# Red Sky In The Morning

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P.S. You're great.

# Red sky in the morning Lent Series 2021

For Lent 2021 I wrote a series of 33 emails that went out to subscribers of my daily emails. In this pdf ebook you will be able to read them 'warts and all' – if you'd like to subscribe to get my regular daily emails and other seasonal special series like this one, then you can do so by visiting my website simonjcross.com

The focus for these emails was the ongoing Climate Crisis – in particular I was keen to reflect on why we think the way we do, how this impacts the way we behave, and what might be done to change the ways in which we both think and act in the future.

#1

I lived on farms for the first dozen or more years of my life, I think we moved to the town when I was 13. In my most formative years I would quite often join my dad, who worked as a shepherd in those far off days, on some of his morning walks around the sheep. I must have walked miles and miles in my wellies, along rutted paths, over fences, through gates, across fields and up and down hills. One thing I learned back then was how to tell, roughly, what the weather was going to do by looking at the sky. I still believe I have that ability now, although others in my house are sceptical.

I'll come back to these early experiences later in this series, because I learned other things walking around the fields too – although it's taken me years to realise it.

In the first place though I'll start with that most arresting sight: the red sky at dawn. The big skies of Northumberland were a good source of spectacular sunrises and sunsets, and I learned very early to judge what sort of weather was on the way by the colour of the sky and clouds. We took heed of the 'shepherd's warning' as if it was meant for us. Which of course it was. Failing to heed warnings could lead to serious problems, so it was important to pay attention. We have to ask ourselves what it was that stopped us, collectively, paying sufficient attention to the bright red skies that have loomed over us for the past many years. Have we so damaged our connection with the world around us that we just don't recognise the signs? A storm has been on the way for years and too many of us have ignored it, denied it or pretended it wasn't real. Why?

#2

We didn't' have a TV back when I lived on farms. We didn't have a TV when I left the countryside either, but that's another story. No TV meant that I listened to the radio a lot, especially Radio 4 and that meant I heard a lot of Shipping Forecasts. Broadcast since 1867, before national radio even began, the Shipping Forecast is a bit of a British institution.

These days you can get music mixes that include sonorous excerpts from (presumably real) forecasts that are supposed to help you go to sleep, and an excerpt was even played as part of the London Olympic Games opening ceremony. But its place in popular culture belies its importance, because for a long time the shipping forecast was a really useful broadcast for more than just sea farers. Perhaps it still is. The early

morning broadcast is on shortly after 5am, a time not unfamiliar to many people who work on the land. As such it was/is a great and timely indication of what weather was coming in, and from where. In the days before phone apps, the internet and in our case before TV weather predictions too, the shipping forecast (along with the normal weather forecasts and careful observation of the skies) could tell you a lot about what was going to happen in the coming days. Enough perhaps to make sure you could get some vulnerable animals into a safe place in good time, move things away from a river that would go into flood, or maybe even get some crops harvested before the weather turned.

Back in the 19th century the shipping forecast represented a great leap forward in technology, no more depending upon sky-based-guess work for

the mariners who received it. Since then, of course, technology has advanced at an eyewatering rate, along with it has come a vast amount of information which has slowly become cacophonous. We have such clever technology delivering so much information now that it's hard to know who or what to listen to. It's exhausting. There is another issue – 'the medium is the message' as McLuhan said: we've come to know that the answer to everything is to be found in technology. We expect now that technology will solve every problem. And if that's true, then what incentive remains for us to change our own behaviour?

#3

There's an old proverb about some blind men who are presented with an elephant, each touches a part of the elephant and tries to describe the animal from what he can feel. "It's tall and thick, like a tree" says the man touching the leg. "It's smooth and pointy" says the man touching the tusk. "It's all bendy and a bit… snotty…" says the man who has found the trunk. A partial view leaves us with a distorted description, and as a result a different idea of how to deal with the whatever we're trying to describe.

There's another truism that I became aware of a few years ago – 'to someone who only has a hammer, everything looks like a nail'. That's to say that we think of everything through the lens of our experience.

We humans have known the climate is changing for more than a century, getting on for a century and a half in fact – but for a long time the danger of this wasn't well understood. Really it has only been in my lifetime that the real risks of a change in the world's climate have begun to be well understood. Towards the end of the 1980s governments began to take it seriously, and (in theory at least) to work together to address the problem – but they were inevitably only looking at part of the problem, and trying to deal with things through a particular kind of political and economic lens. As the scale of the gaping wound began to become more obvious, calls for the purchase of more sticking plasters began to ring increasingly hollow.

#4

Do you know what the most massive living organism in the world is? It's a tree – although you wouldn't necessarily know it. Because it's a multi-trunked tree, that appears to be a grove of trees, and it's called Pando. It's classed as just one organism because Pando is many Aspen trees which are basically clones of one another, existing on one giant root ball that spreads for more than 100 acres. Many trees, one root. Some people argue there is another contender for biggest organism, an underground organism known as 'the humungous fungus' which extends across an improbable area but while Pando may be edging it at the moment because of the mass of all of its trees, it may not do for too much longer, because Pando is not able to regenerate properly any more. It is dying.

After all the predators were cleared out of Pando, and deer were allowed to munch on the young Aspens unafraid of being eaten, the rate of reproduction slowed dramatically. Now as some of the Aspens grow old and die off, they are not necessarily being replaced by new growth. Human settlements within Pando have made protecting the trees by other means impractical too – we're in danger of killing it off altogether.

The problem with Pando is something we'll return to later in this series, because it is indicative of a much bigger issue that underlies all this. This time though I want to raise the question of unintended consequences: deer predation on Pando's young Aspen shoots is partly the unintended consequence of ridding the area of wolves, bears and mountain lions. For a long time such animals were very much seen as our enemies, while cute

'Bambi' type deer were our friends– or at least as potential food. But as we know from much closer to home than Utah's Pando, deer are very harmful to our trees and their nibbling can get very destructive very quickly. That this is an unintended consequence if our (well meaning?) activity is inescapable, and it begs a further question: in how many other situations do our ongoing decisions and actions unintentionally continue to cause such harmful effects? It's a question to address personally as well as corporately.

#5

Tens of thousands of years ago Pando – now the world's most massive living organism - began as just one single, tiny, seed. That seed grew into a tree, that tree's roots spread out and other trees began to grow, this process continued over ensuing centuries and now something like 47,000 trees are part of the Pando. It is a living giant. All those interconnected leaves and roots work together to share out resources, getting energy from the sun and nutrients from the ground to resource the whole group, but now scientists say that possibly 70% of the trunks that make up Pando are dead or dying, as a result the whole thing is thinning out.

So the question has become – how do we save Pando? What can be done to rescue this ailing giant? Potential solutions have included hunting

(impractical due to the fact that Pando includes a highway, several houses and a campsite, and anyway, other deer just replace the ones killed by hunters); reintroduction of predators (again impractical due to all the humans living there); and fencing. So far more than half of Pando has been enclosed in supposedly deer proof fences, allowing parts of it to regenerate naturally. But of course all of this requires cold hard cash, filthy lucre. Again we're talking tens of thousands, but dollars this time.

For some people the solution seems clearer and in some ways harsher: get rid of the people. If you do that, you can shoot as much as you like, and reintroduce as many predators as you want. The place could be swarming with bears and wolves as soon as quickly as you can sing "the bare necessities". Similar arguments are employed in

some arguments for the restoration of apparently 'lost' parts of our own country: to summarise – "clear the people out and let the wolves in". But of course this fails to take into account a simple fact: people are part of this world too.

#6

One of the ironies about Pando is that while it is just one single, gigantic, organism, the habitat it creates is enormously biodiverse. That is to say that a vast range of animals and plants share its ecosystem, considerably more than a conifer forest for instance. This is one of the things that makes Pando so talismanic of the wider issues we face. For if Pando dies, which it might just do, then it will take with it an environment which has played home over the last many thousands of years, thereby calling an end to an extraordinary range of flora and fauna.

It is the scale of the potential loss, and the complexities of trying to address it, that make Pando a kind of case study in miniature of the global climate crisis. If we can help this one massive organism, we can potentially save

thousands of others from being destroyed too. If we just focussed on saving one species that depends on Pando we would be fighting a losing battle, failing to address the underlying cause of their endangerment.

Our global crisis is, of course, much more complex than saving one single grove of Aspen clones, no matter how many acres it covers. The problems we face are also much more complex than being eaten to death by deer*. But the same fundamental truth remains: it is vital that we come to terms with the underlying issues that threaten our world, and resolve to find solutions to them, rather than continue to argue about which birds, bees or flowers we would prefer to look after in our dying forest.

*I should also point out that there are other factors which impact the Pando that I haven't previously mentioned, including the impact of climate change which has dried the soil and the impact of cattle breeding which has made a similar impact to the unchecked explosion in deer numbers.

#7

The inescapable reality that bedevils us as we look at the problems facing Pando, and facing the world around us, is that to a very great extent we are to blame. It is our activity over the last century or two which has put Pando at risk, just as it is our activity which has caused the even bigger scale problems the world is facing.

Often of course, what I've described as 'activity' is really a series of small-scale decisions. The rancher who set out to clear the wolves and bears away from his precious herd for instance wasn't setting out to endanger an ecosystem, rather he was setting out to provide for himself and his family. After all, if not him, then whom? Should he not allow his cattle to grow sleek and fat on young Aspen shoots while shooting any creature that tries to attack them and instead watch his children

just die of hunger? Multiply his activity by the dozens or the hundreds though, and the problem becomes obvious.

The problem is, perhaps, not so much the action itself, but the scale of it. There are so many millions of us, that the individual choice to live in a way which does some limited harm to the world around us is always going to be multiply replicated and therefore magnified in terms of impact. This is why we have to work to be conscious – conscious of the individual actions we take, but conscious particularly of the scale of those actions. Do we drift along doing 'what everyone does' or do we deliberately try to lower the scale, to lessen the impact of human activity on our world?

#8

In the 1930s the sociologist Robert Merton described what he called 'Strain Theory' – it was developed from work of earlier scholars and is sometimes laid out in a kind of grid. He said that what happens in human society is that many people strive to achieve socially acceptable cultural goals: an example of one such goal might be economic wealth. So people are striving to achieve these goals, and in some cases they are able to achieve them by acceptable or 'institutionalised' means – that could be getting a well paid job, or it might even be winning the lottery. Others however find that no matter how many scratch cards they buy, they never get rich, and anyway they can't get any well paid jobs because there aren't any. So long as those people continue to accept the same goals, they face a choice – do they continue to stick with the acceptable means or do they 'innovate'? Innovation, per Merton's schema

may equal crime. After all, it has sometimes been shown to get to the goal of wealth a lot faster than a job in a factory.

Some people choose to refuse the cultural goals of course, they may also choose to accept or reject the way society dictates we should live – if they reject both the goal and the means, Merton reckoned, they are 'retreatists'. Merton also proposed an extra category of person who sits outside his four-block scheme or acceptance/rejection of goals and means. Some people, he explained, come up with new goals, and new means to gain them. These, per Merton's thinking, are the rebels. They get stuff done.

Maybe when it comes down to working out how to address issues like the possible death of Pando, or the much wider issues facing our planet, we

need people who are able to get out of the usual box, people who aren't caught up in conventional ways of thinking – whether that be accepting or rejecting the way things are usually done. Maybe we need people who can think in terms of new goals and new means. Maybe we need rebels.

#9

We should probably talk about guilt – because it's all very well thinking about these enormous issues, but a lot of people are genuinely, quietly and without any fanfare doing their best, and it doesn't feel like you're even making a dent. And that leaves them feeling guilty and worried, depressed even.

I don't mean to sound sexist, but it's my experience that women are more likely to feel guilty about this than men. Perhaps I just know lots of very conscientious women and very lackadaisical men (actually that is quite true). Or perhaps it has nothing to do with gender, and it's all about personality: I'm just not sure. To some extent I suppose this can be helpful, it can spur you into action, but I suspect that largely this isn't the case. More likely it becomes paralysing and

depressing, 'no matter how much or how little I do, it doesn't stop the glaciers melting...' The truth is that our individual efforts are never going to be enough on their own, the sort of change that will solve the problems we have has to be much bigger.

Its true too that sometimes there is no easy, or obvious, 'right thing to do'. This week I am going to explore these ideas a bit, but in the first place I want to say to those who find themselves wracked with guilt whenever they so much as look at something wrapped in plastic: thankyou for being a caring and dedicated person; please don't take all this responsibility on your shoulders; we're all in this together and you don't have to be superhuman; thankyou for being a caring and dedicated person (again).

#10

Back in 2017… wait, doesn't that seem like a long time ago!? Waaaay back in January 2017 when the world was young and we all lived carefree lives of happy abandon, a team of Swedish designers won a prestigious award. About two years earlier they had made what amounted to a flat packed plastic shed, rectangular with a pitched roof, some people said it looked 'like a child's drawing of a house'. This flat packed plastic shed was, the judges from the London Design museum unanimously felt, a worthy – indeed an 'obvious' winner of worldwide Design Of The Year award.

Of course it wasn't just 'any' plastic shed – it was a refugee shelter. Designed to be rapidly deployed and quickly constructed, to provide a temporary home for people fleeing their own homes for fear of violence or other threats. Equipped with a solar

panel, light, and power source, this was a step up from the usual tents.

Because the Swedish furniture giant funded the project, it was mainly known as the Ikea Refugee Shelter, even though it wasn't Ikea who came up with it in the first place, and it had another name: The Better Shelter. The intention was simple – create a better shelter than the sort of tents which are routinely used in refugee camps around the world. And in many ways it was exactly that – a better shelter. More secure, more private, more dignified. But that doesn't mean it was universally popular – far from it. Because the Better Shelter in some ways exemplifies the complexities of our interconnected world as I will unpack a little over the next few days – in the first place though it's enough to note that if you set fire to one of the early versions of those suckers they went up like a

torch – they are after all made of plastic. Here's the thing: there is rarely (if ever) a perfect solution to any problem.

#11

Some people really hate the Better Shelter, the mass-produced refugee housing units, because they are too simple: just a smallish rectangle really, a dry space with enough room for five people to sleep, move around, live together. Those critics feel that although the shelter is easily deployable and quite movable, it is simply not good enough. And it's expensive too – about three times the price of a tent.

Others feel the exact opposite – the Lebanese government for instance objected to the use of the plastic shelters because they were just too good. The occupants might get too comfortable in there, what with their rain proof walls and thin insulation panels. As far as these people were concerned this was too close to a permanent dwelling and couldn't be allowed.

Perhaps the most strident critique of The Better Shelter though, was to be found in the multitude of voices that were raised to question the way that it was constructed. In development circles local materials and expertise are usually preferred as more sustainable and more suited to the specific context. That might be bamboo and mud, or it might be sheets of wood, but in any case the Better Shelter raised an important ethical question: In mass producing a plastic shed and sending it around the world, were the designers actually causing an environmental problem as well as a social one? Every choice we make has environmental consequences and we have to choose our compromises.

#12

The flipside of the sustainability argument over the Better Shelter is simple and obvious: If you're not using valuable local resources to build temporary refugee shelters, you can use them for other things instead. Bringing in a load of easy to assemble plastic sheds means that you can redirect all your local materials and expertise to somewhere it is needed.

Attempting to solve any problem is tricky, sometimes there is no 'obvious' solution, no 'right answer' this was what Jean Paul Sartre tried to demonstrate in his example of a student who had to choose whether to go off to war to fight for his country, or to stay at home and take care of his mother. Each choice has negative consequences, ultimately the decision has to be made in 'good faith' – which is to say that you choose the one

you think best, and then you accept responsibility for it. From Sartre's perspective there is no ultimate right or wrong, and no higher power to claim or blame for any problems arising from your choice. To claim that you're not responsible for your choice is to act 'in bad faith'.

The Better Shelter conundrum seems to exemplify the difficulties we all face when thinking about the climate crisis. When you're making 'big' decisions like 'how do we solve the refugee housing problem?' Or 'How do we solve the climate problem?' You're always going to get it wrong somehow or other. The key to making decisions in good faith is probably to look through the other end of the telescope. What small decisions can I make that I can live with in good faith? That's not to say that we shouldn't look for bigger scale solutions too, we need answers to these bigger

questions, but it is to say that to look 'up' for grand solutions while neglecting the basics our own behaviour is to live in bad faith.

#13

If you compare the Better Shelter to a tent for housing refugees, there's an obvious winner. Tents are inherently fragile, they're inflexible, you can't stand up in them easily and if you do manage to stand in front of a light while getting undressed you're in danger of giving everyone a silhouette show. The polymers of the plastic shed are recyclable and the whole thing is modular, meaning it's possible to create other structures than just simple dwellings. The solar panel is a huge boon too – providing power and lighting, allowing mobile phones to be charged and people to remain connected to agencies and families.

When the shelters were first deployed to a refugee camp in Djibouti though, there was an obvious problem: they were way too hot. The designers scrambled to make alterations, learning as they

went about the differing needs of cultures and environments. A similar process was followed as they tried to solve the fire problem, attempting to create a shelter which was inflammable proved only to accelerate any fire which burned inside the structure. Ultimately the designers settled for a least worst option, which nonetheless required that the shelters were kept reasonably far apart. After all these are only 'better shelters' not 'perfect shelters'.

Technology is one of those 'big others' that we tend to turn to in order to solve the problems in our lives, it has been that way for a long time now. But there are problems which require solutions that can't be solved by technical means. We have developed various big others over the course of history. At one point the main 'big other' we turned to was God, but slowly we developed

alternatives: kings and governments; factories and computers; national health services; the internet… all of these things have been given the role of a God-like 'big other' in our world. The problem is that we tend to expect that they share (at least the potential for) perfection which has been traditionally ascribed to the divine. When Nietzsche provocatively claimed that 'God is dead' he was pointing to the fact that 'big others' let us down, we have to recognise this and act accordingly. Lets not fixate on the expectation that a 'big other' will step in and save us with a grand answer because that will either leave us paralysed with anxiety or even to ignore our own responsibility for things. Instead let's get on with the small things that we can do. As St David said: "do ye the little things in life."

#14

What can we do, each one of us, that will actively, positively, impact the world we live in? It's a question that I ask myself, and others have increasingly asked me since we started this Lent series. Of course we already know that everything we do has an impact in one way or another, positive or negative. I've already suggested that sometimes we have to make apparently impossible choices, and when we face these our approach is either to act in good faith (own our decisions and their consequences) or bad faith (claim that we have no real option). But of course there's more.

For those of us who have a 'religious' outlook of one sort or another, perhaps particularly those who are part of one of the great historic spiritual or religious traditions, the question of how we address our activity toward and/or within the

natural world is, I think, going to be one of the defining issues of the coming decades. That's because a lot of the people with whom we share our planet already recognise something that many religious folk have either denied, ignored or overlooked: that our planet is spiritual.

For Christians and others who are interested in what it means to live out a faith or to pass on a system of belief and action, this ought to be impossible to ignore. One of the tragedies of contemporary Christianity is that it has, for far too long, appeared entirely ambivalent towards the natural world. Activity has taken places on the edges of mainstream religion for sure, and there has been significant movement in recent years towards redressing the balance, but there has still been little by way of recognition of something that has seemed obvious to hordes of people who

aren't concerned with religious dogmas and traditions, that the world we live in is not the inert object, or series of objects of Newtonian thought. Quantum physics has cast a new light on the nature of 'matter' and this has chimed with the intuition of very many people. It has largely been ignored by churches though, sadly. This week I'm going to start thinking about ways that we might positively impact the world around us, but as so often is the case, this begins with a reorientation of the mind. We have to stop thinking of the world as a material object devoid of anything other than physical existence.

#15

It's difficult to be definitive about when humanity shifted away from having a sense of reverence for the earth because in each community that time was different. Some folk, communities and cultures, still have, or have renewed, their reverence. If pushed though I would say that in North America and Western Europe the end of the 19th century was a key pivot point, and I find this shift exemplified to a degree in the life experience of one man: Nicholas Black Elk, the indigenous or native American medicine man who was given the name Heȟáka Sápa as a child.

Black Elk's story was famously brought to light by the poet John Neihardt who interviewed him towards the end of his long, and eventful, life. A cousin of the famous Crazy Horse, a child of the plains, Black Elk's early life was one which at least

resembled many of the stereotypes of what it used to mean to live as a native American. There's something searingly profound about so much that Black Elk had to say to Neihardt. His connection to the natural world and the wisdom of the lessons he derived from it stood in stark contrast to the changing world around him. Born during the last decades of the 19th century he lived until 1950, which meant that he went from a boyhood spent close to the soil, to an old age in the era of the space race. The books that Neihardt wrote with and about him are fascinating, and sad too.

One of the most jarring juxtapositions between the way that indigenous people like the Oglala Sioux lived, and the way of the Wasichus (white settlers) who colonised their lands is this issue of reverence for the natural world. In his stories, so well interpreted by the poet Neihardt, Black Elk

speaks of the natural world in terms of it being a living thing or many living things – rather than a series of resources waiting to be exploited. By the time he died, this way of thinking was an endangered species in North America and in many other 'developed' countries. Today it's almost extinct. My feeling is that if we are to genuinely change the way we live and behave in this world, we all need to get to work to rescue that way of thinking.

#16

It really is vital to change the way we think about the world, but as Yvon Chouinard pointed out: "To do good, you actually have to do something."

Or to put it another way, "the proof of the pudding is in the eating." Or even: "faith without works is dead."

The way we know that we think in 'another way' about the world around us is in the way we behave. This is why beliefs are important. One way of understanding the word religion is 'the way we behave because of what we believe'. In other words, if we believe that the world we live in is worthy of respect, if we believe it is not just another 'object' which we can treat as suits us best, then we will treat it accordingly. If we don't

behave like that, then perhaps we don't really believe it at all.

#17

Have a close look at the stone work and wooden carvings on the walls and pews of some of our older religious buildings and if you're lucky you might find a Green Man. They turn up all over the place, particularly on medieval Churches and Cathedrals, but elsewhere too. It's quite fashionable to ascribe their presence to subversive pagan architects and masons who sneaked in a non Christian symbol or two into the wood or stonework of the buildings. I suspect that there's a bit more subtlety to the story than that.

My own theory* is that the Green Man represents a story that we don't tell any more, known as The Legend of the Rood. Stop reading if I've bored you with this one before. The Legend of the Rood recounts the story of how Adam (the first man) lay dying and dispatched one of his sons to the garden

of Eden to get a fruit from the tree of life in order to save him. When the lad reached the garden the angel blocked his way, the boy told his story and the kindly angel eventually allowed him to take a seed from the tree back to his ailing pa.

When he got home though, his dad was already dead, so he decided to plant the seed in his father's mouth. It sprouted and grew to become a mighty tree which, according to the legend then provided the wood for Noah's Ark, and even for the cross that Jesus was killed on. A decent yarn, I'm sure you'll agree. One of the interesting things about this story is that it represents something of that idea of an intimate connection between humans and the rest of the natural world. The loss of this idea demonstrates something of our collective alienation from the world around us. This was another thing that I kind of picked up on

those long walks around the sheep with my dad when I was young, the sense that we are part of our environment, that somehow we belong to the earth, that we are interconnected and interdependent. I learned it unconsciously, by osmosis perhaps. It seeped into me but I recognise my own alienation from that idea too, and have to ask myself how that can have happened.

**It is my theory in as much as I like to talk about it, but I'm pretty sure it is not original to me. Regrettably though I don't know where I got it from. I wrote about this at more length in 'Earthed, Christian perspectives on nature connection' published by Mystic Christ Press in 2014. Available goodness only knows where.*

#18

Just thinking again about the Green Man story that I wrote to you about yesterday, one of my other theories* is that we keep creating Green Man myths. It showed up in depictions of Mary Shelley's Frankenstein, it's there in pictures of Aliens – the little green men. Swamp Thing: another foliate faced Green Man. Even the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles are a kind of Green Man myth, because they all relate to the same thing: they relate to the interconnection of earth and life.

All of these stories are creation myths of one sort or another, and they point to an idea which is, I suspect hidden deep in our minds: that we come from the earth. It's right there in the Genesis account of God 'making' humanity. It's even there in the word human – of the humus, of the earth.

Deep down I think we know that we come from the earth, but throughout our lives we are consistently taught otherwise, taught to differentiate ourselves from the world we live in: to protect ourselves from our environment. To overcome this conditioning we have to actively reintroduce ourselves to the earth, if we don't do that we are in much greater risk of becoming alienated from that idea. There are many ways to do this, but the simplest is this: sit in silence. Just listen to the world around you. Spending time in silence is a practise that is profoundly reconnecting. If you're trying to work out how to change your life to take better account of the natural world, then spend time in silence. It removes the differentiation.

**I say this is my theory, and actually I think it really is. Again I wrote more about this in my chapter of the book*

*'Earthed, Christian perspectives on nature connection' published by Mystic Christ Press in 2014. Available wherever they sell obscure books these days.*

#19

Walking around the sheep with my dad decades ago, sometimes I would look into a field to see the animals huddled together in a dense woolly knot instead of spread thinly across the field or hill side. This was a sign every bit as reliable as the red sky: a warning of bad weather on its way. It's not just sheep. If cattle are all lying down, that's a good sign that the weather is going to get cold and/or wet too. There are various other examples too: animals know. And so far as I know they don't even listen to the radio.

The thing about sheep and cattle is, that what they mainly do is just get on with being sheep and cattle. (Also, sheep tend to get on with trying to die in new and inventive ways, but that's part of what it means to be a sheep I guess). Admittedly not all animals are like that, we had a goat who

had aspirations to be a dog at one stage and liked to try and round up sheep – but y'know… goats will be goats. Maybe that's the point.

Part of the way we change our mindset and then our behaviour towards our planet, is to go back to being humans. One reading of the creation story that's found in the book of Genesis is that it's a parable concerning the human tendency to try and transcend our own humanity. To become 'like God'. 'There is a supreme being', this part of the Hebrew scriptures points out, 'and we're not it'. This alone isn't enough, remedial work has to be done, but I'm fairly convinced that it's the necessary foundation for any activism. Recognise your humanity and inhabit it. Animals don't try to become anything more than what they are, and as a result they find themselves much more aware of the world around them. So much so that they can

even tell when it's going to rain without even looking at the Met office app.

#20

The scale of change required is off putting, isn't it. "What is the point of me doing my little bit, making good faith decisions? Unless everyone does it too we're all doomed…" I sympathise with people who feel this way, it's a fair point. But it's not the full story.

I used to work as a Chaplain and I was in a school staffroom one day when I saw a colleague that I knew a little bit. She wasn't someone I had spoken to a lot, and to be honest I didn't think she was particularly interested in anything I had to say. On this day though it was just she and I in the room and she looked at me and smiled. "Oh, I thought of you the other day!" She said. "I was in the supermarket and I was about to buy some bottles of water for work like I always do, then I thought of you and your metal bottle and I thought 'no…'

so I got myself a metal bottle too." She waved her metal bottle at me and then filled it up.

That small interaction reminded me of how something I don't even think about – like carrying a metal water bottle instead of using disposable ones – might change the way that someone else behaves. We all have a sphere of influence, even if it's quite small. Sometimes, as in this case, more people are paying attention to our behaviour than we realise. By making our good faith choices, even small things like carrying a metal bottle can effect a bigger change than we ever thought it would.

#21

Our society is run according to a collection of systems of 'norms' – ways of behaving that are normative, and failure to adhere to which makes one a 'deviant'. Norms are so 'normal' they are unremarkable, wearing clothes in public, perhaps, or eating with a knife and fork – they are also often really strange when you stop to think about them, but that's another story. Norms are established in various complex ways, sometimes they are confined to a small group and at other times they become widespread.

Our behaviour is governed by the way we understand the social norms of our particular part of society. If, for instance, we think it is normal to carry a metal water bottle, then we do so without even really thinking about it. If we don't know other people who do that, then it seems like it

could be a deviant, transgressive or even a subversive act. At the same time we might recognise that 'other' groups behave differently to 'us' – this recognition may not inspire us to act likewise. This sort of thing helps us to decide what to wear, how to talk, and how to behave in a given situation. It can also prevent us from making the world around us a better place.

As long as we accept without question the social norms which allow us to engage in harmful behaviour, or prevent us from engaging in helpful behaviour, then we carry on with business as usual. We can change that though by living examined lives: what is stopping me from picking up litter whenever I go out for a walk? What keeps me buying new clothes when second hand ones are perfectly adequate to my needs? What makes me flick the thermostat up instead of putting on

another jumper? What prevents me from trying to pool gardening tools with my neighbours rather than buying new ones to keep in the shed for most of the year? There may of course be valid answers to any or all of these questions, but the point is that we are conditioned to accept certain normative ways of thinking and acting and until our eyes become open to alternatives we do these without even realising.

#22

A while ago my washing machine broke down, I may have lightly fictionalised what took place when this happened before (I definitely have). Anyway, what really happened was much more boring than the story of the mystical repairman. Someone did come and have a look at it, took the back off, had a bit of a poke around and scratched his head, and then let me know that it would cost more to get it fixed than to replace it. "Built in obsolescence," he explained.

Its everywhere, and it's purposeful. Our economy relies on people not making things the way they used to be made (to last forever). Everything needs to be replaced and upgraded, that's how many firms make money. Perhaps the most obvious candidate is the mobile phone, if you try to take it apart you're liable to find that you can't,

bits have been glued together, perhaps, or just fixed with screws that no normal screwdriver can manoeuvre. The result? Something goes wrong with the phone and we're on to the next iteration (which by the way is faster, cleverer, and shinier than the older one. There has to be some incentive after all.) There is at least one alternative 'in the market' which can be opened up with a normal screwdriver and which is both updateable and reasonably easy to fix at home, but that's very much an outlier. Mostly things confirm to the pattern of built in obsolescence.

This is one of those things about which we do well to make ourselves conscious, and to make choices about the things we do/purchase accordingly. Much of our economic model is based on us being too distracted to consider these things carefully. The more distracted, stressed and

harassed (or in my case hungry) we are, the more likely we are to do things without thinking about them. Making deliberate and conscious choices is a key part of the way we collectively address the situation we're in.

#23

Some weeks my posts seem to hold together in a consistent thread, or narrative. Other weeks they seem disjointed and fail to hold together – a bunch of loose threads. I'm aware this week looks like the latter, but I want to say it is the former: here's how.

To address the crisis we're in we need to remember first who we are – this is about bringing our consciousness into the present, stopping ourselves from dreaming of grandeur, or chasing a God-like status. That's how sheep know when it will rain, even when we don't, because they get on with being sheep (and trying to die). Developing our consciousness of the present moment leads us to be aware of the small choices we make, these may seem unimportant until we recognise that these choices impact others. When we become

alive to the fact that whatever we say or do is being heard and seen by those around us, we understand the importance of even a small action. Becoming conscious also helps us to recognise the way in which we are conditioned to behave by social norms: we can begin to see how we behave, and why. More importantly perhaps we can start to see what things we don't do, and to recognise why.

Ultimately this thinking has to resolve into changing our behaviour, whether that's making a consumer choice like buying a mobile phone which can be fixed, or choosing to deviate from some other social norm when we recognise the harm that it does. Everything we do is part of a complex network of meanings and signals – the social norms we have are the ones we make or choose to accept. We can change that: we can

normalise things. In order to do that, though, we have to recognise where we've gone wrong and to change our behaviour. Thanks for coming to my Ted talk.

#24

I expect that you and I have this much in common. We both have belly buttons.

The thing about belly buttons is that they remind us that no matter how much we'd like to protest otherwise, we're part of a giant network of people, the human race. And one thing about that is that we humans aren't meant to exist entirely on our own. Not all the time anyway. We need other people. As it happens, last year I interviewed the man who was later judged to be the second strongest man in the whole world. He's enormous, gigantic, not like a normal man at all really, but… he has a belly button too. He is reliant on others just as I am, just as you are. Even if he can pick up a car on his own.

Our belly buttons are a reminder of this sense of connection, and that we're not on our own in all this. There are many, many others stumbling along, trying to make sense of things just like us. Sometimes they band together to help achieve a goal – like trying to deal with climate chaos for instance. Listen to your belly button: you weren't born to be an island, seek out those connections, they exist and they help.

#25

Long term readers might be aware that I am a fan of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian and pastor who was killed by the Nazis during World War two. He's eminently quotable, which is a boon to bears of little brain like me, here's one of his best "mic drop" moments.

"The person who loves their dream of community will destroy community, but the person who loves those around them will create community."

Darn it all Dietrich… He's right though. There is no perfect community, we're people stumbling along, feeling our way through the dark. When we come to realise that and learn to love those with whom we stumble along we create something special. When it comes to finding common cause with folk over things like the crisis we're in right

now, we shouldn't let the perfect become the enemy of the good. It happens all the time, doesn't it. We must learn to accept the flaws, love the people, and work together.

#26

Something that's worth remembering when we come together on an issue, is that we don't have to all be in perfect agreement on everything. What we have to be in agreement about is the importance of setting aside our differences for the greater good.

If someone needs blood from a donor, we don't stop to ask what that donor's position is on the key theological or political issues of the day. We recognise that they are ready to donate blood that will save someone else's life. That's what is important here. Not how they voted on Brexit, or whether they subscribe to penal substitutionary atonement.

I learned this rather simple lesson by working out how to deal with dog poo on our pavements

alongside people who represented a wide range of communities (bad example really because it turns out that dogs still poo on the pavements, but we tried). The point is that it turned out that it really didn't matter if they were a UKIP member or a Neo Pagan, they still didn't want to step in dog poo when they were walking to the shop, and neither did I. To borrow from a proverb… "Rich and poor have this in common: they don't want to step in dog poo."

Banding together with people who don't look or sound or think like you might feel counter intuitive, but it works. After all, that's how the ripples of your influence can be felt in a wide range of communities.

#27

In 1932 a bunch of people went for a walk, and ended up changing the world. Technically I suppose it was three walks, all setting off from different places, but aimed at the same destination: Kinder Scout, the highest point in Derbyshire.

The Kinder mass trespass, as it has become known, goes down in folklore as one of the most successful pieces of deliberate law breaking in British legal history. It led, in time, to the creation of the Peak District national park – turning previously private land into a place where people now can walk and explore legally and safely (no longer under threat of getting a beating from the gamekeepers). After consistent pressure over the decades that followed, a 'right to roam' in parts of England was enshrined in law in 2000.

All of this was due to people power. An estimated 500+ people took part in that first mass trespass, not a huge amount maybe, but more than enough to outnumber the hired men with sticks who tried to get rid of them. Some of the trespassers were arrested and taken to court, but ultimately the victory was theirs. And ours. Banding together; making common cause; working together; works.

#28

There's a trick question that often gets asked when people have to do obligatory safeguarding training: "Who is responsible for safeguarding?" I don't know if anyone gets caught out by the question anymore, because most of us now know to automatically reply: "everyone." We might have someone or some people in charge of the systems and processes, but ultimately its down to each of us to ensure that people around us, and we are ourselves, are kept safe.

The same is true of our engagement in all things environmental. "Who is responsible for looking after our planet?" Answer: "everyone."

Next week I'm going to revisit Pando – that grove of Aspen clones in North America, and we'll round out this series with some thoughts about

what it really means for us all to be in this together. But as we finish off a week where all the emails have been about the benefits of working together, it's worth reflecting again that this is about more than us as individuals, this is about 'we' – humans have precipitated this problem, humans have a responsibility to address it. Of course that message hasn't got across to everyone yet, but that's part of our job. We need to communicate the need to make better choices, and the importance of taking responsibility for our behaviour. We have to model what it means to take good faith decisions and tread lightly on the ground.

#29

It's Holy week – the run up to one of the most important festivals in the Christian calendar. Every year (it seems to me) there are the obligatory stories shared about how Easter is really a pagan festival dressed up in Christian clothing. As usual with this sort of thing there's a way in which this is true, and a way in which it's not. We are, after all, an interconnected people with ideas that don't fit neatly into discreet boxes to the exclusion of all else.

It is certainly true that for most of human existence we were much more closely connected with the earth beneath our feet than many of us are now. In recent years we've been at pains to remove ourselves as far as possible from the stuff 'from which we are made' – concreting over it,

hiding ourselves in metal boxes, or building our homes ever closer to the sky.

This week we're going to revisit Pando, the world's biggest organism (probably), because there's so much to learn from that enormous grove of Aspen clones. I don't want to be too obvious – but ultimately this is all about interconnection. We don't live in splendid isolation any more than the Aspen clones do, we are intimately connected not just with one another but with all the other life, seen and unseen, in our world. The Pagani, the 'uncivilised' countryside dwellers, knew this well enough. Their rituals and beliefs or superstitions revolved around their understanding of our interconnectedness with the natural world. Although the Urbani, the 'civilised' town dwellers, did their best to rid us of these festivals some linger still – like the spring Equinox

celebrations that were named after the goddess Eostre. It wouldn't be fair to suggest that Christian's simply stole the pagan festival though, for just as Christmas is the Christian festival of light in the darkness, so is Easter the Christian celebration of the sunrise. We are all interconnected, once we start looking for the points of connection we may amaze ourselves with what we find.

#30

Its extraordinary how quickly time moves, and with it, understanding of our world. Only in recent years have we come to recognise that apparently 'non sentient' forms of life are not only sentient, but apparently social too. Trees have been shown to communicate with one another, to share resources with one another, and to be interdependent in ways that were hitherto unimaginable*. Or perhaps – only imaginable, but impossible to demonstrate.

With this growing recognition that the world around us is alive in ways that we hadn't realised, has come a renewed interest in the panpsychism, an idea that has its roots in centuries old philosophy which suggested that consciousness exists beyond 'just' the animal kingdom. Panpsychists think that consciousness of some

sort may exist at a molecular level, which, when you come to think of it is pretty mind blowing. Although given the subject matter, that seems like exactly the wrong term, or perhaps exactly the right one.

What if we treated the world around us as if it were host to a vast range of consciousness? What if we considered trees and plants to be living beings with more than just the ability to turn towards the sun? What if we looked upon trees as individuals who could form friendships, and even remember things? How would, or could we change the way we treat the world around us if we start to think like this?

*If this concept is new to you, try looking at the work of Peter Wohlleben or just looking up 'the wood wide web'.

#31

Yesterday I used a long word: panpsychism. Today I'm going to use another: panentheism.

Panentheism is a theological idea, that the divine exists not only 'beyond' everything, but 'within' everything too. It's effectively the outworking of the old idea that divinity is 'omnipresent' or in other words, that God is everywhere, or perhaps better still: there's nowhere that God isn't. If you prefer technical jargon, we're talking both 'transcendent' **and** 'imminent'.

This is a bit of a mind shift for people who picture God as a man on a cloud, (wrong on both counts folks) but if its an idea that we can take seriously then it really matters when it comes to ideas about how we treat the world. The Hindu greeting

'Namaste' translates as something close to 'the divine in me honours the divine in you' which is a challenging and deep thought really, what if we were to extend an approach of 'Namaste' to the ground we walk on? "Walk as if you are kissing the earth with your feet," advises the famous Zen teacher Thich Nat Hanh, it's a literal idea, but one that deserves to be extended to the broadest senses in which we 'walk' too.

#32

Just as the Pando Aspen clones form a vast living organism, mutually dependent and supportive, reliant on shared resources and apparently even able to communicate from one part of the organism to the other, so we too in our world of multiple individuals are deeply interconnected. And not just with 'people'.

We are all entirely reliant upon the world in which we live, if we aren't able to breathe air with the right gases in it, then we die. If we can't take in water or nutritious foods, then we die. If bees all go on strike, then we die. If the forests stop cleaning our air for us, then we die. I could go on. We are deeply connected with, and entirely reliant upon, the world around us.

If we are to begin to change our behaviour, to put right the damage we have caused, then an understanding of this must become mainstream. Pando isn't an anomaly, it's a visual representation, a microcosm if you like, of the way we all live. Just as Pando is under existential threat because it's eco system has been interfered with, so are we under threat too. Unless we learn to live in the reality of a world in which connection is a present reality, and choose to adjust our activity accordingly, we endanger our own existence.

#33

"Red sky in the morning, you know what that means…" I say to my daughter. Without missing a beat she replies with customary drollery: "Red sky in the morning, shepherds in an awning." There are few things worse than funny children (not that she's a child anymore, but she's my child if you get me).

But at the same time, young people give me hope. They are, collectively, much more engaged with issues of the world around them than many of my own generation. When I was growing up it was hard to get a vegetarian meal outside of my house, now it's easy, and many young people are leading the way in demanding much greater changes as we begin to move away from intensive agriculture and better treatment of both animals and landscape. We have them (and those who went before them)

to thank for shifts away from fossil fuels and dozens of other things that are beginning to move us away from our old habits of inconsiderate destructiveness.

Teaching some students recently about the moral problems associated with consumerism I suggested that the real issue is a 'refusal to take suffering into account' – as long as continue to do that then our problems don't go away. We must increase our consciousness of suffering that goes beyond the annoyance we feel when things aren't exactly the way we want them to be. As we do this, our behaviour changes too, we become more aware of our actions, we seek to change our behaviour and to encourage others to do the same, and we band together to make real changes where we can, overlooking differences in favour of common goals. In all this we don't seek to duck

the responsibility we have for our actions, but we also don't let ourselves be overwhelmed with guilt. Live in good faith, and recognise that when we do so we make mistakes. That mustn't stop us from trying.

*Fin.*

# About the author

Simon Cross is a writer and journalist who was born in Scotland and raised in rural Northumberland. He went on to study Politics and Sociology before beginning a career in news journalism. He spent a number of years working as a full-time journalist before becoming more involved in community work. He continues to write news and features for a variety of publications, as well as working on a PhD in theology. He is married to Kelly and together they have two children.