



The Quiet Garden Movement

Web: [www.quietgarden.org](http://www.quietgarden.org)  
Phone: 01494 569057  
Email: [info@quietgarden.org](mailto:info@quietgarden.org)  
Reg Charity No 1038528

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## Quiet Garden Movement Annual Gathering 2015 Bristol - 30 May 2015

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**Brother Sam SSF, of Hilfield Friary, gave the opening address at  
the Quiet Garden Movement's Annual Gathering in 2015**

**Audio available at: <http://quietgarden.org/annual-gathering-2015/>**

**By kind permission of Brother Sam SSF the full transcript is available below:**

### **Towards a Contemplative Ecology For Our Time**

From Great Head, the promontory of land that sticks out from Batcombe Down above Hilfield Friary, one can look out across north Dorset towards Somerset and Wiltshire. Turning clockwise from west towards the east you can see the Blackdown Hills; beyond them, in the far distance, the Quantocks, and then the low line of the Poldens above the Somerset levels. Beyond Glastonbury Tor the blue mass of the Mendips stands as a barrier before Bath and Bristol. Further round towards the east one looks over the Blackmore Vale, a patchwork of green fields, hedges and woodlands, Hardy's 'Land of the Little Dairies'. Then there's the outcrop of the Salisbury plain beyond Stourhead which, from where one is standing, appears to join up with a continuation of the chalk Downs which run to the sea - Hambledon Hill, Bulbarrow Camp, High Stoy and back to Great Head. It's a stunning panorama which changes with the seasons, the weather and the time of day. I come here often just to stand there, to gaze at what lies before me, to feel the wind on my face, to take a deep breath. I may be biased, but to my eye this is one of the finest and least spoilt views in all of England.

Returning to the Friary through our woodland and meadows at this time of the year I'm chorused by bird-song. The caws of the rooks and the croak of the raven which are with us in winter have given way to the repetitive call of the chiff chaff, the rising trill of the blackcap, the sweet song of the blackbird and the chit-chit of the wren. The meadows are thick with wild flowers, and the orchids which love our land are back in abundance: the early purples, the birdsnest and the fly orchids are in the hedgerows; the twayblades and the southern marsh orchids on the thin soil of the fields. The common spotted, the bee, the butterfly and the pyramid orchids will be making their appearances next month. Later on, in July, when

most plants have finished flowering, we'll mow the fields for hay – winter fodder for our sheep and cattle, who in turn feed our community.

A Franciscan brother, unlike a Benedictine monk, takes no vow of stability to a particular monastery – the world is his cloister – and over the past forty years I have lived in various parts of this country and around the world, but Hilfield has been the place to which I've returned, like a homing pigeon, and this is where I feel I belong. I have a deep affection for the place.

And yet, as I look out from Great Head (Girt Head as the locals call it), I know that what I see is under threat. There is change on the way. Of course, there has always been change taking place in the landscape before me. Glastonbury Tor in the distance reminds me that that place was once the site of one of the greatest Benedictine monasteries in the land, the centre of a monastic revival a thousand years ago. Now there are just some ruins. The shape of the fields nearer below me signifies that they were surrounded by the hedges that we so admire only in 1804, the date when the common land of Leigh parish was enclosed by Act of Parliament. The population of the parish of Batcombe today is less than two thirds of its number in the census of 1851 – a reminder of the huge 'flight from the land' that took place all over England between 1870 and 1939. The local family farms that surround us, especially those that are into dairy, are struggling to survive in a market where the price they receive for their milk hardly covers the cost of production.

But these changes are as nothing compared to those that are taking place at deeper, more widespread level and that have greater implications. What I don't pick out immediately from my viewpoint on the Downs is that here in the UK, as elsewhere in the world, we are in the midst of a drastic decline of species of plant and animal life, unknown since before the last Ice Age. A report by the RSPB, *The State of Nature*, produced at the beginning of 2104, speaks of an average 60% decline for a range of species over the past 50 years. It estimates that there are in the UK 44 million fewer breeding birds than there were in the late 60's, that the butterfly population has declined by some 72% over the past ten years, and that in 16 English counties one species of plant is becoming extinct every year. All this is due to loss of habitat suitable for their survival. Maybe you have noticed some of these changes yourself in your garden. How many times have you heard the cuckoo this spring?

If I could see further afield than the view from Great Head I could also discern collapsing fish stocks in many of the world's oceans, increased desertification and loss of soil fertility where forest has been cut down and land over-farmed, a drastic decline in the water table in areas of population growth, and growing air pollution in most of the major cities of the world – all these due to human pressure on the environment. The American agronomist, Wendell Berry, writing of his visit to Hardburly, a site of mountain top removal to extract coal in his home state of Kentucky, is stunned by what he sees:

*[S]tanding there in the very presence of it, one feels one's comprehension falling short of the magnitude of its immorality. One is surrounded by death and ugliness and silence as of the end of the world. After my first trip to this place I think I was most impressed by the extent of the destruction, and its speed; what most impresses me now is its permanence.... Standing*

*and looking down on that mangled land, one feels aching in one's bones the sense that it will be in a place such as this—a place of titanic disorder and violence, which the rhetoric of political fantasy has obstructed from official eyesight—that the balance will finally be overcast and the world tilted irrevocably toward its death.... Since I left Hardburly I have been unable to escape the sense that I have been to the top of the mountain, and that I have looked over and seen, not the promised land vouchsafed to a chosen people, but a land of violence and sterility prepared and set aside for the damned.<sup>1</sup>*

And I haven't yet mentioned climate change! I'm not going to go into the details of which I'm sure that most of you are already familiar. I recognise that there are some who are in denial that it is actually happening; that there are others who cannot see that it is already having a drastic effect upon ourselves and on our natural environment, and that there are yet others who doubt that it is in very large measure due to human activity caused by the burning of fossil fuels. To all of these I would simply ask whether, if faced with a diagnosis of terminal illness caused by one's own lifestyle, a diagnosis confirmed by nine out of ten consultant physicians (95% of the world's climate scientists agree that the current rapid climate change is due to carbon emissions), they would not seriously consider radically altering that lifestyle to a way of life that was more sane and healthy.

That radical change of lifestyle is what this talk is about, but I'm not going to be lecturing or hectoring you on using your car less, or insulating your home, or making sanctuaries for hedgehogs, or dis-investment from fossil fuels – important as these things may be. I want to talk about contemplative prayer. Sir Jonathan Porritt, environmentalist, founder of Friends of the Earth, wrote in a paper some years ago, *'What's needed in the current situation (of the threats associated with climate change) is not so much a cap on carbon emissions, important though this may be, but a radical re-orientation of the way we see ourselves in relation to the natural world around us, something akin to a spiritual revolution'*. I fundamentally agree with Sir Jonathan – what is needed is a revolution in how we see, which is what a life shaped by contemplative prayer is about.

Contemplare (latin) – to gaze upon. Gazing is not something we usually give ourselves time for these days. There are too many images present to us, and we are too busy, too distracted, to rest our eye upon them for long. Have you noticed how in public places the majority of people now stare into their smart phones, lost in a virtual world, rather than being aware of what is going on around them? Maybe you are one of them! The art critic and social thinker of the Victorian age, John Ruskin, said that *'For every ten people who can speak there is only one person who can think, and for every hundred people who can think there is only one person who can see – seeing is everything.'* The artist necessarily has a contemplative absorption with what is there. When Jesus in the gospels accuses the Pharisees of blindness, he isn't speaking of the loss of eyesight; he is speaking of their lack of awareness, their inability to see beneath the surface, their failure to be attentive, and their refusal to see the work and presence of God which is happening before them. And when in the Beatitudes he says *'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God'*, he is speaking of a single-hearted attention that begins to glimpse the world, each other and ourselves as

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<sup>1</sup> Wendell Berry, "The Landscaping of Hell: Strip-mine Morality in East Kentucky," in *The Long-Legged House*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1969), 28-29.

God sees us – with love. Angela of Foligno, a Franciscan mystic of the 14<sup>th</sup> Century said, *‘As we see, so we love. The more perfectly and purely we see, the more perfectly and purely we love’*. To see clearly, to train oneself to see clearly, to purify the heart to see deeply, is an act of love. For the early monks, who went out into the desert to live the life of the Beatitudes, this is what their life was about – a training in attentiveness by stripping, simplifying their lives to the basics, so that they might see clearly and love deeply.

I suggest that this *contemplatio*, this gazing with love, is the basis for that radical re-orientation, that spiritual revolution, of which Jonathan Porritt speaks as necessary in the face of climate change. Why? Because it’s a lack of seeing, a lack of loving attention to the world around us, a fundamental disregard for the material world, that lies at the heart of the ecological crisis which is looming. As Rowan Williams has said, *‘our industrialised, globalised, consumerised culture has come to see the universe as a giant warehouse of stuff there for our convenience, rather than as a community of creatures living in relation to the mystery of God’*. Post enlightenment man – and I think it is essentially a male tendency to dominate – sees the world around him in terms of its usefulness. We speak of natural ‘resources’, assets to be harnessed, developed, exploited, possessed, defended, bought, sold or fought over. The majority of the world’s conflicts are fought over the control of some or other ‘natural resource’. Even nature tourism has become a resource with a market value upon it. How much is Great Head worth to the economy of West Dorset? What value does this view add to one’s property? There’s a certain irony in that, as well as being a place for a glorious view, a lane close by Batcombe Down has become a favourite spot for fly tipping, for dumping those bits of creation which have outlived their ‘usefulness’.

Francis of Assisi, from an essentially contemplative viewpoint, sees the world differently. Thomas of Celano, his earliest biographer, wrote of him: *‘he delighted in all the works of God’s hands, and from the vision of joy on earth his mind soared aloft to the life-giving source of all. In everything beautiful he saw Him who is beauty itself, and he followed his Beloved everywhere by his likeness imprinted on creation’*. God’s ‘likeness imprinted on creation’. That is, he saw that every creature bears the maker’s mark or sign, and therefore is able to reveal something to us of the character, the mystery of God. Francis wasn’t the first to recognise this: *‘The heavens proclaim the glory of God and the firmament shows forth his handiwork’*, says the psalmist. The early Church fathers spoke of creation being the ‘first scripture’ with every creature being a word of God. In Francis’ footsteps St Bonaventure declared that creation is the overflowing of the ‘fountain-fullness of God’. If you see the world in this way, as sacramental, as bearing the maker’s mark, then you will know that the world and everything in it has an intrinsic rather than simply a utilitarian value. Every creature has a place because it reflects the glory of God. There is nothing in the natural world that is completely trivial or worthless, to be discarded or dumped. As Dave Bookless, the former Director of A Rocha, has said, *‘God doesn’t do rubbish’*. Francis told a brother who was hoeing the community’s vegetable patch to ‘leave a place for the weeds, for they too have right to be there’. If we are to discover a sane and wise ecology which our world so desperately needs, it will come from looking at and loving the world, and all that is in it, as much as the Creator does. ‘Lord, I want my sight’, should be not only Bartimaeus’ prayer, but our own as well.

Of course, it has to be said that the Church in her teaching and practice over the centuries has not always assisted this contemplative approach to the world. The tendency to exalt the spiritual over the material, and mind over matter - the promise of heavenly reward after earthly labour, by which is meant being lifted out of our embodied-ness to a spiritual, non-embodied existence, a denigration of the mundane as opposed to the holy - has played its part in leading us to treat this world as if it doesn't matter what we do with it. There are some who assert that human induced climate change is indeed a blessing in that it will hasten the day when the earth shall be consumed by fire, and the saints will be carried up in rapture, so Christians are encouraged to burn as much fossil fuel as possible! Alternatively, when Martin Luther was once asked what he would do if he knew that the Lord would be returning tomorrow, he replied that he would plant a tree today!

Gazing on the world with love, gazing from God's viewpoint, results not only in seeing the intrinsic worth of every creature, but also in recognising the essential relationship, the fundamental interconnectedness of all things. Everyone knows that St Francis had a way with animals, but they may not be aware of what underlay that gift. St Bonaventure, writing of Francis, said that *'he would call all creatures, no matter how small, by the name of "brother" or "sister" because he saw that they shared with him the same beginning'*. So Francis spoke of Brother Sun and Sister Moon, Brother Fire, Brother Wind and Sister Water, Sister Swallow and Brother Wolf. He saw the world as a family, of which he was a part. This may seem fanciful and romantic to us, but, of course, it is factually true. We are all essentially made of the same stuff. 98% of my genes I share with an orangutang, 70% with a banana! We are part of a community of creatures, animate and inanimate, star dust containing atoms created in the seconds after the primordial explosion which brought the universe into existence. It's said of Francis that he had a 'piety towards every creature'. Today that might sound quaintly religious, but in medieval latin 'pietas' was the duty owed to someone of the same blood, indicating that Francis had that sense of obligation and responsibility towards the rest of creation, the family to which he knew he belonged.

Such sense of 'belonging', which our transient and fragmented culture has largely lost, has been natural to older societies. Sir Ghillian Prance, the former Director of Kew, and one of the world's leading experts on the Amazonian rainforest tells of how the fragile eco-system of that forest, so important to the wider world's climate, is recognised, honoured and preserved by those few indigenous tribes that remain within it. The tribal peoples are utterly at home in their surroundings; they know the properties of each plant and tree; what they kill or uproot they value and guard. They know how to care for it and how to use it sustainably. They are in communion with the forest. And they notice – the late arrival of a migrating bird, the increasing scarcity of a particular plant; small changes that require the kind of communion that comes from knowing a place deeply, not just as scenery, but also as sustenance, and when local knowledge is passed on with a sense of sacred trust from one generation to another.

Eight thousand miles away in the Solomon Islands, our Franciscan brothers witness to what happens when a logging and/or mining company has bribed politicians to allow access to this natural 'resource'. When the trees are felled the habitat for local food supply and medicinal plants is destroyed, the land is exposed and becomes easily eroded by tropical rainfall,

leading to polluted rivers which then spill out silt into the sea, killing the coastal coral reef. The US dollars, which suddenly become available in quantity, disrupt the local economy and lead to a drift into Honiara, the capital. A whole community of people, land, animals, trees and plants is lost. Aldo Leopold, writing as a conservationist in his native Wisconsin back in 1947 says: *'We abuse the land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect. There is no other way for land to survive the impact of mechanised man, nor for us to reap from it the aesthetic harvest it is capable, under science, of contributing to culture. That land is a community is the basic concept of ecology, but that land is to be loved and respected is an extension of ethics.'* I think I would add that community is the fruit of contemplation.

There are some, perhaps many, who regard the contemplative life, a life dedicated to periods of withdrawal for silent, attentive prayer, as an escape from the world, a cop-out, a retreat into a rural idyll, concerned only with personal sanctification. I would argue to the contrary that contemplation leads us to communion, with each other and the rest of creation as well as with God, to an awareness of the whole of which we are a part, to see the essential connectedness of all things. Far from leading us out of the world, it enables us to love the world as God so loves it. And that can be painful. Returning to Batcombe Down above the Friary, and looking out over the Blackmore Vale, I see not only a stunning view but also something of the cost of all that is before me. I'm conscious that everything before me - humans, animals, plants, bacteria - predates upon something else; nature red in tooth and claw. The offering and taking of life is built into the very structure of the universe, and I know that God himself does not stand aloof from that. I become aware of the struggles in the lives of those who live around me - one friend of the Friary has recently been diagnosed with terminal cancer - and I'm made indignant at the careless disregard that can dump rubbish in a place of beauty. Further afield I see the desperate faces of people crammed into a leaky boat, and the masked faces of those holding guns. I'm painfully aware of my own complicity in the abuse in and of the planet. And I weep.

Maybe it's the fact that the pain of the world is so great and, in particular, the threat of climate change so enormous, that we find it hard to acknowledge it, own up to it. I find it hard to watch those scenes of people struggling to cross the Mediterranean, even harder to see the atrocities that are taking place in Iraq and Syria. Neither, perhaps can I cope with the degradation of the earth and the loss of species taking place. Ecocide and genocide are closely connected. But gazing with love brings on the tears which, among the monks of the desert, were counted as a spiritual gift: *'Whoever is aware of their own sins is greater than one who raises the dead'*, said Isaac of Nineveh, *'and whoever can weep over himself for one hour is greater than the one who is able to teach the whole world. The one who recognises the depth of his own frailty is greater than the one who sees visions of angels'*. Tears can be a blessing because they are a recognition of our frailty and limitedness, an abandonment of the controlling hubris into which our technology often seduces us, and the opportunity for change. What the world most needs in the face of climate change, says the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople, is eco-penance - a change of heart and a change of the way we see.

Every morning at the Friary we gather for thirty to forty minutes of silent prayer. Not everyone makes it, some struggle with distracting thoughts and images, some nod off back to sleep, but the purpose of this time for all of us is to seek that loving attention which reflects the loving regard of God towards us and every creature. What we do there at the beginning of each day shapes our ecology, our household wisdom and our practice: the bread we bake, the care of the land and animals, the way we generate energy, our use of transport, the hospitality of the table, our relationships with each other and our guests, our forgiveness and our forbearance with each other, our protest and political involvement in the face of climate change. It's an integrated ecology, an ecology that is spiritual, social and environmental, that sees life whole. But it's the contemplation, the gazing with love, that shapes and sustains it, and it's the basis for that revolution, that radical re-orientation of the way we see ourselves in relation to the world around us which Jonathan Porritt calls for as the first requirement to combat climate change.

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