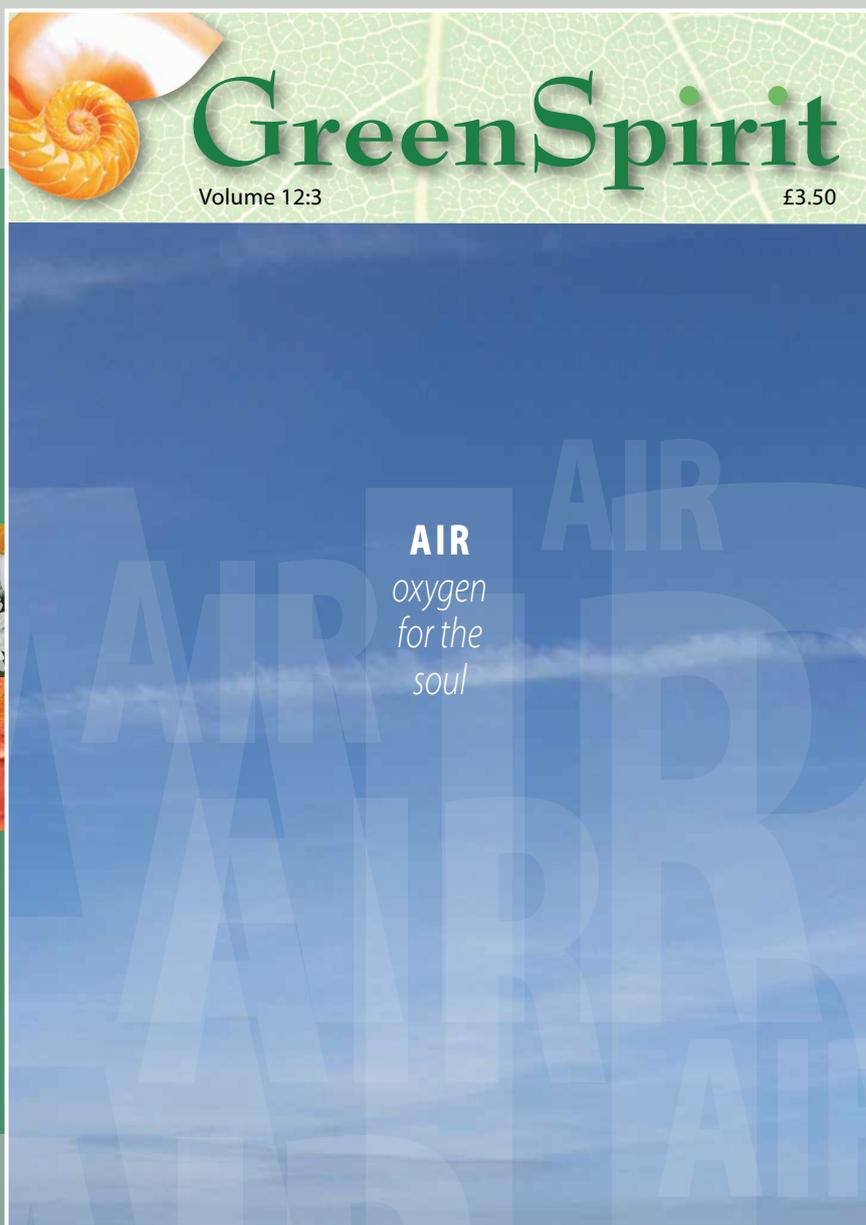


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The Hurricane

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"Friend enjoying an early morning cup of tea in front of our tent."

A force ten wind is officially described as a storm but a force fourteen is a hurricane. I know this because living on the Hebridean island, Erraid, these things mattered. We withstood the storms pretty well as the buildings had been designed to cope with them and I found them one of the more exciting features of island life. Only once did we have a hurricane and even then we had relatively little serious damage. But it was a different animal. One of our heavy wooden outdoor loos, which took four men to carry, was not properly secured and was lifted and moved several yards across the ground. It felt good to be safely inside a sturdy stone cottage!

My next encounter with a hurricane was a very different affair. I had gone with a friend to make a camping retreat on an uninhabited island a little further south, one of the Garvellachs. A local fisherman took us out on his trawler and we climbed up the steep side of the island to our camping ground. We put up our tents and cooked our supper on a camp fire. The weather was dreadful, lots of rain and wind and no sun. I had a strong and serviceable sleeping tent which kept me dry, once I had learnt which way to point it. My friend was less fortunate and her tiny bell tent was a constant problem. During the day we had a larger tent but because of the difficulty of carrying so much equipment we had only brought its outer shell. Nevertheless it was a wonderful and exciting way to make a retreat and I never remember hearing a word of complaint from my friend who was less used to Hebridean weather than I was. We explored the island and found ancient bee-hive cells built by monks who were, alas, routinely murdered by marauding Vikings. There were also the roofless remains of a beautifully made stone chapel where my friend eventually took the day tent to sleep in and find some limited shelter from the driving wind and rain.

One day a couple anchored their yacht beside the island and climbed up to explore the famous monks' cells. We

chatted with them for a little while until in the middle of the conversation one of the visitors looked at his watch and said, "Well, we had better be going before the hurricane arrives." My friend and I looked at each other. "Did you say hurricane?" we asked in horror. They said, yes, it was due in about twenty minutes and seemed surprised that we had no radio to keep up to date with the weather news. So off they went while we prepared ourselves for the worst. Soon we saw an ominous green-black bank of cloud appearing between the islands. We made our tent as safe as possible and sat inside and tried to meditate while the hurricane roared around us. From time to time I would go out to check that all our pegs were firmly in the ground as I knew that if even one of them were loose the tent would almost certainly be lifted up and disappear before we had time to blink.

I often learn my most profound spiritual lessons from nature and this turned out to be one such occasion. As I tried to meditate I could find no peace only the fear of being at the mercy of the terrible wind and rain as our fragile tent was buffeted by their force. Noise and chaos reigned and when I inadvertently touched the canvas, water poured in. I realised that while I could usually find my peace in nature now it was impossible. I had to look inside to find stillness. When I did this I was able to allow the hurricane to be a hurricane. I stopped mentally fighting the weather and found I could be in the hurricane and at peace. I was able to cope in the present moment but I could not cope with the thought that our tent might be blasted away and we would have to survive the rest of our stay with no daytime shelter. Nevertheless I now knew that if and when such a time should occur as long as I stayed totally in the moment I would still have all I needed to cope. Thankfully it never came to this, and just as I arrived at that moment of peace and confidence my friend did the same and we looked at each other and laughed out loud.

Whatever it was I had gone to the island to learn was in that experience. The next day the sun shone and I remember lying back and enjoying its beautiful warmth and saying in my delight, "You know if heaven is better than this, I'm really not interested." And later that hurricane experience gave me the confidence to keep my peace of soul when over the next few months the chaos round about me was at a much more human level.

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