

Foreword: Ruth Valerio



Dr. Ruth Valerio is a passionate voice for faith-based environmental action around the world. She is the author of several books which are gutsy and easy-to-read, practical and theologically rich. Ruth founded Eco Church as Churches and Theology Director for A Rocha UK. She is now Tearfund's Global Advocacy and Influencing Director.

Yesterday I went for a walk with my eldest daughter, home from university where she is studying zoology. We took binoculars and went to a nature reserve: a wetland site on an estuary that leads to the sea. For some inexplicable reason, of all the many walks I've done over the years in my beautiful area of England, this was one place neither of us had been before and we set off with excitement. We are both trying to learn more about birds and were a bit nervous as to whether we would see much and, if we did, would we be able to identify them?! We needn't have worried.

It was a stunning walk that will stay in both our minds for a long time. We were out for hours – far longer than expected – and identified 33 different bird species. Much of that was through asking people with bigger binoculars than ours what they were looking at, and learning on the spot. One of the highlights was large flocks of lapwings, twisting, turning, swooping and swirling across the sky in beautiful shape-shifting formations, their calls ringing out over the estuary. We arrived home cold, hungry but happy, and poured over our bird book to confirm the birds we had seen.

It was a beautiful time: two women, mother and daughter, connecting with each other and with the world around us.

We have been made for connection, for relationship. I am who I am because of my relationship with God and my many relationships with people who have shaped me over the years. Sometimes that shaping has come out of pain. Sometimes those human relationships have warped the God-shaping in me. Nonetheless, they have formed me and made me who I am, and who I will continue to become.

And my relationship with the wider creation is also integral to who I am. Right back in Genesis 1 God creates an earth creature, an earthy one. *Ho adam* ('the adam') is a play

on words, with the Hebrew for 'ground' being *adamah*. We are literally made from the earth, humans from the humus. Genesis 2:7 highlights this again: the first human are formed out of the dust of the ground. So we are earth creatures with an intrinsic relationship with the wider natural world.¹

We are not isolated beings, floating free, independent from everything and everyone around us. Our connectedness places a responsibility on us to nurture our relationships and work for their good health. In the same way that some of my relationships have caused me pain, so I recognise that I can cause others pain and I can damage the relationships that exist within the natural world. So we all have choices to make: will I act for love, justice and compassion? Will I seek to live lightly on this earth?

My role as a director at Tearfund – an organisation that partners with churches in the world's poorest countries to tackle poverty and injustice and respond to disasters – shows me how those connections reach around the world. Those connections can be negative. As the climate crisis ravages through the communities we serve, I see the terrible destruction caused by our addiction to fossil fuels and our inability to live in a way that takes care of the earth and its bounties. I face the stark reality that a person in the UK will take only 6 days to emit the same amount of CO2 that a person in Malawi emits in a year.

But those connections can be positive too. We can make a difference. We can reach out and use our blessings to help others. We can learn from each other and benefit from the wisdom of the generations in cultures very different to our own. I have experienced those connections in reading *Awhi Mai Awhi Atu*. What a humbling privilege for me, living on the other side of the world, to be asked to write the Foreword to this book! It is full of so many inspiring and wonderful women, all drawing on their life experiences to be people who care for the land and the seas and all the creatures – human and wider – that share those spaces.

The radical Latin American educationalist Paulo Freire used a phrase from the Spanish poet Antonio Machado when he stated, "We make the road by walking". Such is the case for each woman you will meet in the following chapters. Such is the case for you too. No woman's experience can be replicated, but as you read, my prayer is that you will be inspired to use your own experiences and connections to walk your road of care for this wonderful but so wounded world that God has made. And know that as you do so, you are in good company.

¹ For more on this: Ruth Valerio, *Saying Yes to Life* (SPCK, 2020), 157-158.