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Deep Listening as Faith (Hebrews 11: 1-3, 8-16)

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Two weeks ago, Neil and I were in Alice Springs, participating in a conference called 'Exiled from Country: Deep Listening to the Spirit of Place'. Something significant happened at this gathering, certainly for me. I want to share a bit of the experience with you, since I sense it could hold something for all of us as members of an Australian contemplative community at this time in our history.

The conference was held on a property about 17 km out of Alice Springs, on the edge the West MacDonnell Ranges. It was hosted and organized by friends of ours who live out there, and had no institutional affiliation or backing. So – a citizen's gathering if you like. It drew people from a wide range of backgrounds and faith perspectives, and from every state in Australia. The theme seemed to have immediate resonance; within a few of weeks of advertising, 120 people had registered and there was a waiting list to attend. 'Exiled from Country: Deep Listening to the Spirit of Place' – it's like we were all recognizing a need, profoundly hungry for new or re-connection.

The structure of the conference was free-r than these things often are. There were designated speakers and discussions, but also music and poetry, movement and dance, time around campfires and in the nearby dry river bed, and a couple of sessions of formal listening where we went out into the land and practised simply being still, listening, receptive. We were privileged to have two Aboriginal elders sharing something of their relationship to country – MK Turner, an Arrente woman from the Alice Springs area, and Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr from Daly River who is known for her teaching on the notion of 'dadirri' or deep listening. And of course there was the palpable presence of the land itself – red rocks and earth, whitegums, spinifex, moon rising, birds.

I gave one of the first talks, early in the conference. I described how I often have the experience of longing to feel deeply connected, fully present to and in relation with the world around me, and yet, despite myself, often feel a degree of separateness, as though I'm not deeply attuned. I explained my sense of disconnection, by contrasting it with the words of Aboriginal artist Emily Kame Kngwarreye. Whenever she was asked to explain her paintings, 'regardless of whether the images were a shimmering veil of dots, ... raw stripes seared across the surface or elegant black lines, her answer was always the same: "Whole lot, that's whole lot, Awelye (my Dreaming) ...". She went on to name the various elements of her Dreaming – pencil yam, lizard, grass seed, emu, green bean and yam seed – saying: "That's what I paint, whole lot".¹

In this vision of the whole, it seems, it's possible to recognize everything as connected to everything else. Nothing can ultimately be separated out from the web of life, and to see one thing truly is to see all that it's related to. And that includes us. Theologian Ilia Delio has said: 'We emerge from an evolutionary process and are biologically linked to the natural world. The same currents that run through our human blood also run through the swirling galaxies and the myriad of life-forms that pervade this planet'.² MK Turner and Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr said they experience literally the veins in their country running through them, a sense of their flesh and the flesh of the earth being one. If we have eyes to see, it seems, we can truly recognize our radical connectedness, our earthliness and communion with all that is. We can know all things (as St Francis did) as our kin – brother Sun and sister Moon, brother Wind and sister Water.

Yet, in my talk, I said that although this vision makes profound sense to me, although I believe it to be true, I've always felt that I don't *know* it deeply for myself.

¹ Emily Kame Kngwarreye, interview with Rodney Gooch, trans. Kathleen Petyarre [accessed http://www.nma.gov.au/exhibitions/utopia_the_genius_of_emily_kame_kngwarreye/emily_kame_kngwarreye, 22 June 2016].

² 3 Ilia Delio, *Christ in Evolution* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008), p.21.

The words of Thomas Merton have described my experience: 'We are already one. But we imagine that we are not. And what we have to recover is our original unity. What we have to be is what we are'.

Well – what happened for me during the conference was a sense of that reality becoming more realized. As if I were shifting from being on the outside of it, just talking *about* it, to being more on the inside – experiencing it ... not in anything like the depth expressed by Emily Kngwarreye or MK or Miriam-Rose, but a glimpse. I felt a new sense of connection, and the presence and aliveness of the land itself – not just a stage set for the human drama, but a subject in its own right, communicating (communing) with us. And together with this, I experienced a new appreciation for the profound gift that indigenous teachers and elders have to share with us – the possibility of belonging deeply to this land and each other. Some of you might know or have glimpsed this experience too – maybe in childhood, maybe through relationship with indigenous people, maybe through time on the land or in the bush or by the sea. Or perhaps you know it more often as an absence, through the experience of exile from a place or beloved country.

So for me, this was a kind of awakening. And the thing about an awakening, coming to realise something in a new way, is that you can't go back to how you were before. Things are different. And when I reflect on where we find ourselves – our culture's need to transform how we relate to the natural world, our country's need of an authentically shared future for indigenous and non-indigenous Australians – then what happened at this conference seems important. Because I wasn't the only one affected – something was opening up. It was a *kairos* kind of time, with a sense of a movement of the Spirit towards healing and new life.

Tonight's reading from the Letter to the Hebrews speaks of the unknowing that's intrinsic to this kind of movement – a movement of faith – and how responding involves entrusting ourselves to the unfamiliar. 'By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to

set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance ... not knowing where he was going' (Heb. 11: 8) Faith means letting yourself be led by the intimations of such a call, and in advance of any fulfilment – it is 'the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen' (Heb. 11: 1). I sense this kind of faith-full responsiveness is being called forth in me, and perhaps in us as a contemplative community in this land – a community committed to listening, and seeking to respond to God's call as it is renewed and heard afresh in each new circumstance and time. And that's why I wanted to share something of this experience, and wonder about it with you.

One final word. The Christian tradition has been justly accused at times of 'heaven-ism', as if what happens here on earth and in our relationship to the earth is not central to salvation and our journey of faith. Indeed, our passage from the Letter to the Hebrews could be read as justifying such a stance, since it speaks of the faithful as 'strangers and foreigners on the earth' who are seeking 'a better country, that is, a heavenly one' (Heb. 11:16). But I think this is a mis-reading. Faith, the journey into God, is not a license to leave this earth behind, let alone exploit and abuse it. Rather, it's a call to be *here* in a new way. It's about being open (as indigenous culture is) to the depth dimension of reality and our profound interconnectedness. It's about being wholly responsive to the invisible source of all that lives, participating in God's continuing creation of life and love. This faith, this way of being and knowing, is itself a practice of deep listening – and it is the reconciliation we long for.