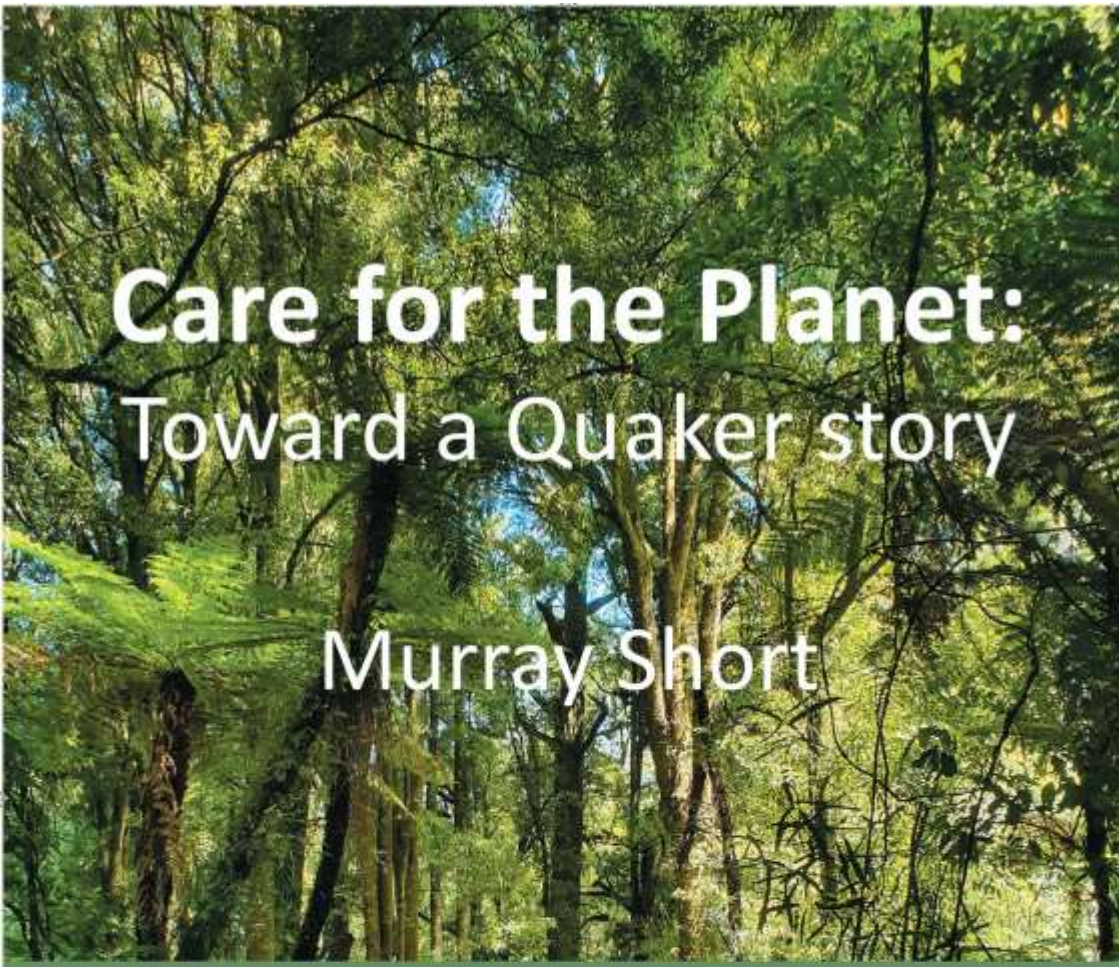

Care for the Planet:
Toward a Quaker story

Murray Short

Sometimes on autumn evenings
I walk round the house, outside,
looking up at the trees...
and I feel the closeness of the green world
with me in it.

Evening in April
Lauris Edmond

Care for the Planet:
Toward a Quaker story

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Introduction

Quaker beliefs have much to offer as the world faces the challenge of making radical change to reverse the environmental degradation caused by human behaviour.

Quakerism was founded in radicalism and it was the spiritual experience of early Quakers that drove their passion for change and consequent action in the world. The social testimonies evolved as outward expressions of the inward transformation of the spiritual experience. When one reads the early Quakers like George Fox, one can feel the spirit was like a 'fire in the belly' for them and it compelled them to act. Quakerism would not have thrived and influenced the world the way it has, were it not for this spiritual conviction.

My concern is that we have lost that sense of spiritual conviction. Some commitment to change remains but it does not seem to be driven by our spiritual beliefs, or at least, we seem unable or reluctant to articulate what the connection is.

Without spiritual conviction clearly articulated, the question arises whether Quakerism has anything particular to offer and therefore whether it has any relevance in the present day. I am convinced that Quaker beliefs do have much to offer. Many of them were a radical challenge to the establishment in the beginning and they continue to provide an alternative to mainstream religious beliefs, including those that seem to encourage ongoing exploitation of the environment. The issue is not the irrelevance of those beliefs but the need for ways to understand and enunciate them in the contemporary context.

I find the traditional Christian language, imagery, and narrative used to describe spiritual perspectives singularly unhelpful and, indeed in some respects, objectionable. They reflect the insights and cultural norms of an ancient culture. The patriarchy is deeply embedded in religious language and narrative for example, and this continues to legitimise male power and control, not only in the communities that take a literalistic view of the Bible but in Western society generally. The language we use becomes rather like a creed, fostering conservatism rather than radicalism.

I therefore try to avoid using such language, imagery, and narrative. The challenge has been to replace them with alternatives that reflect contemporary understandings. It is interesting in this regard that 'non-theism' has taken such a hold amongst liberal Quakers. Rather than seeking new ways to understand and describe the spiritual dimension, this seems a rejection of such a dimension, which is curious in a religious society.

Our behaviours are shaped in part by what we believe, including our spiritual beliefs. We act in accordance with our worldview and our beliefs. Exposing these, finding new ways to express them, and developing a renewed sense of spiritual conviction will help to speed up and embed the process of change. I suggest in this paper that spiritual regeneration will in this way, lead to environmental regeneration.

Beliefs are the product of a lifetime of socialisation into particular cultures and worldviews and many are either subconscious, or the connection between beliefs and behaviour is unclear to us. They become internalised and

inform our behaviour at a subconscious level. Unless we make the effort to bring these beliefs to our consciousness, we will not learn and develop.

Many of our beliefs are conveyed to us in the form of narratives or stories, which illustrate and affirm our beliefs, and as George Monbiot says, "…facts and figures have no power to displace a persuasive story".[i] We may be confronted with a plethora of facts about the climate crisis but the powerful stories that convey our beliefs will continue to influence our behaviours.

Stories are cultural artefacts, and they need to evolve with the culture. Many of us now reject much of the traditional religious narrative, imagery and metaphor but we are then at risk of losing the underlying meanings and messages. We need to understand those meanings, test them against current realities and then reimagine and tell new stories.

In their book *Universe as Revelation: An Ecomystical Theology for Friends*, Jo Farrow and Alex Wildwood suggest that Quakers need a:

> *…theology, in the sense of the religious story we tell ourselves about our origins, about the purpose and meaning of our lives, about how we each belong to 'a life larger and more lasting than our own' – a story that can inspire us, that evokes in us a sense of awe and wonder.*[ii]

This paper identifies some existing stories that have illustrated and conveyed our beliefs and offers a contribution to developing a Quaker story.

Some stories of influence

The Judeo-Christian story

Creation stories are a significant means of conveying beliefs about the meaning of life on this earth and the place of people within the rest of nature. It seems to me that in this regard there are three aspects to the Judeo-Christian creation story as recorded in Genesis that are particularly important:

> *Then God said, "And now we will make human beings; **they will be like us and resemble us. They will have power over the fish, the birds, and all animals**, domestic and wild, large and small." So God created human beings, making them to be like himself…blessed them and said, "Have many children, so that your descendants will live all over the earth and bring it under their control I am putting you in charge of the fish, the birds, and all the wild animals.*[iii]

Being made in the image of God conveys the idea that, of all creation, humans have special and largely unique abilities. This is an important insight, in the sense of explaining that we have the ability to understand the true nature of our relationship with the rest of the natural world, we have the

freedom to make choices about our impact on nature, and we have special abilities to give effect to those choices.

The second key aspect flows from the first. If people are made in the image of God, this gives them a unique degree of power to control the natural world. I am aware that there are different interpretations of 'control', some of which introduce the concept of stewardship and responsibility rather than simply control and exploitation. Those interpretations have not had the influence that the basic interpretations of control have had. Instead, the basic interpretation has fostered the idea of human exceptionalism. As a metaphor, the creation story also reveals a dualism that can be problematic, a point I will return to later.

The third key aspect is the knowledge of good and bad.

> *Then the Lord God placed the man in the Garden of Eden to cultivate it and guard it. He said to him, "You may eat the fruit of any tree in the garden, except the tree that gives knowledge of what is good and what is bad. You must not eat the fruit of that tree; if you do you will die the same day"…*
>
> *The snake asked the woman, "Did God really tell you not to eat fruit from any tree in the garden?"*
>
> *"We may eat the fruit of any tree in the garden," the woman answered, "except the tree in the middle of it…"*

> *The snake replied, "That's not true; you will not die.* ***God said that because he knows that when you eat it you will be like God and know what is good and what is bad.****"*[iv]

Apart from the role ascribed to Eve and the poor old snake, I like this image because it conveys that essential warning that knowledge is a double-edged sword (to use an un-Quakerly metaphor). With knowledge comes the freedom of choice between good and bad.

Our knowledge means we can destroy ourselves and the planet as we know it with nuclear weapons, evil artificial intelligence, and many other technological inventions, or we can use our knowledge to safeguard all of nature, including the human community. As one example among many, we are close to finding ways to deflect the next asteroid from a catastrophic collision with this planet.

People have made many poor choices over the centuries and as a result there is an understandable ambivalence about technology. However, our evolving knowledge and technology are wondrous things. If we can only make the right choices, an immense flourishing of life for endless generations is entirely possible and we need to keep such a vision constantly in front of us. As one of my favourite authors, Peter Senge says, "What if we have something distinctive to contribute – something to give rather than just take?"[v]

I am not suggesting here that the use of technology is the solution to everything including the climate crisis, because it is clear that dealing with overpopulation and over-consumption are essential parts of the solution to that

challenge. What it does highlight though, is that our knowledge has reached the point where we know how to be, as James Naylor an early Quaker would say, "at unity with all creation" and, in a very real and practical sense, carry out "God's wisdom and love"[vi] by protecting creation, whether with technology or by understanding the need for restraints on, amongst other things, population and consumption.

Returning to the dualistic element revealed in the creation stories, this dualism is the notion that there are two dimensions, a sacred one occupied by God and a worldly one occupied by the rest of creation illustrated in Figure 1.

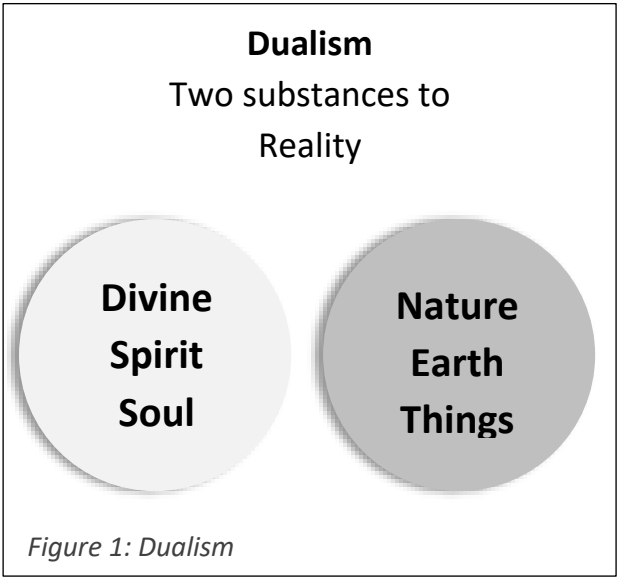

Figure 1: Dualism

People, who are made in the image of God and have been given some of the powers of God are by implication also to that degree separate from and "above" nature. This dualistic way of seeing the world was a contrast to the many preceding religions that emphasised the immanence of the spirit world, which was often accompanied by a reverence for nature and natural processes such as the cycle of the seasons and what they bring in terms of fertility and fruitfulness.

The nature of this dualism was revealed not so long ago in a conversation within the Quaker community here in Aotearoa. In an article that appeared in the Aotearoa New Zealand Friends Newsletter following the 2016 Quaker Yearly Meeting, a comment was made about the epistle of that Meeting referring to "honouring of our ancestors including the volcanoes that form the land here in Tāmaki Makaurau/ Auckland". While one Friend wrote that the epistle was "concerning", and that those Friends especially in Africa who had not long been converted from "ancestor worship and animism", would be "shaken by reading this",[vii] some other Friends were supportive:

> *Animism is belief in a dynamic supernatural power which animates the material world. Many Quakers believe in that of God in all things (panentheism) which is not very different from animism. Rather than condemn animism we can learn from it, to treasure the natural world. Respect for volcanoes comes into this.*[viii]

For myself, I can adopt the spirituality of Aotearoa with deep respect for the land, especially that which moves beneath my feet in the form of earthquakes/Rūaumoko and the amazing volcanoes that dominate Te Ika a Māui.[ix]

On the face of it, traditions that are more monist, as depicted in Figure 2, e.g., animism, pantheism, panentheism, and some polytheism, may encourage a less exploitative mind-set.

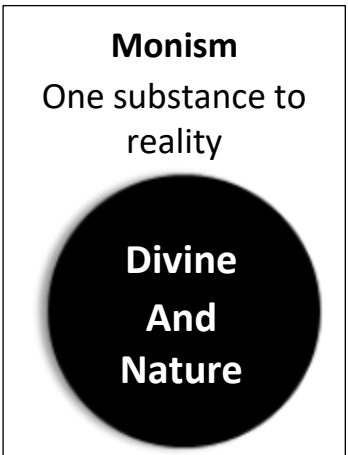

Figure 2: Monism

A monist worldview is illustrated in Aotearoa by the values of a Māori programme Para Kore, which was established to achieve zero waste goals. They describe their values in the following way:

> *Our values acknowledge our connection not only with all people but with all things living and non-living with whom we share this planet. We acknowledge our hākui Papatūānuku, and our matua Ranginui from who we all descend.*
>
> *We communicate from the perspective that we are all interconnected; we are linked through our genealogies, our relationships with each other, and our inseparable ties with all living and non-living entities with whom we share this planet.*
>
> *We build relationships with others based on the understanding that we are them and they are us.*[x]

Such a sense of connectedness with the natural world would provide a sound basis for respect, care for the environment, and sustainable living.

When I have made this point in the past, a not uncommon response has been that Māori did not establish a particularly sustainable lifestyle here in Aotearoa, as evidenced by the number of species extinguished before the arrival of Europeans. Scientific enquiry and debate about this continue, and the current consensus is expressed carefully in Te Ara as follows:

> *It is likely that hunters deliberately set fire to the bush to flush out game birds such as moa, and to make hunting easier. The fires caused widespread deforestation in the South Island*

> *east of the main dividing range, and also in large parts of the eastern North Island. It is almost certain that at times the fires got out of control, and some of the burn-off would have been accidental.*[xi]

Some caution is therefore necessary, although what this highlights is that living sustainably is a combination of belief and knowledge. Māori were relatively new to this environment and were still learning about their impact. Their more monist belief system meant that, as they learnt more about their impact, they were introducing sustainable practices more rapidly than other societies.

There are many examples of sustainable practice followed by iwi and hapū. My father-in-law Ralph Kereama was a renowned kererū hunter in Te Urewera and he described to me in some detail the Tūhoe tikanga that he followed which, amongst other things, had the effect of limiting how many birds he could take in any one season. When serving my marae 'apprenticeship', I also learned from the food gatherers of Mataatua marae in Rotorua, the tikanga associated with the taking of shellfish. Rules such as never cleaning or eating fish below the high tide mark, also put constraints on how much was taken.

Furthermore, there are examples of cultures living sustainably over long periods, such as the first nations of Australia who have lived in that environment successfully for over 65,000 years. They have, nevertheless, had a major impact on the environment and there are examples of indigenous communities like Rapanui where such impact was

unsustainable and led to the destruction of the environment and the human community[xii]. It is therefore a mixed picture.

An early Quaker story

Given that Quakerism is firmly rooted in the Western dualistic tradition, the question that arises for me is whether there are Quaker beliefs and perspectives that might counter the more exploitative interpretations that can arise from this tradition. The conversation about the 2016 Yearly Meeting epistle indicates that some of us in Aotearoa are already incorporating more monist perspectives into our belief systems, so is there a theology that may be predisposing us to this?

Some early Quaker views indicate this may be so, and they also provide a perspective that I consider helps explain Quaker concern for the environment or 'creation' as they would call it, from our earliest days.

James Nayler, one of the first generation of Quakers represented a key strand of early Quaker thinking. Fundamental to Nayler's theology was a distinction he made between life "in Adam" (i.e. after the "fall") and life "in Christ".[xiii]

The characteristics of Nayler's view of life in Adam and in Christ are listed in Table 1.

Table 1: People's relationship with God	
First birth (in Adam)	Second birth (in Christ)
• Rebellion against divine will • Loss of God's guidance • "Spirit of pride, gluttony drunkenness, pleasures, envy and strife" • Control and exploitation of the rest of creation	• First birth crucified leading to transformation • Right relationship with God • Revealing God's wisdom and love in the world • Harmonious and fruitful relationship with the rest of creation

After creation, there was the Garden of Eden in which everything was good, "God looked at everything he had made, and he was very pleased."[xiv] In this state, people were ruled by the word of God and were God's agents carrying out God's wisdom and love within the natural world.

Then came the disobedience of Adam and Eve in eating from the tree of knowledge. This resulted in the "fall", and the subsequent "life in Adam", in which people became separated from God. In this state, Nayler's view was that people had lost God's divine guidance and so could no longer carry out God's will in the natural world and this led to the desire to control and exploit the rest of creation.

> *The first man…lusts after the earth, covets, contends and sues for it; for his treasure is in the earth and his heart is with it…and his thoughts, words and wisdom are all employed about it, plotting and forecasting how to compass it and fetch it out of the hands of others, to heap up; but is never satisfied.*[xv]

Life in Christ, by contrast returns people to right relationship with God and they realise the error of their ways. "And as the light ariseth the creation is seen, and how the enmity hath spread over, and how the lust hath defiled it, and how that which was planted as a vineyard is become as a wilderness." In Christ, people once again represent God's wisdom and love in relations with each other and with the natural world.

What I found helpful in Nayler's perspective is that it mitigates the potential problems of dualism by the idea that rather than total separation of the sacred and the worldly, there is a bridge between the two and that bridge is people, but only if they follow the word of God. The key is right relationship. While people "stood in that will which had set all these things in their place" they were "at unity with all creation" but "a changed relationship with God led to a changed relationship with the rest of creation."[xvi]

Furthermore, the Quaker view that all of life is sacramental also introduces a nuanced approach to dualism. In identifying similarities between Eastern Orthodox theology and traditional Quaker faith and practice Stuart Masters, a tutor at the Woodbrooke Quaker Study Centre who in 2020 offered an

online course called *The Spiritual Roots of Quaker Ways*, made the following points:

> *Eastern Orthodoxy is characterised by a strongly non-dualistic doctrine of creation. It opposes any rigid dualism in which God and the material world are separated from one another. A profound sense of God's presence within creation also leads to a rejection of any sharp division being made between the sacred and the secular…*
>
> *Linked to a non-dualistic vision, the Orthodox tradition has tended to view the whole of creation as a sacrament – an outward symbol or image of God's grace…*
>
> *The Eastern view has therefore been critical of Western rationalism for disenchanting and demystifying the glories of the creation and regarding it as mere matter.*
>
> *In the West, we have tended to disconnect this world from heaven and, by so doing, have lost the sense of the sacred in creation.*[xvii]

Quakerism has from the earliest times then, held a theological perspective that can be seen to counter the potentially exploitative interpretations of the Christian tradition.

My plain language interpretation of Nayler's theology is that the fundamental purpose of people is to care for the planet, and we have unique powers of understanding and relating to

enable us to do that. We lost our way for a time but if we endeavour to live a life of wisdom and love (as epitomised by the life of Jesus) we are transformed and return once again to a caring and sustainable relationship with all of creation.

The positive and hopeful tenor of this belief was in stark contrast to the general Protestant view at the time. Quakers believed that when people are transformed by the experience of the Light of Christ, it is possible for them to attain perfection, or in other words, to be ruled by the word of God. According to Stuart Masters, the widely held Protestant view, based on Calvinist doctrine, was that human nature was totally depraved, and so it was not possible for them to be ruled by the word of God in this life.

Early Quakers also believed in the apocalypse, in the sense that the time was imminent when all people would be transformed by the love of God (through Christ) and this would usher in the 'Kingdom of God' on earth. That Kingdom would of course, include right relationships within all of creation.

Martin Buber's story

For those of you who, like me, find the religious imagery and narrative dated and difficult, alternative metaphors, images and narrative may be helpful. I find Martin Buber's writing useful in this regard.

According to Lloyd Geering who wrote an introduction to Buber's book *I and Thou*[xviii], Buber was aware that he was living in a post-theistic world. In developing and explaining his basic model he therefore used secular language. To

illustrate his points he used art rather than religion as an example of people's capacity to experience and attest to the intangible. For me therefore, Buber has provided a non-religious way of understanding the intangible dimensions of people's experience that include the spiritual or transcendent.

The foundation of Buber's model is the idea that there are two modes to existence, the "I-Thou" and the "I-It", as illustrated in Figure 3.

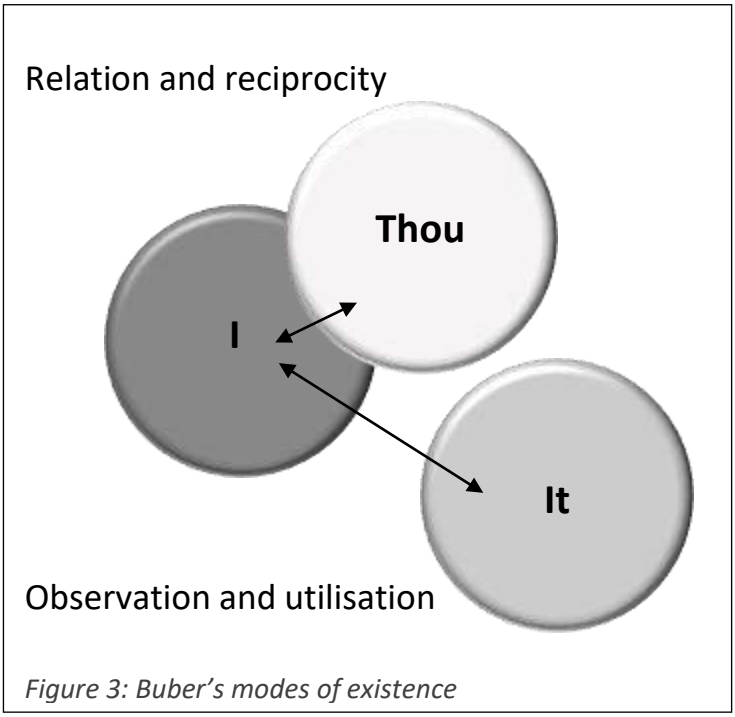

Figure 3: Buber's modes of existence

The modes of existence apply in three spheres: life with nature, life with other people and life with spiritual realities.

The I-It mode establishes and maintains the world of things and objects that are observed, analysed and understood intellectually and Buber called this the "It-World". There is no reciprocity in this world and much of it is engineered by the 'I' who remains dominant. It is an impersonal and detached world of utilisation, control, extraction, and possession. It engages our capacity for objective and dispassionate observation, classification, study and analysis. It is the world of discovery and proficiency, of science, industry and production. The It-World is about the past and future in the sense that it concerns 'things' that have already been made or will be made, rather than the here and now process of creation.

The I-Thou mode helps to establish and maintain the world of relation. The I-Thou mode includes both person-to-person and person-to-nature encounters. Of fundamental importance is that the I-Thou mode is reciprocal and therefore can only develop as a matter of grace. This is the mode of the subjective and personal, of involvement and community. It is the world of language and communication, of love and affection, of enjoying and suffering. It engages our emotional, intellectual, creative and spiritual capacities. The I-Thou mode is in the here and now and is impermanent in the sense that it exists only for as long as the I-Thou encounter itself.

The characteristics of these modes are set out in Table 2. They are presented as opposites for clarity but there can be movement in any given situation. What was part of the It-World can become part of an I-Thou encounter and vice versa.

Table 2: Buber's modes of existence compared	
World of relation	It-World
• Reciprocal • By grace • Here and now, impermanent • Subjective, personal, involved • Affection, love, suffering enjoying • Language, communication • Creative, spiritual, intangible, mysterious	• One way • Past and future • Objective, impersonal • Utilisation, exploitation, extraction • Observation, study, analysis • Scientific, intellectual, cognitive, concrete • By design, made, produced

Buber highlights that it is through the reciprocity in relation that people develop a sense of self, of their "I-ness". We learn about ourselves through relating with others.

> *The primary word I-Thou can be spoken only with the whole being. Concentration and fusion into the whole being can never take place through my agency, nor can it ever take place without me. I become, through relation to the Thou; as I become I, I say Thou.*[xix]

Without the 'Thou', including nature, the 'I' would not consciously exist. Personhood then, fundamentally depends not only on the I-Thou relation with other people, but also on the I-Thou relation with the rest of nature. The natural world is a critical part of our development as humans. This can be seen in the way that different natural environments help to define the culture and way of life of the communities that live in them.

These modes are both critically important and not mutually exclusive. However, because the It-world is prone to possessiveness, exploitation, and egocentricity, Buber maintains it needs to be kept in balance, and one of his central concerns was that the course of the history had seen an ever-increasing dominance of the It-world. Even in the 1920s and 30s when he was writing, Buber predicted that the very survival of people on this earth was under threat if that trend continued.

For Buber the I-Thou relationship goes beyond the physical, intellectual and emotional and enters the spiritual dimension. He sees the spirit dwelling in the reciprocal relationship itself as illustrated in Figure 4, rather than separately in the I and Thou. This is a perspective that I find particularly helpful.

Buber builds on this idea with concepts of a 'central' and 'eternal' thou (as also illustrated in Figure 4), which go beyond what is relevant for the present consideration. Suffice to say, when a group of people enter into a network of I-Thou relations they become aware of an intangible reality beyond the characteristics of the individuals themselves. Buber saw this as the "Central Thou", which is the foundation of

community and gives it a life of its own. The infinity of I-Thou connections, past, present and future represents the Eternal Thou or the Spirit of life itself which is encountered whenever we enter into an I-Thou relation with another person or nature.

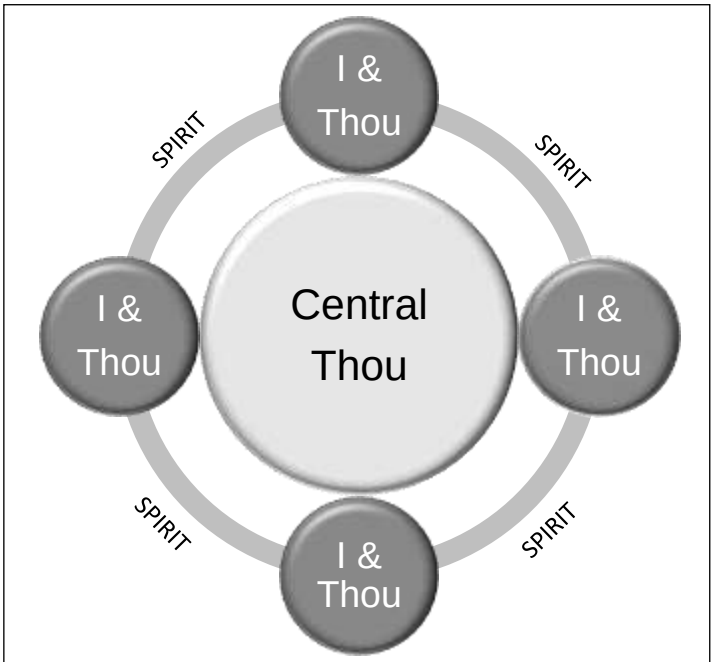

Figure 4: The Central Thou and Spirit

Buber's idea that I-Thou relation can exist not only between people, but between people and nature is of particular significance to the consideration of sustainability. In the Western tradition we tend to see nature as part of the It-World. We see a forest primarily as timber for utilisation, for example. However, Buber highlights that we have the capacity

to enter a reciprocal relationship with the forests and other features of the natural world.

One of the reasons we in the West struggle with this idea of I-Thou relation between people and nature is that we fail to see the potential for reciprocity. Consequently, 'Tree huggers' for example, have had a bad press. However, there is increasing medical and other scientific evidence that nature does indeed reciprocate. The growing popularity of 'forest bathing' is based on observed health benefits of spending time in natural environments. The term originates in the ancient Japanese practice of shinrin-yoku; shinrin meaning 'forest', and yoku meaning 'bath'. There is evidence to show that forest bathing, and the experience of other 'ecosystem services' can reduce stress-hormone production, improve feelings of happiness and free up creativity, and have several other health benefits.[xx] This is nature reciprocating when we allow ourselves to enter into an I-Thou relation.

In her book *This Pākehā Life*, Alison Jones describes some contrasts between Māori and Western worldviews and in doing so provides further insight into the nature of Buber's relation:

> *As Anne Salmond put it, for Māori the world is not '…composed of arrays of bounded entities in different realms and on different scales' as it tends to be in dominant forms of Western thought. Rather, boundaries are conceived of as thresholds, and…relationships between people, and between people and things, are the foundation of Māori common-*

sense knowledge and encounters in the world. It is in the space between us as we face each other where everything happens, where there is energy of all sorts…[xxi]

Buber's work can be seen as replacing the dualism of Christianity that separates the sacred from the worldly, with the two modes of existence, the It-world and the world of relation. The major difference is that every time people enter the world of relation, in Buber's theology, they encounter the divine, which bridges the separation.

In very different language and imagery, this is another way of expressing Nayler's idea of right relationship with all of creation that is re-established through the new life 'in Christ' in which people are reconciled with God. Right relationship, and Buber's world of relation, can be seen to bridge the separation of the sacred and the worldly.

In both Buber's and Nayler's theology, people have a choice to make. Buber emphasises that we must choose ways to keep the world of relation and the It-world in balance. For Nayler, people must choose to enter the life in Christ and leave the life in Adam. For both, the consequence of not making this choice results in the destruction of creation. The very meaning and purpose of human existence therefore, is to make the choice that sustains life on earth.

Toward a new Quaker story

A personal story

I was struggling to understand this idea of I-Thou relation between people and nature until I had a flash of insight whilst on holiday with extended family in Wanaka. There were 13 of us staying in a big house with one of those classic central Otago views of the snow-covered Alps. Wanaka is an incredibly beautiful place, with mountains rising steeply out of lakes and rivers, covered with bush to the snow line. Every view is like a postcard and can be enjoyed like that, as many tourists do: a brief observation of many, as they 'do' central Otago. This is an example of what Buber calls an I-It experience.

In contrast, for a week we walked the hills, the rivers and the lakeshores and skied the mountain slopes. We touched the rocks and trees, listened to the streams and rivers, smelled the aromas of bush and beach and viewed the light and conditions of the ever-changing landscape. All the while we enjoyed the relationships of three generations, eating, playing, talking, and loving. The mountains, lakes, rivers and bush infused those relationships with a sense of place, they became part of us, and we became part of them. When I now think back on our time together, the environment is an inextricable part of those memories. In Buber's terms we entered the I-Thou world of relation with nature, which is so different from the postcard experience of the It-world.

This experience threw light on Buber's idea of the I-Thou relation between people and nature and Nayler's idea of right

relationship. It also highlighted how entering the world of relation opens up a dimension that transcends the rational and intellectual.

Western culture has elevated the rational to almost exclusive primacy through the commitment to scientific enquiry. This is the I-It mode that, in the interests of objectivity, separates the observer from what is observed. It works well for technical problems, but not for whole systems issues involving complex relationships of interdependence in which the observer is a participant. Humans are a part of the natural world and ultimately cannot be separated observers of, and actors on that world. Full understanding can only develop through entering the world of relation. As Alison Jones says of the Māori worldview, it is in the relationships "where everything happens, where there is energy of all sorts."

As a flautist in the Wellington Youth orchestra, it always fascinated me how a set of notes on a sheet of music were transformed into a symphony. Any amount of rational analysis of the individual notes gives the observer no sense of the symphony. It is not until the individual musicians enter into a creative relationship with those notes and then with the other musicians of an orchestra that the symphony emerges and can be 'understood'. Equally the listeners need to go beyond observing the notes like background Muzak and mindfully connect in I-Thou relation, before they can hear and understand the full symphony.

The human capacity to enter such I-Thou relation needs to have a central place in a new Quaker story.

Building blocks for a Quaker story

I agree with Jo Farrow and Alex Wildwood's statement quoted earlier, that Quakers need a new 'theology' in the sense of a 'religious story'. Such a story needs to reinterpret, build on, and/or replace our existing stories, otherwise, we are ignoring a foundational belief of Quakerism, that revelation continues. There are a few building blocks that the story needs to include.

First and foremost, as a religious organisation we do need to try and express our current understanding of what constitutes our religious or spiritual perspective. We may use a variety of images and language but what is the nature of the reality we are attempting to communicate by those images? People have pondered this for centuries and for an excellent description of the mental gymnastics this has, at times, entailed, I recommend Karen Armstrong's book *The Case for God*. In describing the thinking of Denys the Areopagite who was writing about the year 529 CE, Armstrong suggests that he explained the 'incredible and fictitious' and 'ludicrous' nature of the significant parts of the Bible as serving to:

> *"…shock us into an appreciation of the limitations of all theological language" and that "We have to remember this when we speak about God, listen critically to ourselves, realise that we are babbling incoherently and fall into an embarrassed silence."*[xxii]

Whilst not wanting us to embarrass ourselves, I remain committed to the idea of trying to describe our evolving understanding of such matters and *The Case for God* provides plenty of support for this. By way of example, Karen

Armstrong says that Gregory of Nyssa who lived in the year 300 CE expressed the view that:

> *We could not speak about God rationally, as we speak about ordinary beings, but that did not mean that we should give up thinking about God at all. We had to press on, pushing our minds to the limits of what we could know…*[xxiii]

This conveys a similar understanding to what Isaac Penington says about the Bible:

> *And the end of words is to bring men (sic) to the knowledge of things beyond what words can utter.*[xxiv]

The "limits of what we could know" and "the end of words" are constantly extending, if one believes as I do, that revelation continues. We need to keep pushing those limits.

So, for the purposes of a Quaker story that can inspire us, my offering would include as a foundation idea that people have special powers of relating and understanding or "love and truth" as expressed in Quaker *Advices and Queries*[xxv]. Some use images such as "that of God", "Spirit" or "Light" to describe the source of these powers. Rather than struggle with the imagery, it is useful to focus on the nature of the reality behind these images. That reality is a capacity within each of us that goes beyond our physical, rational, and emotional powers and enables us to connect as persons, as community and as part of the natural world. Indeed, pursuing images is misleading because this reality is not an 'it', an object or thing

that can be rationally analysed, understood and explained. This is a reality that can only be sensed in relation, in those I-Thou encounters with each other and with nature. This is for me, our spiritual capacity.

The powers carry with them a unique and formidable responsibility, as they place people in a special relationship with the natural world. When we fully use our spiritual capacity and exercise our powers of knowledge and choice to follow the right courses of action, we can work with nature to create a future of unfathomable potential. In this way spiritual regeneration leads to environmental regeneration.

So, some of the building blocks for a new Quaker story are shown in Table 3.

These building blocks could contribute to the creation of a story that meets the spirit expressed by Yearly Meeting of Aotearoa New Zealand in 2000:

> *Let us recognise the diversity of life, its independence and balance. The inherent wisdom of life astounds us. From cells to ecosystems, we see a self-organising, self-repairing, cooperative whole. Our human focus needs to be widened to encompass the whole web of life. We need to change from domination to participation. The process will not be easy. Our belief in simplicity will help us to live full and joyful lives without devouring the earth's resources. We can cheerfully do more with less.*[xxvi]

Table 3: Building Blocks for a New Quaker Story

- **There is a capacity or power within every person to enter into relationships of reciprocity with other people and with the natural world.**
  This relates to the Quaker idea that there is that of God, or the promptings of love in everyone, which is like Buber's idea of the I-Thou relation.
- **People can distinguish good from bad and use this power of choice for creative and constructive purposes, or exploitative and destructive ones.**
  This is the other part of the Quaker idea, the promptings of truth, and Nayler's idea of life "in Christ" or "life in Adam". It also relates to the Genesis story that after people ate from the tree of knowledge, they could distinguish between good and bad.
- **Humans need to work with nature rather than attempt to control it because they are part of the natural world and their very existence is inextricably connected with it.**
  This contrasts with the Genesis idea that people have "control" or "dominion" over the natural world, which has fostered the notion of human exceptionalism. Instead, it incorporates Nayler's idea of the need for "right relationship" between people and the rest of nature because humankind is not an exception and its existence relies on the natural world as much as any other part of that world.
- **Of all within the natural world, humans have the most highly evolved intelligence and therefore responsibility.**
  This picks up the idea in Genesis that people have God-like capacities including wisdom.
- **There is a future of awesome potential for all things on this planet, including the human community, if we use our powers creatively to work with nature as agents of co-evolution.**
  This is based on Nayler's idea that "in Christ" people once again represent God's wisdom and love in relations with each other and with the natural world.

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