



## Spiritual Reflections

### When All Creation Speaks

By Catherine Smith

*The loss of a language—in some sense—represents the loss of a way of thinking, perceiving and being in the world as a human.*

—Listening to Indigenous Voices, Session 4

Honouring the truth of this reference to the loss of Indigenous languages prompts the consideration of a language endangered as a result of certain strands of Christian teaching. This language gives shape to the I and thou of our relationship, our distinctness and our kinship.

Embedded in the Hebrew Scriptures are the wise and delightful voices of other-than-human creation, speaking a language resonant with God.

Ask the animals, and they will *teach* you; the birds  
of the air, and they will *tell* you;  
Ask the plants of the earth and they will *teach* you;  
and the fish of the sea will *declare* to you.

Who among all these does not know  
That the hand of the Lord has done this?  
In the living Presence is the life of every living  
thing  
And the breath of every human being.

—Job 12:7-10, NRSV (italics mine)

And,

The universe in eloquence proclaims your beauty,  
God.  
The starry vault of sky each night reveals the  
artistry of your hands.  
Each day in time passes on its knowledge to the  
next,  
night speaks to night across the ages.  
All this without a language that we speak or know;  
Without a need for words,  
It's all been said.

But its voice and tones are everywhere  
Spreading out in waves across all space and time.

—Psalm 19:1-4 (Baumann, 2000)

Have we ceased to listen to this shining, cloud-filled language, spoken at a level beyond codified patterns, beyond cognition?

In the gospels, Jesus directs his listeners to consider the lilies, (Mt. 6:28-29; Lk. 12:27). Their being articulates the knowledge of living without thought for anything beyond the essence of their being.

They have much to tell us about our distraction. We are not told to be like lilies, but to reflect on them as teachers, learning, from them, to become more deeply ourselves. It is from that depth of ourselves we live in respectful relationship with all.

Trickling through the Bible, the speech of nature runs, expressing knowledge of the Living Presence in reverence, humility, joy, and playfulness. Mountains and hills break into song and trees clap their hands (Is. 55:13), bursting forth with the life of God. We are encouraged to listen and to participate. Too often we have resisted.

Mystics such as Hildegard of Bingen have continued to call us to the vitality of the language of trees, grasses, and clouds: "The Word is living, being, spirit, all verdant greening, all creativity. This Word manifests itself in every creature."

Despite the clear voices of the Christian nature mystics and the Celtic tradition, a dominant Christian strand has fostered an insidious mistrust and degradation of the sensual life of creation. The self-elevation of humankind to a place where it no longer embraced or allowed the embrace of all the created world came to dominate other voices. The surge into the industrial and technological realms and the modern notions of constant progress as a virtue all contributed to a deafness to or more profoundly, a silencing of, the wisdom of the song of hills and the teaching of plants.

# Languages of the Land



This has been at the cost of abundant life for all of us, hills and humans. It has also set the feet of humankind on what may be the path of human extinction.

While much focus is necessarily on the latter, there are pre-extinction losses inherent in our silencing of, or deafness to, non-human language. As the opening quotation reminds us, the loss of a language is a shrinkage of our being, a tearing away of something vital. When we lose our ability to hear the language of all creation, we lose a part of ourselves.

Deafened to its anguished cries, we are more comfortably able to pillage and commodify. Insensible to, or fearful of, its knowledge, we do violence to ourselves.

We lose the part of our life that disposes itself to a receptive and reciprocal posture and surely that receptive posture is constitutional of those made alive by Grace. "Ask the birds of the air and they will tell you." "Consider the lilies."

Anishinaabe writer John Borrows asks us, "How can we learn from the grass?" As a Christian contemplative, I must not forget that question. How necessary to relearn what has been there all along, the playfulness of mountains, the trees' applause for life itself. How essential in itself but also as a counter to our driven life, so driven that even our rest has become goal-oriented. We too often rest only so that we can be more productive.

Perhaps, in listening to the Indigenous voices reminding us that the land itself speaks, that other-than-human beings are our teachers, we can rediscover the language of other creatures within the Christian tradition and reawaken to its ecological teachings.

Surely, we need to learn the wisdom of hills that skip if we are to shed the over-identification of goodness with progress or product.

Surely, we need to be in conversation with flowers that briefly speak their beauty in order to dilute our captivity to self-importance.

Surely, the Earth may instruct us in humility and the birds in graced freedom. May it be so.

*Catherine is a writer, liturgist, and grandmother, who, following ordination in the United Church of Canada, encourages the spiritual deepening of individuals and congregations, particularly in rural areas. She lives in Sackville, NB.*

## Questions for Reflection

1. What struck you most?
2. What other examples can you think of in the Christian scriptures or tradition that remind us of the voices of the land and of other creatures? What can we learn from these?
3. What parallels do you see between these traditions and the teachings of Indigenous Peoples from Turtle Island?
4. Share a quote or insight that sticks with you.

## References

Baumann, Lynn C. (2000). *Ancient songs sung anew: The psalms as poetry*. Telephone, TX, Praxis, 44.