

**National Justice and Peace Network Conference
'Our Daily Bread – Food Security, People and Planet'**

Text: FOOD AS SACRED RELATIONSHIP

Talk by Alastair McIntosh

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Chair: Maria Elena Arana

I am Maria Elena Arana from CAFOD, working in the campaigns team. I am really honoured to be introducing Alastair McIntosh here tonight. Alastair grew up on the Isle of Lewis. It was wonderful reading in his books some of his history about growing up there. He is a writer, broadcaster, campaigning academic, known for campaigning work such as land reform on the Isle of Eigg; also for developing human ecology as an applied academic discipline in Scotland. He is based now in Glasgow and specialises in the fullness of community, understanding this to be a dynamic of soil, soul and society, and of course that includes food as part of that. He is a prolific writer and contributes to BBC Scotland's *Thought for the day* and this past week he mentioned this NJPN Conference –we thank him very much - and there is a link on the NJPN website to it. His books include *Hell and High Water: Climate Change, Hope and the Human Condition*, and *Soil and Soul: People versus Corporate Power*. So, I invite Alastair to come to the podium.

Alastair McIntosh

Thank you for your welcome. In 1977 I applied to do Voluntary Service Overseas, and I was coming from the highly Presbyterian Isle of Lewis. I was rather hoping to be sent to somewhere like India where I might meet some kind of a Guru figure, but what did I get? I got sent to a Catholic Mission. *[Laughing]* Now you didn't convert me. I'm a Quaker these days with continuing strong sympathies and some involvement with the Church of Scotland that I grew up in. But being posted for two years as I irreverently used to like to put it, as a 'quak' amongst the papes, *[LAUGHING]* was a wonderful experience.

I was sent to the Catholic mission of Kerema in the Gulf Province of Papua New Guinea - a very difficult area because of its climate and poverty. It was headed up by a retired Australian Archbishop called Virgil Patrick Copus and there were four Mother Teresa Missionary of Charity Sisters there, who used to wake me up in the morning doing what I discovered nuns do *[LAUGHING]*. Every morning at four o'clock in the morning they would jump out of bed and ring little bells and chant their prayers and so on, and my bedroom was immediately underneath. But it was a wonderful experience because I discovered that what many Catholic religious are profoundly open to is the mystical underpinning of life, the profound spiritual underpinning, that in my view transcends all denominational differences. I would also say it transcends differences in faiths. What matters is that we worship life as love made manifest. And in my belief that is how the Holy Spirit through all times and places moves us to be.

Now our conference here is about 'Our Daily Bread: Food Security, People and Planet'. One of the things that happened to me in Papua New Guinea is that it turned me back to my own culture. We were told that we were likely to have culture shock when we went out to our postings. I had no culture shock on going out. My culture shock was on the return. My culture shock was of the superficiality of a plastic society, of a society that was so rich that it didn't know it was born. But it had become spiritually blinded – not by the money but by the love of money, which was germaine.

I remember coming back and the big issue that everybody was talking about – or perhaps it was after my second time in Papua New Guinea - was ‘who shot JR?’ Do you remember Dallas? Who shot JR? By the way I believe JR now has a new career advertising solar panels, which is quite a development for an oil man. But the fact that people could be concerned with such triviality, that they had nothing better to do with their lives, really disturbed me. It got me thinking a lot about the culture that I was from.

My father is Scottish and half his ancestors are Gaelic speakers from the highlands, the other half from the Scottish borders. My mother was from the Birmingham area and would you believe I was born in Doncaster, probably not far from here, in 1955 when my Scottish father met my English mother when he was a young doctor and she was a nursing sister in the Doncaster Royal Infirmary. My father was desperate to get back to Scotland and when I was four years old in 1960 we went to live on the Isle of Lewis where he became a general practitioner.

Now we are here to talk about food and the deeper meanings of food. I’d like to read you a passage from one of my books, *Soil and Soul*, which will give you some idea of what that community was like to have grown up in. And what I am describing to you here, remember, is shaped by that reflection of life in Papua New Guinea and how it opened my eyes, speaking of which I will put these on to aid my eyes (*LAUGHING*). I was rather sorry to see the children going out. I thought they would rather enjoy these tiny little narrow glasses that you can peer over the top of. Here we go. There we are. I am growing up in this village. I am writing here about 1966, the significance of which I will draw out in a moment. It was the era of Apollo space shots, *The Man from Uncle* was on TV, the Beatles were on the go. Does anybody remember that era? That’s what we’re talking about here.

‘I can remember waiting for the school bus one day – I think it must have been in 1966 because the village was full of men. They were all home because of the seamens’ strike. This was a community of mariners. Crofting, small-scale agriculture has never been able to provide a living from the land alone – the plots are too small, the ground too poor. The produce of the soil has to be supplemented by Harris tweed weaving, commercial fishing, local part-time jobs, or working away – for example in the merchant navy.’

(Talking of which I had to go to the bookshop and borrow a copy of my own book here. I brought one with me, but lo and behold, it was standing room only on the train coming from Birmingham and eventually a seat appeared and I went and sat down next to a very interesting-looking English looking gentleman in a Harris Tweed jacket. I had to get talking to him. He was a retired stonemason who had worked on St Magnus Cathedral and so I just had to give him my copy [*LAUGHING*]. A wonderful encounter. We talked about the grounding nature of involvement with stone, the groundedness of what happens when you get your hands dirty - immersed in the earth, blending human creativity with God’s creativity that is nature.)

‘Anyway across the road from us was a family, the daughters of which were my sisters’ best friends. One of their main sources of income was from their big brother Neely. He was a seaman and there was a lengthy strike on and they had very little money. Yet here they were building a magnificent modern bungalow. How come? On this particular day the school bus had been delayed. We’d had a cold snap – ice covered the road and so we had to wait for grit to be spread by hand before the bus could make it up the hills. Isabel and I wandered into the new house to keep warm. Nobody ever knocked on doors in those days and many houses had no locks fitted. You went in and out of other people’s houses as if they were extensions of your own.

'If you were hungry you would be fed. If you were cold you would be warmed by the peat fire. If you were naughty you would be ticked off because the village was like an extended family. As Isabel and I stepped inside the half completed bungalow that frosty morning we encountered a hive of activity. It was buzzing with men – all manner of building skills were being applied and every mod con was being installed and over the open fire a string of salted Ling and Cod from Loch Leurbost was being cured for consumption later.

'Much of our diet then was local and everything was what would now be called organic. Dad, being the village doctor, would rarely come back from his morning rounds without a leg of lamb, a bottle of milk, homemade butter, new potatoes or even a lobster. Anyway, there I was in Neely's new bungalow, standing there in my black lace-up shoes, flannel shorts and long grey socks, with a striped yellow scarf bulging under a navy blue duffle coat. On my back I carried a brown leather satchel carrying books and all manner of essential accessories – a torch made myself from batteries, which in those days tended to leak a white powder, magnets, string, nails, penknife, rubber sling shots, fish hooks and line, a tin with holes in the lid full of worms for bait. (Apologies to the vegetarians here). Often, rattling round amongst it all was an apple. Dad used to get boxes of apples regularly posted up from England. We'd get one a day to keep the doctor away.

'How is it I said to one of the workman in the bungalow that Neely's not rich but he can afford to have all of you working on his house. Ah well, came the response. You see Neely has helped all of us build our new houses each time he has been back on leave. Now it's our turn to help him.'

I think that may have been the last communally built home in our village. Now, to comply with council regulations for housing grants and planning requirements, contractors put up most of the houses through competitive tender. But you can't just blame outside forces for the weakening of convivial old ways. Even bringing in the peat – the moorland turf, dried to provide winter fuel - is now more often than not a solitary activity. Everybody has easy access to cars and tractors these days, many people have jobs with hours that constrain the shared use of time. Accordingly, the old custom of making a communal effort in order that many hands might make light work has greatly declined. Yes, people have become richer but often money has replaced relationships. These days there are fewer demanding common tasks around which to build community. George McLeod of the Iona Community used to say that only a demanding common task builds community.

And I want to put it to you that the fundamental problem with our relationships, not just with food but with other produce today, is that we have moved out of relationship. In the community I come from – as in many traditional Catholic communities – it would be the custom to say often quite a long grace before meal, and sometimes even afterwards. These days I have to be frank and say that I usually find the attempt to say grace before meal a rather hollow gesture. When I ask why that is it is, it is because we are not in relationship with what it is we are trying to give thanks for. We are in this plastic synthetic dynamic where we don't know where our food has come from. We don't know whether there might have been exploitation in the course of it being produced. And that cuts off the heart. It makes perfect economic sense – we have never been richer in terms of the food we have at our disposal today, but that richness is powered up by oil. That richness is made possible by the fact that food can be moved enormous distances – apples not from England but from New Zealand or wherever, because of the power of the oil economy driving it.

That allows what the economists call comparative advantage to come into play. So, the New Zealanders produce apples and we produce Harris Tweed. (Got to get the adverts in somewhere.) Which makes perfect economic sense because we are each respectively better at those things. But it only works because we are pumping oil into driving those ships and planes around the world – a byproduct of which is that we are also pumping oil out on the Mexican Gulf. We are also pumping oil out in the deltas of Nigeria where people are far less powerful than the fishers of the Mexican Gulf to do anything about it. We are also pumping carbon dioxide from that oil and gas and what have you into the atmosphere and driving climate change. So this is a hidden cost of where we're at.

All of which a year or two ago got me interested again in that 1966 strike of the National Union of Seamen. And I had a young Canadian student called Lauren Eaton, studying ecological economics for her MSc, seconded to me from Edinburgh University a couple of years ago. She wanted to do something on the Isle of Lewis. So I said it is often useful to be – you know we have this expression in Scotland a 'daft Laddie' – a boy who knows exactly what he is on about but he plays daft. It is also useful to be a 'daft lassie' and just go to a place and start asking very innocent questions. Like, do you remember the strike of the National Union of Seamen in 1966? After all you should do. Harold Wilson, who was Prime Minister at the time, declared a national state of emergency. The pound collapsed. It was a difficult time for the country. It lasted six and a half weeks. No merchant shipping on the move. That's why all these men were back in the village – that I recalled.

And I noted in my memory that I also recalled all these fish hanging up. Good sized fish full length Ling and Cod being dried over the peat fire that day. I said, "Go on up and check out two things – what people remember about how they survived during the seamen's strike. And ask what happens today when the ferry fails to sail for just one or two days because of bad weather or break downs". She said, "how am I going to justify that to my lecturer in economics at Edinburgh University". I said: "Just remind him that in October 2008, when the financial crisis hit, at least two of the big banks came within hours of having to turn off their cash dispenser machines. They came within hours of lines of credit failing which lubricate the flow of that international globally linked supply chain that I have mentioned. Now if that had happened we have an inkling of what might have happened from what happened in the summer of 2007 when in parts of the south of England there were supermarket shortages, especially of bottled water when, because of the flooding ironically water purification systems closed down. There was panic in the supermarkets, and police had to be called in to deal with people who were pushing children out of the way and making grabs for the last of what was on the shelves." So my question about what happened when very few supplies came into the islands when I was a boy is a highly pertinent one – because it teaches us about that key word which is part of this conference - Resilience. What resilience did we have then and do we have it now? She was able to dispatch pretty quickly what happens now. Being from there I knew exactly what she would find out, and I will read you some quotes from the study here.

'The manager of Tesco in Stornaway said "we don't carry three days worth of stock, we only carry 24 hours worth of stock. Our bread stock replenishes every 24 hours. We don't carry any extra." The Coop manager added, "for perishable items in the winter we tend only to carry a two days' supply. For veg we keep just a day's worth". Because of this today we would not be able as a community to cope with a prolonged cessation in our shipping unless we were pre-warned. One of the shoppers told her that if a six week long strike happened now we would be absolutely stumped.

So what you have going on there is a combination of panic buying when the ferries no longer sail – even when there is an intermission in sailing because of bad weather. Panic buying in the Stornaway supermarkets, combined with the fact that we are in a ‘just in time’ supply system that is globally connected. A lot of the food comes from distant parts of the world, distant parts of the country and it is all driven by oil and that is what we have become dependent upon.

Now what was it like in 1966. My take is that in 1966, first of all I couldn’t remember anything except what I have just read to you. I was about ten at the time. And when Lauren went out and started interviewing people of my age and older – I am 54 now – most of them couldn’t remember much either. I said to her go along to the Stornaway Gazette Office and get the cuttings. Show them to people to jog their memory.

“Yes, you know the island ran out of fuel to such a point that the community decided to prioritise it for doctors and nurses”, which is an interesting prioritisation to have made. That kind of thing.

What she found was that there were basically three resiliences in place and I want to put it to you that these are resiliences that we have substantially lost in the name of greater economic efficiency today. And that if we are going to recover resilience in our food supply – both in this country and internationally - these are things we are going to have to be aware of and to build into what we are doing.

The first one is what I would call resilience of eco-systems. I’ll read you one of the quotes: “Back then a community boat would go out for fishing and catch enough to feed the whole village. Today the fishing has gone down a lot. Big business bought out all the local licenses. Today there are mega ships that use radar that just kill all the fish. These used to be the best fishing waters in the world. But today Lewis has become an island of fishermen who can’t fish.”

I remember it well. As a boy aged around 13 I would go out into the sea on my own, having been taught by the older men. And I would come back with a good sized bucket of fish that I would share on my way home in the village, taking enough for ourselves. We didn’t need deep freezes and so on. Most people didn’t have them in those days because the village was a deep freeze. The village was a deep freeze. I would share my fish.

I remember once going out in the morning and gritting the road by hand because I knew it was icy. I would have been about 14 at the time. And that evening the local butcher came in with a big slab of steak. (I’m so sorry vegetarians – I need to do a lot of Hail Marys, I know) [LAUGHING]. A big slab of steak - to thank me for having made it possible for him to get his van out that morning. You see this was the way the village worked. We had resiliences of eco-systems – the land and the sea were still intact in their integrity and their ability to provide.

I put it to you that we need to bring back that resilience of eco-systems and that is why a lot of my work in Scotland is with land reform. We now have over two percent of the land of Scotland being held by communities – nearly half a million acres - and it needs to go much further because only when people are in direct communitarian-based relationship with place can full responsibility, ability to respond, ability to come alive in that place be made possible. So our system of land tenure, of massive private ownership, and land being used for speculation is in my view one of the most important things that we should be learning from such likes as Latin American liberation theology.

Secondly, we had resilience of knowledge. Quote: “In those days we would have had enough potatoes to last a whole year. We would have made a hollow in the ground, placed the potatoes in and covered it with hay, with turf on top of that. Today the youth wouldn’t know where to begin with something like that.” I think it’s really important, even on a token basis – like in a window box - that we involve our children in getting their hands dirty, in not being afraid of dirt, of being involved in the processes of putting seeds in the ground and watching them grow into things of beauty in their taste and in their appearance. Because that re-grounds our children in elemental reality of fire, air, earth and water. I put it to you that this needs to be understood as holy work.

And finally to develop that theme, in the village of 1966 we had what I would call resilience of spirit or of soul. So many people testified like this. This is from one of the island’s newspaper journalists. “In 1966 everyone in the community was cared for. For example, people would ensure they visited old spinsters in the country to deliver their surplus supply of milk. These acts were founded on Christian generosity. But today it is every man for himself.”

Now I put it to you that we use the word grace in two main senses: in the narrow sense relevant to food of grace before or after a meal. And grace in the wider sense of what drives the providence, the wherewithal that creates this life on earth for which we give thanks in saying – or as I would prefer to say as a Quaker – feeling the grace.

And I put it to you that as people passionate about spirituality, perhaps the single most important thing we could be doing is to restore right relationships with the earth, in community with the earth, in community with one another and in community with God – if you like soil, soul and society. The single most important thing that we can be doing is deepening that understanding of grace. What does that mean in practice?

It means that we need to consume whatever it is we need to consume in a way that we can allow it to enter into our hearts, without having to close it off, because we know that there is unpleasantness involved in what we are doing. I personally do not have a problem with eating meat and fish in right ecological relationship because I understand myself to be part of the ecological system. At the same time my confession to you has to be that I am also addicted to eating more than my fair share of meat and fish than I know the planet can sustain. So I can only enter into any kind of relationship with what I eat if I acknowledge not just what the ecological balance is, but also if I look fair and square and admit it to others where I am out of balance with that. I think this is the kind of spirituality that we need to deepen. Not a repressive spirituality – in my view - of saying well just don’t go there but one of saying, so we’re all out of balance so we need to move back into right relationship.

I leave you lastly with a consideration about the depth of this relationship, because everything I’ve said to you so far could be taken at a very cerebral, intellectual level. I would like to put it to you that when we enter elementally into relationship with the creation, in being involved with producing our food, in cooking our food, sharing our food, very profound bonds of human community start to develop. Last night – in fact most Thursdays - I am involved in a community meal in Govan where I live in Glasgow. It is with the poorest people in the community. We have a shared meal. It is so powerful - what comes out on sharing food together, in terms of communion.

You know you Roman Catholics talk about transubstantiation. I think you are dead right about transubstantiation. The only thing I would suggest – respectfully – as a heretical Quaker - is that

transubstantiation is all around us. It is holy all around us. The transformation needed is an awakening of our eyes and hearts to see that .

So I leave you with a piece of poetry I would like to read you - about Finlay Montgomery, who was an old man who taught me how to fish in the sea. He always promised to take me out further. He had two boats - a canoe-type boat / a currach type boat, which my mother had nicknamed 'Hiawatha' for obvious reasons, and he had a big blue boat when he went far out – three miles out from the shore to a place called the Carranaught, which was an undersea reef where you would line up by certain bearings – you would take your bearings to find the place where the much bigger fish were. And Finlay was never able to fulfil his promise to go there.

Just one or two other explanations here. Archangel Tar is what you would cork the boats with. It would be pine tar from the north of Russia. You would put it on the boats and it had a wonderful smell. In Gaelic the word 'Ugus' means and. So the traditional end to many prayers would be 'Amen Ugus Amen'. In other words, twice Amen. When I was talking to a Russian theologian recently, he told me that among the old believers in the Orthodox Church the blessing was done with two fingers. The new way is with three fingers to symbolise the trinity, but the idea of the two was to symbolise the unity of God and Christ. So, I just wonder if that is tied in with this form of closure.

So, this came to me when I was in Papua New Guinea and I received a letter from my father:

Eulogy for Finlay Montgomery of North Lochs

The news came in a letter from my father
Aye, the news came across the furthestest watery wastes
Attention all shipping in sea area Hebrides.

And all I have now is the prow of Hiawatha hanging from my wall
By a silver cord
Attention all shipping.

Crippled Finlay, wise, kindly, of few or no words
Who taught small boy to handle small boat – big weather
Attention, attention, attention.

I remember your promise - never met Finlay - to take me fishing
Far out there beyond our normal haunt
The big blue boat to the Carranaught – three miles pulling eastwards
Out from port, an oarslength north of 58th parallel.
Broken promise, broken fingernails
Finlay, alone on water cramped grip on tarry keel
Scrape down beneath Loch grime shadow

Goodbye dear friend
And I shall always slightly fear the beauty of that sea loch now
The pitiless sea, the shadow side of nature that we can but accept
Accept and like the next wave accept.

Very dead as you would say on those rare days we let down baited lines

Six fathoms but to no avail.

Very dead was how the divers found you,
under the whelming tide beyond the furthest Hebrides
Archangel tar beneath your splintered fingernails
Archangel chorus soaring overhead
Very dead dear Finlay
Aye, very dead
In all but memory of your brightness sitting on the western wave

Attention all shipping
Attention all shipping
Attention all shipping in sea area Hebrides, Hebrides
Attention all shipping.
Attention all shipping stand to attention all shipping
God rest his soul. Amen Ugers Amen.