

Ipswich Unitarians

PROPHET FOR THE EARTH: RACHEL CARSON REMEMBERED

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When, on the day of Pentecost, Peter preached to the crowds in Jerusalem, he quoted from the book of the prophet Joel:

“In the last days, says God, I will pour out my Spirit on all mankind;
and your sons and daughters shall prophesy...Yes, on my servants and
my handmaids I will pour out my Spirit...and they shall prophesy.”

(Acts 2: 17-18)

Now, we are apt to think of prophets as rather fierce old men with long beards and booming voices who mostly lived a very long time ago and who spent their time predicting future events. But Peter’s words – and Joel’s – suggest something else: that prophets can just as easily be young and, more significantly, that they can just as easily be women, the “daughters” and “handmaids” of God.

And the other thing about prophets that we often get wrong is the idea that they are fortune-tellers, star-gazing predictors of future events – such as who is going to win the World Cup! The word “prophet” actually means, ‘one who speaks out’. A prophet is someone who “speaks truth to power”, who challenges both the tyrant and our own conscience, who becomes the mouthpiece of the Divine to a humanity that has lost its way. A prophet is someone who speaks out because they *must* and can do no other. Prophets are impelled by something that overrides the temptation to take the easy way out and opt for the quiet life. Prophets often have a rough time: telling truths that most of us would prefer not to hear, and that powerful interests would prefer us not to hear either! The lot of the prophet is often vilification, persecution, and even death.

I have just been reading about a prophet who didn’t live in ancient times, who was neither fierce nor endowed with a booming voice, and who was one of God’s daughters rather than his – or her – sons. And like all true prophets, she wasn’t concerned with gazing into a crystal ball but rather with telling us – quite rationally – what our own folly would bring upon us if we didn’t do something about it. Her name was Rachel Carson.

Now, I wouldn’t want to give the impression that Rachel Carson was self-consciously a ‘prophet’, or that she either believed or presented herself to be God’s mouthpiece! Rather she was a quietly-spoken scientist and writer who loved nothing more than to go out bird-watching or exploring the tide-pools in her summer retreat on the coast of Maine. Until her writing and her books about the sea and sea-shore, gave her a degree of financial independence, Rachel Carson worked for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. This had enabled her to combine her love of the natural world with her work as a scientist and her developing talent as a writer. But it had also revealed to her the often unsuspected ways in which human activity was despoiling and damaging the natural environment. She saw that we were in danger of unpicking the threads of the web of life on which we ourselves depend, both physically and spiritually.

Her prophetic voice was first heard in her lyrical books about the sea. We know so little about it and yet we treat the sea both as a dump for our rubbish and as a supposedly inexhaustible source of food, as if the sea can somehow be both without there being any consequences. We behave as if the sea can absorb without limit our noxious and toxic waste while still supplying us with an endless supply of healthy fish for our burgeoning population to eat – not to mention many other

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resources. Recent events in the Gulf of Mexico have brought home yet again, and all too clearly, the truth of Rachel Carson's perception.

When she wrote her first best-seller, 'The Sea Around Us', sixty years ago, oil-production was still a largely land-based affair. But she foresaw that, as supplies dwindled, the industry would have to move offshore, and then into ever-deeper waters. She wrote:

"Offshore drilling platforms rest on piles that must be driven as far as 250 feet into the floor of the Gulf [of Mexico] to withstand the force of the waves, especially during the season for hurricanes. Winds, storm waves, fogs, the corrosive gnawing of seawater upon metal structures – these are hazards that must be faced and overcome."

But however great the hazards might be, Rachel Carson knew that they wouldn't deter the oil industry. She wrote: "Yet the technical difficulties of far more extensive operations than any now attempted do not discourage specialists in petroleum engineering." Today, oil is extracted from the sea-bed at far greater depths than the 250 feet that Carson mentions. We are now seeing the consequences of this reckless and relentless over-reaching of our capabilities in the search for oil and for profit by companies like BP – but not only BP, of course! Rachel Carson didn't live to see what was, perhaps, the first of the many marine environmental disasters that have since resulted from our dangerous dependence on oil - the wreck of the 'Torrey Canyon' in 1967.

And neither did Carson live to see the establishment of the connection – first being mooted at about the same time - between the burning of fossil fuels, like oil, and global warming. She did, however, have this to say, in 'The Sea Around Us':

"Now in our own lifetime we are we are witnessing a startling alteration of climate...It is now established beyond question that a definite change in the arctic climate set in about 1900, that it became astonishingly marked about 1930, and that it is now spreading into sub-arctic and temperate regions. The frigid top of the world is very clearly warming up."

Rachel Carson was well aware of the natural fluctuations in global climate that have led to alternate periods of global warming and cooling over the millennia, but she could still write, in 1950: "But what we are experiencing now is perhaps a climatic change of shorter duration, measurable in only decades or centuries."

But although she wrote of, "a long trend...toward a warmer earth", she did not see this in quite the same way that we do now. Were she alive today, though, I suspect that she might. She was, after all, the prophet who first gave us a clear and comprehensive analysis of our technology-obsessed civilization's unforeseen impact on the earth and its complex of ecological relationships – the interdependent web of all existence. That analysis came in 1962 with her best-known book, 'Silent Spring'.

Driven by the increasing hard evidence that the indiscriminate use of poisonous chemicals in the environment – as pesticides and herbicides – posed a growing threat, not only to wildlife but to all life, including human life, Rachel Carson wrote what was to be one of the most important books of the 20th century. I cannot rehearse the book's case and arguments now, but let me quote from its closing paragraph:

"The control of nature is a phrase conceived in arrogance, born of the Neanderthal age of biology and philosophy, when it was supposed that nature exists for the convenience of man. The concepts and practices of applied entomology for the most part date from that Stone Age of science. It is our alarming misfortune that so primitive a science has armed itself with the most

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modern and terrible weapons, and that in turning them against the insects it has also turned them against the earth.”

Rachel Carson’s ‘Silent Spring’, a work of prophecy in the true sense, unleashed on its author a storm of abuse and vilification from the many powerful vested interests that she had challenged and offended. And although she had her supporters, some quite influential themselves, it was Rachel Carson herself who met the hostile and well-funded campaign against her with calm, rational, and well-researched argument. But what few people knew at the time, outside a small circle of close friends and physicians, was that, even as she wrote the book, even as she put her case in speeches, lectures, interviews and television appearances, Rachel Carson was dying of cancer.

Somehow she found the strength to manage the effects of the disease – along with those of the radiation treatment, the surgery and the drugs – long enough to finish her task. Rachel Carson died in April 1964, aged 57, just eighteen months after the publication of ‘Silent Spring’. Perhaps it could be said of this daughter of God that what had kept her going, in those crucial final years, was an outpouring of that Spirit of prophecy spoken of by Peter and by Joel.

And there is both an appropriateness and a seeming irony here. Joel’s prophecy is about a natural ecological disaster, which he sees as the consequence of human faithlessness and folly:

“Mourn you priests, who minister to the Lord! The fields are ruined, the ground mourns; for the grain is ruined, the new wine has come to naught...the seeds have shrivelled, the water channels are dry, the barns lie in ruins; for the harvests have come to naught.”

(Joel 1: 9-10, 17)

But the prime instrument of God’s wrath in Joel’s prophecy is a plague of locusts; and, “What the locust has left, the swarmer devours; and what the swarmer has left, the hopper devours; and what the hopper has left, the grub devours.” (Joel 1: 4)

A good case here for Rachel Carson’s enemies, you might think! But this would be to misunderstand her. She never said that we must just submit to the depredations of insect pests. Rather she argued that we must deal with such problems in ways that work with nature and not against it. She pointed out that the chemical pesticides being sprayed across America – and other countries too – at the time, actually made the situation worse, as pest species populations developed resistance to the sprays, while other living things did not!

Joel didn’t argue for pesticides; he argued for a return to faith and wisdom. And perhaps, in a way, that’s what Rachel Carson argued for too: an informed, truly scientific faith in nature, and wisdom in our stewardship of the earth. And maybe Carson’s positive vision of what might be wasn’t all that different from Joel’s either. He wrote:

“Earth, fear not, but rejoice and be glad; for the Lord has done great things.
Fear not you beasts of the field; for the open pastures will be green,
the trees will bear fruit, the fig and the vine yield their harvest.”

(Joel 2: 22)

Rachel Carson was a woman of quiet and unobtrusive faith. Her upbringing was Presbyterian. Towards the end of her life, though, she became friendly with the minister of All Souls’ Unitarian Church in Washington D.C., the Rev. Duncan Howlett. Carson’s biographer, Linda Lear, has written recently: “Unitarianism was an ideal spiritual connection for Carson with its focus on the unity of nature and science.” (‘Journal for the Study of Religion and Nature’, 2010)

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It was Carson's expressed wish that her memorial service be held at All Souls', but when she died others intervened and the funeral was held in Washington's National Cathedral. While not entirely inappropriate, given her great contribution to national life and to science, it was not what she had wanted. The following Sunday, therefore, the service at All Souls' was also dedicated to her memory. Duncan Howlett said of her, "Last week one the true prophets of our time died here in Washington."

It was an assessment that still holds good forty-six years later – as does the prophecy she delivered.

Sources:

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- Rachel Carson, 'The Sea Around Us' (1950), Oxford University Press, 1991.*
- Rachel Carson, 'The Edge of the Sea', Houghton Mifflin, 1955.*
- Rachel Carson, 'Silent Spring' (1962), Penguin Classics, 2000.*
- Linda Lear, 'Rachel Carson: Witness for Nature' (1997), Mariner Books, 2009.*