

## **How Do We Respond When All Our Ways of Knowing Converge on Subversive Truths?**

An Interview with William McKibben

Benjamin Sewell Webb

Bill McKibben is a Harvard graduate, a former staff writer for *The New Yorker* magazine, and regular contributor to *Harpers*, *Christian Century*, *Sierra Magazine* and others. He is the author of *The End of Nature*, *The Age of Missing Information*, *The Comforting Whirlwind*, *Hope: Human and Wild* for which he was the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship, and *Long Distance: A Year of Living Strenuously*. What interests Bill about the present moment, he said at one point, is that we're beginning to get the same advice, though for different reasons, from atmospheric chemists and soil scientists that we hear from our best religious thinkers. What scientists are learning from our assault on the natural world points away from "gross over-consumption and hyperindividualism...to humility, simplicity, community." They point on a global scale to the same things that Wendell Berry talks about on a landscape scale, that Buddha talks about in a psychological way, that Jesus talks about in a moral way.

BW: Several years ago you wrote a book titled *The End of Nature*. In it you presented the facts and effects of large scale environmental damage, including the now unimpeachable scientific evidence of global warming from greenhouse gases emitted by our cars, factories and burning forests. While there are important signs of hope in that book, there is an emotional tone of sadness and grief in facing up to the enormous losses involved in this global ecological tragedy. Such grieving is understandable and necessary. What has the experience been like for you, this coming to terms with the reality of our human condition?

WM: I was glad that I could write the book. It was cathartic in some way. I felt like I had done something to begin to deal with it. But it was also painful. Like falling in love with someone at the same time you realize they have a terminal illness, or something close to it. I am absolutely in love with the Adirondack woods where I live. At the same time I see in them the

signs of illness, the same kinds of problems the world faces, everywhere. That's one of the reasons the book is so emotional, or so bizarrely divided between the scientific and the emotional. Global warming, in particular, operates on such a large scale and is so quantitatively different that it becomes qualitatively different from any kind of pollution or environmental degradation that went before. So your emotional response to it is different. It raises the deepest kinds of questions about who we are and what on earth we are doing, in much the same way that the holocaust raises deep and fundamental theological questions in a manner that a long chain of serial murders doesn't. If someone does something bad to someone, you don't ask, "Is God dead?" But you do when the holocaust happens, and then your relationship to the world around you begins to shift.

BW: Because we're no longer talking about a few isolated events but rather social behaviors that are widespread and systemic.

WM: We're talking about altering and affecting, in the course of our lifetimes, every terrestrial ecosystem in the most profound way, by changing the climate, by controlling things that once were beyond our reach, by changing the definition of who we are, and maybe who God is.

BW: Has it been important for you and your readers to express grief? To lament?

WM: Yes, I think so. I guess I like to get the bad news out of the way. It's important to face the bad news and the extent of the problems. I think that's unavoidable if you are then going to turn to useful work that might ameliorate things. So yes, it was hard and difficult, but finally important, for me and many reading the book to face the seriousness of our situation.

BW: If *The End of Nature* was more descriptive of our predicament and problems, your work since has focused on ways we can retool our society and economy. In a more recent book, *Hope: Human and Wild* you examine three local and regional economies around the world — in the Adirondacks, in Brazil and India — for their lessons about change and why it is still reasonable to possess hope when surrounded by daunting environmental problems. What are those lessons?

WM: The first thing to be said is that I've not turned into some kind of optimist on these matters. It's unlikely that we'll embrace the lessons of any of these places. The only thing I wanted to prove was that despair is

inadmissible. That it's not legitimate to throw up one's hands and say, "Well there's nothing that can be done." That cop-out is not available. And to show that there were real life situations where things were being done. There are a lot of lessons from those places. One of the most important lessons is that there is no obvious correlation between the pleasure that one gets out of life and the arrangements that one has made materially to lead it. A city where everyone takes the bus all the time is not necessarily less pleasant than one where everybody has enough money to buy a private car and drive it around. In fact if anything, the opposite is true. All my books are chapters in some long book that I seem to be at work on. The transition between *The End of Nature* and *Hope: Human and Wild* is a book I wrote on television and the environment a few years ago. I had to watch everything that came across the largest cable channel on earth, 2,400 hundred hours of videotape.

I thought about what the world looks like if that's your primary source of information. That was part of this long meditation on the question of what it is that we want. How can we figure out what it is we want when we've been constantly informed by what someone else thinks we should want for so long. Though our choices seem unlimited when we walk into Wal-Mart, where there are so many things to choose from, in fact our conception of what is possible occurs along a very narrow spectrum of choices. So one of the points of my book *Hope: Human and Wild*, is to broaden the spectrum of choices and ideas a little bit.

BW: Bombarded by this kind of thing in our culture, it's no wonder so many people seek to slake their thirst for a rare word of meaning by resorting to scripture as an alternative in this information age. It's still a text that is remarkably germane to our times and predicament, as you so well point out about the Book of Job. I was interested that you referred to Job over the course of a few pages in *The End of Nature* and then returned to it in a much longer reflection in a separate book titled, *The Comforting Whirlwind*. Why is this story so useful to us today as you see it?

WM: The Book of Job is an amazing piece of writing. It is the greatest piece of nature writing ever, especially in the last few chapters when God speaks. It's also useful, I think, because it's the first recognizably modern piece of literature. Suddenly we're into a psychological world that we recognize completely. Why are all these things happening to me? Explain this. It's no longer just works of miracles, or let's kill that king over there. Now we're someplace very modern and understandable, even calling God to account, which is like our modern impulse of the last few centuries. But

environmentally, God gets directly to brass tacks, and we're forced to confront the idea that we're not the center of the world. God asks, for example, "Why do you think I make it rain in the wilderness where there are no people?" In this long sarcastic speech, which is still uncomfortable to read as human beings, it's clear that we're one small part of something very large, and certainly not at its center. That the whole world should work according to our notions of justice or pleasure is clearly not in keeping with God's understanding of the situation. So that's one half of it. But the other is equally important, in part because of the depth and beauty of the language. It is the understanding that this life of which we're a small part is so beautiful and grand and coherent and meaningful that it's all right to be a small part of it, the witnessing part of it, and let us be content with that.

BW: So on the one hand it presents this absolutely radical and jolting worldview to Job and us...

WM: ...and then provides a kind of balm, too...

BW: ...giving us a way to live with that new worldview and more accurate self conception, that humbler view of self.

WM: The problem with thinking that we are the most important life on the earth is not only that it drives all our environmental troubles, which, I think it does. It's that it doesn't make us anywhere near as happy as it should. So there are anthropocentric reasons to avoid thinking so anthropocentrically. But that's not such a revelation. Every religious thinker we know back through time has said the same basic thing. Live simply. Live for others. Community is important. A sense of the natural world is important.

BW: If you want to find yourself you must first lose yourself.

WM: You can't serve both God and money. And we've always nodded our consent or treated these message givers as kooks. Many of us worship and go to church, but basically we treat most of what Jesus has to say as if it's the ramblings of a crank. But what's interesting about the present moment is that we're beginning to get the same advice from atmospheric chemists and soil scientists and everyone else. Not for the same reasons. I mean they're talking about simplicity and community because they understand that their opposite—the gross consumption and inefficiency of hyperindividualism—is changing the upper atmosphere, stretching the capacity of the earth to grow food, and so forth. But the message is quite similar. And that's a powerful convergence.

BW: So we've had all this sage advice, and now it's beginning to be echoed by the scientific community and writers like yourself. In your current book, for instance, we see evidence of how it's possible to live a humbler life with the aid of a new teacher, nature. As Wendell Berry says, "Nature is an indispensable teacher and inescapable judge."

WM: Nature as teacher is indispensable on a number of levels. No one has written and understood so profoundly as Wendell Berry the ways in which nature teaches us on a very small scale, the square foot by square foot of what to do and how to do it. Now, on the macro scale, we also have the emergence of Nature as teacher. The signals that we're getting from the natural world, the fact that temperature is higher than it has ever been, is altogether new data from a trustworthy source. So, too, with the ozone, that we're getting excess UV radiation. That we're seeing species die at astounding rates every day. That we're experiencing fishery collapse around the world. These are intelligible signals pointing to humility, simplicity, community. They point on a global scale to the same things that Wendell Berry talks about on a landscape scale, that Buddha talks about in a psychological way, that Jesus talks about in a moral way. As I said, I think it's an important moment as each of these ways of understanding begin to overlap and become mutually reinforcing.

BW: You're a bit unusual, among environmentalists and nature writers, in that you turn not only to nature but to scripture for its capacity to instruct and safely guide us through the personal and social changes you believe are now necessary. Furthermore, you've made the audacious claim as an environmentalist that faith communities can be an enormous help as we attempt to integrate the moral and religious life with an ecological worldview and practice. You've said that religious institutions are better situated than any other force in our society to help us make these changes, for two reasons. One, that faith communities are the only institutions left that understand some goal other than material progress and endlessly rising material affluence. And secondly, that religious communities understand something about what you called transcendent joy. Do you really believe this? I mean, why aren't you, like so many others, still rebelling against religious institutions and traditions?

WM: I don't think that churches by themselves, or any other institutions, are going to turn this tide around. My guess is that sooner or later, we're going to be facing a series of unmistakable crises derived from our abuse of the environment that will shake us much more deeply than we've been shaken so far. As this happens we're going to be casting around for ideas

of all kinds. One of the reasons I do this work is to be a small part of the larger drive to create as many models, networks, and organizations as possible to be there in that moment. That's when it's going to be incredibly important for religious institutions to be there to deal with these questions. Because people are then going to realize that these are questions and issues of enormous scale, and they will turn to religious communities for answers. That's why we're in churches when people die, even if we haven't been there for a very long time. But it's going to be a tremendous stretch for religious institutions because they've spent so much time focusing on relationships between people. So the relationship between humanity and the natural world is going to be challenging, especially if it's not seen for what it really is, a relationship between people and God manifested around us in creation. But I do think that there is more reason for hope in our churches than in other institutions, most of which have been so thoroughly co-opted by the reigning ideologies of the day, of growth and progress, that they've become exceedingly destructive and will be difficult to change in new directions.

BW: Our religious institutions are not exactly immune from this reigning ideology either. North American Christians have been just as likely to participate in the destructive aspects of our economy as anyone else. But when the Judeo-Christian tradition gets off course, it has within it this self-revising capacity, this internal critique, that is anchored in the prophetic narratives. Like Micah, who admonishes us and reminds us what it means to be truly religious, to do justice and walk humbly. Do you find that useful?

WM: Yes. Because it has a body of scripture and tradition to appeal to, when the society in which it is situated begins to lose its way, there is still a magnetic north to which you can reorient yourself. Not as simple as that, but very true. We've seen that bear fruit before in the abolitionist movement and the civil rights movement, which were led and dominated by church people and by the images, stories and understandings that came from that tradition. The story of Moses and the Exodus from Egypt were strongly linked together in their minds.

BW: Religious communities have long played a vital role in social reform movements, as we saw again in Eastern Europe with the new democracy movement. If you want to engage and reform society and the institutions through which we live, you can't ignore religious communities whose traditions and stories lend meaning and purpose to the task. In his essay, "Christianity and the Survival of Creation," Wendell Berry chides those environ-

mentalists who simplistically point to scripture as the source of our environmental problems. He says these scriptural critics have ignored the first rule of criticism, that we have to first read what we criticize. The kind of criticism now required, he says, is the lifetime work of real criticism, which engages us in the text and the tradition as mature adults. To begin with, this means reading the Bible not just literally as children do, but poetically.

WM: Which is the most fundamental way to read it in most cases. It is possible that churches and synagogues will play a much more vibrant role in the future than they now do because there is an enormous amount of kinetic energy there to be released, a ticking time bomb. I mean, no one has read the Bible in these ways with much care or interest, or studied the traditions that grew out of it, all of which is filled with extremely subversive material! Extremely subversive! And so there's a real possibility that when we begin an authentic encounter with that tradition, it will be a powerful one.

BW: What would happen if people in our generation with "movement sensibilities," as Parker Palmer calls it, began to return to religious life and religious traditions? What would happen if we saw ourselves standing within living traditions that are always engaged with current social realities, and began to form authentic religious communities in response to new conditions of life? What would that be like?

WM: It would be exciting! But it's a ways off yet. The cults in which we've grown up, the scientific and consumer idolatry that have occupied us for the last hundred years or more, are beginning to receive some body blows from which they won't recover easily. That's what the environmental crises we face are about. And as they're sent reeling, we're going to need things to fill that vacuum. Maybe what will fill it is a nihilistic unhappiness, and quite possibly what will fill it is a fearful, panicky, private reaction that prompts us to sit out the crises that are coming, to isolate ourselves from other people and from danger through more accumulation of whatever. But the other possibility is a revival in the true sense, a revival of our instinct towards community, our instinct towards companionship with the natural world. That could be extremely powerful. It would be fun to be a part of that, and to have one's own mind and habits stretched and challenged much more than might have been.

BW: To participate in new gatherings of people that could become the seedbed for a regenerative culture.

WM: Yes. There is a recurring history of humanity going off in the wrong direction for years and years and then being called back, sometimes through large scale catastrophes that remind us it's time to get our house in order. I haven't thought this through, but it occurs to me as we're sitting here that what we're doing now to the planet is this sort of large scale destruction of the temple. The destruction of the temple was always a rallying cry, a way to make people begin to mend their ways. Perhaps it will happen again.

BW: Interesting that you would use that image of the temple. Remember the story of Jesus in the temple with the moneychangers? I've often thought of that as an image of our turning the world into an endless series of commercial transactions, which is not finally what our life together is all about. And the rage, the rage Jesus expresses over that.

WM: Let's hope it's not what our life is all about. But it's certainly what we've tried to make of a lot of life in the last half of the 20th century. To see the stunning success with which we've done so, and especially the stunning success with which we've implanted those ideas around the world with incredible speed, especially in the last twenty years. These cults with their well recognized idols. There's hardly a place in the world where you're not in sight of a Coca-Cola sign or the golden arches of McDonalds. It's not like there are people out there making statues of Baal. But Joe Camel, on the other hand, may have taken Baal's place.

BW: Let me ask you something about your own local faith community here. You referred in your book on Job to a resolution passed by your Methodist Church conference that urged its 80,000 members to limit Christmas gift spending to \$100 per family in order to address social and environmental problems and as a call to humility and simplicity.

WM: And just as importantly, as a way to have more fun at Christmas. It's not just that this accumulation of battery-operated tie racks and things are wrecking the planet, and that this money should be given to people who need it, it's that we've succeeded in cheating ourselves out of what should be the incredible pleasure of Christmas. How many people really look forward to the approach of the Christmas season? How many shudder after Thanksgiving as they gear up to meet the demands of another Christmas buying binge?

BW: You indicate that Americans spend about \$40 billion on presents, which comes out to about \$700 for the "average" family, and that it takes

about four months to pay off those debts. Doesn't that make this resolution, if practiced, a little subversive?

WM: Yes! It is. All I do with anything I write is try to be subversive in some way. But the best way to be subversive at the moment — and this gets back to this question of churches as a source of joy as well as a source of chastening, of humility — is to have more fun than other people, because we're not a particularly joyful culture. To have real, authentic fun is to be subversive and a little dangerous, and probably more effectively subversive than to be long-faced and pious at all times. So that's what we are trying to do with Christmas. The year we were trying to get it launched was really exciting! We had these great gatherings at churches all over the northeast, gospel choirs and everything, and we really had a lot of fun.

BW: So did this resonate with folks?

WM: With a lot of them it did! That's interesting, given the badly weakened authority of the Church and the residual authority of the pulpit, where people don't even pay that much attention to how they might spend religious holidays. The resolution had the effect of giving lay and ordained people the permission they were looking for on this subject. It's been a few years since we pressed it hard here, but people have picked it up in other Methodist conferences and have begun to practice it.

BW: One last question. Though you are a member of a Christian faith community and attend regular worship services, you once wrote that you feel God's presence most in wilderness where the "numbing categories we've devised for sin and redemption and incarnation fall away, leaving this overwhelming sense of goodness and sweetness in the world." What has been the role of Nature in your own spiritual formation? Why is this direct, unmediated experience of Nature indispensable for human beings, even when our religious tradition helps affirm and sustain our environmental sensibilities?

WM: I'm not a very intellectual person. I start with experience and work backwards. There are two sets of experiences in my life that are important to me, and two sets of observations as a result. I once established and ran a small homeless shelter in my church in New York City. It felt astoundingly good...far better, more right, and far more fun than anything else I was doing with my life. Which is not what our culture would lead one to expect. There was a genuine feeling of transcendence offered by people's love and

active caring for each other. It was much the same overwhelming feeling that I think everyone feels, when they're out alone someplace where the physical presence of God is palpable. Where the surf is pounding. Where the stars in the night sky are present in overwhelming abundance and intensity and beauty. Where the forest is profoundly quiet and the sense of age and vitality of every living thing around you is so great. That's the only other powerful clue in my own emotional experience to what transcendence is about in two forms: service, or more broadly the capacity of humans to love each other in some profound way, and the transcendent and lavish love given and received in the natural world. I'm not a theologian in any sense, but whatever I've written is ultimately an attempt to explain those two feelings. In terms of the environmental problems we face, both parts or dimensions of transcendence are utterly important. Because we will only get out of the fix we are in if we begin to understand that we are but a small part of a larger creation, and thus not warranted in making endless demands upon the world. And if we remember that as human beings, each one of us is not the most important human being on the face of the earth, but that we badly need to begin a deep and radical program of sharing things with each other, loving each other in the most practical and deep ways. We won't stop the greenhouse effect short of figuring out how people in China will also have enough to live dignified, decent lives without destroying the environment. That will only happen if we share wealth and technology with them, and if we moderate our own demands and stop setting the materially excessive example for the world that we set for ourselves here.

BW: And for that we need to be reminded there are more vital and pleasurable ways of living, of living from within.

WM: Yes; I don't even have very good words for it. You just don't need so much if you can persuade someone to go spend some time alone outside. It takes care of itself. Just as when you persuade kids to start volunteering someplace when they're fourteen. It changes the course of their lives.

BW: As we end this conversation together, I'm aware of how we benefit from good conversation and good conversation partners. Yet this conversation also reminds me that we need solitude. We really need time just for listening of another sort.

WM: I certainly need that. Silence and solitude are the most difficult commodities to come by in 20th-century America. We all probably need a good deal more of that. Not of loneliness, but of solitude, for loneliness is easy to come by.