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How Green Is My Valley?

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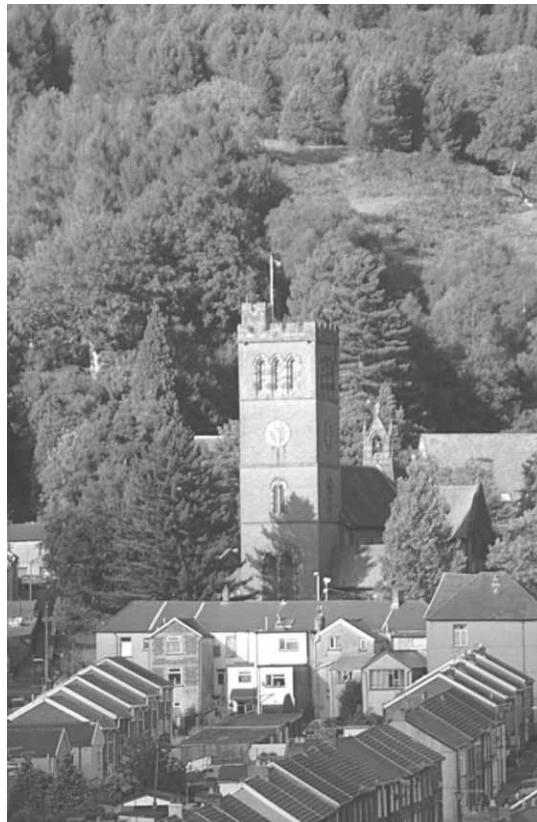
An immediate best-seller on its publication in 1939, the novel *How Green Was My Valley* is an evocation of a mining community in South Wales, strong at its heart, but tragic in its downfall with the flooding of the mine and the death of the father of the one telling the story.

Richard Llewellyn is the author and Huw Morgan is the storyteller, as he looks back thirty years to his boyhood in the Valley with tender and vivid memories:

“The wind held up above his head the sound of the choir from the Chapel for me to hear, and give it back, but in those few notes I heard the rich, male voice of the men of the Valley, golden, brave, and clean, with heart, and with loftiness of spirit, and I knew that their voice was my voice for I was part of them and they were part of me, and the Valley was part of us and we were part of the Valley, not one more than the other, never one without the other. Of me was the Valley and the Valley was of me, and every blade of grass, and every stone, and every leaf of every tree, and every knob of coal or drop of water, or stick or branch or flower or grain of pollen, or creature living, or dust in the ground, all were of me as my blood, my bones, or the notions from my mind.”

It is quite evident that ‘living green’ for Richard Llewellyn was not just a matter of venerating the green of the flora of the Valley, but a whole way of life in which the humans and the plants were intertwined at the very deepest psychological as well as physical levels. The Valley, with its myriad life forms was an organic, one might almost say, ‘organismic’ whole. For me also, green living is as much

about vibrancy as it is about sustainability. (Note that Llewellyn’s mining community was not sustainable, since the coal reserves were limited, but for its limited duration, it was touched by the breath of life and love). It has to do with the quality of our living.



I write this during the height of an English Spring. Life bursts forth wherever I look. Its heady scents, fabulous colours and beautiful bird songs delight nostrils, eyes and ears. We long that the seasonal round, that produces such magic, will continue unabated for the continuing delight of our children and grandchildren. But we also know this cannot be taken for granted, and that part of living green has to include taking responsible action to advance the cause of the natural world. And when it comes to producing a really workable formula for effective action, I have never found a better one than ‘the

three aitches’ – head, heart and hands. Let’s try it here, as we consider our own ‘Valley’:

Use your head.

Knowing the ‘lie of the land’ is essential to the serious business of living green. It’s worth starting with the bigger picture within which our own special ‘Valley’ is located, since a certain distance lends a valuable perspective, as well as enchantment, to the view. For those of us living in England, the perfect answer is close to hand – I refer to the very recent Governmental Report ‘The State of the Natural Environment 2008’ (see <http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/sone/default.htm> for full details). The report is divided into three main parts – the values of the natural environment, the pressures and risks to these values, and the responses currently being used to conserve and enhance the natural environment. Unusually for a report from a governmental advisory body, the language is fresh and appealing, and this greatly helps when a report is 330 pages long! You can easily pick and choose what you want to look at, once you have glanced at the page-long Introduction and the very helpful Quick Find section at the end of the report. And, immensely valuable for an old duffer like me with a very poor memory for detail, a really comprehensive Glossary of Terms just after the Quick Find. Most appealing of all is the mass of up to date information about the grasslands, heathland, woodland, wood-pasture and parkland, arable, orchards and hedgerows, open waters, wetland, inland rock, urban and brownfield land, coastal and marine (very special to

me, living on the North Devon coast), and a fascinating species 'overview'.

What's really heartening for us at GreenSpirit is that the report acknowledges the intrinsic value of the natural environment. It even uses the term 'spiritual' in one or two places, and although this aspect is not stressed one cannot but help feeling that the authors have a deep love for their subject matter, and what can be more spiritual than that? Indeed, this for me is a beautiful example of the head and the spirit joining to speak boldly to our generation about the most precious resource of our planet - its land and seas. I should add that the report provides evidence in geographical form wherever possible, so that a regional breakdown is everywhere apparent. This gives us all a head start (!) in locating significant background features as we explore our own special 'Valley'.

Open your heart

Living green is not for wimps. It needs a 'tough love' approach, and this is where we get to the heart of the matter - if you'll forgive the pun. What can possibly empower the will, not just to start out, but 'keep on keeping on'? This was a problem faced by the Transition Town project, described by Hilary Prentice in this year's Spring Journal. There, remember, she described the formation of the Heart and Soul group:

'Here was an opportunity to bring the aspect of inner work, of personal process, to a big project of outer transformation of the very structures by which we live - and we were all welcome, very literally to sit down at the same table...' (she goes on to describe the many ways in which the Group helps to keep the vision fresh and the work of the project on-task).

What we can learn from Transition Totnes is that living green is the

work of many heads, hearts and hands supporting and encouraging each other. It is a noble ideal to go out on a limb with a personal pet green project, but few of us can endure the toil and inevitable heartbreaks which accompany swimming against the tide of public apathy, and even hostility, when we follow our green dreams.

Perhaps here I can put in a plug for our GreenSpirit Annual Gathering in September this year (see www.greenspirit.org.uk/ag2008). Our theme is 'Relating with Earth - loving life, receiving love, empowering ourselves to care for creation'. People might ask why we feel a need to empower ourselves to love and care for creation. Surely it all comes naturally? We watch a beautiful sunset, sigh with pleasure, and vow we shall be faithful unto death to this majestic vision of earthly magnificence....until the rain comes on the morrow! Then comes the emotional crash as we curse our fickleness, and it is just at this point that we need the consolation and fresh challenge that like minds and hearts - our friends in the faith - can give us.

'Busy' your hands

Our bodies are made for action, for use. And of all our limbs, our hands best express this 'business'. We have many epithets about this e.g. 'getting your hands dirty', 'many hands make light work', 'being handy'. With good background information and a willing heart, we are many steps already along the green pathway. What next? I suggest we engage those major organs of seeing, hearing and smelling. Some good examples of this are in the other articles in this Journal, where we can see that it is possible to start on the green pathway in our own 'Valley' - our homes, our schools and our communities. Living green means just what it says - living lightly, mindfully and lovingly in the daily round.

And then what?

Well, if we have enough time and energy to spare, I suggest we widen our gaze, listen carefully and smell the air of our 'bio-region', that area of the natural landscape - independent of artificial, human boundaries - in which our 'Valley' sits. Sooner or later our attuned senses will recognise what needs to be done, and what we, perhaps along with others, can do about it. In my case, it became apparent, after several years, to a group of us living along the North Devon coast that our bio-region needed/wanted both protection and enhancement (it's been a genuine two-way dialogue!). Avenues of work and influence have opened up, as we have become progressively aware of the ecological situation. Hey Presto, just recently, CoastWise North Devon was born!

Of course we might widen our gaze yet more to encompass a national, or even global, area of need. A sense of place can take in both little and large when our head, heart and hands are fully engaged. Looking back thirty years over his life, Huw Morgan muses:

'An age of goodness I knew, and badness too, mind, but more of good than bad, I will swear. At least we knew good food, and good work, and goodness in men and women....But you have gone now, all of you that were so beautiful when you were quick with life. Yet not gone, for you are still a living truth inside my mind.'

How green was Huw's Valley?
How green is ours'?

Note: *How Green Was My Valley* was first published in 1939 by Michael Joseph and reprinted by Penguin Classics in 2001.

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