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Environmental Humanists Respond to the World Scientists' Warning to Humanity



## Passionate Specificity

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# Passionate Specificity

by Ann Fisher-Wirth



## Abstract

*I am a Professor of English and Director of the Interdisciplinary Minor in Environmental Studies at the University of Mississippi. Mississippi is a conservative state, and environmental education is not part of many schools' general curricula. As a result, many Mississippians have little awareness of or interest in environmental issues, and that includes some students when they begin the course "Humanities and the Environment," the mandatory gateway course for the minor, which I teach every year. Last spring, I interviewed my students regarding the role that the environmental humanities can play in confronting our dire climate emergency. This, in general, is what my students cited as the power of the environmental humanities: to engage the senses, to make us more attentive to the world around us, to stimulate the heart and the imagination. "To a large population," one biology major said, "sciences are meaningless without a story, an emotionally driven story, that is fact-based. By nature, science is devoid of sympathy. The humanities bring emotion and therefore empathy." Another, also in biology, concurred. "The humanities supplement scientific understanding," she said; "they incorporate questions of value, ethics, and history." Whereas science gives statistics, "the humanities make instances real." And because the instances are made real, people are made to care.*

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## About the Author

*Ann Fisher-Wirth's sixth book of poems is The Bones of Winter Birds (Terrapin Books, 2019); her fifth, Mississippi, is a poetry/photography collaboration with Maude Schuyler Clay (Wings Press, 2018). With Laura-Gray Street, Ann coedited The Ecopoetry Anthology (Trinity UP, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition 2020). A senior fellow of the Black Earth Institute, she has received numerous awards, including Fulbrights to Switzerland and Sweden and several residencies and poetry fellowships. She directs the Interdisciplinary Minor in Environmental Education at the University of Mississippi and is Principal Investigator for a 2020-2021 NEH Planning Grant, "Environmental Literacy and Education in North Mississippi." A Professor of English, she also teaches yoga in Oxford, Mississippi.*

## Passionate Specificity

*Ann Fisher-Wirth*

*Nature seemingly provides no moral guidance; mass extinction is another of her many flavors. Neither can moral questions be answered by our culture's obsession with policy think tanks, scientific reports, or legal contests. I believe that the answers, or their beginnings, are found in our quiet windows on the whole. Only by examining the fabric that holds and sustains us can we see our place and, therefore, our responsibilities. . . . To unravel life's cloth is to scorn a gift. Worse, it is to destroy a gift that even hardheaded science tells us is immeasurably valuable. We discard the gift in favor of a self-created world that we know is incoherent and cannot be sustained.*  
—David George Haskell

I direct the Interdisciplinary Minor in Environmental Studies at the University of Mississippi; I'm also an English professor and a yoga teacher. One mandatory course for the minor is ENVS 101, Humanities and the Environment. It is actually as demanding as a 400-level class but listed at the 100 level so freshmen and sophomores can take it. In this class, we read a variety of books, which, this semester, include Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, Elizabeth Kolbert's *The Sixth Extinction*, Lester R. Brown's *Full Planet, Empty Plates*, David George Haskell's *The Forest Unseen*, Richard Power's novel *The Overstory*, Thich Nhat Hanh's *The World We Have: A Buddhist Approach to Peace and Ecology*, and excerpts from Pope Francis' Encyclical, *Laudato Si'*. Students also keep nature journals and reading journals, attend talks and/or films, take part in Earth Day activities, complete and present research projects, and participate in field trips. Some of the students have declared a minor in Environmental Studies, but the course is open to anyone. Some are majoring in the natural sciences, mostly biology—but we also have students with a wide variety of other majors, including public policy, art, history, international studies, English, psychology, and anthropology. Some begin the class with a firm knowledge of environmental issues and the environmental crisis. However, Mississippi is a conservative state, and environmental education is not part of many

schools' general curricula. As a result, many Mississippians have little awareness of or interest in environmental issues, and that includes some students when they begin the course. What is so rewarding is that they quickly become involved. Our class emphasizes discussion, and by mid-semester, every one of the nineteen students is passionately engaged. Witnessing this engagement with a course called "Humanities and the Environment," it occurred to me: What a perfect group to help me consider how the environmental humanities can confront the implications of our dire climate emergency. So we took some time in class to talk about it.

Over one hundred years ago, the novelist Joseph Conrad (1953) wrote, "My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel—it is, before all, to make you see. That—and no more, and it is everything" (107). And this, in general, is what my students cited as the power of the environmental humanities: to engage the senses, to make us more attentive to the world around us, to stimulate the heart and the imagination. "To a large population," one biology major said, "sciences are meaningless without a story, an emotionally driven story, that is fact-based. By nature, science is devoid of sympathy. The humanities bring emotion and therefore empathy." Another, also in biology, concurred. She harkened back to what Pope Francis (2015), in *Laudato Si'*, calls the "technocratic paradigm" the dominant attitude in our culture that science can solve all problems and there can be a technological fix for everything. "The humanities supplement scientific understanding," she said; "they incorporate questions of value, ethics, and history." They present facts in a form that engages readers; whereas science gives statistics, "the humanities make instances real." And because the instances are made real, people are made to care.

One woman pointed out, though, that many people *don't* care about the climate emergency, including plenty of students at the University of Mississippi. In Mississippi, President Trump will easily win his bid for re-election. It's a Republican state, and one in which many elementary and high schools do not offer environmental education. Some public figures, of course, flatly refuse to accept the notion of climate change; they do not believe there's any emergency. This ignorance of the issues is made possible by the fact that, in our technologically advanced first-world nation, until the coronavirus hit we mostly have been sheltered from environmental realities. Again and again I have heard recently, "The economy's good." Everything seems accessible, everything seems limitless. In my class, one student said, "Until now I didn't even know what a food desert was. And I didn't know that, growing up in the Mississippi Delta, I lived in one."

"So then, why do *you* care?" I asked my class. "It's in our nature to care," one said—"To care for the self and those you love." Another, who has traveled to China and India,

expanded this: “I live a comfortable life in a wealthy nation but lots don’t, so it would be reprehensible not to care.” And another took it beyond the human: “Because this is the world I live in. There is an intrinsic, healing value in our relationship with the environment. And art that expresses that awareness enables us to know and experience it.”

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On my campus, outside the Student Union, there is a huge catalpa tree. Also popularly known as Shawnee wood, cigar tree, and bean tree, the tree “commonly called catalpa or catawba, is a genus of flowering plants in the family Bignoniaceae, native to warm temperate and subtropical regions of North America, the Caribbean, and East Asia” (Wikipedia 2020). In herbal medicine, teas and poultices are made from the bark and leaves, and used for various ailments, though the roots are highly toxic. The Southern catalpa, *Catalpa bignonioides*, which is what we have in Mississippi, has heart-shaped leaves, frothy white flowers, and long, slender seedpods. It can grow up to fifty feet tall, and its lifespan is said to be between fifty and one hundred fifty years.

I had seen and admired the tree on my campus for years. One day, passing by on my way to class, I heard a biology professor tell her students, who were standing around taking selfies with it, that it probably predated Columbus—that, instead of being possibly 150 years old, it was probably more than 500. Suddenly the tree, which I had loved, became truly numinous, and various bits of knowledge coalesced to become this prose poem:

### Catalpa

This tree is older than Columbus. Ten years ago my honors students standing in a ring could barely get their arms around it. I took their picture—hands joined, cheeks against the rough wood. Mostly they loved it but one guy told my friend who supervised his lab, *She made us hug a tree. It was the worst class ever.*

When I think of the tree as a sapling, my mind enters a great quiet. Before the Depression, the yellow fever, before the burning of Oxford, before the University Greys left their classrooms for the battlefield and died or were wounded to a man at Pickett’s Charge, and before Princess Hoka of the Chickasaws set out with her people on the Trail of Tears, this tree sank its roots deep and deeper into the nurturing ground. Generations moved about beneath its boughs, spoke and loved and died as it grew.

And here it is, still, in the clattering present.

Ten years ago I could walk around it, smell it, stroke the lichens on its bark. If I put my hand into the hollow in its trunk right near the ground, it was always cold, always comforting, no matter how brutal the summer, as if some dark, mysterious lungs kept serenely breathing.

Now fences surround it, stakes hold up its branches. No longer do art majors loll on the benches and smoke at the little table under its big-leaf shade. A sign warns NO CLIMBING: KEEP OFF. Still, every spring, wet tender leaves unfurl on branches jagged as broken bones, and the tree bursts out in a froth of white petals.

And every spring, the preachers line the sidewalk near the tree, and thrust their Bibles as we pass by. *Repent and be saved*, they say. *Turn or burn*. I want to tell them, *Turn around, turn around, and look at the tree*.

I'd like to think that this prose poem offers an example of a fruitful relationship between science and environmental humanities. The tree never would have claimed my attention so dramatically had I not overheard the scientific remark about its age, which triggered my musings on time and history, all that the tree has seen and all the ways in which the ground it inhabits has been altered. But the tree would not claim *your* attention, whoever and wherever you are, if you did not have the prose poem. It lives, and lives anew in language. It is seen.

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We humans are destroying the world. Anthropogenic change is causing what has come to be called the sixth mass extinction, in which, as the Pulitzer Prize-winning science writer Elizabeth Kolbert (2016) reports, “one third of all reef-building corals, a third of all fresh-water mollusks, a third of sharks and rays, a quarter of all mammals, a fifth of all reptiles, and a sixth of all birds are headed toward oblivion,” and the mass extinction rate for amphibians—“the most endangered class of animals”—may be “as much as forty-five thousand times higher than the background rate” (17–18). The earth is in a state of what, in a private conversation, the activist and writer Janisse Ray described to me as “global climate disruption,” with abnormal and unstable weather patterns, including violent storms. NASA reports that 2016 was the hottest year on record, followed by 2019, and *The Guardian* reports that this past January was the hottest January globally for the past 150 years. Aquifers are being depleted; rivers are running dry; desertification is spreading; clearcutting, including the clearcutting of rainforests, proceeds, with the consequent release of enormous amounts of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere; air is polluted; water is polluted; ocean dead zones are expanding; and the

list goes on and on. Crop yields decrease as temperatures rise; as GeoEngineering and other sources report, photosynthesis stops at 104 degrees Fahrenheit. The consequences for human suffering are enormous. The World Health Organization (n.d.) reports that worldwide, around a billion people lack access to an improved water source, and 2.6 billion lack adequate sanitation. As many as 25,000 people die from hunger every day, according to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations; that adds up to around 9.1 million people a year. Over 3 million children die of hunger and undernutrition (which makes children more vulnerable to illness) every year.

It seems to me that the environmental arts and humanities play two major roles in confronting the implications of this. The first is simply that they enable us to articulate anxiety, shock, and sorrow. “Solastalgia,” a neologism coined by philosopher Glenn Albrecht (2007), combines the words “solace” and “nostalgia,” and refers to the existential anguish felt at the knowledge of the loss and suffering caused by climate change. Much work being done in the arts these days is solastalgic—and this expression of grief is important, both in itself, and because such a “timely utterance,” in Wordsworth’s phrase, can give our thoughts “relief” and enable us once more to become “strong” And despair leads only to inaction. Second, environmental arts and humanities engage with living beings, not just statistics. Toward the end of *Walden*, Henry David Thoreau ([1854] 2004) writes of listening to a bird, “O the evening robin, at the end of a New England summer day! If I could ever find the twig he sits upon! I mean *he*; I mean *the twig*” (254) And because of the passionate specificity of this image, the bird and its song are alive for us 170 years later.

“Soon it will be too late to shift course away from our failing trajectory, and time is running out,” write the authors of the article “World Scientists’ Warning to Humanity: A Second Notice” (Ripple et al. 2020). “We must recognize, in our day-to-day lives and in our governing institutions, that Earth with all its life is our only home” (1028). When we stop denying the reality of ecological death, and when we become aware of the beauty and meaningfulness of earth and all its creatures, they reveal themselves as unutterably precious. Gus Speth (2015), co-founder of the Natural Resources Defense Council, has said,

I used to think the top environmental problems were biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse and climate change. I thought that with 30 years of good science we could address those problems. I was wrong. The top environmental problems are selfishness, greed and apathy, and to deal with those we need a

spiritual and cultural transformation. And we scientists don't know how to do that.

But the environmental arts and humanities *do*.

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