



James S. Mastaler

foreword by Holmes Rolston III

Woven Together

FAITH AND JUSTICE FOR
THE EARTH AND THE POOR

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Foreword

Weaving What Together?

BY HOLMES ROLSTON III

YOU HAVE IN YOUR hand an intense effort to weave things together, although Mastaler will instantly insist that the weaving is of words and life. This book in hand is pointless unless it points you toward living in a “more just and verdant world” (94). But that requires interweaving multiple dimensions of what we as individuals and as communities think and do. That requires “the creative potential of powerful storytelling” (3). Perhaps a foreword can help if it considers what is woven together in this powerful story.

What is mainly woven together is Christian concern for Earth and for the poor on Earth, environmental ethics, and environmental justice. “If we first acknowledge the indivisible necessity of both economic development and ecological conservation for shared planetary flourishing, then we have our twin pillars of sustainable development” (36.)

Two other themes interwoven here are the theoretical and the practical. In an analysis of medical care in developing nations, we encounter a little girl in rural Bangladesh named Hawa, with failing kidneys as a result of severe malnourishment and dehydration. Trying to distinguish the different degrees and causes of poverty, we decide to ask a poor, disabled woman in Zimbabwe to define poverty: “What kind of definition of poverty do you expect me to give you, which is better than what you have seen with your naked eyes” (29)?

Two further interwoven themes are the past and the present, from ancient Genesis to Pope Francis’ recent encyclical letter, *Laudato si’*. The pope

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himself sets an example for us, drawing on the past, adapting it for the present, and with an eye for the future (51). We visit Augustine of Hippo and St. Thomas. One might think that the ancient seers, whatever their wisdom, have little to say to help us with global warming. They didn't even know they were on a planet. "Many of the old stories simply do not incorporate images of the world as we now know it, and they do not cultivate the kind of moral concern for other species, and the planetary life support systems on which we all depend. Critically and creatively imagining new stories is an essential way to usher in a dramatic shift in the predominating collective consciousness" (74–5).

But maybe what those who knew the law and the prophets did know about human nature, our self-interests, our selfishness, our short-sightedness is a key to solving this new unprecedented contemporary problem of curbing global warming. They fully recognized how humans turn in on themselves, rather than seek the common good. Mastaler can be an insightful guide in an effort to help the world "shift from a generally and overly anthropocentric approach to a responsibly retrieved and yet newly constructed creation-centered framework more capable of supporting planetary flourishing" (75).

Mastaler is challenged to interweave human uniqueness and human embeddedness in nature, humans fitted into the ecosystems they inhabit. "Human continuity and participation in the larger universe story frame perceptions of the human person with special or distinctive attributes as simultaneously wound up with and connected via a shared evolutionary story to every other being with which our species shares the planet" (73). Humans and nature are not polar opposites. Replace divergence with convergence. Figure out how you are "distinctive" and "simultaneously wound up," integrated into everything else. See if Mastaler helps. "I wish more of us could approach the world with the faith of a peony" (20).

He seeks "enfleshed spirituality" (66). Classically, we might have called this the human sensing of simultaneous transcendence and immanence. The contemporary challenge is to blend the spectacular new powers gained in science and technology, distinctive to *Homo sapiens*, with wisdom about using and constraining these powers. "As our collective human power and presence on the Earth grows, the need for careful, judicious, and humble wielding of this newfound power also increases" (98). Enfleshed and embedded, as are the other animal species, yet we are considering

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geoengineering the planet. Weave those disparate dimensions of human nature together! Get yourself an “earthy sacramentalism” (62).

This book in your hand interweaves the discursive and the pointed, surveying what has been said by dozens of others, often ending with an aphorism to provoke you to further thought. “Cultivate a gritty kind of faith” (96)! The book reconsiders accounts of incarnation and redemption across the centuries of Christian theology, working out this enfleshed spirituality. The sum of it: “There is no salvation from the world, only salvation with the world” (71). The book recalls and surveys cosmologies, ancient, medieval, contemporary, East and West. Then: “We are the cosmos writ small” (70).

We find ourselves wondering whether and how we can interweave rights, values, instrumental values, intrinsic values, goods, goods-of-their-own, legal standing, natural law, moral law, civic law, ownership, animals, sentience, persons, respect, reverence. Mastaler tries to put everything together. The weaving together of these ideas will take some rather sharp distinctions, or else it will just be a muddling together, bringing as much confusion as clarity. Readers will watch for any use of weasel words where different parties to the conversation seem to agree because they use the same word; but, since they mean different things by this same word, the apparent agreement is superficial. “Sustain” and related words occur some sixty times in the text. “Sustainability” - everybody wants it - but sustainable what? Sustainable growth? Development? Profits? Resources? Biosphere? The devil is in the details. Mastaler chases these interwoven details, and invites you to come along.

A particularly devilish problem is how to weave together “myth” and “truth.” Scholars have found this perennially challenging. Mastaler calls for “a kind of myth-making on an epic scale, which is to say, one that is up to the equally epic task of ushering in ‘a period when humans would be present to the planet in a mutually beneficial manner.’ New myths are needed that are capable of penetrating the deepest levels of human consciousness. They are needed to inspire and motivate changes to deeply held assumptions one holds about oneself in relation to others and the world” (72).

Of course, if this adventure is simply choosing what new or old myths we prefer, what spin we choose to put on ideas we have inherited or experiences we have had, then my myth is as good as yours, and yours as good as mine. We need some way of testing better and worse myths, which, hopefully, will better fit what we consider to be facts of the matter – about

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Earth, a planet in space, about the biosphere and what threats it faces, about human nature and decisionmaking. So watch how Mastaler mixes truth and myth, with his invitation “into the darkness with hearts ablaze” (77). You are going to be challenged to think big, to weave yourself into the Earth, into the cosmos. “Our consciousness, our curiosity, and our sense of wonder and awe are gifts the universe has brought into being through us, and we can use them to advance the flourishing of life across the cosmos” (73). Maybe you will wonder whether that is too grandiose. Humans are the wonder of wonders on wonderland Earth, but their influence is quite limited in a cosmos that is 93 billion light years across. But you will not wonder about Mastaler’s hyperimmense vision.

Here, in his conclusion, is the hoped-for interweaving:

“I so desperately wish more of us would see and engage the world in this way—to more clearly and more often experience that deeply mysterious and seductive sense of joy and peace that really is all around us. We only have to look for it. Seek God in all things, through the microscope, the telescope, and everywhere in between. The same energy that brought the cosmos into being, sustains it still; it fills your lungs, it courses through your veins, and it animates your spirit. There is hope in that.” (107)

Now more than ever, it's critical that religious stories encompass a call to moral responsibility for the earth and to the global poor. But, the divorce between religious faith and science has left many people feeling unmoored and adrift at a time when we ought to be drawing closer to nature and each other.

It is a theological activity to see the world as it really is—to look its suffering squarely in the face and tend to a wounded world. The global poor, especially women among them, are some of the world's most disenfranchised people. Their realities must inform the conversations about God and the world that people of faith are having in the church.

There is no salvation from the world, only salvation with the world. This means learning to live as a member of a community of mutual responsibility—to look inward and ask ourselves how we might turn outward and live differently. Concern for nature and social justice must become a central part of Christian moral life.

“A good-hearted and useful effort to bridge some of the gaps between communities of faith and the environmental justice movement. The author understands how important it is that our campaigns are deeply rooted in the lives of the poor—this is the best lens with which to view the world going forward.”

—**BILL MCKIBBEN**, Schumann Distinguished Scholar in Environmental Studies at Middlebury College

“*Woven Together* is a gem—an invaluable weave of theology and ethics in the context of environmental concerns and social justice. Mastaler's personal stories make for a highly engaging book, one that will appeal to all who are concerned with the future of our planet.”

—**MARY EVELYN TUCKER**, Forum on Religion and Ecology at Yale University

“This passionate and thoughtful exploration of difficult and often painful issues is rooted in wide intellectual knowledge and broad personal experience of human and non-human suffering.”

—**ROGER S. GOTTLIEB**, author of *Morality and the Environmental Crisis* and *Political and Spiritual: Essays on Religion, Environment, Disability, and Justice*

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