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CLIMATE GENERATION

Awakening to Our Children's Future

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“Leaving an inhabitable planet to future generations
is, first and foremost, up to us.”

Pope Francis

For my boys

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FOREWORD _____

There are many reasons why science has failed to sensitise the person in the street regarding the urgency of tackling climate change. Lack of political leadership, powerful vested interest groups, and communication failings, are among the usual excuses expressed to explain why the most pressing problem of the twenty-first century does not occupy a more prominent position in the consciousness of the average person. But perhaps a less well publicised failing is an inability to bring the issues down to a personal level, a level which impinges on the everyday life experience of people, causing them to question their priorities, and consider disrupting their conventional and sometimes comfortable way of life.

Such a journey of transformation is related in this text by Lorna Gold. Drawing on her life experiences from childhood in the shadow of a Scottish oil refinery to motherhood in an Irish country town, she positions herself as a parent picking up danger signals for the future of her two children. In a highly personal account she builds a poignant picture of someone who has wrestled with her emotions as she embarked on her journey of awakening regarding climate change. The contradictions between mother and activist, the need to see beyond the day-to-day mundane priorities, the growing awareness that time is running out – all are forensically

examined in a narrative that is compelling to read. The language is straightforward and accessible and always deeply personal. One cannot but share with the author her growing acceptance of the conflicting emotions swirling around her as she seeks to give her two young sons a wider experience of a natural world increasingly absent from the formative years of most children in the developed world. Yet there is no guilt trip in evidence here. Certainly the injustice of climate change insofar as it impacts on those least able to bear the burden is well explored, and the author's background in the Irish Catholic Development Agency, Trócaire, makes her ideally qualified to comment on this. But there is no moralising from a height in this text. Rather there is a cry for understanding and acceptance that we cannot continue on the present path as self-centred, consumerism-obsessed individuals and imagine we are protecting our children's future. The book opens with the analogy of a lioness protecting her cubs and warning off any external threats. Like the lioness, the author's cry of warning becomes louder as the text proceeds, exploring the political perspectives of Naomi Klein and Bill McKibben and the faith-based environmentalism of Pope Francis. Eventually the cry becomes a roar that seeks to enlist all generations, including the delightfully named 'raging grannies'!

This is an eminently readable book which flows seamlessly across a multitude of themes, ranging from the scientific to the psychological. The plain language grabs the reader throughout and captures the essence of the message very successfully. It was obviously a catharsis for the author personally to come to terms with the conflict between the treadmill of everyday life

and the need to radically change the organisation of society to tackle climate change. But maybe it is a catharsis we all have to undergo eventually, and in writing this book Lorna Gold provides insight into the turbulent and transformative journey that lies ahead.

JOHN SWEENEY,
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NOTICING

Many years ago I went on safari in northern Tanzania. I hired a local guide and took a trip to the Ngorongoro conservation area, a world heritage site which is home to the colossal Ngorongoro crater, an impenetrable fortress some six hundred metres deep. From the outside, it looks stark and hostile; yet its exterior hides one of the most beautiful places on earth. As we reached the summit of the winding, precarious road to the crater's edge, we were greeted by Maasai warriors dressed in their traditional red checked garb. Beyond them, the vista was a vast African plain, brimming with all kinds of life. A vision so perfect, its existence seemed almost implausible. Elephants, giraffes, baboons, wildebeests, hyenas; every animal, large and small, was cradled in this Noah's Ark. Towering, fat baobab trees decorated the lush savanna. Standing there on the edge of the crater was like walking straight into the opening scene from *The Lion King*.

As we drove down the steep track, bumping our way to the plains below, we spotted a pride of lions. What luck to come across these majestic creatures! The lions were sprawled about, lazily digesting the morning's prey and enjoying the early morning sunshine. Behind them, a few yards away, stood the hyenas, ready to move in when the lions' share was gone. Behind them, circling high above, were vultures,

ready to swoop down once the hyenas had had their fill. These awesome creatures looked so different in their natural environment compared to the glass-fronted enclosure in a zoo where I was accustomed to seeing them. They exuded power and elegance in equal measure. Content among their own, they had a familiar gentleness about them as they relaxed together and played.

As I watched on silently, I spotted a lioness with a newborn cub. I felt deeply privileged to witness something so rare and intimate. Seeing my excitement, my guide wanted to take a closer look. We eased the jeep forward, trying to close in for a better picture. I almost had the perfect shot when we heard a few low growls and heads began to rise from their relaxed slumber. I had already taken enough photos. But my guide probably felt his tip was dependent on the perfect shot, so he continued to edge in, closer, closer, closer. Suddenly, the lioness, who had been gently tending her young cub, sprang to her feet. Tail pointed upward, back arched, she stared straight at us and made a terrifying roar that pierced the still, hazy air. Echoes could be heard right across the crater, as the warning bounced around its walls and returned to us amplified. Instantly, all of the lions were then on their feet, all of them roaring, all of them staring at us; the intruders. We knew we were no longer welcome. Our skidding tyres sent red dust flying.

The roar of that lioness still rings in my ears and reverberates in my whole body. It was a life lesson in respect for the power of nature and our vulnerability to other beings, especially when we are guests in their habitats. It still reminds

me never to outstay my welcome and to be conscious of the warning signals around me. Above all, however, that incident speaks to me of something awesome and awe-inspiring that I also share with the lioness: a powerful instinct to protect my young from danger.

I really only understood that instinct, the fierceness and intensity of that love, when I had my own children. It is something so strong, deep, visceral, that it can overtake me. It can manifest itself at the most unexpected moments. One day I was out with my two boys who were riding their bikes. My youngest son was four and still trying to master the art of balancing on two wheels. We arrived at the top of a path winding down through a park beside a river. His older brother saw the challenge and freewheeled down to the bottom of the path at speed. Eager to copy his big brother, my younger son followed suit. However, at a certain point he lost control and came off the path – careering down the bank and headed straight for a gap in a hedge which led to a river. I was a few steps back. When I realised what was happening I yelled something, a strange cry, as I seemed to watch the scene in slow motion. I ran like I never ran before, adrenalin filling my whole body. Those few seconds seemed to last forever. I caught him just before he reached the hedge. I was shaking, terrified, relieved and held him so tight. Oblivious to the danger, he just smiled at me and told me he was fine. That night, I lay awake. I could feel the pain of those few moments of fear, of that protection instinct taking root.

Like the lioness, I will do anything to protect my young from danger. And that is why I decided to write this book. You

may well ask what on earth writing this book has to do with protecting my kids. I am writing this book in the hope that perhaps someone will read it – maybe you, maybe someone else – and understand a little more about what is happening to our world, particularly due to climate change and the real and present danger we are placing our own children in.

You certainly don't need to have your own children to understand what this book is about. Most people can grasp the kind of instinct to protect that exists between parent and child. We have all been children. All of us have, or have had, parents and grandparents. The vast majority of us have at some point been on the receiving end of that fierce love. It is the kind of love that instinctively sticks up for a child who is being bullied or drops everything without thinking at the sound of a certain cry for help. It is a love that would go to the ends of the earth if a child were sick, in the hope that somehow they might get better. It is the kind of love that gives the tightest hug and doesn't want to ever let go. It can be fierce.

This book is my personal story of waking up to the danger our children are in. It asks how we can protect them before it is too late. Just like my son on his bike, I fear their future is speeding out of control; and unless our protective instinct kicks in, we may lose what is most precious. We may do so unwittingly, without so much as a thought, often in pursuit of the best for our children. Yet we all have that instinct to protect deep inside us; it's in our DNA. It is essential to the survival of our species. Above all else, understanding climate change now is about coming face to face with our children's

future and that protective instinct. It is about safeguarding them against future harm. It is about cradling their dreams. To do that, we need to start joining the dots and see the connections that exist between our climate, our actions and their future.

The actual moment when I decided I just had to write this book, however, didn't come to me in any exotic place. It came to me while I was sitting upstairs on a bus, stuck in traffic on Dublin's north quays, on my way to give a talk about climate change in a church hall. It was an atypically mild, sunny afternoon in December. I remember the precise moment: I was looking out the window at The Croppies Acre, a memorial to those who died in the 1798 Rebellion.

As I was staring into the distance, my mind a thousand miles away, I suddenly noticed the garden was full of daffodils. I love daffodils. I think there is something so joyful about them, something that signals the end of winter and the start of spring. These were *not* the normal tiny green shoots peering up above the cold winter soil. No, these daffodils were fully grown, the crowns of yellow petals welcoming in the sunshine. Wait a minute ... rewind there. What did I just see? Yes, daffodils in *December*. As I looked again, I realised what a peculiar sight it was. There were no leaves on the trees, the sun was setting in the early afternoon, yet here were daffodils in full bloom.

I turned around to the young man next to me as if to say 'how weird is that?' But he had his headphones in, so I kept quiet. He would have probably thought I was a bit cracked anyway. I looked around at the passengers on the bus.

Everyone was peering at their phones, each in a little world of their own, so removed from the very peculiar scene outside the window. I wonder if anyone else even noticed the daffodils that day or was it just me? So I sat and thought. And thought. By the time I arrived at my stop, my mind was abuzz.

It seemed to me that those daffodils were trying to tell me something. I felt as if they were crying out and no one could hear them. They were silently screaming two words which none of us really wants to hear: climate change. An extraordinarily mild winter – the mildest on record – had caused them to bloom three months early. Everyone was talking about the weird weather, but nobody was joining the dots.

Thoughts were whirring around in my head: Why is it, I thought, that such an important issue is falling on so many deaf ears? How come we can't seem to grasp what is blatantly happening right under our noses and bring ourselves to take it seriously? How come we are ignoring what may well be the biggest threat for the future of the planet? Given that there are so many good people in this world – mums and dads, grannies and grandpas, aunts and uncles, sisters and brothers – who all care deeply about the children in their lives, is there anything I can do to change this situation? I thought about the lioness and her instinct to protect. And that's where the idea for this little book came into my head.

For me, trying to make sense of what is happening to our world has resulted in two essential sides of my life – being a parent and being an activist – colliding and becoming intermeshed. My activism has become an expression of my parenthood and vice versa. While campaigning, I often think

about what my children, and their children, will ask me when they grow up – ‘What did you do about the climate?’ ‘Did you know what we would face?’ ‘Where were you when we needed you to stand up for us and our future?’ These questions are so vivid in my mind, they keep me awake at night. They push me to take action and keep going when things seem hopeless. As a mother, I am constantly thinking about what I am teaching my children about our world – judging how to be truthful about what is happening, but also how to protect and nurture them, in the knowledge that their ability to deal with an increasingly uncertain future is in my hands.

And that is what this book is all about. It is my personal story of how I came to understand that certain things are happening to our world which are putting the prospect of our children having a peaceful and happy future at risk. There are of course many such risks to their future, but one problem stands out: climate change. It stands out because it is so huge. It also stands out because it is fixable, yet we choose to ignore it and hope it will go away.

This dawning took time, but was pierced by some startling light-bulb moments. It took place over a number of years and continues to this very day. It has been like piecing together the bits of a jigsaw puzzle. If I am totally honest, I fought it at first. Such was the magnitude of the story and the need for an urgent response, my first reaction was to turn away and hide behind the sofa. It is far easier in fact not to know. If you are fortunate enough to be living in a solid house on high ground in a rich country, ignorance is bliss where climate change is concerned. So is there a reason to keep looking?

The conviction that I need to do my bit to tackle this issue made me come to a personal decision. Not an easy one but a clear one. I might as well spend my short time here on this planet trying to do my part to help protect my children's future and that of the millions of children in the world. I may fail miserably, and probably fail each day, but I think it is a gamble worth taking. It is the only logical response to the feeling that as a parent and a citizen I need to raise my voice and do something to change things. And so I write with a sense of urgency, a plea to be heard.

BEGINNINGS _____

My interest in what is happening to our planet and to people in the developing world has been a driving force throughout my life. I came to Ireland in 2002 to work on these issues for Trócaire, the official overseas development agency of the Irish Catholic Church, but my interest goes right back to my teenage years. Like a whole generation of aid workers, I came of age to the soundtrack of ‘Do They Know It’s Christmas?’ and ‘We are the World’. Together with Bob and Bono and their Live Aid concert, we were going to feed the world. No, better – we were going to save it. I still remember when I was thirteen I mobilised my entire school to collect wellington boots for people in the Philippines after a cyclone! After that episode the headmaster rather embarrassingly dubbed me the ‘school conscience’. My thinking on how to help people has moved on somewhat from those days.

When I was around fourteen I did a geography project which really made me think about the environment around me. I still remember the smell of the project book, with its white padded wallpaper cover and spiral binding. Back in those days there was no Mr Google to ask, not even a basic computer to type up my project. Every project was like a piece of detective work. I loved it. This particular project was on my local environment. I lived in Scotland, right next to