

The 2018 Castlefield Manchester Sermon

I wish for you

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There is today, and there has been for some time, a pall of gloom and doom hanging over the environment. And with good reason, very good reason. But it is not the whole story. And being downhearted about it all does not help put it right.

There are good stories to tell. Red kites have been saved, otters too, ravens as well. Conservationists have pioneered sustainable fishing in Lyme Bay in Dorset. The Soil association continues its wonderful work, as does the World Wildlife Fund, the RSPB, Friends of the Earth, Client Earth, Greenpeace, and many, many others. Our rivers do run cleaner, our cars are becoming less polluting, our energy is coming more and more from sustainable sources. We are turning away from fossil fuels. We are using more renewables. It is happening. People, individuals, have made these things happen, devoted their lives to it, changed their lives for it, for our fellow creatures, for the good earth, for us. And we must follow where they have led.

But we learned yet again, only this week, that we are struggling and failing to reduce global warming. It is hardly surprising. Coal fired power stations are still wreaking their havoc in countries all over the world. We still build airports – the new airport at Gatwick? Heathrow? How about no new airport at all? We fly around the world, as if there's no tomorrow. We use plastic and throw it away, like there's no tomorrow. We still drive too often, when we could easily walk or cycle or use public transport. We are addicted to greed and speed, and comfort and convenience. For too long humanity has been squatting on this good earth, sucking it dry, despoiling it, poisoning it and stifling it. We know it and we are changing. But it's all too slow, and it's late. Not too late, we hope, but urgent, critically urgent. So no more prevaricating, no more procrastinating, no more excuses, and most certainly no more denial.

Are we down hearted? No!
Then altogether sing, and let your voices ring.
Are we downhearted? No.

Cheering words from an old popular song, from the days of the First World War, from times even darker than our own. And songs help, to raise spirits, to help us feel we are not alone in our despair, in our sense of hopelessness, powerlessness. We need songs and poems and stories, to sing them, read them, hear them, write them, to help us hope beyond, think beyond, to rejoice together, or grieve together, and unite to change the world for the better. So my sermon will not have just one text but many. You will hear many voices raised, not just mine. And that must be good.

And let's not call this a sermon. That way I'll feel better doing it – I won't be preaching at you, so I won't feel uncomfortable – and that way you might not go to sleep.

The poem you are about to hear is, by way of being then, not a text to introduce a sermon, but rather a declaration, a fervent declaration of conviction, of intent.

This, by Ted Hughes sets the tone of what I have to say.

My own true family

Once I crept in an oakwood – I was looking for a stag.
I met an old woman there – all knobbly stick and rag.
She said: 'I have your secret here inside my little bag.'

Then she began to cackle and I began to quake.
She opened up her little bag and I came twice awake –
Surrounded by a staring tribe and me tied to a stake.

They said: 'We are the oak-trees and your own true family.
We are chopped down, we are torn up, you do not blink an eye,
Unless you make a promise now – now you are going to die.'

Whenever you see an oak-tree felled, swear now you will plant two.
Unless you swear the black oak bark will wrinkle over you
And root you among the oaks where you were born but never grew.'

This was my dream beneath the boughs, the dream that altered me.
When I came out of the oakwood, back to human company,
My walk was the walk of a human child, but my heart was a tree.

Ted Hughes played a hugely important part in my life, our lives, as a dear friend, a writing and teaching mentor, as an inspirational supporter of the educational charity my wife Clare set up in 1976. We called our project Farms for City Children. Her idea, born of her own love of nature and the countryside as a child, was to help create a world in which all children, especially those living in the inner cities, had the same opportunity she had had, to experience the countryside at first hand, to feel they belong there, as she had, that it was theirs to love, as she had. And theirs to care for too, as she has.

Clare, aged about 7, was fortunate enough to find herself wandering free, where her wellies took her, in a hidden corner of England, 'down the deep lanes' of Devon, as Hughes later called them, through the woods and farms, along the valley of the river Torridge, where the writer Henry Williamson had walked before her, where Tarka the Otter and Salar the Salmon lived. She met the farmers, fed the calves, groomed their horses, fetched their eggs, talked with them, sat in their kitchens, listened to their stories, learnt of their bond with the countryside, understood early on in her life, what Thomas Hardy had called 'the old association,' that elemental connection, going back centuries, between humankind and the countryside, a countryside that our ancestors helped to create.

Here's what our friend and neighbour, Sean Rafferty, poet and sage and gardener, wrote, towards the end of his long life, about the children who came to stay on the farm through the project that Clare created and made her life's work. He lived down the lane and worked with the children often in the walled vegetable garden, digging potatoes, picking raspberries and apples.

'Children come to the farm in winter and summer, in all seasons, in all weathers. Calves are born, foxes kill the chickens, sheep are dipped and shorn: and all this is not something which they just watch – they are involved. THEY feed the hens, hiss at the geese, walk back up the lane from the milking parlour in the evening up a dark lane without street lights, hear owls hoot in the night and are afraid.

Now, more than ever, it matters that children can experience life in the country. This is a generation that will be told repeatedly of ecological disaster; will be told that the earth itself is threatened. For some of them the earth will not be a globe in the classroom or a map on a wall, but a Devon farm where they scuffed beech trees along the drive and broke the ice on the puddles in the lane.

When they are told of polluted rivers it will be one river, which has had its share of pollution, where they first saw a trout jumping and a wading heron, and plastic bags caught in the branches to mark the level of the last great flood.

Last spring two children went down to the river at dusk to watch for badgers. They did not see a badger, but they did see two young otters at play, something many people born and bred in the country have never seen. It was as though Nature herself were choosing her champions.'

Sean Rafferty and Antoine de St Exupéry never met, but they had much in common. In *The Little Prince*, Antoine de St Exupéry's iconic book, the Little Prince is full of questions, rarely answering any himself. He is like that. A child he may seem to be, but he is a source of great wisdom and understanding. He has great insight into human foolishness, and wickedness, and recognises grownups for what we are, knows our vanity and our greed for what it is.

And do you remember, I wonder, his touching and overwhelming love for the rose he has himself grown and cared for, and watered and protected, how that single rose is more important to him than any other rose, or all the roses in the world could ever be? The Little Prince understood that the more you know and love and respect nature, whether it is a fox or a rose, the closer you are to it, the more you live in harmony with it, the more fulfilling your life will be, and the life of the fox and the rose too, and of your planet too that you share with the rose and the fox.

Know too of the work of a young writer of today, *A Shadow Above* by Joe Shute, whose study of ravens, the birds he loves and knows so well has transformed our understanding of them, and of our ancient connection to them, and our persecution of them. He has helped us see these magnificent creatures anew. What might have been to us a rather ordinary looking large crow, has become distinct, important, a part of us and who we are.

And do you know Jean Giono's *The Man who Planted Trees*, that glorious and heroic story of how one old man was determined to change the world he lived in and loved, how he brought it back from the brink by planting acorns, a hundred a day for years and years, in the arid dry and exhausted soil of the high hills of Provence? Here was an ordinary shepherd to whom the welfare of his world was so important that he devoted his life to bringing it

back to life. His beloved hills that he shared with his few precious sheep had been abused, over-grazed, exploited, the soil eroded. Desertification threatened. He spent his whole life fighting the terrible wrong mankind had done. And he succeeded. He grew singlehanded an entire forest, and restored an ecosystem. An ordinary shepherd, an ordinary man? I don't think so.

And the soil itself is all too often taken for granted, considered ordinary, until we know what it does, how it feeds us, how we have poisoned it with chemicals, exhausted and eroded it. We can't understand the importance of soil, feel any real connection to it, understanding of it, unless we have dug it, smelt it, grown from it, harvested from it.

Hear the words of Seamus Heaney, in his poem Digging:

Digging

Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests; snug as a gun.

Under my window a clean rasping sound
When the spade sinks into gravelly ground;
My father, digging. I look down

Till his straining rump, among the flowerbeds
Bends low, comes up twenty years away
Stooping in rhythm through potato drills
Where he was digging.

The coarse boot nestled on the lug. The shaft
Against the inside knee, was levered firmly.
He rooted out tall tops, buried the bright edge deep
To scatter new potatoes that we picked,
Loving their cool hardness in our hands.

By God, the old man could handle a spade.
Just like his old man.

My grandfather cut more turf in a day
Than any other man on Toner's bog.
Once I carried him milk in a bottle
Corked sloppily with paper. He straightened up
To drink it, then fell to right away,
Nicking and slicing neatly, heaving sods
Over his shoulder, going down and down
For the good turf. Digging.

The cold smell of potato mould. The squelch and slap
Of soggy peat, the curt cuts of an edge

Through living roots awoken in my head.
But I've no spade to follow men like them.

Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests.
I'll dig with it.

And Seamus Heaney did dig with it, with his pen, did he not, and to great and wondrous effect. Do not let me hear that old sad cry that writers and poets cannot change the world. Each of us can help do that, writer or poet or not.

Seamus Heaney and Jean Giono, and Joe Shute, and Antoine de St Exupéry, and Sean Rafferty, and Henry Williamson, and Thomas Hardy and Ted Hughes, all dug with their pens, and in doing so, shone a light on the world as they saw it, lived it and loved it. Their visions enriched lives, changed lives, lives that can and do change the world. I have tried in my own way to follow in their footsteps, to do the same.

Clare has too. She has done her digging, but a different way, by the setting up of Farms for City Children all those decades ago, that has enabled over 100,000 city children now to spend a week of their young lives on a farm.

Virginia McKenna has devoted her entire life, her digging, to Born Free, to the saving of wild animals, lions, elephants, all of them, before it's too late. She believes they were born free, and have the right not to be hunted, or caged for our pleasure, that they should be able to live free, to roam wild in their own land, the land of their birth.

And all her life Caroline Lucas has been calling us to the environmental colours, urging us to think again, to change the way we live, to broaden our horizons, to deepen our understanding of the world about us, to encourage us all to cherish this good earth, and do all we can to restore it and sustain it.

David Attenborough, perhaps more than anyone living, has championed the cause of Planet Earth, has introduced so many of us to the lives of plants and animals of this earth, reminding us all that they are our fellow creatures that we have a duty of care to them and their habitat, if they are to survive, if we are to survive, leaving us in no doubt that we are all in this together. Through his life's work, so many millions of us understand better now how fragile is the nature of our coexistence.

These champions, and those like them, are the heroes and heroines in this all-important struggle to bring us closer to nature, to feel a new sense of belonging, of oneness that we have to feel if we are ever to find the determination to live together in harmony with this good earth and its plants and creatures, to live with no heavy footprint, no global warming, no more fouling of land and sea and air, no more extinction of species, no more erosion of soil and habitat. It can be done. It has to be done. And we are beginning to do it. But too slowly, painfully slowly, dangerously slowly. We have to acknowledge now the responsibility we all share, and that each of us has a part to play. We cannot leave it to others. It's for me to do, you to do, all of us to do.

And as we have heard, writers can play our part in this. Which is why I wrote this letter, to all children and grandchildren, and to you, meaning every word, wrote it with all my heart and soul, in the fervent hope that some or many might read it or hear it, and start digging in whatever way they can.

‘Dear ones,

Have you ever seen a picture of us, of this earth of ours from space?

We are a bright blue bead spinning through infinity.
A beacon of light.

But one day, if we do not care for her, this good earth of ours will be as arid and lifeless as the moon.

The life of this world is as fragile as you are, as I am, as trees are, as butterflies and bees and birds are, as worms and frogs are.

If I have learnt one thing for sure in my long life – 75 last week, and that’s old – it is this: this good earth is a living breathing being, and we must hurt her no more.

We are using her up, fouling the air and sea, making a dustbin of the land, a sewer of the oceans, a graveyard of her creatures.

We have to learn to love her again, as much as I love you and you love me. For you and I, we are part of this living planet, part of earth’s great family. And we are her guardians too.

So I wish for you, for all children, for all of us everywhere, a new world, without war and waste, where you will be able to breathe in good clean air, and drink from clear bright water; a new time when we grow and eat only what we need, no more, learn to share all we have, so that no one anywhere goes hungry again.

I wish no tree ever to be cut down without planting three more in its place. I wish for you a world where, in flying our planes, driving our cars, heating our homes, in our endless striving to be ever more prosperous, ever more comfortable, we do not overheat the planet, do not melt the ice-caps, raise the oceans, and so bring down famine and flood and fire upon ourselves.

I wish for you a world where the whale and the dolphin, the turtle and the jellyfish, can live the life of the deep, undisturbed, in seas unpolluted, those same seas, where we have paddled and played so often.

I wish for you a world where the elephant and the lion, the tiger and the orangutan, can live wild and free – never locked up and imprisoned simply for our curiosity and entertainment,

but left to themselves in their forests, left to roam their plains and their deserts, left to live their lives in peace.

These we have loved together: the sea, the trees, the blackbird, the robin, the wriggly worm, the jumping frog, the good soil we dig in, the moon, the stars, our whole wonderful world, rolling through space.

So, dear ones, look after all we have loved together, live always in rhythm, in harmony with this earth. Then all my wishes will come true for you, and all shall be well.

But all shall be well, only if we make it well. There's a lot of healing to do, a lot of loving.'