ECOLOGY & JUSTICE SERIES

THE HEART AT THE HEART OF THE WORLD

Re-visioning the Sacred Heart for the Ecozoic Era

Mary Frohlich

Maryknoll, New York 10545

INTRODUCTION

The Breakdown That Is Breaking Our Hearts

I grew up in South Dakota in the 1950s, in a family that was not religious or even "spiritual." We almost never attended church, and talk about God or any other religious theme was extremely rare. One day when I was about eight years old, we went for a family picnic at a small lake in the Black Hills. It was a pristine spot that few people knew about, but my father knew the way because he had grown up not far from there. The whole family went swimming in the lake. I paddled out about fifty feet, delighting in the cold water and the warm sunshine. Then something amazing happened. Even today I am almost tongue-tied in trying to say what it was. Since then I have had a long career as a theologian, a teacher of spirituality, and a nun, so I surely have many words that I can say. But if I am honest, I have to acknowledge that the original experience exceeded them all. The "heavens opened," so to speak, and the love at the heart of the world was revealed. I could not say any of that at the time. I only knew that the world—the actual, physical world, or "nature" as we call it—sparkled in its depths with a profundity and joy and mystery that I had never known anything about before.

So that is my first "heart story"—a personal story of being brought to the heart of things, without knowing where that

was, what it meant, or where it would take me. Stories are the most basic way in which humans share meaning with one another. Orators and teachers know that the best way to get people's attention is to tell a story. Stories are key in every human being's urgent search to find a place of belonging in both fruitful social relationships and a sense of inner coherence. The more deeply we search, the more we find at the heart of our existence a mystery that can never be fully articulated—a timeless dwelling in God that is our source and our fathomless ground. Because we are creatures who live in time, however, we have a practical need for guiding models of how to navigate through the many challenges of life. It is in stories that we find—and generate—these models.

It is of the nature of stories, however, that they do not stand alone. No one has just one story. We always have many, because life's relationships and dramas are ineradicably multiple and complex. It is when we get stuck in the erroneous notion that there is just one story of "who I am" or "who we are" that we wreak the most misery upon ourselves and others. The story I told at the beginning of this Introduction is only one episode in "the story of my life." The epiphany at the lake was the beginning of a lifelong spiritual pilgrimage that has, to say the least, taken many twists and turns. I was sixty-two years old by the time I made final vows as a nun with the Society of the Sacred Heart. The pilgrimage continues, and this book is part of it. I want to put words not only on my experience but on what it revealed: that an infinite depth of love and life permeates all creation.

My personal pilgrimage has led me to articulate this in Christian terms, as the story of a living Heart at the very heart of the universe. I can never forget, however, that the essence of this story was shown to me long before I was baptized or had any religious language at all to name it. This truth is so far be-

yond language that it will inevitably generate many and diverse names—and stories. Or, to put it in the terms of my own tradition: Christ is not insulted by being given many names, or even no name at all, as long as we genuinely receive and live in the love of the Heart inscribed at the heart of creation.

Counterevidence: A heartless world?

It is not hard to find counterevidence for the claim that love is at the heart of creation. The world often seems like a truly heartless place. Going for a picnic and a swim in a mildly wild location may be fun for well-fed denizens of advanced technological societies, but those who have to make a living from the natural world know that it is often a hard, dangerous, fickle place for human beings. For the billions of poor all around the globe who depend on the rhythms of land, sky, and sea for survival, the combination of rampant resource over-exploitation plus climate change is increasingly making life almost impossibly difficult. Yet any effort on their part to migrate to wealthier areas of the world is met heartlessly with rejection or with consignment to camps where conditions often approximate torture.

In the modern technologized world, heartlessness often appears in the form of the unrelenting grind of impersonal structures or, even worse, the intrusion of senseless violence. An epidemic of loneliness, isolation, distrust, and anxiety is raging through contemporary societies. The causes are surely complex, but one significant contributing element is that a literal form of heartlessness is still enshrined in predominant modern intellectual traditions. Since the so-called European Enlightenment of the seventeenth century, we in the West have been taught that the physical world is basically nothing more than an inert resource to be exploited relentlessly for human

benefit. Even living beings other than humans—and, too often, human beings other than white Europeans and Americans—have been similarly characterized. This modern dualism perniciously separates us from vital, sustaining connection with the Earth and its ecosystemic web of living creatures.

Influenced by this context, Christian theology and spirituality in the modern era (i.e., the seventeenth to early twentieth centuries) incorporated a similar mentality. Humans were regarded as the only creatures with "souls" and thus the only ones eligible for salvation. Our life on Earth is only a preparation or backdrop to our true destiny in heaven, which is "elsewhere." The main obstacle to arrival in heaven is the horror of sin, which primarily offends God, although it also has irreparably shredded the fabric of human relationships. Even though there is usually lip service to the biblical tradition that God originally created the world to be "good," this does little to counteract the sense that Earth itself is, indeed, a heartless place.

Yet persistent human traditions see things otherwise. Across numerous cultures and religions, many have proclaimed that, despite whatever cruel circumstances we may encounter, the core of creation is actually permeated by tenderness, compassion, and mutuality. To express this, the metaphor of the "heart" appears over and over again in spiritual traditions. The Mayan people of Mesoamerica, for example, always begin their invocations, "Oh great Heart of the Universe!" In her book *Heart*, Gail Godwin chronicles stories of the heart among the Sumerians, Egyptians, Hebrews, Hindus, Buddhists, Chinese, Japanese, and Greeks.[1] The present

1. Gail Godwin, *Heart: A Personal Journey through Its Myths and Meanings* (London: Bloomsbury, 2004), 22–79.

book focuses primarily on heart traditions within Christianity. Its thesis is that our Christian heart traditions can be a powerful resource for regenerating the vital flow of life within the web of human and more-than-human life on Earth.

An explanatory note on the expression "more-than-human" is in order here, since some readers may not be familiar with this phrase. In the literature on the ecological crisis and on the need for humans to reconnect with our Earth roots, this has become the standard term for referring to the complex ecological web of life, land, air, and water within which human life emerges and is sustained. It can also be used on a more localized scale for any part of this web with which someone is in relationship; for example, one might say: "The indigenous hunter had exquisite sensitivity to the sounds of the more-than-human world around him." Sarah Elton provides a more technical definition: "More-than-human refers to contexts in which multiple species and processes come together to produce a result."[2]

The first time I heard the term, I reacted against it because I thought it sounded almost like a deification of the natural world. I have learned, however, that this term was chosen in preference to "other-than-human" because the latter sets humans apart from the rest of the world and makes us the defining element. More-than-human does not define a hierarchy, but rather puts us in our place as completely interdependent with a far larger matrix of beings and elements. It tells the truth of our radical vulnerability in relation to the Earth and its processes.

---

2. Sarah Elton, "More-than-Human," in *Showing Theory to Know Theory: Understanding Social Science Concepts through Illustrative Vignettes*, ed. Patricia Ballamingie and David Szanto, vol. 1 (Ottawa, ON: Showing Theory Press, 2022), https://ecampusontario.pressbooks.pub/showingtheory/chapter/more-than-human/.

If the ancient heart traditions are to serve the vital needs of the twenty-first century, they will need to be substantially reworked. That will be the project of the remaining chapters of the book. Before we can begin again, however, we must first acknowledge how deeply our hearts are broken by our disconnection from the deep rhythms of life.

The breakdown that is breaking our hearts

In our time, the entire global community of life is collectively undergoing a traumatizing calamity. The unfolding ecological catastrophe that is manifested in—among other things—the ever-intensifying heat waves, fires, floods, and hurricanes of climate change; the daily news of the extinction of more species; the plastic and chemical pollution that extends both to the deepest oceans and to the blood of newborns; and the literal bulldozing of ecosystem after ecosystem, is far more than just one more difficult period in human history. Andy Fisher, who has developed an ecopsychology of widening our social fields until we are able to live the fullness of our ecological and cosmic kinship, calls the ecological crisis "both a spiritual crisis and a pathological disturbance in this largest of social fields."[3] It is so drastic that it could, in fact, be the end of human history.

Geologists say that the Cenozoic era, which lasted for 66 million years and saw the proliferation of life on Earth into 8.7 million species of plants and animals, as well as up to one trillion species of microorganisms, is coming to an end. Geological eras are divided into periods and epochs, and the final epoch of the Cenozoic is called the Holocene. Lasting 11,650

3. Andy Fisher, *Radical Ecopsychology: Psychology in the Service of Life*, 2nd ed, SUNY Series in Radical Social and Political Theory (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2013), 126.

years, this has been a time of mild climate that provided ideal conditions for humanity's flourishing. As it crashes to a close, what comes next is up for debate. Thomas Berry (1914–2009), a Passionist priest who clearly foresaw the ecological and spiritual implications of humanity's disconnection from the Earth, proposed that if humanity is to survive, the coming era must be the Ecozoic. By this he meant a time when human beings relearn how to live sustainably within the reality of our physical and spiritual interdependence with the Earth.[4]

Meanwhile, many in the scientific and philosophical communities have named the emerging geological epoch the Anthropocene, as a stark indication that every aspect of Earth's functioning—from air flow and ocean currents, to the chemical composition of soil and water, to which species survive and which die out—is now being shaped by human activity. Some of them regard that scenario positively, as if human technology were on the verge of truly mastering the Earth and making a better life for the human species. A more likely possibility, however, is that the changes humans have introduced will so radically undo the ecological balances upon which human life depends that the result will be the downfall of the human species. Even if total extinction is not the end result, the probability is high that in the not-very-distant future, all human societies will undergo extreme levels of chaos, violence, and death due to the effects of the deteriorating global ecosystem.

Even if we try to regard such a catastrophe as an event external to us, like, say, a tornado that devastates a nearby town where we have frequently walked and enjoyed life with our friends, such a scenario evokes a shiver in our hearts. The

4. Thomas Berry, *Thomas Berry: Selected Writings on the Earth Community*, ed. Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim, Modern Spiritual Masters (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2014), 134–44.

problem with the attempt to ignore it is that this already-in-motion catastrophe is not external to us. We are the Earth. Even when we are not fully cognizant of it, the Earth means everything to us. At a primal level, the Earth is the motherly body within which our bodies take shape, and all the other Earth creatures are not only our companions but a support system without which we cannot survive. Experiencing the deterioration of the Earth is like living through the descent of a once-functioning family into toxicity, addictions, violence, and disease. Yet it is even more than that. Perhaps the most apt analogy is the experience of the people of Paradise, California, who in 2018 watched their beloved town and surrounding forests go up in flames. While many of us have not yet seen the flames of Earth's demise, we live in the dread of knowing they are just over the hill and headed this way.

The breakdown of the Earth is breaking our hearts. I will tell a small story of my own about this. When I lived in Chicago, I devoted many hours of labor to our backyard garden, to try to make it as friendly as possible to native wildlife. Sometimes I would sit in the far back section of the garden, just watching to see who or what would appear. One day I saw, for the first time in my life, a hummingbird moth. This is a moth that is as large as a small hummingbird and hovers in a similar manner. Although the books say they are not terribly rare, they are not often seen. My heart was moved with tender delight in the intricate beauty of the creature, and with joy that my efforts had made it possible for such a wondrous being to thrive in that place. Yet in the same movement of the heart, I also felt poignant sorrow. Although my labors had given this creature a livable niche for the time being, I felt the inevitability of its destruction already bearing down upon it. Even as I loved and delighted in the moth, my heart was broken by awareness of the looming threat to its entire web of life connections.

This was, obviously, not a response on a rational level. I did not actually know at that time whether hummingbird moths, specifically, are imminently in danger of extinction. Perhaps they will be able to survive, even if humans and many other species do go extinct. My response was a response of a heart that knows these are death-dealing times for all my kin, human and more-than-human. In these times, to open one's heart to the Earth community from which we come, or to any of its members, is to open oneself to a sorrow unto death.

Chaos, restitution, or quest?

The heart breaks when something or someone in whom one has deeply invested betrays, or is betrayed, in a profoundly disturbing manner. The energizing narrative moving toward an envisioned bright future that one was happily spinning is shattered, leaving one in agonizing confusion and chaos. The classic example is the romantic breakup: a person falls in love, invests many hopes and dreams in the relationship, and then is shockingly abandoned. But there are many other ways for the heart to break. In his book *The Wounded Storyteller,* Arthur Frank writes of how life-threatening illness affects the stories people tell about their lives.[5] The story-map that the ill person had been following with much vibrant energy suddenly seems to have landed on the trash heap, stinking and disintegrating before their very eyes. Much that Frank says about the impact of illness is relevant to other kinds of heartbreak as well, including our heartbreak over the fate of the Earth and its creatures.

Frank says that when faced with the shattering impact of a serious illness, the story-making imagination goes into overdrive

5. Arthur W. Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness, and Ethics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

to try to rebuild a viable story for oneself and one's witnesses. An early manifestation of this is what he calls the "naming story." The person feels an urgent need to find a name—in the case of illness, a diagnosis—for what has gone wrong. Under the circumstances of modern medicine, the naming story is often quickly followed by the "restitution narrative." This is a story about how life will soon return to normal, exactly the same as before. The hero of the restitution narrative is typically the doctor, the medical institution, or the healing regime that can restore one to health. If the cure is successful, such a person may resume their former self-story, without feeling much need for significant change. As we collectively face the current ecological crisis, we hear many restitution narratives about how technology will soon save us from any need to change our lifestyle.

Despite these efforts, many seriously ill people find themselves instead overcome by what Frank calls the "chaos narrative." A fully chaotic narrative has no plot; awful things just happen, one after another, and nothing comes of it. There is no sense of purpose, direction, or hope. Such a story is deeply anxiety-producing for listeners, who often try to steer the speaker towards a different story—whether it be the restitution narrative, or the silver lining ("there's always some good that comes out of bad things"), or the "count your blessings" story. The person who is truly experiencing chaos, however, will have none of it.

Not long ago a story appeared in the *Boston Globe* and other news outlets about William Good, a thirty-one-year-old man who became a paraplegic when his head hit the headrest during the crash of an Uber vehicle in which he was a passenger.[6] The story was mainly about Good's lawsuit against Uber

6. Tonya Alanez, "Uber Passenger Paralyzed in Crash Sues Company

for hiring the driver, who had other crashes on his record. As I read through the story, I began to feel uneasy. I realized at that point that I had an unconscious expectation that, as in so many news stories about tragic events, the focus would eventually arrive at how the victim was heroically overcoming his difficulties and making a new life despite his limitations. That type of news story sometimes even includes a line about how the victim realizes that they are actually a better person now because of all they suffered and overcame. All of us love such feel-good stories. It is as if we say to ourselves, "Yes, this is how I would respond if something terrible happened to me!"

Storytellers, including news outlets, typically prefer to tell the kind of stories that people enjoy hearing. They will often base a story on the smallest glimmer of hope or heroism, rather than tell an outright chaos narrative. In the case of William Good, they focused their story around the lawsuit in which he seeks financial compensation for his injuries. Perhaps one can interpret this as a kind of heroic resistance to his circumstances. Between the lines, however, it is easy to see that William Good is not telling any kind of feel-good or heroic story. His story is about how, in a single totally unexpected moment, he forever lost all possibility of access to everything he had loved and taken for granted—his bodily independence, his favorite pursuits, and his hoped-for future endeavors. The mood of his testimony was of heartbreak, depression, and anger, without any hint of a happy ending or a silver lining. Good's story is a chaos narrative. It made me uneasy because, on the level of story, it is one I instinctively resist having become my own.

---

for $63 Million," *Boston Globe*, January 25, 2022, https://www.bostonglobe.com/2022/01/25/metro/uber-passenger-paralyzed-crash-sues-company-63-million/.

The whole planet now seems to be living in the midst of the ultimate chaos narrative: one horrifyingly destructive event after another, going nowhere except over the precipice of the end of the world. It is not surprising that many close themselves off from this sorrow, since living in narrative chaos is the worst of all possible fates for a human being. A person can bear remarkably heavy loads of pain and loss if they can place their agony within a story of meaning. Viktor Frankl famously wrote about how people were able to survive the monstrous conditions of the German concentration camps if they could cling to a story of purpose or of love.[7] Those who had no such story, or who discovered that their version could not bear the strain of prolonged and dehumanizing suffering, usually fell into madness, deathly depression, or self-centered violence. Most of these did not live long.

Some try to sweeten the ecological chaos narrative by attributing it to God, who (it is said) will use the occasion to lift the elect above it into a different place called heaven. Another large cohort of human beings simply live in denial that any of this is happening. This is partly because they are busy and distracted by more immediate concerns, but it is also because it is too painful and frightening even to allow thoughts of such chaos and death into a corner of consciousness. Even more common is a version of Frank's "restitution narrative."[8] This is the optimistic assumption that, although we do indeed have a problem on our hands, it won't be long before humans find the way to fix the global ecosystem so we can all go back to happily enjoying our high-consumption lifestyles as usual. Finally, there are an increasing number who, like those whom Viktor

7. Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006).

8. Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller.*

Frankl described as having lost all hope of finding meaning in their ordeal, fall into self-centered cynicism as a way of life.

Perhaps we cannot avoid a certain degree of grasping for some version of the ecological restitution narrative, for otherwise it is difficult to maintain our sanity. Frank proposes, however, another option: the "quest narrative." For people enduring severe illness, this is a story about the illness as a "hero's journey" in which the suffering and multiple unpredictable crises of illness are an initiation into wisdom, which can then be offered to others who are just setting out on their own quests. Such a story is not necessarily about being cured or recovering from the illness; it is about living fully and generatively through the process, even if the physical end point is disability or death. Applying this to the case of our planetary calamity, we look for stories that assist us in growing into people of wisdom even as we live in the midst of wounded ecosystems and care for dying species. An example of this approach is Meg Wheatley's training program for "Warriors for the Human Spirit," which seeks to prepare leaders who guide with generosity, insight, and compassion even under the current conditions of breakdown.[9]

Toward a new story

Frank observes that one of the characteristics of story-making is that it is an inherently relational activity. Even when I am only telling my story interiorly, it is an attempt to find the sense and direction of my life in terms that are both truthful to myself and meaningful to those with whom my life is intertwined.

---

9. Margaret J. Wheatley, "Warriors for the Human Spirit: Training To Be the Presence of Insight and Compassion," https://margaretwheatley.com/2020-europe-warriors-for-the-human-spirit-training/#top.

Every self-story is a testimony, a witness to the creative act of articulating the meaningfulness of a life. We incorporate and model ourselves on the stories we hear from those with whom we share life. When we can identify with the stories those around us tell, we feel a sense of community with them.

When we find no resonance with the stories that are affirmed in a community or institution, however, the vitality goes out of our participation and it is likely that we will soon drift away. This is one significant element of the accelerating drift away from churches and from participation in institutionalized religion. Living in a profoundly different world, people have great difficulty identifying with many of the "old" religious stories. Especially as this generation and the coming ones face the chaos inherent in ecological crisis, we have a profound need for a renovation—or, as I like to call it, a "re-visioning"— of our religious stories. We need stories that can help us to become people of wisdom who are not only able to navigate in such turbulent times, but can also build supportive, healthy communities inclusive of the human and more-than-human worlds.

William Thompson-Uberuaga has written that the best Christology (the theology explaining the identity and role of Jesus Christ) is done in stories generated by personal experience of participating in Christ's life.[10] Based in my own experience as well as that of a burgeoning number of others who offer similar testimony, this book offers a story of the Heart of God as literally the heart of all creation. The cosmic Heart dwells in every created being—including those that are regarded as inanimate in the modern mentality. Our spirituality and theology will be transformed by embracing the "new animism" that regards every being (including humans) as a node in webs of living relationality, rather than as lonely, heartless, and hierar-

10. William Thompson-Uberuaga, *Christology and Spirituality* (New York: Crossroad, 1991).

chically arranged individuals. While this book is by no means a systematic Christology, one of its goals is to refresh and update our participative understanding of what it means to discover the Heart at the heart of the world.

A friend who read my book proposal commented that this is not a completely new story, since similar stories can be found in some ancient Christian traditions—not to mention among indigenous peoples and in various other religions and cultures. The truth is that all our stories come to birth in a process something like that of a jazz musician, who riffs on old tunes while reaching creatively for new ones. No one creates a story *ex nihilo* (from nothing); we always have old stories (sometimes several of them) playing in the back of our heads as we reach to tell a new story that will be fresh and compelling for our hearers. The reader will no doubt hear the melodies of many old stories playing in the background of this new story.

Not all who awaken to this Heart will join our Christian churches, nor will they necessarily use the kind of Christian theological language that I am using here. Many who do not call themselves Christians may be more attuned to the call of the incarnate God than are many baptized, churchgoing Christians. Living heartfully in everyday life, humbly risking goodness, actively respecting every living creature and ecosystem, going all in to assist movements for peace, justice, and the integrity of creation—this is what it means to live in tune with the Heart at the heart of the world.

Overview of the book

After this Introduction, the book is organized in three parts. Part One, "Heart Devotion," includes a chapter exploring the meaning of heart and heartfulness, and a second chapter providing a brief historical survey of Christian devotion to the Heart of Jesus. Part Two, "In the Heart of the World," offers

the main development of the theme. Three chapters explore the implications of Christian animism, a Heart-focused evolutionary Christology, and the wildness and queerness of God's kindom. Three more chapters delve into how Christ may "person" in any part of creation, wisdom as participation in the depths of created being, and the Eucharist as interspecies gift economy. Finally, Part Three summarizes a "re-visioning" of the Sacred Heart in terms of the accompaniment of the Pierced Heart. The final chapter develops the idea of "reparation in the key of accompaniment."

Concluding comments

During more than thirty-five years of being a student and then a professor in higher education, I got used to writing for academics. That kind of writing has to be very precise and heavy with footnotes. This book is different. It still has some footnotes—I can't help it after all these years, and besides that, I hope someone may actually want to follow up on some of the ideas presented here! My goal in this book, however, is to write an evocative and inspiring text for a wide range of readers. In dealing with theological issues and with biblical texts, I have given myself the freedom to reflect creatively rather than to develop each insight in the thorough, nuanced manner of a scholarly essay.

I love scholarship with all its plodding detail and carefully worked out thought processes, and I am far from being ready to renounce that work completely. At this stage in my life and in the life of planet Earth, however, I find that communicating a vision that could possibly make a difference feels more urgent than taking the years (or decades) it would require to work it all out with full scholarly precision. In tune with this book's themes, I have written from my heart. It would be a

bonus if some of the book's readers went on to explore these issues themselves, perhaps eventually writing something far better on these themes than what I have been able to produce.

One other prefatory comment may be in order, in view of current sensitivities in regard to cultural appropriation. At various times in this book, I refer to indigenous peoples and indigenous ways of thinking. In some cases I quote indigenous writers, while in other places my comments are more general. I myself am not indigenous, nor do I have a personal relationship with any specific indigenous community. I am not under the illusion that white "settlers" such as myself have the ability or the right to claim indigenous culture for ourselves. Nor do I believe that anyone, settler or indigenous, will be able to go back to the way life was in earlier times; we all have to go forward together with what is given to us now. As we do that, I believe that we who are not indigenous can and must learn as much as we can from those who have centuries of experience in living more wisely on the land than our own people have.

In his book *Think Indigenous,* Lakota teacher Doug Good Feather makes a similar point as he writes: "There's a fine line between the appreciation of a culture and the appropriation of a culture."[11] He defines appropriation as claiming the language, symbols, rituals, and so on of an indigenous culture as one's own, which is a form of stealing. Appreciating the culture, on the other hand, can include recognizing and amplifying the wisdom of that culture's spiritual teachings as a positive and needed force in our world today. I hope I have respectfully stayed on the correct side of this fine line that Good Feather and others have drawn.

---

11. Doug Good Feather, *Think Indigenous: Native American Spirituality for a Modern World* (Carlsbad, CA: Hay House, 2021), 6.