



Women's Climate Conversation #4

Tuesday 1 June 2021

Finding compassion in public discourse and policy making

Reflection by Honey Nelson

One of the Women's Climate Congress values statements states 'We assert that qualities of the heart (such as compassion, love, empathy and forgiveness) are the basis for true strength. These human laws must be reactivated for us to survive.'

This idea was explored in this online conversation hosted by Congress founding members Dr Janet Salisbury and Kirsten Anker.

The conversation was led by our two guests speaking on matters of the heart, conscience and spirit: **Dr Lynne Reeder**, Director of Australian Compassion Council and a trustee for the international Charter for Compassion.

And **Revd Dr Sarah Bachelard**, founder of Benedictus Contemplative Church in Canberra, and meditation retreat leader and theologian. She teaches contemplative prayer, especially concerned with integral ecology.

These women both concern themselves with inward thought, upon the organic nature of our feelings, sympathies and behaviour; and our ways of responding to others, to motivations, challenges, and to the great crises of the present day.

Lynne Reeder spoke of Compassion as particularly a cultural characteristic of human society, one that can be little used, or instead nurtured and spread in support of our planet and its life.

We face a planetary climate crisis of decades ahead, perhaps permanent – and our evolutionary 'programming' tends to limit us to empathise within our own small circle rather than with world-wide life-populations; and to respond to brief immediate threats rather than to long-term crises. She urges us to look beyond the view that we have over-reached our capacity in our present stage of evolution; and to develop short- and long-term creative

responses to our present crisis: using our great capacity for compassion and purposeful shared understanding, directed to the next generation and to life itself, through our own loving parenthood.

As one participant said: Human society is a part of the whole planet's system; and we may now be at an inventive tipping-point in human consciousness to help lead us away from the present dangers.

Sarah Bachelard spoke of how contemplative practice can draw us away from abrupt, even aggressive reaction to present threats to our identity, habits, values, collective survival.

Through meditation we can find the quiet centre in our own hearts, from which we can understand not only our own source, but also the meaning of the life we are here to live. It brings space for wider considered choices in our responses, beyond mere reactivity. When this attitude spreads through our wider society, this can inform our 'tipping-point' of social consciousness, to see objectively our own habits, and creatively undertake to change them.

She admires the breadth and depth of First People's cosmologies, which are not speculative and vague, but rigorous and expansive: a holistic way of knowing.

There is great unresolved grief and trauma to First Peoples; sufferings we can comprehend especially through the dissolution of 'self' or self-interest, which relinquishment comes with contemplative thought.

Pain, lament, impotence, vulnerability – these are all experiences we cannot control with our will alone, we need to travel into a deeper mind-vein beyond the prevailing technical and rational paradigm.

General comments:

Discussion included the Congress's goals of developing a collaborative national plan and a cultural change to re-balance cultural discourse, towards valuing cooperation and empathy. 'How we are made' can aid our understanding: that in using our compassionate mind our wider array of choices becomes clear.

Spaces for contemplation and connection:

Churches have declined in recent times. But we still need spaces and practices for calm and contemplation: music, light, quiet, 'deep listening' such as taught and practiced by First Peoples (eg ['dadirri'](#) as taught by senior Australian citizen of the year, Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr) .

What if there was a space for this in our parliament? A ceremonial start to sessions that included some silent contemplation and other ceremonial/artistic ways of connecting to our common humanity and purpose.

Compassion and connection can be taught to our children from the earliest age; encouraging them to 'see' suffering in others, and the life of the natural world.

'Wisdom is not knowing more, but knowing by more of us.'

Women's leadership:

We spoke of the rising frustration (and even anger) of women today: as we face societal harms and permanent threats to our families, descendants, and all life; while we are largely excluded from transforming the lagging social and environmental policies of an entrenched patriarchy. In the words of one participant: '.... the entire economy and culture is progressing away from quality and care, towards bull behaviour and buyer-beware as our rapidly-escalating normal....'

We recognised that a few countries, such as New Zealand (led by a woman) are developing long-term 'wellbeing' budgets for families; whereas those such as Australia remain on an overt 'war footing': a severe impact on our national consciousness. These examples give us a model to follow.

Women can harness and moderate present-day aggression and anger on behalf of future life.