

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

July 24, 2012 at 12:52pm

Memoir explores one man's journey to social justice

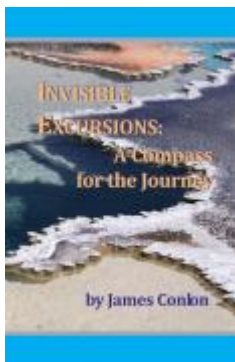
by Sharon Abercrombie

Eco Catholic

Invisible Excursions: A Compass for the Journey by Jim Conlon (Wyndham Hall Press) brings to mind intense "Where were you then?" memories, especially for those of us who were born into Catholic environments during the late 1930s and early 1940s.

We attended parochial schools, obediently learning the church's doctrine and commandments. We were told by the popular culture that getting ahead in the mechanistic, often dull working world was our sacred economic duty. We were expected to believe that the military industrial complex was to be supported without question. Oh, yes, and wherever did this ridiculously strange, radical idea about caring for the environment come from?

If we questioned, our ponderings were carried out in silence, lest we anger families, teachers, friends and employers.



Then Vatican II emerged, its revolutionary documents giving us the language we

needed to articulate the thoughts that had been simmering in our hearts. We were overjoyed by John XXIII's openness. Elated and inspired, many of us from this generation went into journalism, teaching,

social justice work and community action.

Full of hope in these exciting times, we plunged into the writings of emerging prophets -- Fr. John Egan, Paulo Freire, Saul Alinsky, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Matthew Fox, and later, Thomas Berry and Brian Swimme.

Sound familiar? If the above occurrences and names elicit similar memories from your own life, Jim Conlon's memoir and cosmological commentary will emerge as a deeply moving, hopeful reading experience. (Full disclosure: I was his student at the Institute in Culture and Creation Spirituality in Oakland, Calif., from 1992-94.)

The author of eight previous books, Conlon weaves his own journey into major events through pivotal years: the Second Vatican Council, war, politics, social unrest, arts and popular culture. He explains how each of these events have influenced and shaped people's spiritual paths. He invites us to walk with him through "invisible excursions," into experiences that touch us deeply and allure us into to unknown terrain.

Conlon writes, "I often say that an invisible excursion can be understand as falling in love, whereby all barriers, all defenses, and all separations melt away. We become one with the person, one with the idea, one with the project, one with the earth, one with the divine. We embrace our true self and are guided to that place in which we can listen with the ear of our heart, and respond to the cry of creation and the needs of our time."

Among the characteristics of invisible excursions "are a keen sensitivity to the promptings of each moment; a capacity to trust one's intuition without being clear about the outcome and to dream and engage in a variety of acts of creativity that will liberate the world."

Conlon's uncharted, moving-with-spirit travels have brought him to that longed-for precious place where the events of each day have become a "tabernacle of divine presence."

The writer's present landing place is a universe away from his beginnings. Jim Conlon was born into a French-Irish Catholic family in the tiny town of Sombra, near the St. Clair River in Southwestern Ontario, the chemical valley of Canada. It was a place where life tended to center around oil and cars, he remembers. After graduating from college with a chemistry degree, Conlon went to work as a researcher for Imperial Oil of Canada.

He expected to be doing research, but soon discovered he would be promoting gas and oil production instead. Conlon reconsidered his options. A priest-cousin's earlier suggestion that he enter seminary now became an appealing possibility.

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"In the end, I was undeniably more fascinated with the idea of an alchemy of transformation that flowed from a Eucharistic vision than I was with the life of a chemist dedicated to the marketing of gas and oil," he writes.

Conlon's gut-level negative instincts regarding the fossil-fuel industry proved correct: "Sadly, my home community now serves as a microcosm of the impact of the industrial era, and the planetary blight for which it is responsible, with an ecological devastation and a cancer epidemic of epic proportions."

The book traces his walking away from that future microcosm of ruin, becoming a priest, and following the spontaneous promptings, invitations and opportunities that came to him. These moved him into community organizing and teaching. He discovered the writings of social justice, environmental and cosmological prophets, which eventually brought him into contact with his future mentors: Alinsky, Fox, Teilhard de Chardin and Berry.

Conlon's travels would bring him to Chicago then to Holy Names University in Oakland, Calif., where he worked with Fox at the Institute in Culture and Creation Spirituality from 1984 until 1996. In 1996, Fox moved his school to downtown Oakland, where it became The University of Creation Spirituality.

Jim Conlon remained at Holy Names and founded the Sophia Center, which functions today as a training camp for mystics. Graduate students explore earth care, environment, art, cosmology and holistic spirituality based on The Universe Story of Thomas Berry and Brian Swimme and the Creation Spirituality of Matthew Fox.

But Sophia Center is much more than a sabbatical experience. One of its goals, Conlon says, "is to bring our passion and our pocketbook together to fulfill our calling in the great work [of Thomas Berry]" to create a mutually enhancing life for every being on the planet, and to also get paid doing it. "This is called right livelihood."

Students are introduced to ways of ways of creating careers outside mainline institutions. They receive legal advice on how to set up and operate a nonprofit corporation and learn grant-writing skills.

The last section of *Invisible Excursions* introduces readers to a few Sophia Center graduates. For his master's project, Vinnie Busch painted a mandala with images depicting both his birth in relation to the story of the universe and the universe's birthing in each individual.

When he returned to the Philippines, Busch worked with Subanean artisans to develop a woven version of that mandala. Weaving is the chief art form of the tribe. The work has since grown into a small livelihood project, where Busch designs handmade crafts that celebrate the sacred story of the universe and honors the spiritual bond of the people with their habitat.

Another graduate, Annie Cuiku, developed an MBA program in social entrepreneurship and management at Tangaza College, a Catholic university in Eastern Africa. The program looks at the ecologically damaging effects of contemporary business practices and offers an alternative, sustainable approach with a social focus that addresses environmental and ecological issues.

For more about Jim Conlon and Sophia Center, go to the Sophia Center's website.

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