Collective Evolution in the Face of Climate Crisis

Keith Runyan

FROM THE EMERGENT PATTERNS of a monarch butterfly’s wing to the fractal branchings of a mycelial web, we find ourselves, as 21st-century Friends awash in a fundamentally beautiful world, unveiled. We find ourselves not in the universe, but of it, in a state of interbeing. Every day we uncover even more of the secrets of our lover, Gaia. Yet with each passing minute our species gets closer to the edge of a growing ecological collapse of our own making. A crisis of which we might not be spared.

Quakerism was founded on the vision of bringing Light into the world during a time of extreme instability, famine, strife, and war. George Fox saw a millenarian future, a coming end-of-days, in which all those who listened would bear the light of Christ into the world and bring the Kingdom of Heaven here to Earth.

Today, in another time of crisis, Fox’s words still resonate. The message of collective evolution in the face of our civilization’s crisis is more relevant than ever. This time, however, it is not only a prophetic vision, but a way in which our species might face these coming storms. Just as in any spiritual transformation, we see humanity’s journey forward as a course from breakdown to breakthrough. In reflecting on Friends’ tradition and practice on Unity, there is a simple truth: the only path forward is together.

The climate crisis is upon us. Just this year, we held our African brothers and sisters in the light as thousands passed from this world beneath the raging winds of Cyclones Idai and Belna. We watched the bright lights of species unknown to us leave our world as fire lit the canopy of the Amazon and the Australian bush. We’ve witnessed the droughts in Chile, Central America, and East Africa destabilize the lives of the most vulnerable amongst us. We held our loved ones as fires raged through Paradise, Ventura, and Santa Rosa in California.

Many among us seek to change our lives and live our truth: to plant more trees, to restore our lands, to transform our societies, and reduce our impacts here on our Earth. And we’ve witnessed the youngest among us take a stand for the future of Life through creative organizing and action. One by one, our hearts spark others. One by one, we shift the world.

As we sink into our work as instruments of the divine we find our hearts unshackled towards a love of all beings. Self-consciousness falls aside to an everyday consciousness of collective will and action. Moving between us and through us, we sense a calling from which we can’t turn away, one that stewards the transformation and regeneration of Earth. In listening, we sense that this path of personal and collective transformation is not only our solemn obedience and duty, but also, our highest aspiration.

The Anthropocene calls to all peoples in such diversity as is endemic to our species. To Quakers, we sense that this calling is to reawaken the message of Fox within ourselves, a Gathered Meeting caught alight upon the Earth. We take this leap not as a fleeting hope but as the deepest resolve, a faith on fire, the work we can’t not do.

Keith is a naturalist, Quaker activist, and host of the podcast "A Future on Waxen Wings".
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