produced, of the greenhouse gases generated, of the massive erosion and loss of topsoil caused by the destruction of forests. And these are by no means the only such problems.

When we understand the interconnections revealed by ecological awareness, the issue of consumption—whether of beef, energy, materials or water—becomes an issue of justice. When we choose the standard of Christ—simplicity, a focus on the spiritual as opposed to the worldly, and humility—we shift toward a more just allocation of the earth's resources.

### ***Ecology and Suffering***

Who is it that suffers from the abuse of creation? St Paul reminds us:

... creation awaits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God.... We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now. (Romans 8:19, 22)

Because of human activities, the nonhuman beings with whom we dwell in our home—all made by God and seen to be good by Him at every step of their creation (Genesis 1)—suffer the loss of their own homes through habitat destruction. They suffer the loss and poisoning of their food, and the loss of one another through the eradication of species. Of course, all species, human and nonhuman, survive at the expense of something else that is alive. But the suffering brought to creation by humans is often unnecessary suffering caused by greed, or at least by ignorance of the implications of our desires and our actions, especially our purchases. Most of us would probably agree that causing unnecessary suffering is wrong. And Christ calls us always to greater compassion with the marginalised and the voiceless. Can we expand our hearts enough to include the voiceless nonhuman creatures on the margin of our overdeveloped human societies?

Our unreflective use of creation also has a profound impact on the human part of creation. As Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, the current Jesuit General, has pointed out, 'The first victims of any ecological imbalance



are and always will be the poor'.<sup>10</sup> Through our destructive exploitation of the natural world, the human poor are deprived of abundant and clean air, water, earth, energy and food. The human poor are also the victims of violence from political struggles that are in part the result of imbalances in the availability of natural resources.

In an effort to consider the needs of others compassionately, my students often suggest that the world's poor are too concerned with daily survival to be able to be attentive to ecological issues. However, this generalisation has been shown to be profoundly inadequate. Riley Dunlap, of Washington State University, studied survey data from 24 nations ranging from the wealthy (USA and Japan) to the poor (India and Nigeria).<sup>11</sup> He found the correlation between income and concern for the environment to be an *inverse* one: that is, citizens of the least-developed countries expressed the most concern for ecological well-being—perhaps because they are the first to feel the effects of environmental degradation, and the least able to shift damaging activities off their own soil to other parts of the world.

Finally, in addition to the suffering of creation and the suffering of the human poor, mistreatment of God's gift of the natural world also has another immense cost. There are millions and millions of printed copies of biblical Scripture, in all languages, distributed around the world. But for a moment, imagine that there is only *one* copy of this sacred text, so rich in written knowledge of God. Imagine that a group of people got hold of that single, irreplaceable copy and began tearing



<sup>10</sup> Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, 'Our Responsibility for God's Creation', Address at Opening of Arrupe College, Jesuit School of Philosophy and Humanities, Harare, Zimbabwe, 22 August 1998 ([http://www.jesuits.ca/justicecr/EcoProj\\_Jc/KolvenbachLetter/KolvenbachLetter5\\_Eco.html](http://www.jesuits.ca/justicecr/EcoProj_Jc/KolvenbachLetter/KolvenbachLetter5_Eco.html)).

<sup>11</sup> Riley E. Dunlap, 'Differing Views of Sustainable Development: Public Perceptions in Wealthy and Poor Nations', presented at 'Planetary Stewardship: an interdisciplinary conference on the environment', Borah Foundation, Martin Institute, University of Idaho, 16 April 1998; Riley E. Dunlap, George Gallup, Jr, Alec M. Gallup, 'Health of the Planet. Results of a 1992 International Environmental Opinion Survey of Citizens in 24 Nations', The George H. Gallup International Institute, Princeton, NJ (May 1993).

and then burning its pages, first one by one and then in clumps. Imagine your sense of anguish at the permanent loss of this solitary Book of God.

With Scripture, this scenario is implausible. But God's one book of creation is being destroyed by burning, and those of us who live in the overdeveloped world are contributing to the process. It is mostly our addiction to fossil fuel, raw materials, and cows that is destroying forests and other ecosystems worldwide, along with the species that dwell in them. Every lost species is lost forever: no amount of time or careful ecological restoration can recall a lost species back to creation. God commanded Noah to preserve every living creature and, when the flood was over, to,

... bring out with you every living thing ... birds and animals and every creeping thing that creeps on the earth—so that they may abound on the earth, and be fruitful and multiply on the earth.  
(Genesis 8:17)

God established the covenant not only with Noah, but also with every living creature that was on the ark with him, and promised never again to destroy them by flood (Genesis 9:10). Shall we then destroy them by greed, and by our persistent ignorance?

With the loss of every species and every ecosystem, we lose manifold ways of coming to know our God. Neither we, nor our children nor any other creature, human or nonhuman, can any longer read the destroyed pages that could have revealed to us yet another expression of God's beauty and creativity and glory. And not only are these species and ecosystems lost: all of the future individuals, species and ecosystems that might have evolved from them as future manifestations of God's work are also lost.

### ***Paths Towards Healing, Consolation and Resurrection***

In the Fourth Week, Ignatius calls us toward healing and new life in his beautiful 'Contemplation to Attain Love'. In its second point, he asks us once more, as he did at the beginning of the Spiritual Exercises, to consider how God dwells in creation: beginning (as Genesis tells us God did) with the elements, then moving on to the plants, animals and human beings. Again in the third point, he calls us to remember,

... how God works and labours for me in all things created on the face of the earth ... as in the heavens, elements, plants, fruits, cattle, etc., giving them being, preserving them, giving them vegetation and sensation, etc. (Exx 236)

In what ways can we interact with the natural world to bring forth the consolation, the sense of God's presence, that leads us to resurrection? James E. Hug, executive director of the Jesuit Center of Concern, stated in his address to the 2002 Ignatian Spirituality Conference the importance of 'becoming fully conscious of the *context* in which we encounter God'.<sup>12</sup> The created world is perhaps the oldest and one of the most powerful contexts for our encounters with God. We can move toward greater consciousness of this context in three ways: personal, communal and spiritual.

On a *personal* level, we can spend contemplative time in natural environments as human creatures, focusing consciously (as Ignatius suggests) on our five senses. We become more deeply enfleshed beings—more full of the life that is God's gift to us—when we are aware of what we are seeing in a place, and also of what we hear, smell, taste and touch. We can acknowledge, honour and thank our brothers and sisters, our fellow creatures, for their work in our world; we thereby grow in gratitude to God for his work through them. John Paul II calls us in this direction:

This capacity for contemplation and knowledge, this discovery of a transcendent presence in creation, must also lead us to rediscover our kinship with the earth, to which we have been linked since creation.<sup>13</sup>

We can grow in *communal* consciousness when we not only become aware of our global interconnectedness, but also take responsibility for it. Because of modern ecological awareness, we know that we can hurt each other from across the world. But this also means that we can heal each other from great distances: we now have the possibility of authentically loving each other in ways that were unavailable during Ignatius' time.

<sup>12</sup> James E. Hug, Panel on 'The Spiritual Exercises: Adapting to Today's Issues', 2002 Conference on Ignatian Spirituality, St Louis, 25 July 2002. My italics.

<sup>13</sup> John Paul II, General Audience, 26 January 2000.

For instance, if US Americans reduced their meat consumption by just 5 per cent (perhaps one fewer meat meal per week), they could save enough grain to feed 25 million people—the number who go hungry in the US daily.<sup>14</sup> All Westerners could drive less, generating fewer of the greenhouse gases that raise sea levels and ruin coastal agriculture on Pacific islands. Knowing that we have these opportunities to love and to heal, how can we not take them?

Finally, we can be healed *spiritually* through our interaction with the natural world. God's creation is immensely graced with a capacity for rebirth and renewal. Only a year after the Chernobyl disaster, wild creatures were making homes in the vicinity. After centuries of denudation, the Appalachian mountains are again rich with forests from Georgia to Maine. On Hamm Creek, a small tributary to the Duwamish River that empties into Seattle's Elliott Bay, one man's work over twenty years has helped the stream recover from being a tyre-dump to providing a path for migrating salmon. Stories of recovery and healing from all over the world can renew and refresh our spirits. And creating our own new stories of creation and resurrection brings us closer to the Creator, so that we 'sing with Francis the glory of God and to discern prayerfully with Ignatius the love of God shining through the environment'.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> [http://library.thinkquest.org/c004833/environment\\_en.shtml](http://library.thinkquest.org/c004833/environment_en.shtml).

<sup>15</sup> Kolvenbach, 'Our Responsibility for God's Creation'.