

Thomas Berry Manchester

'The Miracle of Being'

A Reflection for World Environment Day

5th June 2024

by Kelvin Ravenscroft



A mosaic by the artist Joanna Kessel
working with the Active Therapy Team
celebrating the opening of Withington Community Hospital,
Manchester, England
By HRH The Princess Royal
9th September 2005

5th June 2024 is World Environment Day which is an initiative of the United Nations Environment Programme. The theme for this year is 'Generation Restoration' which aims to raise awareness of desertification, land restoration, and drought resilience and the practical steps which can be taken to address positively and creatively these significant and challenging issues. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is to host the World Environment Day celebrations.

World Environment Day is celebrated internationally with a range of events and activities taking place to both raise awareness of the ecological challenges and opportunities which are facing the Earth and how these can be a catalyst for transformative action.

I note that one of the events taking place in England is to be a screening of the documentary film 'Trees are the Key', produced by the World Forest Organisation and directed by Tim Short which explores approaches to mitigating climate change and alleviating hunger and poverty in Africa. The film can be viewed here:



'Trees are the Key' powerfully and cogently illustrates the work being undertaken by the United Kingdom based environmental and educational charity Word Forest to support the creative and innovative tree planting communities in Kenya.

As time passes, I am increasingly of the view that art has the capacity to illustrate and illuminate profound existential and ecological perspectives and insights. In her mosaic presented at the beginning of this Thomas Berry Manchester reflection, the artist Joanna Kessel presents an image of a tree which is in the shape of a leaf. The tree incorporates eleven different leaves, each one being a different shape and colour. It can be suggested that Joanna's mosaic illustrates the glorious diversity of tree and plant life, and its variety of shapes and colours, evokes a sense of the vibrant richness of the Earth of which trees and plants are integral to the wellbeing of its diverse ecologies.

Joanna's tree suggests harmony and balance in its symmetrical layout in which the trunk of the tree has five

leaves on each side which are brought together in the one leaf at the apex of the tree. Her artwork, therefore, I feel brings to mind a sense of different trees and plants being interrelated and interconnected; there is, in effect, a unity in diversity.

This sense of harmony, balance and unity is also complemented by the inclusion in the mosaic of two birds, each one being located at either side of the base of the tree. The birds are looking outwards and upwards, and one can imagine them as singing joyfully, celebrating their place in the tree's generous, gracious, and life-giving ecosystem. In effect, therefore, Joanna's mosaic can be regarded as affirming what Fritjof Capra has termed the 'Web of Life'. In his book of this name, Capra has suggested that there is an emerging new paradigm which "... may be called a holistic worldview, seeing the world as an integrated whole rather than a dissociated collection of parts. It may also be called an ecological view, if the term "ecological" is used in a much broader and deeper sense than usual. Deep ecological awareness recognizes the fundamental interdependence of all phenomena and the fact that, as individuals and societies, we are all embedded in (and ultimately dependent on) the cyclical processes of nature."

As we approach World Environment Day, we may wish to consider, and reflect upon, the multiplicity of ways in which, individually and collectively, "we are all embedded in (and ultimately dependent on) the cyclical processes of nature." Where are the places and spaces, the cycles of life, the processes of nature, in which we are rooted? Are these flourishing and life enhancing or are they damaged, in decline, and enervating?

Our responses to such questions may be providing pointers, suggesting positive ways forward, in which we can actively immerse ourselves in initiating creative and dynamic projects and activities which facilitate the harmony and balance at the very heart of the Earth's natural systems.

In my experience as an educator, children and adults have often asked me the important question 'How do we change the world?' to which my response has consistently been 'Begin where you are'. We can make a difference in our local environs, our villages, towns, and cities, in our community centres and civic groups, in our places of work and worship, and in our schools, colleges and universities. Change can begin in our local contexts where we can collaboratively engage in the task of healing the Earth one small step at a time. If our local environments and their diverse ecologies are transformed so that they can blossom and flourish, we are changing the world. As EF Schumacher said, 'Small is Beautiful'. Each one of us can begin small, taking realistic, tangible, and achievable steps towards a sustainable future which is deeply informed and inspired by the great mysteries which are at the heart of existence.

Indeed, the very foundation of our diverse ways of seeing and being in the world can be regarded as being that of recognising, affirming, celebrating, and being inspired by the very fact that each of us has come into the world (an existence which is not, ultimately, of our making) and for a limited time, we have this precious gift of life. Perhaps all ecological thought and action has to be deeply rooted in the recognition of the Miracle of Being, a recognition which I regard as being at the heart of Joanna Kessel's evocative mosaic and in the restorative work expressed in the film 'Trees are the Key'.

