

SPIRITUALITY AND ENVIRONMENT: SEEKING A NEW VISION

by MICHAEL RODGERS

The author

Michael Rodgers, SPS, Founder and Director of Tearmann Centre, returned to Ireland after twenty years' missionary service in Africa to serve on his congregation's leadership team. During this time he began to explore his own roots, a journey that led him eventually to mystical Glendalough. In 1993, the old An Óige hostel was converted into self-contained apartments, and Michael eventually occupied them all to provide comfortable and pleasant accommodation for a series of retreat experiences lasting from one day to a month or more.

Michael offers a quiet, respectful space for people to reflect on their life and faith story in an environment that holds its own story. He encourages an experiential approach that incorporates history, legend, spirituality, Christian tradition and awareness of nature and the environment.

Michael is the co-author of the following books: *Glendalough, A Celtic Pilgrimage*, with Marcus Losack; and *Glendalough – A Celtic Soul Journey* with Gill McCarthy.

Introduction

Who am I? Where do I come from? What is my 'bone country'?

Laying the Foundations of Life and Early Influences

My 'bone country' is the parish of Killanena in East Clare where the foundations of my life were laid in the environment of the natural world and the community of family, neighbours and church. My mother was responsible for keeping us faithful to our religious traditions and duties, while my father lived at a more spiritual level in the ordinary circumstances of life. His life was his prayer.

The earliest spiritual experience that I remember happened in his company. We were in the bog in the month of May cutting turf. Half way through the day he would light a fire and boil the kettle to make tea. After eating the midday meal he would lie back in the heather with his hat covering his face for a little nap. While he was resting I would watch and listen to the skylarks. I would watch them rising vertically into the air, singing as they soared, and would continue to watch them closely as they dropped back to earth again. I was so attuned to their movements that I could easily find their nests with either eggs or young birds inside. This little bird later became a symbol of the soul for me. It was very

vulnerable as it nested on the ground, but it was capable of rising above all that as it lifted itself into the sky, pouring out its heart in song as it did so.

As a child I experienced the freedom of the countryside. My spirit was shaped in the natural world where there was a time and a place for everything. I can say now without hesitation that Killanena was my garden of Eden where I experienced life as a blessing. Every time I go back home and catch a glimpse again of Lough Graney, I find myself reciting from the heart those well-known lines from Merriman's great eighteenth-century poem, '*Cuirt an Mheán Oíche*':

*Do ghealadh mo chroi nuair chínn Loch Gréine,
An talamh, an tír agus íor na spéire;
Ba thaitneamhach aoibhinn suíomh na sléibhte,
Ag bagairt a gcinn thar druim a chéile (1)*

My first step beyond home was to St Flannan's College in Ennis. I was there two years ago to reunite with my classmates of fifty years ago. I didn't hear any complaints about how tough a place it was. Again and again I heard expressions of gratitude for the fact that we were the lucky ones among our peers, having had the opportunity to be educated. It was good to hear that because I, too, regard myself as one of the lucky ones.

On the other side of the coin, it has to be said that it was a cold, impersonal place with an emphasis on confinement, regimentation and conformity. There was very little emphasis on creativity or personal development. I always missed the freedom of the countryside and got out over the wall as often as I could. I lost a lot of my original identity as a person there but began to make myself at home in a more institutionalised way of life.

When I left St Flannan's at the age of eighteen, I was quite comfortable to continue in that new way of life. It gave me a sense of security and direction and opened up possibilities that I could never have dreamed about if I stayed at home. I joined St Patrick's Missionary Society, which prepared priests to go to work in Africa. That was as far away as I could imagine at that time. The first year in Kiltegan was a year of spiritual formation, but the emphasis was mostly on fixed routines of prayer, work and study. By the end of the year I was well into a mechanical mode of being, but I believed I had moved into a higher sphere of the spirit – at least several notches above my pre-religious experience.

I came back down to earth quickly when I returned to working in the fields during my first summer holidays from the seminary. One fine day we had a large field of hay ready for saving. I went to Mass in

the morning, which was recommended strongly for the beginning of every day. It was also recommended that we go back to the church every evening for a visit to the Blessed Sacrament. I knew on this day there was no hope of that happening. I worked out an alternative approach and drifted away on my own to a corner of the field where I pretended to be doing some work, but my main intention was to concentrate more on the presence of God for a fixed length of time. I look back on that day now as one of the days when a light came on in me. I knew instinctively then that there was a sacramental presence in the corner of the field and if God wasn't there, God was nowhere else either.

I will never forget the impression that those early years at home in the natural world made on me. Recently, the *Daily Mail* offered free DVDs of some of David Attenborough's greatest works, entitled *Nature's Great Events*, every day for a week. I got all of them and regard them as treasures. I am filled with wonder and a deep sense of connection every time I look at them.

Anyone might ask, 'What do holes in the ozone layer or the extinction of species have to do with my faith in God or how I say my prayers?' In my view, God is no longer a remote figure in the clouds but is here in the midst of us in this moment. When the natural world suffers, the God in me suffers too.

Travelling Outwards — Expanding World View

In Kiltegan, we prided ourselves on our spirit. We were blessed with large numbers and the enthusiasm and energy of youth and the dream of working on the big stage, beyond anything we had experienced before. I got an opportunity to go to third level education and studied my favourite subjects of history and geography. The study of philosophy helped me to understand myself and the world I lived in a little bit better. In the study of theology, I was lucky because Vatican II was in progress at that time and a new vision of the church was emerging. We had a young moral theology teacher, Vincent MacNamara, who guided us away from the old rules and regulations type of morality to a more spirit-driven, Christ-centred approach.

My first journey to Africa was by ship from Dublin to Liverpool and then by train to London. There we boarded another ship bound for Mombasa in Kenya. The voyage through the Mediterranean, the Suez Canal and the Red Sea took twenty-five days. The horizons of my life opened up a lot during that journey. We had a few days' stop in Genoa, which gave us time to go to Rome to visit St Peter's and see the Pope.

We were at home there, but after we got back on the ship we began a journey to a new and very unfamiliar place. The Muslim world opened to us for the first time when we set foot on Egyptian soil.

When we finally reached Mombasa, we were not too surprised to find Hindus and Sikhs added to the diverse community of Muslims and Christians.

I arrived in Africa in the middle of the third decade of my life. It was a challenging experience to step way beyond the environment I knew and become part of a new culture and try to communicate in a new language. I speak in the plural here because very few people could do this on their own. Among Irish missionary personnel, I met wonderful people. They were not afraid to work at the coal face of life and had a great capacity to identify with people. We were part of the larger Irish diaspora, which has made a very big contribution to life on the worldwide scene.

The Wideworld Experience

During the 1970s, my spirituality was formed in the church environment in which I lived my life. It was an exciting time to be planting the seeds of a new church. Vatican II had opened up several new windows and doors. The emphasis was on building Christian communities based on the belief that we are all together the people of God. Two women from outside the diocese came to facilitate our review of where we were and our planning for the future. They introduced us to a way of communication known as the psycho-social method. The idea was to get everybody to sit down as equals and try to make sure that every voice was heard in the expression of needs, issues and concerns and in the drawing up of plans. Even though I was full of good intentions, I began to realise that I did not know how to listen and take the views of others on board. We had our minds set on bringing people into the church and ministering to their spiritual needs by means of word and sacrament, but when we began to listen to them, we heard that most of their needs were in the material world in which they lived. Through listening, we discovered that we could attend to their spiritual needs more authentically when we had first obtained a better understanding of their material and social circumstances. I learned quickly that a spirituality that does not include social justice is very limited indeed.

I remember vividly one very remote place where the first classroom of a school building had just been completed by the people. The walls were mud brick made locally and the galvanised roof was bought by money collected from the people. There were no windows or doors and the dust was a few inches deep on the floor. On Sundays a small group of people used to gather there to pray. There was no water within ten miles of the village during the dry season. As a result of listening to the people, the diocese set up a development office with a team of experts responsible for giving advice and help regarding the storage of water during the rainy season. We brought a water diviner to the village and he discovered that there was an underground source of water, twenty-five feet down under our feet. The first Sunday

after the well was opened to provide water for people and animals, we had Mass in the schoolhouse and I will never forget the happiness of the occasion as the whole community turned out to celebrate. That well became a symbol for me of how the material and spiritual worlds come from one source.

I loved working in that model of the people's church. I was humbled by the open-hearted spirit of the people, who are desperately poor to Western eyes. They had an abundance of spiritual gifts including hospitality, respect, tolerance and love of life. Their Sunday morning Mass was an expression of all of this. It was a celebration of life in a very real sense. Having said all that, the poverty in which people lived was shocking. In that rural part of Africa, nobody had electricity or running water in their homes. The most vulnerable people who were physically and mentally impaired were left in their house in awful conditions. There was no social welfare and the poor had no one to turn to. In 1983, I was diagnosed with skin cancer behind my ear. I was flown home and received the best of treatment in St Luke's Hospital. When I returned to Africa, I heard of a man in the neighbourhood who had also been diagnosed with cancer. The only treatment he got was a few aspirin in a local health centre.

While there was great personal satisfaction from working with the people, there was also a sense of helplessness at how little we were able to do to make a difference. I began to distrust hierarchies because I saw power corrupting people at the highest levels of church and state. I regret very much that when the cuts were introduced here to help balance the books, among the first to feel the pain were the poorest people in the developing countries of the world.

By the time I left Africa in 1984, the local church was getting stronger, but there was a movement back to the old model where the priest is in charge and the people subjected to serving him as he sees fit. Having experienced a new model of church and the richness of the gifts of people working together in community, as well as their ability to develop in the absence of a priest for three Sundays out of four, it made me wonder that if the clerical model is restored, will it be capable of forming and developing a healthy spiritual environment for the people?

The Journey Inwards, Home to Oneself and to God — The Wisdom Years

During the fifth decade of life, many people experience the need for a new beginning. We have all heard of the mid-life crisis; I didn't expect it to happen to me but it did. In 1984, I came back to Ireland as part of a leadership team in my Society. As part of my responsibility, I was asked to lead a team that were involved in vocations promotion. I visited secondary schools and spoke to students in the classroom and my eyes were opened. I learned from young people's responses that the Ireland I knew had changed completely. They made me think of what the future was going to be like and I knew deep down that I

wanted to be part of that future. In 1983, I remember my mother, who was then in the last year of her life, giving me little hints that it was time for me to come home. This is how she would express it, 'Sure, haven't you given them the best years of your life? Sadly, she had passed away by the time I finally came home in 1984.

Another defining moment for me at that time came from a simple unexpected source when I came upon a reflection entitled 'Chief Seattle's Testimony':

This we know. All things are connected like the blood that unites one family. All things are connected. Whatever befalls the earth befalls the sons and daughters of the earth. We did not weave the web of life; we are merely a strand in it. Whatever we do to the web, we do to ourselves.

As I read through the lines my heart leaped. I knew at a very deep level that what I was reading was true and my heart responded accordingly. It confirmed for me at every level of my being that the material and spiritual are one and that all things are one in God, the source of life.

I also turned to the poetry of Patrick Kavanagh, who received some of his inspiration from the clay of the Irish countryside. The first time I heard of him was when I heard some of my colleagues in Africa quoting a few lines from his long poem, '**The Great Hunger**':

*Yet sometimes when the sun comes through a gap
These men know God the Father in a tree:
The Holy Spirit is the rising sap,
And Christ will be the green leaves that will come
At Easter from the sealed and guarded tomb.*

His poem '**Ploughman**' put me in touch again with the spirituality that was in my father as he worked in the fields. I knew at this stage that my heart and soul were hungry for a more spiritual way of being. I memorised many of Kavanagh's poems, including 'The One' with its memorable closing lines: 'That beautiful, beautiful, beautiful God / Was breathing His love by a cut-away bog'.

I had never heard anyone call God beautiful before. I was drawn back to the roots of Irish spirituality. I visited passage tombs and dolmens, stone circles and standing stones in every province of Ireland. From those I moved on to the early Irish monastic tradition, visiting the remains of many ancient monastic

settlements with their high crosses and round towers. I found that what people were calling Celtic spirituality appealed to me greatly.

I began to realise that we are all pilgrims on this earth trying to find our way on an open road. I became more aware of the humanity of Jesus living his life on this earth as a pilgrim spending a lot of his time on the road meeting people. The understanding that all things exist in the divine presence strengthened my sense of the sacred.

I came to realise that the relationship between the light and the darkness is at the heart of the Celtic Christian spiritual tradition. John O'Donohue, in his book *Anam Cara*, expressed it as only he could:

All creativity awakens at this primal threshold where light and darkness test and bless each other. You only discover balance in your life when you learn to trust the flow of this ancient rhythm.

The mystics and the hermits in the old Irish spiritual tradition included the light and the darkness in a very personal way as they journeyed inwards to the very heart of life. I believe they would encourage us today to do the same, because we are all contemplatives and mystics at heart.

Finally, the Celtic spiritual tradition came to its fullest expression in the community. It was there that the individual's life and faith was fully developed, nurtured and sustained. I could now see clearly that the strongest communities are made up of enlightened and committed individuals. I prepared myself to play my part by taking a training course in spiritual guidance, or what was called in the old Irish tradition '*anamcharadas*'.

Finding Myself at Home in Glendalough

In 1992, instead of going back to Africa and spending the rest of my life in the service of the church there, I went to live in beautiful Glendalough in the Wicklow Hills. The story of Glendalough can be summed up in one sentence, which is written on the door of the Visitor's Centre: 'From solitude to community'. The story began 1,400 years ago in the search and experience of one individual called Kevin. From that original story it developed into a powerful community that flourished for hundreds of years in the medieval period. I can say that my story has gone in the opposite direction from community to solitude. I only intended staying in Glendalough for a short while, but I am still there after seventeen years because people continue to come from many different directions to experience the spirit in that unique place, and to share in the inspiration that I feel and try to express in it. In 1993, I established a centre for

reflecting on the spiritual journey, which I call Tearmann Spirituality Centre. The word translates as a refuge or safe place. Its basic ethos is Christian/Catholic, but we welcome all soul seekers.

We begin and end each day with a group gathering for reflection, silence, prayer and meditation. The day is free after that for each individual to follow their own heart and spirit and reflect on their own story. We are guided by the conviction that the natural world activates the spiritual imagination. At the end of the day we come together again to reflect on the day's journey and give thanks for the blessings that we have received in the liturgy of the Eucharist. During the whole experience we encourage people to allow their rational minds and intuitive hearts to work together to develop a more contemplative and compassionate way of being. It is a small group experience that accepts the uniqueness of every person. Similar small centres for prayer and reflection are springing up here and there around the country. Could these be the first shoots of a new awareness of the importance of 'spirituality' in our times?

I am often asked, 'Why did you come to Glendalough?' Most people expect me to tell of an inspired moment or vision that set the wheels in motion. They are a little surprised when they hear the truth. At the most basic level, I attribute my decision to desperation rather than inspiration. I was beginning to experience a disillusionment that was turning my soul sour and I knew that if I didn't do something about it there and then, my spirit level would quickly fall below empty. The system within which I enjoyed working for over twenty years no longer seemed to attract the spirit that was in me. I had a feeling deep down that if I returned to my former ministry my heart wouldn't be in it and I would end up burning out very quickly. However, I never lost the desire to participate in a vital ministry.

Definitions Of Spirituality

I enjoy working with young people. Secondary school students come to Glendalough for one-day walking retreats. I often ask them at the beginning of the day if they consider themselves spiritual. Most are reluctant to show their hand in response. I get the impression that they equate spirituality with being religious and in their minds that is not a cool place to be in the present climate. I then try to approach the question in another way using Diarmuid O'Murchú's definition of spirituality.

Do you have a zest for life? The answer to that one is obvious even if they say nothing.

Do you search for meaning and purpose? They might reply 'not that seriously'.

Do you love what is good and beautiful? 'Of course we do'.

Do you have a passion to create a better world? 'Definitely'.

Are you connected to the life source/energy/God? The great majority say they believe in God.

In this way, I try to help them realise that we are all spiritual beings on a human journey trying to find our way to the sacred heart of life. I emphasise that the primary place of the sacred is life itself and the

universal call to wholeness, goodness, justice, love and peace is heard in the deep heart's core of every single person and is lived out in every detail of life. Our call is, in the words of O'Murchú, to be co-creators with our creative God, participating wholeheartedly in the spiritual unfolding of universal life. Could the response to today's crisis be a call to be more spiritual? If the spirit is strong, the environment we create around us will be life-giving. It will put us in charge of our own future destiny. How to bring this about is in the hands of every individual and every single community.

The Wisdom of Bringing it all Together

Since the early 1990s, I had begun to understand that spirituality is rooted in the earth where life develops in all its diversity. I began to see that the road to eternity is emerging in the here and now. In my religious conviction and practice, I found myself becoming more and more aware of the God of the here and now, and responded to the presence of the divine and eternal in me by trying to be present to everything around me in every given moment. I became more convinced of this understanding when I read a book called *The Universe Story* by Thomas Berry and Brian Swimme, and through it became acquainted with the 'Twelve Principles of the Universe'. The book contained convincing evidence that all of life has come from one source and is continuing to emerging new forms. The old world view based on the Genesis story no longer provides an adequate framework within which we can expand our lives. That ancient story, from which many of our values, ethics, laws and institutions emerged, was based on the story that God designed all the parts of the world separately and then put them together and set them in motion like a machine. From then on and forever, the machine keeps going in a fixed way.

The new cosmological story understands that the universe is alive in itself and has been developing over an incredibly long period of time. It has now reached a stage of such beauty and diversity and complexity that it is almost impossible to believe that there is not a profound wisdom at work at the heart of it. It is the unique privilege of the human to share this wisdom in awareness and consciousness. As Brian Swimme says, 'We are the universe in the form of the human ... Everyone is part of this. Everything is part of this and in it we discover a profound kinship'. My understanding of this new story is still rudimentary, but what I know makes sense to me and makes me enthusiastic and energised about my part in it. Last Easter night we listened to the Genesis account of creation and then watched a DVD entitled *The Universe Story*, which is a new version of that original ancient story.

In 2008, I attended a training weekend for a programme called 'Be the Change'. This originated in America a few years ago as a result of an alliance that was formed between the indigenous Achuar people who were concerned about the destruction of their environment in the rainforests of tropical Ecuador and Peru, and a group of people in California who are aware that the direction the modern

world is taking is heading for destruction. After meeting together, their common conclusion was that the dream of the modern world needs to be changed radically if we are to survive. In America, the programme they designed was called 'Awakening the Dreamer, Changing the Dream'.

The thinking behind the programme is that a crisis is looming over all of life on our planet and the main cause of this crisis is human ignorance, greed, exploitation and spiritual poverty. The purpose of the programme is to heighten people's awareness of life on this planet and bring them to making the following commitment: 'I am committed to bringing forth an environmentally sustainable, spiritually fulfilling and socially just human presence on this planet as the guiding principle of our times'. I have made that commitment, but now I have to ask myself the questions, 'How can this happen?' and 'What am I going to do?'

The programme is developed around four questions: Where are we? How did we get here? What is possible for the future? Where do we go from here? The exploration of these questions and the passionate response from a diverse group of men and women, religious and lay, Christian and others present at the weekend training, gave me a sense of hope and excitement and was another profoundly defining moment.

At the Céifin Conference, we are looking at our economic, political, social and religious situation and how these systems can be changed for the benefit of all people. Many people are aware today of the environmental crisis that we have created on planet earth. I witnessed at first hand for twenty years the huge gap that has opened up between those who are well off and those who have nothing in our world. I am now mostly involved with the spiritual, emotional and psychological effect all of this is having on the souls and spirits of people. Recently, I was called to a house in the local village where a man had committed suicide. I witnessed there and then the heartbreaking effect his sudden death had brought to his family.

There seems to be a growing culture of alienation and dysfunction in our society and people are trying to fill the hollowness they feel with material things. There are few guiding moral principles now and spiritual values have very little influence on human behaviour. There is a spiritual crisis, but the good news is the human family is well capable of coming up with solutions to solve the problem.

How can we achieve this? Mahatma Gandhi left us the following memorable words, 'You must become the change you wish to see in the world'. Can we be the changes we want to see in the world? I think we can if we approach the problems facing us in a positive frame of mind and with determination, commitment and passion. The first step is to believe in ourselves and the contribution we can make. When we come to know ourselves better it is easier to honour who others are and the contribution they

have to make too. In spiritual terms, each one of us needs to truly believe that the power for change lies within each person. The challenge then is to become better informed about who we are in the greater scheme of things.

Can we turn away from the limited images of God that we come across every day and turn towards a profound understanding of the God who created the universe and gave each of us a unique part to play in this unfolding story? As Christians, can we turn towards a more cosmic view of Christ who came to live among us on this earth and blessed our presence here with his example and wisdom, and by his resurrection gave us hope that all things will come to completion in him? Is it possible for us to believe in the Spirit that binds us all together with a bond that is stronger than blood? Is it possible that the next revolution will be a spiritual revolution? How can we start planting the new seeds of change that this revolution will require?

I would like to finish with a short piece written by George Bernard Shaw, which I find inspiring and challenging. I heard it for the first time during the 'Be the Change' training programme last year:

This is the true joy in life, the being used for a purpose recognised by yourself as a mighty one; the being a force of nature instead of a feverish selfish little clod of ailments and grievances, complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy.

I am of the opinion that my life belongs to the whole community, and as long as I live it is my privilege to do for it whatever I can.

I want to be thoroughly used up when I die, for the harder I work, the more I live.

I rejoice in life for its own sake.

Life is no brief candle to me; it is a sort of splendid torch which I have got hold of for the moment, and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations.

This is my belief too. This is the 'personal stand' I wish to make.

Note

1. Brian Merriman's 'Midnight Court' translates as follows:

'When I'd see Lough Graney, my heart would lighten

At the land, the countryside and the horizon,

Delightful, pleasing the array of the mountains,

Nodding their heads o'er the back of each other' (translated by Patrick C. Power).