



**MERCY
GLOBAL
PRESENCE**

Introduction: Presence to Earth

Elizabeth Davis rsm (Newfoundland)

In September 2020, we began the third Segment of Mercy Global Presence, centering our hearts and minds on “presence of, to and with God.” We heard in the Introduction, “Together we rejoice in the God who creates and cares, in the God who dwells among us, in the God who calls us into relationship, in the God who is with us, in the God who suffers with us, in the God who is love, in the God who walks with us now and forever.” Mary-Paula Cancienne rsm gave us a profound reflection, “Opening to the grace of presence involves three stages: vulnerability, revelation, and resiliency.” In an inviting painting, Marilyn Browne rsm used “a spiral to represent God in this painting, to echo the spirals used by some of the first peoples of the world - the Maoris, the Indigenous peoples of Australia and some Native American tribes - to represent the Divine in their art.” Maura Walsh rsm reminded us about “growing up in Ireland in an environment of Celtic Spirituality, in which God was not removed from the world and the lives of human beings, was hallowed. God was all around – in the landscape of sea and mountain, bog and forest, in the rising and setting sun, in the comings and goings of the seasons.”

Amanda Carrier rsm gave us hope in the midst of the pandemic, “Covid-19 highlighted systemic injustices, inequality, and marginalization but is also drew us, individually and collectively, into the presence of God.” Agnes Hunter rsm gave visible depth to this same thought from Kenya, ““Every year, the Maasai Mara, known for its large population of lions, leopards, cheetahs, elephants and millions of herbivores, host over 300,000 domestic and international tourists. No single tourist has visited the Mara in more than 60 days. Therefore, the animals are at peace.” Josephine Davies rsm and Cathy Edge rsm shared with us a beautiful prayer reflection which began with these words, “Awareness of the presence of God fills Julian of Norwich with joy, desire, hope and love. Lord, we pray that, seeking wisdom from her we may make your presence in our daily lives more conscious and vibrant.”

Enlivened and awed by the depths of this first month’s reflection, we move to the second theme within “Presence,” presence to Earth. Once again, diverse voices of theologian, artist, distinct voice, scientist, minister, global thinker, and prayer maker will challenge our thinking, move our hearts, strengthen our spirits and bring us into new awareness of our own presence to Earth and the profound impact that has on who and how we are.

Reflections through Scripture – Creation

Four themes flow through the Scriptures as we reflect on presence to Earth: creation, covenant, care for Earth and God’s steadfast love, and Earth’s response. The very first chapters of Genesis give us two creation stories, very different in their approach, but both focused on God’s intentional creation of Earth. In Genesis 1, God creates with a word, “Let the Earth put forth vegetation: plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind on Earth that bear fruit with the seed in it. . . Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the Earth across the dome of the sky. . . Let the Earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things

and wild animals of the Earth of every kind. . . Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness. . . God saw everything that God had made, and indeed, it was very good” (Gen 1:11, 20, 26, 31). In the second creation story, the Lord God needs someone to till the soil of Earth, “The Lord God made the Earth and the heavens. . .The Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there the Lord God put the man whom the Lord God had formed. Out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food” (Gen 2:4, 8-9).

The psalms go on to give us many other stories of creation, all different yet all showing the love to God for Earth. One example is Ps 65:5-9, in which we read, “O God, you are the hope of all the ends of Earth and of the farthest seas. By your strength you established the mountains; you are girded with might. You silence the roaring of the seas, the roaring of their waves, the tumult of the peoples. Those who live at Earth’s farthest bounds are awed by your signs; you make the gateways of the morning and the evening shout for joy. You visit the Earth and water it, you greatly enrich it.”

Reflections through Scripture – Covenant

The very first time the word “covenant” is mentioned in the Hebrew Bible is in Genesis 9 when God establishes a covenant between God and Earth. God said, “As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the Earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. . . This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the Earth. When I bring clouds over the Earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh” (Gen 9:8-15).

Leonardo Boff, in his *Cry of Earth, Cry of the Poor*, gives us a profound reflection of presence to Earth mirrored in this covenant, “Human beings must feel that they are sons and daughters of the rainbow, those who translate this divine covenant with all the beings existing and living, with new relationships of kindness, compassion, cosmic solidarity, and deep reverence for the mystery that each one bears and reveals. Only then will there be integral liberation, of the human being and of Earth, and rather than the cry of the poor and the cry of the Earth there will be common celebration of the redeemed and the freed, human beings in our own house, on our good, great, and bountiful Mother Earth.”

Reflections through Scripture – Care and Steadfast Love for Earth

God loves Earth. We read in Deuteronomy (11:11-12), “But the land that you are crossing over to occupy is a land of hills and valleys, watered by rain from the sky, a land that the Lord your God looks after. The eyes of the Lord your God are always on it, from the beginning of the year to the end of the year.” Over and over again, we are told of God’s steadfast love (*hesed*) for Earth. The beautiful psalm of steadfast love, Psalm 136, begins with a beautiful section on creation of Earth:

O give thanks to the Lord, for the Lord is good,
for God's steadfast love endures for ever.
who by understanding made the heavens,
for God's steadfast love endures for ever;
who spread out Earth on the waters,
for God's steadfast love endures for ever;
who made the great lights,
for God's steadfast love endures for ever;
the sun to rule over the day,
for God's steadfast love endures for ever;
the moon and stars to rule over the night,
for God's steadfast love endures for ever.
Ps 136:1, 5-9

Reflections through Scripture – Earth's Response

The psalms echo with Earth's response in joy and praise. We sing in Psalm 96 1, 11-13):

O sing to the Lord a new song; sing to the Lord, all Earth.
Let the heavens be glad, and let Earth rejoice;
let the sea roar, and all that fills it;
let the field exult, and everything in it.
Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy before the Lord;
for the Lord is coming, is coming to judge Earth.

And, again, we hear in the third last psalm in the Book of Psalms, Ps 148:7-10:

Praise the Lord from Earth, you sea monsters and all deeps,
fire and hail, snow and frost, stormy wind fulfilling the Lord's command!
Mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars!
Wild animals and all cattle, creeping things and flying birds!

Indigenous Peoples ~ Presence to Earth

While Indigenous peoples are diverse in their lifestyles, in their cultures and in their spiritualities, they all hold in common their interconnectedness with Earth. We will briefly reflect on examples from countries where Sisters of Mercy live and minister.

The Indigenous leader, Luther Standing Bear, from the United States, in the 1930s wrote, "The old people came literally to love the soil and they sat or reclined on the ground with a feeling of being close to a mothering power. It was good for the skin to touch the Earth and the old people liked to remove their moccasins and walk with bare feet on the sacred Earth. . . . The soil was soothing, strengthening, cleansing, and healing."

The Assembly of First Nations in Canada gives us insight into their spirituality in this statement entitled *Honouring Earth*: "From the realms of the human world, the sky dwellers, the water beings, forest creatures and all other forms of life, the beautiful

Mother Earth gives birth to, nurtures and sustains all life. Mother Earth provides us with our food and clean water sources. She bestows us with materials for our homes, clothes, and tools. She provides all life with raw materials for our industry, ingenuity, and progress. She is the basis of who we are as “real human beings” that include our languages, our cultures, our knowledge, and wisdom to know how to conduct ourselves in a good way. 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. All are provided by our mother, the Earth. Indigenous peoples are caretakers of Mother Earth and realize and respect her gifts of water, air, and fire. First Nations peoples have a special relationship with the Earth and all living things in it. This relationship is based on a profound spiritual connection to Mother Earth that guided Indigenous peoples to practice reverence, humility, and reciprocity.

For the Indigenous peoples of Australia and the Torres Straits, the connection with Earth echoes the North American peoples. “Indigenous spirituality derives from a philosophy that establishes the wholistic notion of the interconnectedness of the elements of the Earth and the universe, animate and inanimate, whereby people, the plants and animals, landforms and celestial bodies are interrelated. When Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people say they have a spiritual connection to the land, sea, landforms, watercourses, the species and plant life, this connection exists through the Law developed at the time of creation. Thus, each person or specific plant or place is linked to the spirit of its creation and thus to each other, which is a relationship of “mutual spirit being.”

One of their gifts in exploring this relationship is *Dadirri*. One of their elders, Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann, explains it in this way, “*Dadirri* is inner, deep listening and quiet, still awareness. *Dadirri* recognizes the deep spring that is inside us. We call on it and it calls to us. This is the gift that Australia is thirsting for. It is something like what you call ‘contemplation.’ When I experience *dadirri*, I am made whole again. I can sit on the riverbank or walk through the trees; even if someone close to me has passed away, I can find my peace in this silent awareness. There is no need of words. A big part of *dadirri* is listening.”

The Indigenous peoples of New Zealand, the Maori, have achieved something no other group has yet achieved. The New Zealand courts first accepted their plea concerning river diversions: “One needs to understand the culture of the Whanganui River iwi [tribe] to realize how deeply ingrained the saying *ko au te awa, ko te awa, ko au* [I am the river, the river is me] is to those who have connections to the river. . . Their spirituality is their “connectedness” to the river. To take away part of the river . . . is to take away part of the iwi. To desecrate the water is to desecrate the iwi. To pollute the water is to pollute the people.”

The courts then, the first in the world, granted legal personhood to the Whanganui River which it deemed to be a living entity. The legislation refers to the river as an “indivisible, living whole,” conferring it “all the rights, powers, duties, and liabilities” of an individual. Based on the Whanganui precedent, 820 square miles of forests, lakes, and rivers—a former national park known as Te Urewera—also gained legal personhood. Soon a mountain, Taranaki, will become the third such person.

Presence to Earth – Recent Voices

Francis of Assisi was among the first European persons to see Earth and its creatures as living entities in connection with human beings. His *Canticle of Creatures* contains the verse, “Praise be to you, my Lord, through our Sister, Mother Earth, who sustains and governs us, and who produces various fruit with coloured flowers and herbs.” In the twentieth century, Dag Hammarskjöld, the second secretary-general (1953–61) of the United Nations, wrote words which echo those of Francis, “So rests the sky against the Earth. The dark still tarn in the lap of the forest. As a husband embraces his wife's body in faithful tenderness, so the bare ground and trees are embraced by the still, high, light of the morning. I feel an ache of longing to share in this embrace, to be united and absorbed. A longing like carnal desire, but directed towards Earth, water, sky, and returned by the whispers of the trees, the fragrance of the soil, the caresses of the wind, the embrace of water and light. Content? No, no, no - but refreshed, rested - while waiting.”

A pioneer environmentalist, Rachel Carson, wrote the now classic book, *Silent Spring*, initiating a new approach to our presence to Earth in this new age. Her words began a global movement which continues into our time, “To stand at the edge of the sea, to sense the ebb and flow of the tides, to feel the breath of a mist moving over a great salt marsh, to watch the flight of shore birds that have swept up and down the surf lines of the continents for untold thousands of years, to see the running of the old eels and the young shad to the sea, is to have knowledge of things that are as nearly eternal as any Earthly life can be. . . Those who contemplate the beauty of Earth find reserves of strength that will endure as long as life lasts. There is something infinitely healing in the repeated refrains of nature – the assurance that dawn comes after night, and spring after winter.”

In 2000, most of the countries of the United Nations signed The Earth Charter, a document with sixteen principles powering a global movement towards a more just, sustainable, and peaceful world. Its preamble gives a sense of its fundamental approach: “We stand at a critical moment in Earth's history, a time when humanity must choose its future. As the world becomes increasingly interdependent and fragile, the future at once holds great peril and great promise. To move forward we must recognize that in the midst of a magnificent diversity of cultures and life forms we are one human family and one Earth community with a common destiny.”

Patriarch Bartholomew I of Constantinople and the Eastern Orthodox Church has been the leader in bringing churches into the global environmental movement. He says, “For human beings . . . to destroy the biological diversity of God's creation; for human beings to degrade the integrity of the Earth by causing changes in its climate, by stripping the Earth of its natural forests or destroying its wetlands; for human beings to contaminate the Earth's waters, its land, its air, and its life – these are sins.”

With his encyclical *Laudato Si* in 2015', Pope Francis has led the Roman Catholic Church into a new theological and spiritual understanding of our connectedness with Earth. In that encyclical we read, “Earth herself, burdened and laid waste, is among the most abandoned and maltreated of our poor; she “groans in travail” (*Rom* 8:22). We have forgotten that we ourselves are dust of the Earth (cf. *Gen* 2:7); our very bodies are made up of her elements, we breathe her air, and we receive life and

refreshment from her waters” (LS, #2). And again, “A sober look at our world shows that the degree of human intervention, often in the service of business interests and consumerism, is actually making our Earth less rich and beautiful, ever more limited and grey” (LS, #34).

The encyclical goes on to say, “These situations have caused sister Earth, along with all the abandoned of our world, to cry out, pleading that we take another course. Never have we so hurt and mistreated our common home as we have in the last two hundred years. Yet we are called to be instruments of God our Father, so that our planet might be what God desired when God created it and correspond with God’s plan for peace, beauty, and fullness” (LS, #53). Pope Francis summarizes the key theme near the end of the encyclical, “Everything is related, and we human beings are united as brothers and sisters on a wonderful pilgrimage, woven together by the love God has for each of God’s creatures and which also unites us in fond affection with brother sun, sister moon, brother river and mother Earth” (LS, #92).

In 2019, Pope Francis advanced the theological thinking by calling the Synod on the Amazon. The final document from the Synod, *New Paths For The Church And For An Integral Ecology*, gives us new insights into our presence to Earth: “#2 The Amazon rainforest is a "biological heart" for the increasingly threatened Earth. . . #17 Listening to the cry of the Earth and the cry of the poor and of the peoples of the Amazon with whom we walk, calls us to a true integral conversion. . . #66 God has given us the Earth as a gift and as a task, to care for it and to answer for it; we do not own it. . . #101 The ancestral wisdom of the aboriginal peoples affirms that mother Earth has a feminine face.”

We conclude our reflections on presence to Earth with this prayer from the Navajo people in the United States. It is entitled *Walk In Beauty*:

Today I will walk out, today everything negative will leave me
I will be as I was before, I will have a cool breeze over my body.
I will have a light body, I will be happy forever, nothing will hinder me.
I walk with beauty before me. I walk with beauty behind me.
I walk with beauty below me. I walk with beauty above me.
I walk with beauty around me. My words will be beautiful.
In beauty all day long may I walk.
Through the returning seasons, may I walk.
On the trail marked with pollen may I walk.
With dew about my feet, may I walk.
With beauty before me may I walk.
With beauty behind me may I walk.
With beauty below me may I walk.
With beauty above me may I walk.
With beauty all around me may I walk.
In old age wandering on a trail of beauty, lively, may I walk.
In old age wandering on a trail of beauty, living again, may I walk.
My words will be beautiful. . .

Theological Imaginings: Presence to Earth

Mary Tinney rsm (ISMAPNG)

Welcome to this theological reflection on the theme *Presence to Earth*.

I would like to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the lands on which each one of us meets, in my case the Tuurbal people north of the Brisbane River in Qld, Australia.

*This ancient land was here
In the silences and its sounds of life
Long before history was written
Held carefully in its dreaming.
We acknowledge the traditional owners
and custodians of the land and water
of our various areas.
We pay our respects to them
and honour their links with all creation.
May we walk gently on this land.*

I would also like us to become present to Earth. With St Francis we can embrace Mother Earth, Brother Sun/Fire, Sister Water and Brother Wind/Air as our kin¹, biologically related through our common origins from stardust and suffused with the same Spirit. We, too, are made from the elements of earth, fire, wind, water and spirit.

You may have a stronger sense of identification with one of these elements over another. For us in the southern hemisphere it is currently Spring which is associated with air or breath or wind. For those in the northern hemisphere Autumn is associated with Earth and harvests and fruitfulness. Some places have four seasons which are markedly different from each other. Others around the Equator experience fairly constant temperatures with fluctuations between the dry and the wet. When I am present to Earth, I am tuned in to it with all my senses. I feel it, smell it, and can often touch and taste its distinctiveness.

When we are present to someone or something, it is a two-way encounter. It or they are also present to us. The relationship is “mutually beneficial” to use a phrase of Thomas Berry:

The Great Work now, as we move into a new millennium, is to carry out the transition from a period of human devastation of the Earth to a period when humans would be present to the planet in a mutually beneficial manner.²

¹ See the *Canticle of Creation* of St Francis for his use of these titles:

<https://www.catholic.org/prayers/prayer.php?p=3188>

² Thomas Berry, “The Great Work” in *The Great Work*, 3

The Earth community is a source of awe, wonder, insight, beauty, anguish, pain and sometime suffering. We can enter into its “groaning” something that was understood by St Paul when he wrote to the Christians in Rome.

We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. ((Romans, 8, 22)

We, too, are part of that groaning as the Covid pandemic impacts our lives and our loving and our grieving for deceased friends, relatives and colleagues. We are all affected economically, socially and culturally, some more so than others. We are present to the Earth community and they are present to us in these challenging times. We strain towards what we hope will be a just regeneration where Earth itself is not abandoned in this time of crisis and opportunity.

Earth is Sacred

“Everything is interconnected”³, a phrase used repeatedly by Pope Francis. Our presence to Earth and Earth’s presence to us are manifestations of Sacred Presence. In *Laudato Si*⁴, the Pope says:

We can say that “alongside revelation properly so-called, contained in sacred Scripture, there is a divine manifestation in the blaze of the sun and the fall of night”.⁵ Paying attention to this manifestation, we learn to see ourselves in relation to all other creatures: “I express myself in expressing the world; in my effort to decipher the sacredness of the world, I explore my own”.⁶

All is part of the community of creation, a new paradigm developed by Elizabeth Johnson which takes us beyond a paradigm of dominion. She explains that the theological construct of the community of creation is founded on the belief that “all beings are in fact creatures, sustained in life by the Creator of all that is.”⁷ This is the case for humankind and other species, and this commonality before God is stronger than our differences. In our kinship all are “grounded in absolute, universal reliance on the living God for the breath of life.”⁸ This pattern of relationship, which locates us humans alongside other creatures and stresses interconnectedness without blurring differences, gives a new impetus for ethical behaviour based in that new relationality with one another and the wider whole which can supercede notions of dominion.

³ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si, On Care for our Common Home* (hereafter LS), 20-60, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html, 16

⁴ LS 85

⁵ ID., *Catechesis* (2 August 2000), 3: *Insegnamenti* 23/2 (2000), 112.

⁶ PAUL RICOEUR, *Philosophie de la Volonté, t. II: Finitude et Culpabilité*, Paris, 2009, 216

⁷ Elizabeth A Johnson, *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love* (London: Bloomsbury Press, 2014), 268

⁸ Ibid

In other words, we are present in community, alongside other creatures, with whom we have more in common than what differentiates us, and from that stance we are present in community with the living and loving God, and impelled to act ethically for the whole community.

Johnson takes Job as an exemplar when she is exploring the theological significance of our membership in the community of creation. With Job, Johnson asks the beasts about the interconnection of all that is with God. Job is searching to understand why he is suffering:

Job has come upon hard times, and his friends argue that he must have sinned. Job maintains his innocence, but his suffering is very real. Eventually God speaks to him out of the whirlwind, and asks “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the Earth?” (Job 38, 4) The questions go on and on as God draws attention to the scope of the physical world and the qualities of the wild yet free animals and the fearsome beasts. These creations are a far cry from anything which has been subject to human dominion, yet they are revelatory.⁹

Job realised that the hand of God was present in the multiple manifestations around him rather than in the voices of his friends who denounced him as a sinner because of his suffering. Everyone and everything are in communion just by being who and what they are in themselves.

There is mutuality in the relations between God and the Earth community. If we are truly present we can say in the words of Gerard Manly Hopkins, “The world is charged with the glory of God”.¹⁰ He does point out in another poem, *Hurrahing in Harvest* that there can be a gap between that reality and our presence to it:

It is timely to open our senses and our hearts and be present to Earth in her grandeur and her groaning.

⁹ Johnson, *Beasts*, 268

¹⁰ Gerard Manley Hopkins, *God's Grandeur*, <https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/gods-grandeur>



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Artistic Response: Presence to Earth

Carmel Bracken rsm (The Congregation): 'A 2020 Vision'

Earth has been sending us
Alarming distress signals
For many years now
Calling us to awaken
And change our ways.

For a multitude of reasons
We looked away
Unable or unwilling
To halt business as usual
Though knowing deep within
That we had disrupted nature's capacity
To create conditions conducive
To all of life.

What if 2020 is truly offering us
The gift of clearer vision ?
What if the invisible Covid 19 virus
Is making visible
The invisible viruses
Held within an outdated worldview
Viruses that are the root causes
Of global problems and catastrophes.

The virus of thinking we are separate from nature
The virus of believing we can control her
The virus of believing she is a machine
That we can manipulate.
The virus of thinking she is a dead thing
We can mine and frack at will?

What if the coronavirus pandemic
Is apocalyptic in its deeper meaning?
A revelation and unveiling.
A lifting of the veil
Of all that has been hidden
A lens bringing into focus
What we need to let go of
So a better world can emerge

A world that enables the flourishing
Of the whole community of life.

Our 14 billion year evolutionary journey
Has always been punctuated by jump times
When crises have been drivers for
Extraordinary change and creativity
Pushing life toward greater complexity
Increased diversity and connectivity
And deeper levels of consciousness .

NOW is our jump time.

As we emerge from this strangely surreal time
The quality of our **presence to earth**
May well determine whether we earthlings
Make it through this jump time.

May we know her
As our teacher and mentor
Valuing what we can learn from her
Not what we can extract from her.

May we look to her as Source
Not resource
Knowing she is the sacred matrix
In which we are all embedded
And upon whom we profoundly depend.

May we become re-enchanted with nature
Knowing earth as a living spiritual being
Trusting the Divine intelligence
That is in everything
Opening to her alchemical powers
Of transformation and healing.

As we become present to her energies
Pulsing through us
May we discover that the
Light in our own depths is
A spark of the world soul
The *Anima mundi*

As we deepen our ability
To be present to earth
May we know that everything
Is an expression
Of a Oneness that is dynamically alive.

May we learn to communicate with
The consciousness of Earth
And all sentient beings.
Truly sensing that
we are cosmic stuff
embedded in the ecology
of the Whole
Thus becoming a gateway
for the presencing of the Whole
allowing the fire of creation to burn
and enter the world through us
Enabling the next step of evolution



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Grassroots Ministry: Presence to Earth

Michael Gross (Americas)

When I agreed to participate in this initiative many months ago, I had no idea how I would address this topic. What does presence of Earth and to Earth mean? I'm a scientist – my mind does not deal with ideas like this. And in those cold dark days of December, there were not too many Earth creatures moving about to inspire me.

But then the pandemic happened, bringing that part of the Earth known as SARS-CoV-2 much more present into our lives than we would have liked, raising our awareness of the many inequities among the many humans on Earth – some have better access to healthcare, some have jobs forcing them to be around other people who may be infected with an invisible deadly disease, some are in societies where there is no safety net when a pandemic-induced shutdown deprives them of their livelihood. At my GPS coordinates on Earth, we went into confinement in the middle of March. A wonderfully exciting time for a biologist, specifically a plant ecologist like me, who needs to be outside. At 40 degrees North Latitude and 75 degrees West Longitude, Earth “creatures” are re-awakening and new lives are emerging at an ever-increasing rate each day. Those of us who were trained to observe the world around us can't bear to be inside, away from our DNA kin.

I was thankful to be designated “essential” so I could come to work each day and water the plants in the university's greenhouse. Thankful that I work on a 150-acre mostly “green” campus, a university sponsored by the Sisters of Mercy, with an arboretum, water bodies, gardens, forests....all teeming with life. And then, like many others, I began to realize the unexpected beneficial consequences of how my world had just changed. What new things was I going to be able to do? What new opportunities would I have, given a shift in my responsibilities and how I worked and lived? What new ways would I find to use the precious gift of time? How will I be challenged by these new circumstances and how will I respond?

As I reflect back on the last several months, I realize that I have been more present to Earth and to other Earth creatures, and Earth and its creatures have been more present to me. And it is not just the creatures – why just the creatures? – what about the water, air, soil, rocks? I am reminded of these excerpts from the poem “Do Stones Feel?” by Mary Oliver:

“Do stones feel?
Do they love their life?
Or does their patience drown out everything else?”

Is the tree as it rises delighted with its many branches,
each one like a poem?

Are the clouds glad to unburden their bundles of rain?

Most of the world says no, no, it's not possible.

I refuse to think to such a conclusion.
Too terrible it would be, to be wrong."

This poem reminds me of the interconnectedness of everything in the cosmos. Everything is composed of the same chemical elements, and they have been recycled continuously for billions of years. The oxygen atoms that make up much of my body were in the body of a plant, animal, fungus or bacterium that I ate yesterday, and may very well have been part of Jesus, Mary, Moses, Catherine McAuley, or soil and water in the centuries in between. So, presence of Earth and to Earth for humans and all Earth? Yes, I say, yes....we are all one, we are all part of the same evolving creation story. How will each of us choose to shape this story?

The scope of Mercy Global Presence is indeed global, and contributors are invited to infuse their contribution with their own cultures and geography. I have enjoyed the global images of others over the last several months. And so I want to share with you some images from my part of Earth (in the part of the world known by humans as New Jersey, USA, planet Earth, Milky Way galaxy) that I would not have except that the pandemic gave me the chance to be "present" to Earth in ways that I would not have otherwise experienced, and for those parts of the Earth to be "present" to me. In pandemic times, there were fewer people out and about. There were fewer people noises and people interruptions, so I heard more from the rest of Earth and saw more of the rest of Earth. I was outside more. I went to more parks and other natural places. I shared more of my atoms directly with "Earth" around me, and it shared its atoms with me. I breathed with the deer, the frog, the mockingbird eggs, the cardinal flower, and the green stink bug. I was present in a more immediate way to Earth, and Earth to me. Has this happened to you too? What does it mean? How has it changed me? How has it changed you? How has it changed "Earth"? I invite readers to think about how Earth has been present to them, and they to Earth, and how they can have more mutually beneficial experiences with "Earth".



Eastern bluebird positioned close to its nest to dive-bomb passers-by like me.



Ground nesting bees use the soil for their nests.



Seabeach amaranth, one of a few federally threatened plants in New Jersey. It disappeared from the state between 1913 and 2000, and is now being protected by humans through changes in beach management.



Eastern painted turtle optimistically laying eggs in the soil for the next generation of turtles.



Mockingbird eggs in their perfectly constructed nest, designed to withstand this summer's hurricane Isaias.



Federally threatened swamp pink.



Green stink bug.



Cardinal flower waiting to share its nectar with the ruby-throated hummingbird that visits it daily.



White-tailed deer, surprised to see a human during the pandemic-induced confinement.



Spatulate-leaved sundew, a carnivorous plant whose sticky tentacles trap curious insects.

When I saw this frog on a hot summer day, I thought of Mary Oliver's poem, "Almost a Conversation", which I have adapted here:



I have not really talked with frog about its life.
Frog has no words, still what it tells me about its life is clear.
It does not own a "smart" phone with a camera like the one I am aiming at it right now.
It imagines its pond will last forever.
It does not envy the dry house I live in.
It does not wonder who or what it is that I worship.
It wonders, that the pond is so cold and fresh and alive, and still I don't jump in.

In "Long Life", Mary Oliver wrote:

"What does it mean that the earth is so beautiful? And what shall I do about it? What is the gift that I should bring to the world? What is the life that I should live?"

These words call me, and I think each one of us, to think about our responsibility to the Earth. How we are present globally. What does our presence mean to the Earth? What does the Earth's presence mean to us?



**MERCY
GLOBAL
PRESENCE**

Mercy Global Action: Presence to Earth

Colleen Swain (Americas): 'Reborn from the Ashes'

Earlier this month, I woke up to see the sun rise over the Atlantic Ocean; the forecast predicted a clear sunny day. However, what I experienced was something unexpected. I expected to see the yellow sun break through the horizon as the waves rolled in, something so beautiful yet many times taken for granted. But that day I experienced a dim red sun rise over a dark hazy sky, a sky that was shrouded in smoke. It wasn't until I saw the news that morning that I understood what I was experiencing here, on the East Coast of the United States, was a result from the wildfires on the West Coast thousands of miles away.

This year in the United States, 3.7 million acres have been destroyed by wildfires.¹ My sisters and brothers in Australia began 2020 with this same fate, and last year, wildfire devastation reigned across the Amazon and even parts of the Arctic.

Yet there is a paradox—something I learned more about during this summer when I had the opportunity to explore some of the National Parks in the United States. In 1988, Yellowstone National Park experienced five wildfires destroying 36% of the entire park.² Despite the destruction, it gave scientists and the community the opportunity to understand the role of fire in some of the most unique ecosystems in the world.

During wildfires, despite mass devastation to life, nutrients from the dead trees are returned to the soil. This exposes the forest floor to more sunlight, and allows seedlings that have been released by the fire to sprout and grow, a process known to scientists as ecological succession. What I didn't realize was how relevant the wildfires and this transformation has shaped my own ecological succession, and ultimately, my presence to Earth during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In Christine Valters Paintner's book "Water, Wind, Earth, and Fire: The Christian Practice of Praying with the Elements" she emphasizes the "*paradox of destruction and renewal...[seeing the] cycle of death and new life here*"³.

So I reflected and prayed. COVID-19 has had this paradoxical effect of fire in our own lives. Times that we may feel like a fire has raged through our lives, destroying what we have held dear. Isaiah 48:10 states "See, I have refined you, but not like silver. I have tested you in the furnace of adversity". Times of suffering have the tendency to remind us what is most vital. Halting us to a point of distinction and understanding, a process of refinement and purification giving us the opportunity to be born again from the ashes.

¹ National Interagency Fire Center. "National Preparedness Level 5." September 25, 2020 <https://www.nifc.gov/fireInfo/nfn.htm>

² National Park Service. "1988 Fires". US Department of the Interior. August 27, 2020 <https://www.nps.gov/yell/learn/nature/1988-fires.htm>

³ Paintner, Christine Valters *Water, Wind, Earth, and Fire: The Christian Practice of Praying with the Elements*. Indiana: Sorin Books, 57

We have been forced to stop, to be present to this time and those around us and how we are all connected. Even more so, it has allowed renewed attention to Creation and our presence to and on Earth; truly revealing the sacredness of Earth among us.

Mercy International Association's recent publication, 'Hope in a Time of Pandemic – Responding to COVID-19 through a Mercy Lens', captured the experiences of Mercy Sisters, Associates and Partners across the world and how they have contemplated and embraced integral ecology and indigenous wisdom during this time. A Mercy Sister from Newfoundland shared:

We are being graced with a moment of planetary significance, this time coming from the microcosm that forms the web of existence as we know it. A virus is letting us know that everything is connected, from the non-living to the living, from the rich to the poor, from the first world to the fourth. The task that lies before us is to first acknowledge the need to respect and protect the unity of that web of life by creating and preserving a balance in the seas, rivers, soil, and air.”⁴

This is the call for us all globally; we cannot forget this presence we have felt amongst the stillness. We must respond with moral integrity to the wisdom of Earth and continue to feel her presence. Human activity has subjected Earth to relentless devastation inhibiting Earth's sustainability and the flourishing of life. Earth has called us to witness our connection. We grow. We burn. We are transformed, reborn from the ashes and heal together.

During this five year anniversary of Pope Francis' encyclical "Laudato Si': On Care of our Common Home", the one year anniversary of the Synod on the Amazon and the climate strikes across the globe, we are reminded of the unified call to protect Earth against environmental degradation. We cannot forget that the Amazon was in flames while the Synod took place. Miguel H. Diaz, previous US Ambassador to the Holy See, wrote in an article entitled "Our Common Home is Burning" that

"Our failure to protect our planet increasingly deepens the divide between rich and poor, having the greatest impact on already vulnerable populations... Fire has often been used in the Christian tradition as a symbol of life and vitality. Seen from this perspective, we could call for "fire" to burn in our house. But let's be perfectly clear: our house cannot burn as a result of human ideologies mainly driven by economic profit.”⁵

Reverend Dr. Peter Savastano, Associate Professor at Seton Hall University, wrote in "Merton and Indigenous Wisdom" that Thomas Merton's first step toward reigniting the sacred fire in his own life was "divesting his mind from the prison of his ethnocentric, imperialistic attitudes and beliefs...."⁶ This is necessary in our own ecological conversions,

⁴ Mercy International Association - Global Action. *Hope in a Time of Pandemic: Responding to COVID-19 Through a Mercy Lens* August 18, 2020. <https://www.mercyworld.org/f/45074/x/e3711034bd/f-covid-guide-web.pdf>

⁵ Diaz, Miguel H. "Our 'Common Home' is Burning". National Catholic Reporter. September 10, 2019 <https://www.ncronline.org/news/earthbeat/theology-en-la-plaza/our-common-home-burning>

⁶ Savastano, Peter. "Merton and Indigenous Wisdom". Fons Vitae Publishing. Louisville, Kentucky. 2019 <https://fonsvitae.com/product/merton-indigenous-world-wisdom/>

or our ‘Great Turning’⁷ as described by Joanna Macy. Our mind must be open to be transformed by nature, towards mutuality and sustainability.

Right before the Synod opened, millions marched around the world chanting “our house is on fire”⁸ after Greta Thunberg courageously spoke to world leaders at the World Economic Forum in Davos. While also relating to the increase in wildfires globally⁹, Greta drew attention to the increase in global temperatures due to climate change. A failure for governments to act urgently to reduce carbon emissions, will result in dire consequences threatening our civilization and ecosystems across the globe.¹⁰

Throughout the Mercy World, Sisters, Associates and Partners are experiencing effects of climate change in various ways, through: wildfires, sea level rise, devastating typhoons, water scarcity and more. While both individually and collectively working to adopt measures to curb our carbon emissions, we have continued to advocate at local, national and international levels. Mercy Global Action has brought the experiences and best practices of the Mercy World as key advocacy points to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change Conference of Parties¹¹ where the future of the Paris Agreement is being negotiated.

The Mercy World’s unique voice at international forums both unite and evoke presence to Earth at many levels. In the ways in which we commit to an Integral Ecology; advocate for the rights of nature and people over economic profit; oppose the misuse of resources and extractivism, encourage eco-system based solutions and incorporate the local knowledge of communities; and ultimately, recognize this time as an opportunity for regeneration, to promote resilience and a resolve not to return to what was once ‘normal’.

This is our call. To be present to Earth and be reborn from the ashes in ways that are inclusive and ensure the flourishing of Earth.

⁷ Macy, Joanna. “The Great Turning”. The Center for Ecoliteracy. June 29, 2009 <https://www.ecoliteracy.org/article/great-turning>

⁸Thunberg, Greta. “‘Our house is on fire’: Greta Thunberg, 16, urges leaders to act on climate”. Indigenous Peoples Major Group for Sustainable Development. 2019. <https://indigenouspeoples-sdg.org/index.php/english/all-global-news/950-our-house-is-on-fire-greta-thunberg-16-urges-leaders-to-act-on-climate#:~:text=News24-,'Our%20house%20is%20on%20fire'%3A%20Greta%20Thunberg%2C%2016%2C,leaders%20to%20act%20on%20climate&text=Our%20house%20is%20on%20fire.,able%20to%20undo%20our%20mistakes.>

⁹ Dunne, Daisy. “Explainer: How climate change is affecting wildfires around the world”. Carbon Brief, July. 14, 2020 <https://www.carbonbrief.org/explainer-how-climate-change-is-affecting-wildfires-around-the-world>

¹⁰ IPCC, 2018: Global Warming of 1.5°C. An IPCC Special Report on the impacts of global warming of 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels and related global greenhouse gas emission pathways, in the context of strengthening the global response to the threat of climate change, sustainable development, and efforts to eradicate poverty [Masson-Delmotte, V., P. Zhai, H.-O. Pörtner, D. Roberts, J. Skea, P.R. Shukla, A. Pirani, W. Moufouma-Okia, C. Péan, R. Pidcock, S. Connors, J.B.R. Matthews, Y. Chen, X. Zhou, M.I. Gomis, E. Lonnoy, T. Maycock, M. Tignor, and T. Waterfield (eds.)]. In Press https://www.ipcc.ch/site/assets/uploads/sites/2/2019/06/SR15_Full_Report_High_Res.pdf

¹¹ United Nations Climate Change. 2020 United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. 2020 <https://unfccc.int/>



**MERCY
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Distinct Voice: Presence to Earth

Dominique Marendy (Parramatta)

To be called to the community of Mercy is to live a life led by a deep compassion for the world around you. Many of us champion many causes. Inundated daily with images of the world around us and plights calling to be heard. The ready access to information provided by the ever-advancing technologies of this world can make these many plights overwhelming. With many of us being so attuned to the needs of others we lend ourselves susceptible to compassion fatigue. Compassion fatigue is a condition described as emotional and physical exhaustion leading to a reduced ability to empathize or feel compassion for others, often described as the negative cost of caring. It is sometimes referred to as secondary traumatic stress. While there are many plights that can cause us unrest one of the most common is the call to protect the earth.

From a young age we are taught that we are stewards of the earth entrusted to us by God. I remember as child the idea of being a “steward”, a person in a position to provide care, filled me with a quiet joy that made me stand a little taller as I embraced this sense of purpose. Today it’s easy to get overwhelmed by the many environmental concerns facing communities around the world. In no particular order:

- Global warming
- Pollution: Ensuring we have clean air and clean water while safely tackling the issue of waste
- Population Growth
- Sustainable management of Arable land
- Dependence on Fossil Fuels

Just to name a few. Inundated with headlines touting “disaster”, “Dangerous”, “Damage”, “Crisis”, “Problem” and “Doomsday” it’s easy to see why compassion fatigue happens.

“The Environment is God’s Gift to everyone, and in our use of it we have a responsibility towards the poor, towards future generations and towards humanity as a whole”

Pope Benedict XVI

So what do we know about these issues? With all the information out there (and misinformation), how do we know what is true? And how do we make a difference? As humans, we make the world around us easier to understand by making generalizations which can be very biased. The media we consume is often made up of events where the “unusual” is exaggerated and the spotlight is on swift changes. The slow and steady nature of shifting major trends doesn’t get much attention. Unknowingly we often base our opinion of the world around us, and consequently the decisions on how to address issues, based on misinformation.

I want to start by challenging your perception of the world around you by asking you a series of 5 short questions. You may get some of these questions right, a few of you may even get all of them right! (If so, I think you deserve to treat yourself to some chocolate) but I think there will be a few questions for each of you that may take you by surprise. So grab a

piece of paper or open a new note in your phone and record your answers. The answers will be at the end of this article (No Cheating!)

Question 1: The United Nations predicts that by 2100 the world population will have increased by another 4 billion people. What is the main reason?

- a) There will be more children (under age 15).
- b) There will be more adults (15-75).
- c) There will be more very old people (above age 75).

Question 2: Carbon Emissions in New York have changed how much since this time last year?

- a) Increased by 20%
- b) Decreased by 20%
- c) Increased by 50%
- d) Decreased by 50%

Question 3: The southern jet stream which affects weather in the southern hemisphere is being affected how by current practices?

- a) Continues to move south as damage to the ozone continues
- b) Remains in relatively the same place as damage to the ozone has remained stable
- c) Has started returning to its normal position as damage to the ozone begins to be repaired.

Question 4: When compared to that of 1991, Energy related CO2 Emissions in 2016 were what?

- a) Were Lower
- b) Were the same
- c) Were Higher

Between 2000 and 2019 China's usage of renewable energy has done what?

- a) Remained the same
- b) Doubled
- c) Tripled
- d) More than quadrupled

So how did you go with those questions?

When you got the answer wrong would you say your response was more pessimistic or optimistic than the correct answer?

Why do you think that was?

And what was the point of me asking all those questions? Am I trying to tell you that we've done it, we've saved the world and we can all relax and continue life? No not exactly. I am in no way trying to down play the many environmental issues that continue to plague us. But when we start to feel overwhelmed with it all sometimes it's important to step back and look at where we've come from. To stop and examine the data and see what it's really trying to tell us. Our population is growing but not because we are reproducing at an increasing rate with no disregard for the availability of resources. It's increasing because our health care is improving and the number of people living in extreme poverty has decreased by over 60% (Between 1990 and 2015). This means the population growth will eventually flatten out. It also means that while population growth is likely to put strains on our resources (if we don't change to more renewable lifestyles) reducing the number of children born is realistically only going to result in a host of other problems associated with an aging population.

Sitting back and looking at the data doesn't just put us in a better place practically to tackle big issues but, as we've seen, it can help us emotionally, mentally and physically as well by reducing compassion fatigue. Reducing compassion fatigue means we have more energy to give to the causes we care about and stay present. So here are 10 tips to help combat compassion fatigue and stay present with our call to earth:

1. Get enough sleep
2. Get enough to eat.
3. Vary the work that you do.
4. Exercise.
5. Do something you enjoy.
6. Focus on what you did well.
7. Learn from your mistakes.
8. Find a reason to laugh.
9. Pray, meditate or relax.
10. Support a colleague.

And the next time you're trying to engage someone in a cause you care about maybe you will focus on the positive rather than starting with the negative "Look at the progress we have made so far, you can help us keep it going!"

"The simplest and most practical lesson I know is to resolve to be good today, but better tomorrow."

Catherine McAuley

Answers: 1B, 2D, 3C, 4A, 5D

You can find more resources to help with compassion fatigue here:

<http://www.compassionfatigue.org/>

And if you'd like to challenge your perceptions of the world around you a little more please check out: <http://gapminder.org/>

Presence Of and To Earth

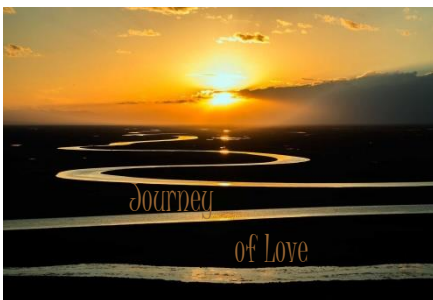
Reflection created for MGP by Ngā Whaea Atawhai o Aotearoa Sisters of Mercy New Zealand

[Journey of Love](#) Click on audio link to play the song

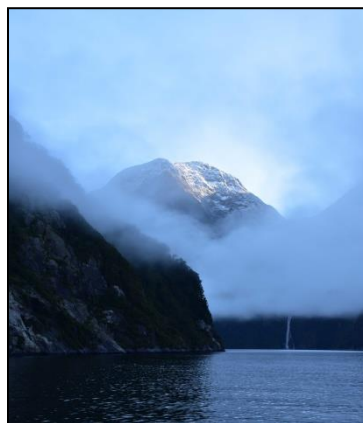
Come journey with me
A journey of love
Deep within the heart
Of our Mother Earth



Feel the warmth of her love
Feel the pain within her heart
Listen to the cry,
The cry of the earth



With your unconditional love
And your merciful heart
Your gentle presence
In our mountains
The moon and shining stars



Within the air that we breathe
The sea, our rivers and
Different creatures
In gratitude
We thank you
Our Mother Earth.



Introduction:

Hear the sound of the Conch Shell.
A call for us to be still and attend to the
Presence of Earth
within and around us.



Listen to the sound of the sea
The earth is present.

Listen to the whispering sounds of the winds
the Earth is present.

Listen to the birds singing
The Earth is present.

Listen to the sound of your breath
The Earth is present.

Look within us
The Earth is present.

Look ...



“E rere kau mai te Āwanui,
Mai i te Kāhui maunga ki Tangaroa
Kō au te Āwa, kō te Āwa kō au.”

“The great river flows
From the mountains to the sea.
I am the river, the river is me.”

Whakatauki (Maori Proverb)

The New Zealand government **granted**
the **Whanganui River**
legal **personhood** - a status
that is in keeping with the Maori worldview
that the **river is a living entity**.

the government of New Zealand. Apr 22, 2019
<https://www.theatlantic.com/video/index/587689/river-me/>

Water is a free commodity ~ Catherine McAuley

**What is clear is that earth is mandating that the human community
assume a responsibility never assigned to any previous generation ...
Our Task at this critical time is to awaken the energies needed to create the new world
and to evoke a universal communion of all parts of life. ~ Thomas Berry**

Exile

By the waters of our Babylons
we sit down
weeping thoughts from
lost minds
plucking unstrung harps

Listen!
Rumbles Papatūānuku Mother Earth
Remember!
Thunders Rangī Father Sky
And Tangaroa drowns our dreams
Sighing in the silence of our Dark Night
Return! Return!

Te Atawhai
Womb love of God
Make of our exile
a watercouse of mercy
Birth us awake
Aware

'Exile' by Anne Campbell rsm
Ngā Whaea Atawhai o Aotearoa Sisters of Mercy New Zealand



You in us
Us in You
Carried together in the
Cosmic Womb
One

Midwife of the ages
Hear our breeched
and bloodied scream
Guide us
in the
Turning

Prayer

For the times we ignore Climate Change and its effects
For the times we live wastefully
For the times we do not think wider than ourselves
For the times we make choices that impact the well-being others
For the times we do not appreciate the beauty and wonder of Earth
For the times we do not appreciate the giftedness of all of life

*Help us to change
Help us to change
Help us to change
Help us to change
Help us to change
Help us to change*

We are grateful for the gift of Earth
We are grateful for the ability of Earth to nourish our bodies and souls
We are grateful for the diversity of life on earth
We are grateful for both the silence and the sounds of nature

*We give thanks
We give thanks
We give thanks
We give thanks*

**Teach us to discover the worth of each thing, to be filled with awe and contemplation,
to recognise that we are profoundly united with every creature. Pope Francis, Laudato Si'**

Closure:

A "Journey of Love" Song ~ words and audio link are on the front page.

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