

## **Poetry and Ecology: the Spirit breathing through Word and World**

For “Engaging the University: A Multi-Disciplinary Day Conference  
exploring Christian engagement at Queen’s University”  
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I’m going to talk this morning about my most recent work, which rests in the knowledge that God is breathing through His world even when we don’t realize it.

### **1. Discerning the way forward**

Just over a year ago, I was trying to decide what I wanted to do, what I should do, with the academically productive years still ahead of me, now that I’m officially retired and teaching only part-time. I’ve worked for 22 years in a Christian university, but before that for a decade in public universities, and I’ve always had a strong sense of being called to speak into both arenas. I try to give academic papers in both overtly Christian and avowedly secular conferences, and to write for both audiences as well. So: was the Poetry and Ecology Project I’d been working on finished, or should I pursue it further? If so, in what shape? Was it worth pursuing the possibility of a big grant, with all the work that even the application would involve? And if I got such a grant, would I then just feel tied down to one specific line of research, and the requirements of the granting agency? Not at all sure. So I took a day at a local retreat centre to ask God about it all.

It was a lovely July day, and the retreat centre is in the country. I sat outside with my bible and notebook in a red Muskoka chair which gave me an 180° view of the gorgeous grounds, and got ready to listen. Trees of a wide range of greens; allotment plots, veggies interspersed with patches of huge sunflowers, a few people pottering quietly about in rubber boots; butterflies, white and red and dark brown; little birds flitting; summer wildflowers, pink, white, and yellow; tall grasses; fields to the horizon; a light breeze, sunshine and moving shadows. Ground that has

been prayed on and through for 150 years. Quiet. I was there for the day. But within ten minutes of sitting there in that chair, I knew the answer to my questions. The concerns that have mattered most to me in my academic work in the last three or four years are ecology, poetry, and faith: why would I *not* continue to explore the relationships between them in the next three or four? I'd already done some work on how I might engage these different areas not only in a Christian university classroom but also more broadly, in the secular academy, in print, and in public venues of all kinds. I'd actually had some good and in some cases very unexpected success. So why stop now? I wrote in my notebook, "I love and honour and delight in this world. To feel that poetry can connect *helpfully* to it is great!" I think I must have had a big smile on my face.

So then, what to do with the rest of my day? Well, first some time with Scripture. (I've been well trained....) I decided to look at some psalms, and was particularly drawn to Psalm 27: "One thing have I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after; that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to inquire in his temple." I wrote down, "Seeing the whole earth as God's holy temple does change the significance here. If I spend the rest of 'the days of my life' on beholding the beauty of the Lord and inquiring into the ways in which this [earth] is his temple, I will not be outside of his house!"

And then I turned to Psalm 19, a favourite of mine because it's what I call the 'Language Psalm': I was reminded that the creation speaks, and its voice goes out into all the earth, not just to those who already know the Creator. So any further work I might do around ecology, poetry, and faith would need to honour God's "house" of the world and help people see its beauty and consider its wellbeing. I wrote, "[The work] would need to inquire in His 'temple' with a very clear sense that this place is holy. But how, then, would non-Christians feel content to take part in it, and to read it?" One of the strengths of the Poetry and Ecology Project, about which more

in a moment, has been that it includes poetry by both Christians and non-Christians, and gives information about environmental groups with and without Christian or religious foundations. One of the pleasures of presenting the project to diverse audiences, both academic and popular, is that some of them have been Christian and some decidedly not; it's been possible to arrange the materials for both groups in a way that still speaks of the beauty and mystery of God's creation and our responsibility towards it.

Something I had learned in previous visits to this retreat centre is the Ignatian practice of 'lectio divina,' or divine reading, in which I can be in active conversation with God. So, I talked to God about possible next steps: perhaps a book? I asked another question that straddled the perceived divide between the sacred and the secular: "If this were a book that worked as spiritual commentary, how could I make it one with a general appeal?" And I felt that the Lord responded, "The earth is both beautiful and threatened, Deborah. This is the way in to spiritual issues, for many, many people." Aha. I wrote down, "The whole of Ps. 19 could 'oversee' this project, including the sense there that God will keep us 'on track' if we ask him to!" –For, as you will recall, the psalm ends, "Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer" (Ps. 19.14).

I guess the big thing I'm wanting to point to first is that all of our work is part of God's creation. In that sense, all of our work is "spiritual." And so it's a good idea for us to ask God constantly about the directions we're taking, the courses we're teaching, the texts we're using, the projects we're considering. How can we honour God in the ways we think and the questions we ask, even in situations where we can't overtly declare our allegiance to Him? Thanks be to God, He's right there to encourage us when we ask Him.

So, let me tell you about some of the thinking that I had already done up to that point

about ecology, poetry, and faith, and some of the thinking I'm hoping to expand further as I work more on this project.

## **2. What does a Christian perspective have to say to environmental issues?**

Even if we start with Lynn White, the oft-quoted critic who back in 1967 blamed “orthodox Christian arrogance” for destroying the natural world, there is a surprising twist. White saw Christianity as having consistently displayed an aggressive and domineering attitude that considered human beings to be the centre of everything, and the natural world as having been given them to use as they liked. But at the end of his article, “The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis,” White concluded that “Since the roots of our trouble are so largely religious, the remedy must also be essentially religious, whether we call it that or not.” White was a professor in medieval history, but he also had an M.A. in theology. And he went on to propose St Francis, “the greatest radical in Christian history since Christ,” as the patron saint for ecologists. Of course it's from St Francis that our present Pope took his name, precisely to signal not only a privileging of the poor but also a deep concern for the environment, whose struggles so often impact the poor most acutely. In his 2015 encyclical *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home*, Pope Francis writes, “We have to realize that a true ecological approach always becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor” (*Laudato Si'* §49).

Since at last count 67% of Canadians still self-identify as Christian, it's legitimate and even important to inquire how the Christian story, whose sacred text ends with the declaration that “the leaves of the tree [of life] shall be for the healing of the nations” (Rev. 22:2), may be

freshly appropriated to speak to environmental causes.<sup>1</sup> When I'm introducing the notion of a Christian mandate for environmental care, then, whether to a Christian audience or not, I like to quote both Lynn White and Pope Francis, but also other prophetic Christian writers and thinkers like Francis Schaeffer (*Pollution and the Death of Man*, 1970), who unpopularity advocated self-limitation; Loren Wilkinson (*Earthkeeping for the '90s*, 1991), who declared that "Earthkeeping is our task. But too often ... earth-breaking has been our accomplishment" (2) and wrote in hope of a "planetary sabbath" (16); Steve Bouma-Prediger (*For the Beauty of the Earth*, 2001), who presents a "cumulative case for earth-care" in arguments "moving from prudence to piety" (162); James K.A. Smith (*Comment online*, 2016), who distinguishes between humanity's seizing of the creation as an entitlement and receiving it as gift; and Mark MacDonald, National Indigenous Anglican Archbishop of Canada, who (in *Living Ecological Justice*, 2013) has written that "we are not truly human without a communion with the rest of life".

Remembering White's comment about the need for a religious solution to a religious problem, I like also to note a suggestion from twenty-five years ago by Anglican theologian and philosopher John MacQuarrie:

It is possible that natural theology [i.e. what can be known about God through observations of nature] ... may have an important function in the future. In a secularized society, it provides a bridge from everyday concerns to God-language and the experiences which such language reflects. It will also have a function in the increasingly important dialogue among the religions. ("Natural Theology," 405)

Depending on the audience, it can be useful to talk about the strong environmental ethic of other major religions besides Christianity. For instance, in April 2019's *Emergence Magazine* there

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<sup>1</sup> June 2017 figures from Statistics Canada's National Household Survey, sourced from 2011.

was a profile of theologian Martin Palmer and his work to engage faith-based communities of many kinds in recovering narratives of love and care for local ecologies; the writer, Chelsea Steinauer-Scudder, was particularly intrigued by the fact that already in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC “[t]he Buddha taught that all things are interconnected, that the health of the whole is bound to the health of every sentient being. If you harm rivers, trees, animals, soil, you harm yourself” (“Hallowed Ground”). Steinauer-Scudder even described how Thai Buddhist priests have recently been ordaining threatened trees as monks, thereby making it very unlikely that Thai developers will dare to chop them down.

Similarly strong environmentalist directives can be found in other world religions. Islam teaches that “Allah is unity, and His unity is reflected in the unity of humanity and nature. We must therefore maintain the integrity of the Earth, its flora and fauna, its wildlife and environment. Our responsibility is to keep balance and harmony in Allah’s creation” (ARC, “Islam”). Hinduism, yet more expansively, teaches that “All living beings are sacred because they are parts of God, and should be treated with respect and compassion. This is because the soul can be reincarnated into any form of life.... Even trees, rivers and mountains are believed to have souls, and should be honoured and cared for” (ARC, “Hinduism”). Nearer to a Judeo-Christian understanding of creation are indigenous religious traditions that subscribe to the idea of a Creator, Great Spirit or Great Mystery—a power or being that has created the world and everything in it (Smith). In North America, the Assembly of First Nations declares, “If we listen from the place of connection to the Spirit That Lives in All Things, Mother Earth teaches what we need to know to take care of her and all her children” (AFN, “Honouring”).

A major consequence of recognizing a spiritual reality actively present in the natural world is that all these religious perspectives emphasize how it is incumbent on human beings to

act in the world with care and responsibility. And the weight and ubiquity of this relationship between the spiritual and the natural orders does make it reasonably easy and quite legitimate to bring the spiritual dimension into the classroom, or indeed into academic presentations. And of course, since our Judeo-Christian heritage acknowledges that “The earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it; the world, and all who live in it” (Ps. 24.1), it is particularly vital for us as Christian believers to find ways to honour both the earth and its owner in our teaching.

But even ecocritical philosophers with no declared connection to any religious tradition have in the last couple of decades been discussing the importance of attentively listening to the non-human. For instance, in “Trees and Truth (or, Why We Are Really All Druids),” David Wood suggests that we need to consider “a practice of thinking and reflection in which the focus of our deliberations is not held fast in our gaze, but is given the opportunity to gaze back, to ask us questions about our very own being” (“Trees and Truth” 33).<sup>2</sup> Wood goes on to propose that that “what we experience, when we imagine being seen, is an intimacy of connectedness with that thing, one that reveals *just how far we ourselves, and even our thinking, have already been formed in relationship to these things*” (34, italics in original). And then in “Speaking a Word for Nature,” Scott Russell Sanders concludes that “If we are to survive, we must look outward from the charmed circle of our own works, to the stupendous theatre where our tiny, brief play goes on” (“Speaking a Word” 195). And in “Nature and Silence,” Christopher Manes regrets the loss of “what might be called the ‘animistic subject,’ a shifting, autonomous, articulate identity that cuts across the human/nonhuman distinction” so that “human speech is not understood as some unique faculty, but as a subset of the speaking of the world” (“Nature and Silence” 18). Manes

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<sup>2</sup> It’s worth noting here that Don McKay, the premier present-day Canadian “nature poet,” uses the Levinasian language of the face to say, “when a lake or a pine marten looks back, when we are—however momentarily—vis-à-vis, the pause is always electric. Are we not right to sense, in such meetings, that envisaging flows both ways?” (*Vis-à-Vis* 101).

advocates for “the need to dismantle a particular historical use of reason, a use that has produced a certain kind of human subject that only speaks soliloquies in a world of irrational silences” (25). Although not himself religious, for a way forward Manes looks to a “new language” which draws upon the medieval contemplative tradition that embodied reverence for and dialogue with nature.

So, then, what is the place of poetry in all this?

### 3. What can *poetry* say to environmental issues?

I guess it would not be unreasonable to find that environmentalists balk at the idea of poetry being in any way useful. And quite a lot of literary types, keen on the autonomy of the aesthetic dimension and anxious that poetry doesn’t become simply a tool of didacticism, might do the same. But here’s another literary type, John Felstiner, who’s written a book called *Can Poetry Save the Earth?* (2009). And he holds out an urgent hope that it can. In the Preface to his book, Felstiner explains that:

*Can Poetry Save the Earth?* tracks a poetic record rooted in the Bible and British poetry and evolving while America was richly overdeveloping, to the point of environmental crisis. Together the crisis and the tradition make for a time of urgent hope, like the question mark in this book’s title. The poems gathered here may end up turning your eye and ear toward a world that is good to live in. (xiv)<sup>3</sup>

Based on the poetic evidence he musters, Felstiner argues that “Poetry more than any other kind of speech reveals the vital signs and warning signs of our tenancy on earth,” because “[p]oems

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<sup>3</sup> Talking in interview about the title of his book, Felstiner said, “The question mark at the end—everything rides on the question mark. The obvious answer is no. Poetry can’t save the world, but it can help. It can help save *you*” (Cynthia Haven, “Felstiner on Poetry, Environmentalism,” *Stanford Report*, April 1, 2009).



make us stop, look, and listen long enough for imagination to act, connecting, committing ourselves to the only world we've got" (4, 13).

Two of the practising poets I've talked with in the course of the Poetry and Ecology Project have particular interests in the science of ecology, and they have things to say that resonate with Felstiner. Adam Dickinson, a poetry professor in the English Department at Brock, is one of those who is fascinated by links between poetry and science. In a 2017 interview with me, he said:

I think of poetry as a form of cultural experimentation, enacting procedures as an attempt to understand things, just as scientists would do. I'm not saying that [poetry] is science in the *way* that science is, but it *is* a science [... Poetry] is a research practice, a part of conducting experiments on one's cultural horizon, and using writing as a way to do this.

Dickinson's most recent poetry collection, *Anatomic* (Coach House Press, 2018), explores how permeable our bodies are to the toxic environment we have created. Dickinson did two years' worth of chemical analysis of his own urine, sweat, and feces as research for this book. His previous prizewinning poetry in *The Polymers* (Anansi, 2013) looked at the interrelationship between the human and the world of plastics. When asked further about poetry as the form of writing he has chosen, he responded, "What is the most extreme form of writing that humans have developed? It's poetry. Poetry lives at the absolute limits of expression, so poetry is a highly appropriate form of response, it seems to me, to these [ecological] questions," given that these questions are themselves asked at and about the absolute limits of ecological health.

And Madhur Anand, both a poet and a professor of Environmental Science at U of Guelph, argued in a 2010 TedX talk at the University of Waterloo that "Poetry, like chlorophyll,

is a catalyst for turning light into energy.” Anand’s research involves the study of natural and anthropological change in local, regional, and global ecosystems, and what these changes indicate for the future of human-environmental sustainability. Anand’s debut collection of poetry is entitled *A New Index for Predicting Catastrophes*—a title that refers to “a theory in ecology that a small change in a system's normal state can cause a big change, [...] leading the system to a different place or even to catastrophe”; scientists are working on how to predict when a system is transitioning (Aggerholm). Anand’s poetry is another genre of new index, attending to causes and effects outside of her usual scientific parameters. Her self-consciousness as a poet-scientist extends to her use of form. In the Notes to her volume of poetry, she writes, “The majority of the poems in this book are written in 13-syllable lines. Of the three naturally occurring forms of carbon, only those with atomic mass 12 and 13 are stable, and they occur in a proportion of 99:1, respectively, in the natural world.” It is presumably not by chance that this note appears on p. 99 of Anand’s volume. One poem which plays with this kind of “natural” stability by using the 13-syllable line, together with a 13-line form, is “Hill Country, Old Mercedes, and Parturition” (*A New Index*, 11). This poem well conveys the interconnection between Anand’s scientific work and her life experiences, and opens with specific reference to the collection’s title: “There’s a new index for predicting catastrophes.”

Since an indexical linguistic sign has been conventionally understood to refer unproblematically to its cause, for Anand to call her poetry “a new index” is already to problematize the nature of traditional scientific referentiality, at the same time that she claims a different mode of accuracy and inventiveness of representation for poetry. As structuralism and its wayward offspring have taught us, the relationship between words and things, signifiers and signifieds, is not natural but conventional, and thus all language involves an arbitrariness that a

conventional scientific mindset may choose to overlook. It is no more literal to call a scientifically-defined result a catastrophe (etymologically a “sudden turn downwards”) than it is to call a poetically-defined cause an index. In other words, the poet will be more conscious of the figurative nature of the language she is using, and more likely to take advantage of its resources, but the scientist will be using figurative language regardless.<sup>4</sup> Anand said in interview that she actually “discovered the truths that could be found in poetry [...] not only complemented the science, but they [...] oddly reinforced [...] my scientific discovery process.”

Neither Dickinson nor Anand is a Christian; Felstiner I think was Jewish (he died in 2017). So, from them we learn about poetry as a practice of attention; poetry as cultural experimentation; and poetry as a catalyst for energy, a new index of discovery. How do these concepts resonate with a specifically Christian understanding of poetry?

#### **4. What might a Christian perspective be on poetry?**

To respond to this question, I might first look at a couple of comments by the great Irish poet Seamus Heaney, a cradle Catholic, and the famous American environmentalist and prolific writer Wendell Berry, a freewheeling Protestant. Heaney has called poetry a “beneficent event” because it “offer[s] consciousness a chance to recognize its predicaments, foreknow its capacities and rehearse its comebacks in all kinds of venturesome ways” (“Redress” 2). And he has said beautifully of poetry that it offers “a glimpsed alternative, a revelation of potential that is denied or constantly threatened by circumstances,” so that it can come to “represent something like an exercise of the virtue of hope” (“Redress” 4). Wendell Berry, writing in a 1990 piece called “The Responsibility of the Poet,” describes the way in which a poem “exists at the center of a complex

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<sup>4</sup> This is not, of course, a new insight: in fact, in *Contemporary Poetry and Contemporary Science* (2006) Robert Crawford articulates how the whole project of that collection of poems and essays is built upon the wager that “poetry and science might at times provide material, images, metaphors, and procedures that might be mutually enriching, illuminating, or pleasurable.”

reminding” which it is the poem’s responsibility to convey: a reminding of the play of language, of other poetry, of subjects that ought to be remembered, of other forms and structures in the world—“the poet affirms and collaborates in the formality of the Creation”—and also of “the spiritual elation that we call ‘inspiration’ or ‘gift’” (*Christian Imagination* 397-8). These two writers are major authors I would be referring to anyway, regardless of whether I was teaching in a Christian classroom or a public one. In a context where I could be more overt about faith, I would also consider the comment by Calvin Seerveld, philosopher of aesthetics, that for the Christian “Culture is not optional . . . . To fight cultural amplification of creation is to be disobedient to the will of the Lord revealed in the Scriptures” (*Rainbows* 24). Or the declaration by poet and literature professor Nicholas Barker, that art (including literature) is “the unfolding of previously unrealized potentialities in the aesthetic dimension of creation, or . . . the exercise on the part of artists of their God-ordained dominion over the aesthetic dimension of creation” (“Christian Position” 16). Or the comment by Roger Lundin and Susan Van Zanten, in their introduction to *Literature Through the Eyes of Faith*, that literature “enables us to respond to the order, beauty and grace of God and his world, and to the disorder that our sin has brought into that world” (*LTEF* xx1v).

And yet ultimately it will be scripture itself that takes me back to poetry. For there I see that we ourselves are God’s poem—the word in the Greek in Ephesians 2:10 is “poiema,” God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works. In this light, poetry too is both created and can be productive for good. I see that the early Christians sang poetry in worship, as had the Jewish nation before Christ every time they sang a psalm. And I see that the ancient prophets often expressed in poetry what it would be more difficult to convey in prose. In other words, the Bible demonstrates that poetry is an ancient and honourable genre with its own pedigree and its

own particular strengths. As we think of God’s created world, poetry can offer praise. As we think of ecological crisis, poetry can turn to lament. As we think of visionary truth-telling about the future, poetry can speak in a prophetic voice. These ways of speaking are part of the Christian revelation, but they need not always be named as Christian: they are also available and audible to anyone with an ear to hear and a pen to write.

So let me now tell you just a little bit about the first stage of the Poetry and Ecology Project, where many of these interdisciplinary and spiritual ideas have begun to come together.

### **5. What is the Poetry and Ecology Project?**

My research has been considering the possibility of a voice of environmental hope, even in dark times, in the contemporary poetry of the highly populated area of southern Ontario where I live, focussing particularly on the region containing the urban centres of Guelph, Hamilton, Brantford, and St Catharines. This area is geographically defined to the east by the tip of Lake Ontario, to the west by the Grand River, and from one end to the other by the Niagara Escarpment. And in this poetry-rich bioregion, so far I have looked to see how the poetry of seven local poets might reflect the bioregional *credo* that “where you are matters,” and might be the vehicle for engaging readers more thoughtfully and creatively with their social and natural environments.<sup>5</sup>

“The remedy must ... be essentially religious, whether we call it that or not” (White, 1207). Over the last two years, my research students and I have worked on a set of “Poetry and

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<sup>5</sup> The significance of thinking bioregionally about environmental issues has recently been articulated in literary terms in *The Bioregional Imagination: Literature, Ecology, and Place* (2012), in the introduction to which, the editors describe bioregionalism as “moving away from existing ... political boundaries ... in favor of those that [have] emerged from a biotically determined framework, primarily based on natural communities or watersheds.” Bioregionalism “seeks to head off environmental crises by attempting to both imagine and create human communities that live sustainably in place.” And as part of that attempt, “By reflecting and respecting the context — both cultural and natural—of specific places, bioregional literature and criticism make a powerful statement that where you are matters.”

Ecology” leaflets on seven issues—food, water, trees, birds, wild creatures, flowers and pollinators, and degraded land—for distribution to the general public locally. I worked in succession with five senior undergraduate students from several different academic disciplines to research, design, produce and begin to distribute these leaflets, which instantiate an interdisciplinary interconnectedness that we do see as essentially religious. The seven poets featured, some professedly religious, some secular, include both nationally-recognized writers with accolades to their names and beginning writers delighted to gain a public platform—poets of different ages, genders, and ethnicities. In each leaflet we sought out eye-catching photography, presented three poems by three of the poets, and on the back page gave a list of local organizations, some professedly religious, some secular, working with that particular environmental concern. The byline for each of the leaflets is “Renewing the earth through the poetic imagination,” and on the front of each leaflet is that quote from Madhur Anand: “Poetry, like chlorophyll, is a catalyst for turning light into energy.”

It is now a staple of ecocritical thought that, as Laurence Buell has put it, “The environmental crisis is a crisis of the imagination”: in his 2005 volume on *The Future of Environmental Criticism*, he asserted as noncontroversial that “issues of vision, value, culture and imagination are keys to today’s environmental crises at least as fundamental as scientific research, technological know-how, and legislative regulation” (*Future* 5). So in this project we wagered, along with Buell and John Felstiner and Seamus Heaney and Madhur Anand, that poetry has the power to awaken our imaginations to new ways of seeing the world around us, and that, once we can see better, we will care better. As one of the Hamilton writers, John Terpstra, put it when we interviewed him,

Nowadays, ... you’re going to be up against the things nature is up against. ... I’d like to

think that ... the environment ... is so integral to the life that's within the poem, that it would encourage people to participate. That we would woo them into wanting to having a similar kind of relationship. Because it's all about relation, right? You do bad things to the environment because you don't have a relationship to it. (June 22, 2017)

An aspect of my bigger research program which influenced the Poetry and Ecology project, though it is only tacitly present in the leaflets and I will do more with it going forward, is the consideration of just this kind of question: the philosophy behind care for the environment, as embodied in different organizations and different poets.<sup>6</sup> Through our interviews, we discovered that some of the poets in the leaflets are Christian, either Protestant or Catholic; others are “spiritual but not religious”; only one identified as secular. One is Indigenous, brought up Anglican, and thus comes from a background in which Spirit is endemic to thought and action at the deepest level. Interestingly enough, the half-year in which we began work on the leaflets coincided both with Pope Francis's encyclical “Laudato Si’,” on “Care for our Common Home” (aka the earth, May 2015), and with the UN's Paris Agreement on international response to climate change (December 2015). In other words, both religious and secular authorities were making important international statements about environmental care. This confluence is something I will follow up in the next stages of the research program.

Time doesn't permit me to illustrate a lot from these leaflets, but let me in the last part of the presentation introduce you briefly to three brief poems there: one by John Terpstra, a Christian poet and cabinetmaker whose work is deeply influenced by his love for the broken

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<sup>6</sup> Redeemer University College, established by Dutch immigrants coming to Canada after World War II, has an overtly Christian foundation, and it is a place that positively expects careful Christian consideration of all issues taught and researched. There is a deep interest in worldview: what, in this instance, would make a group or an individual care enough about environmental issues to take a stand on them?

physical environment of post-industrial Hamilton; one by environmental scientist Madhur Anand, who is declaredly non-religious but who deals in her poetry with some of the ethical complexities she is not able to address directly in her scientific papers; and one by Jesuit priest Greg Kennedy, from the retreat centre where I sought spiritual guidance for my work, and who sees his vocation as a Catholic priest as “explicitly ecological” (interview). These three poets, despite very different cultural backgrounds and spiritual sensitivities, work within what we might call an ecology of poetry that both embodies Heaney’s “revelation of potential” and creates what Felstiner calls “sustainable energy” (*Can Poetry* 15). They offer insight, imaginative vision, and challenge.

First, from the “Trees” leaflet, #3, Terpstra’s prose-poem “Place”:

A tree, when it first begins to shoot from the ground, immediately senses the potential lying within that one location and is persuaded to stay.

By never moving from its original location a tree is in the unique position of learning all there is to know about that one particular spot: the composition of earth, the characteristic of each wind, the inquisition of water, both above ground and under, the traffic of animals, humans, and more—most, or all, of which is modified, or determined, by its presence.

Every tree therefore is a specialist, the one expert in its own self-defined field, and cannot be made redundant.

Then, from the “Food” leaflet, #1, Anand’s poem “Evan Said”:

In the near future we will grow food vertically.  
The condo bubble in Toronto must explode first.

Suds, sofas, coffeemakers, and dreams will be mopped up.  
Glass towers higher than First Canadian Place

will be filled up with light, whole wheat, and arugula.  
There will be machinations, of course. Like where to put

the cows. The bankers will enjoy their occupations.  
And I will still want this: strangers to read these poems.



And thirdly, from the “Degraded Land” leaflet, #7, Kennedy’s “Healing our Harrowing”:

We’ve tilled  
till we can’t;  
now the soil,  
elementarily confused,  
is more air  
than earth;  
all its dead and rotting  
traits ploughed up  
and set against us  
in a bipolar heaven  
increasingly hot and irksome.

We’ve tilled  
till we can’t;  
now the soil,  
bandaged with plastic,  
sweats beneath  
its suffocated weeds  
crazed by an inaccessible  
itch impossible to scratch.

We’ve tilled  
till we can’t;  
our fields far too well travelled:  
downstream from the farm  
leaving sandy, salty beaches  
behind.

We’ve tilled  
till we can’t;  
and a question gets  
planted  
in this desert:  
will we be  
as diligent and determined  
in our healing  
as in our harrowing?

That, of course, is the implicit question in the Poetry and Ecology Project as a whole.

Meanwhile, the reception of the leaflets has been overwhelmingly positive. So far they have been presented in and/or distributed to several local libraries, two arboretums, two

conservation authorities, three high-schools, a seniors' conference, several university groups, three church groups, and various environmental interest groups, and they have been featured on a local radio show, in the local paper, and in two public presentations by environmentalists on matters of local concern. Environmental scientists and activists seem delighted by a new approach to issues that are key to their work; poetry lovers seem intrigued that poetry might, indeed, have any kind of practical agency. I have also presented five academic papers on topics directly related to the project, and have two articles currently in press on these themes. Some of the venues have been Christian, some not, but I have always been able to present aspects of the religious underpinnings of the project, as well as poetry by one or two of the Christian poets. And now:

## **6. What next for the Project?**

My hope is to produce a curated anthology, with a more substantial and culturally representative collection of local poetry, as well as a brief chapter on religion and ecology, background materials about the geosocial environment of the featured bioregion, some introductory material on ecocriticism, and interviews with each of the featured poets touching on a number of issues, including their religious or non-religious motivations for writing environmentally attuned poetry. My hope is that the resulting volume, while appealing to the general reader, will also be attractive for first- and second-year university classrooms and perhaps upper-level high-school classes in English, Environmental Studies, Religion, possibly Geography, possibly Social Studies. And my hope is to honour the presence of God in His temple the earth, recognizing that even though many of the human voices in the book will not be Christian, all of them will have in their own ways heard the voice of Creation and hopefully will enable other readers to do the same. After all, we Christians are a people who recognize not just

the Book of Scripture but also the Book of Nature, through which God speaks in languages we may receive before we can interpret them:

Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge.

There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard;

yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world.

(Ps. 19:2-4)

What a great encouragement for the Christian in a secular context. If, as John MacQuarrie argued, in a secularized society, natural theology may “provide a bridge from everyday concerns to God-language and the experiences which such language reflects,” then I plan to spend a good deal of time on that bridge.

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