Over a year ago as the New Theology Review Editorial Board discussed plans for future issues of this journal, the need to reflect on the linkage between issues of poverty and ecology once again came to high relief. In their April 2, 2009, meeting the national leaders of the G-8 nations had made all sorts of promises to fulfill the U.N. Millennial goals—but then failed to follow through with the necessary funding and enforcement of legal safeguards to bring their promises to reality. Also at that time, the effects of enormous ecological shifts were already clearly felt in many parts of the world (global climate change in sub-Saharan Africa, Oceania). These were “signs of the times” that required our attention. We needed an article on “ecology and [economic] poverty.”

However, when I sat down to write this reflection at the end of June 2010, other “signs of the times” were in the foreground. On April 20, 2010, an explosion and fire on the Deepwater Horizon oil rig in the Gulf of Mexico killed eleven workers and then for months spewed thousands of barrels of oil into the Gulf of Mexico. Writing on the 69th day of the Gulf of Mexico Oil Disaster, it seems clear that we need to consider another kind of poverty—that sense of a deep, to the core, ache of the human spirit that is left untouched by knowledge, wealth, technological prowess, economic security, political popularity, or military might. In the subsequent weeks following April 20, the New York Times ran an “oil spill” section—a daily accounting of the developments in the Gulf—and the CNN television network did continuous coverage, showing the video of thousands of barrels of reddish-brown oil pouring forth and bubbling plumes of natural gas from the floor beneath the waters of the Gulf. Various other media picked up assorted “sound bites” and shots, but few gave sustained coverage. What pervaded most stories were the political and economic battles of who was to blame, legal battles of who could sue whom, who was really in control of the clean-up, how would this affect Obama’s population ratings, and how would this affect the economy. Yet, who should have been surprised?

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We live in a society and a culture that have become expert in compartmentalized thought that has resulted in projecting a false reality.

As advanced as the United States is in many dimensions of development and science, the “common sense” that we live by is still stuck in the false realities that permeated the thought of Francis Bacon (1561–1626) and René Descartes (1596–1650). Descartes saw nature as nothing more than a machine, and Bacon prized technology that was the means to the end of being the master over the universe, recreating the paradisal conditions of the biblical “New Jerusalem.” Added to this Enlightenment mix, Isaac Newton (1642–1727) contributed the normative stance that behind all empirical facts are laws that can explain them. Then knowing the laws, we can control just about anything. It was not much of a leap from there for Newton’s student, Pierre Simon LePlace (1749–1827), to argue that the universe is completely determined “so we no longer require the hypothesis of God” (Toolan, 53). Adam Smith (1723–1790) held that physical things consist of indestructible matter, and he assumed that with enough capital, anything and everything can be assembled, reassembled, replaced, exchanged, and substituted—making commodities well into infinity (Toolan, 55).

What morphed from these basic frames of Enlightenment thought was the kind of globalization based on “cowboy economics” that assumes that if “natural resources” run out in one location, there is always another pasture somewhere where the “resource” may be found. And any amount of environmental exploitation is allowed because resources have no intrinsic value.

What is problematic about Enlightenment thinking and classical physics is that, beyond being limited in adequately explaining the world, they have left us “thinking in silos.” We may well see trees, birds, and cars, but many people rarely see that neither the trees nor the birds may survive long if the cars burn sufficient fossil fuel to poison the atmosphere, causing shifts in weather patterns, which in turn change the climate and result in desertification. Simply put, ecological or relational imagination is absent from most of our interpretations of what we see and experience. If we are to open ourselves to grasping the wisdom that comes from spiritual poverty and experiencing any significant conversion to different ways of being and acting, we need to do our part and learn to think differently.

**Connecting the Dots**

The moral imagination and the ecological imagination are intimately related insofar as both require us to take the time to learn how to “connect the dots.” Put in more technical language, Steven Fresmire states:

Environmental thinkers recognize that ecological thinking has a vital role to play in many wise choices and policies, yet little theoretical attention has been given to developing an adequate philosophical psychology of the imaginative nature of thinking. Ecological imagination is an outgrowth of our more general deliberative capacity to perceive, in light of possibilities for thinking and acting, the relationships that constitute any object. Such imagination is of a specifically ecological sort when key metaphors, images, symbols, and the like are used in the ecologies that shape the mental simulations we use to deliberate—i.e., when these interpretive structures shape what John Dewey calls our “dramatic rehearsals.” There is an urgent practical need to cultivate ecological imagination, and an equally practical need to make theoretical sense of the imaginative dimension of ecological reflections. (2010, 183)
On Thursday mornings during the spring semester of 2010 at CTU, I taught a seminar on “Catholic Environmental Ethics: Sources, Norms, and Issues.” The first Thursday morning after April 20 when I walked into my classroom, there was a palpable sense of sadness and loss in the air. Here were six of the Church’s brightest and best master’s level theological ethics students—one from Kenya, one from Nigeria, one from California, and three from Chicago—in soft voices colored with disbelief, discussing what they perceived to be an overwhelming disaster! It was like being at a wake! Contrary to what they were hearing from their peers and the media and to what remains the “common sense” concerning the natural environment, these students each had sufficient scientific understanding, as well as the moral and ecological imagination, to grasp the serious evil this event represented. They empathized with the eleven families who lost a loved one; they understood the fragility of the marine life cycles; they appreciated the complexity of the ocean currents that originated in the Gulf; they knew the value of the marshes and wetlands; they had a sense of the permanent damage toxic dispersants could do; and they knew the same people who suffered loss of their daily living just five years ago at the hands of Hurricane Katrina would now likely be unable to sustain themselves from the waters of the Gulf.

Now, through the human force of unprecedented technological arrogance, ignoring of environmental regulations and the enforcement of existing regulations, and unquenched demands for cheap gasoline to power more cars per capita than in any other country in the world, catastrophe and folly had wed. One particularly sobering comment came from the Nigerian student, “While I grieve this horrible event, we in the Niger Delta have been suffering events like this with impunity for nearly fifty years!”

Yes, these students connected the dots and they “got it.” As Aldo Leopold put it, “We can only grieve for what we know” (Fremire 2010, 52). But then, if we do not grieve, what else will motivate us to change?

What strikes me as morally significant about this event is that through this horrific Gulf catastrophe, we have been given an opportunity to reconnect with a profound kind of knowing that only comes when empirical knowledge, technology, economics, politics, and militarism, as well as our own logic, fail us and we are cut loose from the moorings of all that succors us. Then our only option is to search through the uncertainties for something that “fits” in terms of the magnitude and depth of the loss. But the bigger question is, do we even know how to open ourselves to such vulnerability?

What were my students able to do that brought about their profound sadness and that allowed them to look deeper, beyond the present false consciousness of the wider society?

**Staying in Touch**

We cannot love someone or something we do not know. This wisdom is put into practice by the Kogi people from the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta on the Caribbean coast of Colombia. This pre-Colombian civilization has survived the conditions of the conquest and all of the temptations to adopt environmentally destructive practices, because they have literally stayed in touch with the earth. Though they live high in the (often snow-covered) mountains, they walk wherever they go in bare feet! Over time, their feet become dry and leather-like, impervious to the “dirty” conditions of daily travel. Similar to the Kogi, my students had the experience of “dirty feet.” In their lives they had learned to stay in touch with the earth and to love it; to value the goodness of creation and appreciate its beauty; to see the sacramental character of creation; to perceive creation’s own ways of praising
God; to acknowledge the kinship and companionship of all creatures; and to know the wisdom of using creation with gratitude and restraint.

We in the church are very good at celebrating the sacraments, bringing fire, water, bread, wine and oil—elements of the earth—to the “dramatic rehearsals” that grab hold of our imagination, helping us understand the love of God by connecting divine characteristics with signs and symbols. Can we not also connect the healing balm with ecology, poverty, and dirty feet—and then change the way we think?

References


