

Barbara J. Fleischer, Ph.D.,
Assoc. Professor of Pastoral Studies,
Loyola University New Orleans
fleische@loyno.edu

and

Emily DeMoor, Ph.D.,
Asst. Professor of Education,
Georgetown College
Emily_Demoor@georgetowncollege.edu

REA Meeting 2013, Nov. 8-10

Hope for Environmental Action

Abstract

Environmental consciousness-raising programs tend to emphasize the magnitude of imminent ecological disasters, if humans continue on their current trajectory. While these environmental literacy programs also call for action to avoid cataclysmic ecological changes, psychological research on “learned helplessness” suggests that information on the magnitude of ecological problems may actually present barriers to action, unless it is coupled with hope. We focus here primarily on Christian literature that finds hope for environmental action in the rhythms and beauty of Creation, in the biblical narratives of a people of hope, and in a faith community that worships and acts on behalf of the *shalom* of God on earth.

Introduction

Many contemporary efforts aimed at encouraging ecological action focus on consciousness-raising about the extent of current environmental problems. Impassioned exhortations from secular and religious leaders, including the three most recent popes, acknowledge the complexity of the issues involved and declare the moral obligation to care for the Earth. Documentaries on ecological devastation often visually shock the senses with a clarion call for action.

Effective action for ecological justice certainly requires such conscientization on the realities threatening the diverse species of our planet. But is this basic knowledge enough to spur action? Indeed, can an enlarged vista revealing the scope of environmental ills at times paralyze would-be actors into a deer-in-the-headlights kind of helplessness and a descent into a “what’s the use of trying” mentality?

Psychologist Martin Seligman and colleagues have identified factors that lead to helplessness and “giving up” in face of major life challenges. Their decades-long research on the antecedents of “learned helplessness” indicates that animals and people, when placed in situations where negative consequences cannot be avoided, often learn to stop trying in other situations where solutions are readily at hand (Seligman 21-23). As Carol Hooker describes it,

“Learned helplessness is the assumption of no control—the belief that nothing one does makes a difference” (194). Seligman’s team also found that a person’s perceptions regarding the *permanence* and *pervasiveness* of seemingly insurmountable situations determine whether or not a person will have hope that spurs action. People who “give up” believe that the problem they see will always be there (*permanent*) (44), and they also view the bad situation as *pervasive* or universal (46). Seligman concludes, “Finding permanent and universal causes for misfortune is the practice of despair (46).”

Immensity of the Current Ecological Crisis

Consider that these are only a few of the issues researchers have identified as currently threatening the earth:

- “Over the past 50 years the average global temperature has increased at the fastest rate in recorded history,” stressing all ecosystems (NRDC).
- “The world’s oceans are on the brink of ecological collapse” stemming largely from pollution and over-fishing (NRDC).
- “As many as 30 to 50 percent of all species [are] possibly heading toward extinction by mid-century” (Center for Biological Diversity).

In facing these impending realities, and others just as looming, where might the human community find the strength to overcome a paralyzing sense of “learned helplessness”? How can we avoid the pitfall of despair as we assess the potential permanence and pervasiveness of ecological damage? Most significantly, where might we find deep sources for hope in the midst of such massive and mounting data revealing the extent of damage inflicted on our earthly home and its glorious array of species? In this paper, we focus primarily on hope for action on behalf of the environment. We explore hope that emanates from a faith in God who whose actions often surprise us; hope informed by the self-organizing patterns, rhythms, and dynamics of creation; and hope that springs from a faith-filled community that joins together in worship and action.

We further propose that while hope is foundational to action, it must be accompanied by environmental literacy that grounds hope in the realities that must be faced. Finally, we propose an expansion of the STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) curriculum for elementary school education to a place-based STREAM curriculum (STEM plus Social Studies, Religion, English Language Arts, and Fine Arts), particularly for religiously-oriented schools.

Biblical Sources of Hope

Walter Brueggemann points out that “the Jewish Bible, the Christian Old Testament, is fundamentally a literature of hope” (72). He further notes that “Jews (and Christians after them) are a people of hope, but they can be a people of hope only if they are not alienated from and ignorant of their tradition” (73). And the hope that Brueggemann speaks of is not other-worldly. Scriptural narratives show that the hope of both Jews and Christians finds fruition in this world as people walk in faith and act in response to God’s call.

As Brueggemann reflects on biblical hope in both Jewish and Christian contexts, he notes that hope is born in the margins, away from those whose interests involve maintaining the *status quo*. The prophets are those who voice a critique of the current system and poetically offer

images of the reign of God, a *shalom* where right relationships abound. The hope they depict creates a communal imagination open to new possibilities beyond the present arrangement, and this hope-filled imagery often includes a restoration of creation (e.g., Isa. 41:18-20). Significantly, Brueggemann points out, hope arises when the oppressive conditions, pain, and loss are publicly mourned and lamented. He highlights the “pivotal power of pain” and calls it “the Bible’s most dangerous insight” (19).

Who keeps the present open to new interventions from God and in what contexts? The hope tradition in ancient Israel suggests this answer: *hope emerges among those who publicly articulate and process their grief over their suffering* (84).

This biblical insight shows that hope does not involve denial of the current problems nor of the pain that results from the *status quo*. Authentic hope does not create escapes from the harsh realities that the current system creates. True hope involves facing the suffering and impediments that exist and mourning them publicly as a community. The prophetic imagination then helps the community move forward with openness to a new vision, the call of the reign of God. With respect to environmental action, this insight calls communities of faith to learn the extent of our ecological damage and also gather together to mourn the loss of our natural habitats, beauty, and fellow creatures.

In ancient Israel, the prophets often acted as the catalysts for seeing current reality clearly. Beyond helping the people face their current reality and grieve the pain that it caused, the prophets called the people to attune themselves to God’s plan for both community and nature and act accordingly. When the people fell out of right relationships, the prophets warned the community to amend ways or suffer disaster. The hopeful vision of the reign of God does not call for passivity but for action. The people are urged to follow the covenant and move forward in faith.

Jesus reminds us that the reign of God is “like a mustard seed... It is the smallest of all the seeds, yet when full-grown it is the largest of plants” (Matt. 13:31-32). Transformative action in accord with God’s reign does not require armies. It usually begins small. As community consultant Margaret Wheatley points out,

Change begins from deep inside a system, when a few people notice something they will no longer tolerate, or respond to a dream of what’s possible. We just have to find a few others who are about the same thing... Gradually, we become large... We don’t have to start with power, only with passion” (*Turning* 25).

Community is essential to the biblical tradition; it is also essential to transformative action in the world. A fierce sense of individualism may be one of the greatest barriers to hope that we face in today’s world. There are others, and as religious educators and pastoral leaders, we need to be aware of them.

Returning to Our Biblical Roots

Jürgen Moltmann begins his theology of hope with the assumption that Christian hope, since the time of Augustine, has been “reduced by the Church to saving the soul in a heaven beyond death and that, in this reduction, it has lost its life-renewing and world-changing power” (3). While affirming the reality of the resurrection, Moltmann asserts that eschatology

throughout the major part of Christian history has focused almost exclusively on “individual eschatology,” personal salvation in eternity, with questions such as “What will happen to me in death and in the judgment of God? How will I become saved? Is there a life after death?” (3). If these are the primary focus of our theological concerns, Moltmann asserts, then “community becomes irrelevant, as also do the body and the earth” (3). In such a paradigm, “Hope, then, for political liberation and peace on earth, hope for the reconciliation of humanity with nature disappears from Christian hope” (3).

In contrast, Moltmann offers a biblical notion of hope that highlights the resurrection of the body and a harmony in creation. Hope for Moltmann is not the “‘opium of the beyond’ but rather...the divine power that makes us alive in this world” (4). He presents an understanding of hope “that is founded on Christ, that embraces temporal life and the cosmos, and that is oriented toward the future of the kingdom of God” (4). Salvation, for Moltmann, is the “shalom in the Old Testament sense” which includes “the eschatological *hope of justice*, the *humanizing* of man [sic], the *socializing of humanity*, and peace for all creation” (4).

Moltmann suggests that focusing primarily on personal salvation gives rise not only to disinterest in this-world transformation but also to a privatization of spirituality that impedes communal reflection on current realities and action (*praxis*). In the context of the U.S., where individualism dominates as the cultural norm (Bella et al.), privatization of religion synergizes with individualistic interests to subvert authentic community development and action.

Anne Clifford, CSJ, echoes a similar concern for an over-emphasis on individual human redemption to the exclusion of remainder of creation and notes that Christianity’s response to the rise of science gave impetus to the neglect of the nonhuman world in theological reflection. As science challenged the credibility of literal biblical interpretations, theology virtually surrendered nature and the entire cosmos to science and focused more on salvation of the soul (Clifford 21).

In theological writings, the cosmos became simply a backdrop to what Scripture scholars named as “salvation history” – the redemption of the human from its original and subsequent sin (Clifford 22). And uncritical readings of the Genesis 1 creation narrative seemed to give humans free reign to “subdue” the earth (Gen. 1:28) and use it in whatever way human desire would unleash. Much of the literature linking human redemption with all of creation had been ignored in post-Enlightenment Christian theology. Yet, Clifford notes that emerging contemporary scholarship is recovering the creation-centered passages of the Bible in the psalms, Wisdom tradition, Pauline writings, and in Genesis itself, revealing the interrelationships between human action, redemption, and the whole of creation. God clearly “is the one that sustains and redeems not only humans but all creatures” (36).

“Ecologist” Thomas Berry often characterized the latter half of the twentieth century as an era of “autism” with respect to our awareness of the earth and its living inhabitants. “Autism has deepened with our mechanism, our political nationalism, and our economic industrialism” (17). He contrasts this insular lack of awareness with the ken of indigenous people, who tread the earth lightly with gratitude, sensitivity and intimacy with all creatures and know deeply “the mutual presence of the life community in all its numinous qualities” (14-15). A major challenge, then, for people of faith in industrialized nations is how to overcome the sense of alienation from nature that has arisen with technological development.

Theologian John Haught reminds us that the universe itself is a sacrament, a revelation of God's glory and presence. Through nature we encounter our Creator, and as gift and sacrament it deserves our reverence and care, for to dishonor the gift is to dishonor the Giver. It is our trust in this Giver of life that births our hope for the future, a hope that is "the fundamental ecological virtue." Haught refers here to the U.S. Catholic Bishop's statement, *Renewing the Earth*, that includes the following, "Hope is the virtue at the heart of a Christian environmental ethic. Hope gives us the courage, direction, and energy required for this arduous common endeavor" (qtd. in Haught 10).

We act in hope because it is the only holy response we can make to the God who gives all hope and who embraces the entire cosmos in sustenance and promise. The challenges of religious educators are to awaken communities of faith to their intimate relationships with Creator and Creation, to hear biblical connections between the story of human redemption and the life of the cosmos, to form authentic community where losses may be grieved and imagination for action may spring forth, and to act in solidarity with the earth and all of its creatures.

A Model Rooted in Spirituality, Community, and Ecological Action

While not explicitly biblically rooted, the Findhorn community in Scotland offers a model for ecological action in a community rooted in spirituality and hopefulness. The community emerged in the 1960s when three adults, unemployed, found themselves living in a "caravan" (small trailer) in a sandy, desolate area of Scotland. Through their meditative practices, they felt guided to plant a vegetable garden in what seemed to be the most inhospitable land. As their meditations continued, "this guidance was translated into action with amazing results" (*Findhorn Visitor's Guide* 2); the garden grew 40 pound cabbages and other over-sized plants that attracted curious visitors. This simple beginning led to the formation of a spiritually-grounded eco-village that today engages in educational, artistic, and ecological activities, including the project of planting one million trees to reforest eastern Caledonia. At the heart of the Findhorn community is a spirituality that affirms the sacred interconnectedness of all of creation. Community, spirituality and ecological action form its sustaining mission (*Findhorn Foundation Workshops* 4).

While not for everyone, the Findhorn experiment demonstrates one model of how spiritually-based communities may reverence the sacredness of the natural world and work for its healing. Those who wish to participate in workshops offered by the Findhorn Foundation must first engage in a week-long experience that introduces visitors to the spiritual and communal foundations of the eco-village. Perhaps other communities of faith might learn from this approach and incorporate in their initiation and "new member" practices a wider view of the sacredness of the human interconnectedness with the entire cosmos.

The religious education of our youth offers a particular opportunity for inculcating a sense of wonder and reverence for the natural world in concert with gratitude to the gracious God who provides such a variety of life and magnificence. Youth are often seen as the "hope" for the future. Their education is crucial for how humans will interact with the natural world in the critical years to come. We provide here one possibility based upon the place-based educational model adopted by one Catholic school in Kentucky.

A STREAM Model for Place-Based Elementary Education

The St. John's Educational Wetlands Restoration Center is located in the north Elkhorn Creek Watershed, outside of Georgetown, Kentucky. The project center has twin goals of ecological restoration of the wetlands and education. A primary educational goal is to provide an outdoor "classroom" available to St. John's Catholic Elementary School and other schools in the area. St. John's School is also expanding the national STEM curriculum (emphasizing Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) to become STREAM (adding Social Studies, Religion, English Language Arts and Art). The educational center will also prepare teachers to cultivate environmental literacy across the curriculum.

The students of St. John's School engage in hands-on, place-based, interdisciplinary education at the wetlands restoration site. Place-based education immerses students in local heritage, cultures, and landscapes as a foundation for all other curricular areas and emphasizes learning through participation. Through direct engagement with the natural world, students learn to cultivate environmental awareness and stewardship. Because St. John's is a Catholic school, teachers have the freedom to incorporate religious education in the context of this place-based schooling, combining an appreciation of spirituality with ecological action.

Preliminary baseline research (DeMoor and McCauley) showed that younger children (fourth grade) have greater attitudes of environmental stewardship, environmental literacy, and connectedness with nature than the older seventh grade students. If such a relationship holds in further research, it may indicate that awakening a sense of connectedness with nature at an early age and continuing the engagement with nature in later grades is crucially important, if such lessons are to deepen. DeMoor and McCauley also found ample research showing the benefits of place-based education, but a dearth of attention to the role of *hope* in fostering and sustaining ecological action. Perhaps this lacuna springs from the separation again of science (ecology) from spirituality (religion) in many instances of place-based education.

Hope on the Edge

Brueggemann reminds us that hope emerges on the margins and not in the royal courts of Jerusalem. Hope begins with a public outcry that something is wrong with the current social order (16), that it is causing pain and does not conform with God's *shalom* on earth. It is those on the margins who critique the current state of affairs and hope for something more (75).

DeMoor and McCauley speak of "hope on the edge" for ecological action. They point out that edges are meeting places for species, soils, and boundaries. Citing Mollison and Slay's *Introduction to Permaculture*, they note that edges, such as those found in reef ecologies where coral and ocean meet, are places that spawn some of the most diverse and abundant of areas of ocean life. They add,

In the case of the St. John's Education Wetlands, the edge is the ever-changing border wherein the wetland pools and the land meet; a constant negotiation...In terms of a STREAM curriculum, it is a place where science and religion, as well as other content areas meet and interact (12).

With so many looming issues threatening the future of life on this fragile planet, only a spiritually-rooted hope nourished by a community in action will support the perseverance necessary to continue, when overwhelming odds may tempt us to give up. Care of Creation is a biblical imperative, and hope in God's guidance and energy will sustain us on the edges as we participate with the Spirit in renewing the face of the earth.

Works Cited

- Bella et al. *Habits of the Heart*. Berkeley, CA: University of California, 1996. Print.
- Berry, Thomas. *The Dream of the Earth*. San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1988. Print.
- Brueggemann, Walter. *Hope Within History*. Atlanta: John Knox, 1987. Print.
- Center for Biological Diversity. "The Extinction Crisis." Web. <http://www.biologicaldiversity.org/programs/biodiversity/elements_of_biodiversity/extinction_crisis/>
- Clifford, Anne M., CSJ. "Foundations for a Catholic Ecological Theology of God" in Drew Christiansen, SJ, and Walter Grazer, "*And God Saw that it Was Good*." Washington, DC: U.S. Catholic Conference, 1996. Print.
- DeMoor, E. & McCauley, W. J. STREAM Education and "Hope on the Edge." Midsouth Educational Research Association Conference, Lexington KY, 2012.
- Findhorn Foundation. *Workshops and Events 2013*. Findhorn, Scotland: Findhorn Foundation, 2013.
- Findhorn Foundation. *Visitor's Guide*. Findhorn, Scotland: Findhorn Foundation, 2013.
- Griffiths, Sarah. "Global Warming is Happening 10 Times Faster than Any Other Time in Earth's History." *Daily Mail*, Aug. 2, 2013. Web. <<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-2383472/Global-warming-happening-10-times-faster-time-Earths-history-climate-experts-claim.html#ixzz2arUAoXCA>>
- Hooker, Carol E. "Learned Helplessness." *Social Work*, May, 1976, 194-198. Print.
- Haight, John. "Ecology and Eschatology" in Drew Christiansen, SJ, and Walter Grazer, "*And God Saw that it Was Good*." Washington, DC: U.S. Catholic Conference, 1996. Print.
- Moltmann, Jürgen. "Love, Death, Eternal Life: Theology of Hope—the Personal Side" in Frederic B. Burnham, Charles S. McCoy and M. Douglas Meeks (eds.), *Love: The Foundation of Hope*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988. Print.
- Natural Resources Defense Council. "Issues" Web. <<http://www.nrdc.org/issues>>
- Seligman, Martin. *Learned Optimism*. NY: Simon and Schuster Pocket, 1998. Print.
- Wheatley, Margaret. *Turning to One Another*. San Francisco, Berrett-Kohler, 2009. Print.