

Only fundamental changes, not only to the global economy and to individual lifestyles, but to the way we relate to one another, to our past and to the planet, will be enough to avert a climate catastrophe / **By JOSIANNE GAUTHIER**

The courage to act

WE ARE FINALLY getting ready for COP26, after many postponements and uncertainties. We will go there with our allies and friends as part of a global community to fight for climate justice. But most of our real leaders won't be there. For our real leaders in this struggle are the people whose lives have been upended by typhoons, droughts, rising waters that took away their land and their traditions.

They may not be with us in Glasgow, but these are the people already showing us real alternative ways of living. They are the guardians of the forests, rivers, mountains and oceans. Many who would otherwise have come to the conference have been unable to do so because of Covid restrictions. The unequal distribution of vaccines across the world has highlighted that, even when it comes to protection against a deadly virus, it is the poorest communities who come last. People are impacted differently by climate change, but so often it is the ones who are the least responsible for it who feel it the most: the very people unable to travel to Glasgow.

There will be those at the conference who will speak up for them, and there are other places where their struggle goes on, in the streets, on social media, within communities. But will world leaders listen? As young people in particular keep teaching us, the time to act is now. There is nothing more important than saving our planet, our home. Governments, businesses and citizens have to act in global solidarity as one human family. This might mean making drastic changes in our lifestyles, but the wealthy nations should not be in the driving seat this time. We should learn to listen, even if that means hearing uncomfortable truths and facing some ghosts of our past.

PHOTO: DEPARTMENT FOR INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT/RAFIQUIR RAHMAN RAQUI



Shopping by boat after weeks of heavy rain flooded streets in the district of Satkhira, in southern Bangladesh

Two years ago, I was in Rome for the synod on the Amazon. I had a profound feeling that for the first time the Church was opening up to the voices of people speaking from a place of direct experience and ancestral wisdom. I could sense the Church being pushed to rethink its past, and to imagine and prepare for a sustainable and just future. Pope Francis and other Church leaders have pushed us to demand a radical shift from business-as-usual to a way of life that benefits the common good, that treats every human life as sacred and protects our planet for present and future generations. We need to find harmony again, between us and between humanity and nature.

The current health crisis must not be used as an excuse to continue to allow fossil fuel subsidies, the unsustainable large-scale production and consumption of goods and services and

the surge in global debt. There must be an integrated response to the climate and health crises. Massive investment in a transition to clean and renewable energy sources is crucial. We must create an inclusive economy that actively promotes healthy and thriving ecosystems and protects human rights and the dignity of all. Our survival depends on it. We know of the destruction that humans can inflict on the planet, but we should not forget our amazing potential: “[Why] are trees such social beings? Why do they share food with their own species and sometimes even go so far as to nourish their competitors? The reasons are the same as for human communities: there are advantages to working together. A tree is not a forest ... But together, many trees create an ecosystem,” wrote Peter Wohlleben in *The Hidden Life of Trees*. This reminds me how love and respect for each other are an essential part of ecological conversion.

WE ALL COME to the struggle from our own perspective, with our own knowledge and with our own story. I was involved in human rights and social justice work but, like many people of my generation, I believed for far too long that the environmental cause was the special interest of a select group of passionate people who believed that animals and plants needed better protection from human behaviour. I was not unsympathetic but I did not see where I fitted into this movement. The first step towards involvement in the struggle was an intellectual awakening, an “ah-ha” moment when I grasped how ecology was impacting on human development and vice versa: how the welfare of people around the world was directly tied to the welfare of the planet itself. It can seem terribly obvious now, but 20 years ago we had to fight to have the connections between international solidarity and development and ecological justice recognised. Development, I realised, is not only about economic growth, but about social welfare, the preservation of culture and social resilience. “Ecology” means all of this: the study of what surrounds us and the interactions between us.

The other trigger for my engagement was more spiritual and emotional. In 2015, two things happened which had a lasting impact on me. Pope Francis’ groundbreaking encyclical *Laudato Si’* was published. I read it through the night, highlighting passages to come back to reread. I found myself using my marker on every page. It is hard to communicate how profound an impact this document had on the life of someone like

‘Educating is an act of love, it is like giving life’ Pope Francis

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There are enough of us to make a noise, and that might smother the still small voice

myself, a Canadian Catholic working in the development sector. This is a wealthy country where natural resources seem endless but which has a darker story behind its shiny public image. We live with the ghosts of peoples whose culture, whose lives, whose way of living were violently and intentionally stolen from them.

In the same year, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada on the Indigenous Residential Schools published its findings and calls to action. It became crystal clear that the cries of people and of peoples and the cry of the Earth were one. When you have benefited your whole life from the violence done unto others, when you have access to clean water, safe schools, warm homes only because you are from the settler community, the connection between land and people is no longer an abstract question. It becomes your chant and your prayer. You have a responsibility to be on the side of justice, and to begin to repair these broken relationships between peoples and between people and planet.

THESE TWO learning experiences continue to drive me to unlearn and learn again, to do what I can to ensure that all voices are heard, not just those of the powerful. There are so many different journeys towards action and commitment, so many different triggers and obstacles; but in the end what moves us all is courage: to change, to act, to react. In my life and my work, I have come across so many activists, many of them women, who are defending their land and environment with extraordinary courage. Some have lost everything because they have done what they felt was right for their communities: opposing ecological destruction, deforestation or megadam projects. Berta Cáceres was a Honduran environmental activist and indigenous leader who was shot dead in her home; Máxima Acuña is a Peruvian subsistence farmer who has refused to sell her land to a mining corporation in spite of years of violent intimidation. The difference they and many others have made won't be forgotten, and whenever I hesitate, I think about their stories and know that we can all contribute to their fight.

Courage will for some of us mean being willing to confront our colonial attitudes and our arrogance. Elaine Alec, an Indigenous author from Canada, has said this hasn't happened yet because so many of us don't want to face some uncomfortable truths. "We cannot lead a real climate justice fight without dealing with our ghosts from the past," she says. "But the more we share, the more we contribute, and the more we move away from our comfort zones, the easier it gets for everyone else to also move." She concludes: "Keep moving, keep modelling, keep growing, even when it's hard."

It's time for us to be brave, and to face our ghosts, because only through that path will something beautiful and powerful arise.

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IN THE YEAR that Alexander Pope, trying to be a Catholic in London, was exercising his enlightenment

sensibilities in *The Rape of the Lock*, a poet in a very different convention was constructing some tight verses in Arabic about Rome.

The author was Jibra'il ibn Farhat ibn Mitr ibn Shahin al-Mashruqi ibn Ra'd al-Hasruni al-Halabi al-Maruni, more conveniently known as Germanus Farhat (1670-1732), for the last seven years of his life Maronite Archbishop of Aleppo. *Sahrata l-imani sarat*, "Rome has become the rock of faith," he declared in the poem inspired by his only visit to the city in 1711.

Farhat was a lexicographer as well as a poet, a founder of monastic communities and of a library in his see. Aleppo's Cathedral of St Elijah was unroofed this century in shelling during the Syrian civil war, but last year was reopened. Outside stands, or sits in his episcopal chair, a statue of Farhat in Maronite headgear, the *tabieh*, which looks like a giant hazelnut whirl. Behind him a clock in the bell tower chimes *Ave Maria* on the quarters; I don't much care for bells that play tunes, but I'm glad they have the chance. In the cathedral courtyard between orange trees survives, I hope, a statue of St Elijah himself, curly-bladed sword aloft, ready for smiting.

The prophet's hand wielding a sword appears on the coat of arms of the Carmelite Order, which likes to see it as a sword of the spirit. But it was by putting the prophets of Baal to the sword that Elijah reached his lowest ebb, pursued by the forces of the wicked Queen Jezebel, and reduced to sheltering beneath a juniper tree hoping for death.

Saved by an angel with water and bread, he walked for 40 days, sustained by the angelic waybread, to the mysterious Horeb, the mount of God. One nice thing about the Bible is how little it sets out to explain. Moses from a cleft in the rock had seen the glory of God as he passed; Elijah from his cave in Mount Horeb heard God not in the strong wind, nor in the earthquake, nor in the fire, but only at last in the "still, small voice". Then he wrapped his face in his mantle and stood at the entrance of the cave.

This speaks of the numinous that it is scarcely possible to express. The *New*

Revised Standard Version translates that phrase as "a sound of sheer silence", on the grounds that the Hebrew word *daqqah*, meaning "small", could mean "undetectable". I don't know about that.

But Elijah was in any case pretty put out at being the only one, he thought, left among the people of Israel who was faithful – and all he got was people pursuing his life. It can't have been easy for Germanus Farhat either, living in the Ottoman Empire with Christian neighbours who hated that rock of Rome.

I was thinking about Elijah when Cardinal Vincent Nichols inaugurated the synodal pathway at the vigil Mass for last Sunday. There are quite a few distractions to the listening project that he invited us to begin. Covid left things literally quiet but robbed Catholics in Britain of regular channels of transmission for which they listened out by going to church. But it's not as though we are an endangered species, like the Christians of Aleppo and surrounding lands. We're much better off even than the English Catholics of Pope's day. There are enough of us to make a noise, and that might smother the still small voice.

COMPLEMENTARY to the sound of silence is a folio album of 80 blank leaves up for sale at the Forum Auctions online sale ending on 28 October. The paper was made in 1811. It is expected to fetch two or three hundred pounds. It would be a brave writer who thinks he could increase its value by writing in it.

MY LATE career as a Good Samaritan got off to a faltering start when I spotted an old lady trying to lug a bag and suitcase on wheels over the kerb of a traffic island in the middle of the road near Victoria Station in London. As we headed back to the pavement, a committed cyclist hurtled towards us shouting, "Get out of the way!" As though it might help, I shouted to the disappearing racer: "F— off!" The old lady purported not to have noticed. Yet I wonder what the original Samaritan might have said to the Levite if he passed him on the way back.



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