Nature, Joy and Human Becoming
by On Being

What follows is the transcript of an On Being interview between Krista Tippett and Michael McCarthy:

KRISTA TIPPETT, HOST: I have rarely discovered a book that so delighted and galvanized me at once. The Moth Snowstorm: Nature and Joy is written by the English naturalist and journalist, Michael McCarthy. “The sudden passionate happiness which the natural world can occasionally trigger in us,” he writes, “may well be the most serious business of all.” We could stop relying on the immobilizing language of statistic and take up joy as a civilizational defense of nature. With a perspective equally infused by science, reportage, and poetry, he reminds us that the natural world is where we evolved, where we found our metaphors, and it is the resting place for our psyches.

MICHAEL MCCARTHY: There is a legacy deep within us, a legacy of instinct, a legacy of inherited feelings, which may lie very deep in the tissues — it may lie underneath all the parts of civilization which we are so familiar with on a daily basis, but it has not gone; that we might have left the natural world, most of us, but the natural world has not left us.

MS. TIPPETT: I’m Krista Tippett, and this is On Being.

[music: “Seven League Boots” by Zoë Keating]

MS. TIPPETT: Michael McCarthy was longtime environment editor of the U.K. newspaper, The Independent. He was a driving force behind that paper’s campaign to explain the disappearance of the urban house sparrow in London. He also orchestrated the Great British Butterfly Hunt. This became intertwined with his mother’s death, and her mental breakdown, when he was a child, had first led him to take solace and joy in birds and butterflies.

MS. TIPPETT: I start most of my interviews with a question, just wondering about the religious or spiritual background of someone’s childhood. I find that is a very fertile place in everybody’s imagination, whatever their story is; it’s full of questions and searching and softness. So, I don’t know, however you would begin to think of that.

MR. MCCARTHY: I would use a curious phrase to describe what I am now; I would describe myself as an ethnic Catholic, meaning that I grew up a Roman Catholic, and I have abandoned the faith — formally, at any rate. But the belief system — or, not necessarily eschatology, the belief in heaven and hell, but the sense of right and wrong, I think, stays with you all your life, and you relate to it. And so, even though I’m not formally religious, I suppose that I carry with me what some people might describe as a religious sensibility.

MS. TIPPETT: And I feel like, right at the beginning of your book, The Moth Snowstorm: Nature and Joy, you — this is a book about our bond with the natural world.

MR. MCCARTHY: That's right.

MS. TIPPETT: And that bond is both civilizational — it's at once civilizational and species — something about our species, but it's also personal. And you use the word "soul" in this way — rather early, you describe your mother's illness. And she was away for a time, institutionalized, and one of the things that happened to you as a child is that you had a lack of feeling about that, that you could perceive. But then you describe this day — and you said, "When I was a skinny kid in short pants, butterflies entered my soul." [laughs] So would you just tell a little bit of that story and why that is a vantage point for you on, again, this large, civilizational issue?

MR. MCCARTHY: Well, it was really just a personal way, a way — through my own personal experience, of beginning to explore the strange conundrum, which is what it seems to me, that we can actually love, very fiercely, the natural world. I say that everybody may have their own stories, but this was simply mine. It was the way in which, at the age of seven, in a time of great trauma in my family, I personally became attached to nature. And this was a day in August, 1954, when my mother had gone away to hospital because she'd had a mental breakdown, and my brother, who was a year older than me, was completely mortified. He was terribly, terribly upset, and yet, I felt nothing whatsoever, which took me 50 years and a certain amount of psychotherapy to discover why.

And we went to my aunt's in a nearby suburb of the town where I grew up, which was greener than our house, which had been in the inner city, and there was a garden, two doors away. And over the wall of this garden hung a buddleia bush. And in those days, when wildlife was far more numerous in the U.K., as indeed all around the world, than it is now, on the first morning, as I ran out into the road to play, this bush was just simply covered in butterflies. And it was, very particularly, very colorful ones, the most colorful of all the British butterflies, four of them, in particular — the peacock, the red admiral, the small tortoiseshell, and the — what's the other one? Vanessa cardui. And I was very taken by them. I was lost in contemplation of them. I thought they were remarkable. And it was a time when I should have had terrible feelings, but I had no feelings, and the feelings for the butterflies filled this hole, as it were. And from that moment on, I began to love the natural world, albeit in fairly strange circumstances.

MS. TIPPETT: The framing that you give, as you think about our collective encounter with this phenomenon and what it means for us in this moment in time, is taking a very long view of time; that there are 5,000 generations of us.

MR. MCCARTHY: Just to be precise, I say 500 generations of farming, and 50,000 generations of —

MS. TIPPETT: OK, sorry, right, I —500 generations of what we call civilization and the 50,000 generations when we were part of nature, and your argument is that that is "where we evolved; where we became what we are, where we learned to feel and react," "where the human imagination formed," "where we found our metaphors and similes." And that's — it's not an idea that I had ever heard expressed that way, but as you lay it out, it — in the way you're talking about it, it makes sense in my body, what you're describing. That that is still defining us.

MR. MCCARTHY: The idea is not mine, and it's not new. It's about 40 years old. It's a

perception that comes from evolutionary biology — that's the Neo-Darwinism of the late 20th century, and a particular branch of that, which is evolutionary psychology, which has been going, really, since about the '80s. And the core perception of evolutionary psychology is that the 50,000 generations that preceded us in the Pleistocene, which is the age of the Ice Ages, when we became what we are as part of the natural world — when we were wildlife, if you like; [laughs] we don't think of ourselves as wildlife anymore, but we were wildlife then — that those generations are more important for our psyches, even now, than the 500 generations of civilization which have followed the invention of farming about 12,000 years ago. So that there is a legacy deep within us, a legacy of instinct, a legacy of inherited feelings, which may lie very deep in the tissues — it may lie underneath all the parts of civilization which we are so familiar with on a daily basis, but it has not gone; that we might have left the natural world, most of us, but the natural world has not left us.

MS. TIPPETT: You describe really interesting — you've pursued this in many ways. You describe interesting conversations you've had with — is it Nial Moores?

MR. MCCARTHY: Oh, Nial. He's the guy who runs Birds Korea in South Korea.

MS. TIPPETT: And some of his observations about the horizons human beings favor and that there are dangers — as you say, it's not all beauty and softness — but that these are dangers our bodies can understand.

MR. MCCARTHY: It's funny you should pick up on that reference; not many other people have, but I did think it was very interesting. Nial Moores is birdwatcher, a birder. But what he specializes in is what we would call waders and what you guys call shorebirds. And he spent years and years and years looking at shorebirds and other birds and the way in which they move through landscapes, the principal motivation of which is to see and not be seen. And what he gradually came to realize was that people still move through landscapes in this way. It's still deeply within us.

For example, if you watch people go into a square, very often they will walk around the edges of it without even realizing they're doing it, rather than cross it; rather than going across the open middle, where they are very visible. And there are numerous such ways in which — what you were referring to then is that I do say that nature's not paradise. If you think nature's paradise, you're mistaking it, because nature has wonderful things, but it also has great dangers, and nature can kill you. But the point I was making is that these are our dangers. These are the dangers that we evolved to be familiar with; whereas, much of modern life, from everything from central heating to automobiles to modern sewage disposal to air travel — that's not what we evolved to be at peace with. And so, perhaps, the only place we can be truly at peace is in the natural world.

[music: "Suva" by Jacob Montague]

MS. TIPPETT: I'm Krista Tippett, and this is On Being. Today, with naturalist and journalist Michael McCarthy.

[music: "Suva" by Jacob Montague]

MS. TIPPETT: So here we are at this moment, as you say, where we can — in this young century, and there are all the milestones we could summon and all the lists we could make of what the 20th century was about, and the accomplishments of the late 20th century. But you say we may come to a different way of categorizing our time on earth —

that we were the generation who, over the course of their lives, saw the shadow fall across the face of the earth.

MR. MCCARTHY: I'm referring to the baby boomers there. I'm a baby boomer; I'm born in the same year as Elton John and David Bowie; a bit younger than Paul McCartney. But the point I was making was that if our generation is characterized — well, it's characterized in many ways, isn't it — for example, that we've had a much better life than our children, which is often pointed out now. But the baby boomers now, we're all getting old. And when we look back on what that time was, the people who were born after the Second World War and came to adulthood in the late '60s and are now retiring, one of the things that happened in our time was, the world population doubled in our lifetime. And the other was that the fabric of the earth began to be torn apart in a way that we have increasingly come to realize — we didn't, at first, notice it; we thought this was a — as Neville Chamberlain said, that — something like, the Amazon was "a faraway country of which we know nothing," and only specialists were aware of what was happening. But now, I think, it's very hard not to realize that all over the world, natural systems and species are being given a terrible time.

MS. TIPPETT: And I think this point about the dimensions of our advance — whereas we focus so much on the trajectory of advance — we get more sophisticated with our technology, our mastery, our inventiveness — and I think we focus a lot on the pace now, and even, people talk about population growth. But somehow, for me, the way you put this into context — that the "dimensions," "the runaway scale of the human enterprise" — and that, as you say, in the same period of this baby boomer generation, between your teenage years and your middle years, between 1960, the year I was born, and 2000, the world's population doubled, and the world economy grew more than six times bigger. And that the scale of the human enterprise is this defining thing that is also overwhelming this natural world, which is our life support system and home.

MR. MCCARTHY: One of the points I would make about that is that this is not just a point we've arrived at. It's a direction of travel. So the scale of the human enterprise is mammoth and gargantuan, but it's going to get very much bigger.

MS. TIPPETT: And I think your — the subtitle of your book, The Moth Snowstorm, is Nature and Joy. And I don't want to call this an argument; I'm trying to think of a better word. Your thesis — but it's more passionate than a thesis — is that even as we start to grapple with the dimensions of what's happening, and as we start to rediscover the value of the natural world to our well-being and even survival, we turn instinctively to measuring value the ways we do and having these cerebral conversations about it. And I think these discussions about solutions, which also overwhelm people amidst all the other things that are overwhelming them — and your point is that we could be making a different formal defense of nature, and, in fact, that that's what we are called to do right now, is to defend nature. And you said, "We should offer up what it means to our spirits; the love of it. We should offer up its joy." And I wanted you to talk a little bit about your understanding. And joy is — it's something that's distinct from mere fun or happiness or pleasure, although it may contain all of those things.

MR. MCCARTHY: Well, in fact, you're right. If we look, what is joy, I say it's an intense happiness; yes, it is. But it's somehow one that is set apart. It's not the same as fun, or even delight. We don't use it to define our pleasure in eating a particularly well-made pizza. But we might well think it was appropriate to describe the feelings of a parent finding a missing child, finding them safe and well, or the feelings of a lover whose love for another person has long been unrequited but who, at last, finds it being returned. All I

say is that joy looks outward to another person, to another purpose; and I say that joy has a component, if not of morality, then at least of seriousness. It signifies a happiness, which is a serious business.

MS. TIPPETT: Yes, I think that's a line in the book: "The passionate happiness the natural world can trigger in us may be the most serious business of all." [laughs] And whereas, I think, what's important about that — also, in terms of what we're learning about our brains and bodies — is that while statistics of decline and demise and the destruction of the natural world don't mobilize action — they, in fact, dampen us — and so joy can have a quality of seriousness, and yet, be animating.

MR. MCCARTHY: Well, that's my hope, and that is my suggestion. There have been two attempts to try and stop this and one was sustainable development, which is trying to grow the economy in a green way; and that basically hasn't worked. And the other one that is going on now is to realize the value of ecosystem services — i.e., to realize just exactly what nature can do for us; and if we destroy it, we're certainly damaging our own prospects. But I take the view that that isn't sufficient, either.

And I suppose, ultimately, what this book was hoping to do was to mobilize in people the fact that the natural world — we can sometimes have very peculiar feelings for the natural world in certain circumstances — not always common; by no means happens to everybody, but it is my contention that it's possible for it to happen to everybody and that if we could mobilize this sort of love we have for the natural world — and the essence of it is the fact that the natural world is a part of us, and that if we lose it, we cannot be fully who we are. And if we were to realize that, which is hard, and if we were to realize it on a large scale, which is even harder, that might offer a defense of nature at the time when we are trashing it remorselessly.

MS. TIPPETT: So your writing is infused with this joy. And I'd like for you to indulge in that a little bit, and let's just demonstrate what that is. Would you talk a little bit about the part of the world you grew up in and the natural world there that held you?

MR. MCCARTHY: OK, I grew up in the northwest of England, and what I tell — which is the industrial part of Britain, for your listeners who won't know the U.K. I used to tell people, when they'd say, "Where do you come from?" I'd say, "I come from Liverpool. I come from the city of the Beatles," which is a Victorian port, really — and industrial city, but it was a port. It was a bit like Baltimore, I suppose; something like that, a 19th-century port. And it's on a river, and across the river on the other side is a peninsula, which is called the Wirral. And it's the far river, which is called the Dee, which starts off in Wales — it's a very beautiful river; it starts in the Welsh mountains, and it flows into the Irish Sea, and it's very wild. Even now, even now it's very wild. It's a massive, massive area of marshland and then, further down, of sandbars and mud banks as it actually reaches the Irish Sea. And that's where I got to know nature in a deeper way. And I do say in the book, you're very lucky if you can have a special place in your early life; it's almost as lucky as coming from a happy family. And certainly, the estuary of the River Dee, the Dee Estuary, was my special place when I was a teenager.

MS. TIPPETT: But I have to say, reading you — again, to get at this joy in nature, because I have been reading you while we were entering spring — again, you're very lyrical and powerful about — just in the joy you take in this world's reawakening each year.

MR. MCCARTHY: Yeah, I think —

MS. TIPPETT: Just being attentive to that.

MR. MCCARTHY: Well, I think that's right. I think there are a number of reasons why the natural world can spark joy in us. I think, yeah, it can often happen suddenly. And you don't quite realize what you're feeling, when you're suddenly taken over with this very strong emotion in certain circumstances. It can be in a sunset. It can be in a — it can be in the presence of a landscape.

But it's certainly the case that the reawakening of the world every spring is something that stirs very, very profound emotions in us. The fact that our lives are linear, they only go in one direction — but the life of the earth is circular; it goes round, and everything dies in the autumn, and the leaves fall off the trees, and the world seems to come to an end, and it's locked up in ice, but then, it's reborn. And that's one of the greatest things in our lives, surely, that rebirth of the Earth. I think you have to be a very, very concrete-hearted person not to — I think the cherry trees in Washington are flowering just about now. You have to have a heart of stone not to be moved by that, surely. And it's not just the physical beauty, which is enormous; it's the sense of new life, to us who only have one life, especially as we get older and we know that the end of it is coming; the fact that here is new life being born. I have a friend who's a woodland scientist. He's in his early 70s. And he said to me, last year, "I just see life now as how many springs I've got left."

MS. TIPPETT: You say, somewhere, "For some years, I have thought of spring birdsong as blossom in sound." [laughs]

MR. MCCARTHY: I did think that. [laughs] Well, when I first thought that — my family and I spent Easter on the Isle of Skye, in Scotland. And I don't know if your listeners know the Scottish islands, but — they're very beautiful, but it's quite a harsh beauty; it's quite a tough beauty. It's not the Greek Islands. It's not the Florida Keys. But when I first went to Skye, it was in the early spring. And spring was coming, and the birch trees were all in flower. That's like the olive trees in Greece. But there was this particular small bird, which in Britain, it's called a willow warbler. And when it sings, it's not sensational, but it's very nice. And it's a sort of silvery descending cascade. It sort of goes "seep-seep-seep sup-sup-sup-sup sop-sop-sop-sop seep-seep-seep-seep sup-sup-sup sop-sop-sop." And on Skye, in the moorlands and the birches, it's a harsh landscape, but these softened it somehow. The birdsong softened the harshness of the landscape, and it softened it as much as blossom would have done. And that's when I first started to think that birdsong — in spring, birdsong could be thought of as blossom in sound. I hope that's not too "poetic" with a capital "P."

MS. TIPPETT: It's wonderful; no, it is poetic, and we'll take it. [laughs]

MR. MCCARTHY: OK, jolly good.

MS. TIPPETT: It's a line of poetry, definitely.

MR. MCCARTHY: Well, I'm saying that self-deprecatingly.

MS. TIPPETT: I know you are, but I'm refusing to let it be self-deprecating. [laughs]

MR. MCCARTHY: Yeah, right; OK, all right. OK.

[music: "Waltz" by Mother Falcon]

MS. TIPPETT: You can listen again and share this conversation with Michael McCarthy, through our website, onbeing.org. I'm Krista Tippett. On Beingcontinues in a moment.

[music: "Waltz" by Mother Falcon]

MS. TIPPETT: I'm Krista Tippett, and this is On Being. Today, a conversation about joy in nature as elemental to human flourishing and to our civilizational defense of the natural world. These are themes of the naturalist and journalist, Michael McCarthy, and his wondrous book, The Moth Snowstorm.

MS. TIPPETT: The title of the book is The Moth Snowstorm.

MR. MCCARTHY: That needs a bit of explaining.

MS. TIPPETT: I want you to tell that story, but I think the context, also, of so much of this and what we're discussing here, the abundance of spring that you and I knew in our childhoods, it's also this irony of the baby-boomer generation of abundance, right? As you say, this is the generation that, supposedly, everybody did better than their parents, but that, at the same time, the defining characteristic of the natural world of this century that the baby boomers brought into being is no longer beauty. It's not abundance. And one thing you talk about is, we are very focused on rare and charismatic wildlife, and extinctions, but you talk about the "great thinning."

MR. MCCARTHY: Well, that's really — it's with regard to the United Kingdom, really. It's fairly specialized, but I'll try and briefly explain it.

MS. TIPPETT: Well, but there's also this new study out of Germany about insects. It's happening —

MR. MCCARTHY: Oh, that's the Krefeld Entomological Society. That is sensational.

MS. TIPPETT: And you say— the windshield phenomenon, right? It's made me think about how, when I was younger, just how there would be bugs — and it wasn't pleasant — bugs smashed on every windshield. But that has changed. And when I say "our generation," I just also mean, all of us alive right now.

MR. MCCARTHY: Well, what in America, for want of another term, is generally referred to as the windshield phenomenon, more and more — the fact that 30 or 40 years ago if you went on a long journey, especially at night in the summer, your car windshield could be covered in bugs, and so could your headlights, and you might have to stop, and you might actually have to clean the windscreen, as we would say, to carry on. My own term for that, which I came up with myself, is the "moth snowstorm," because — 30 or 40 years ago in the U.K., maybe 50 years ago, certainly, if you drove down a country lane on a muggy summer's night, there would be so many moths in the air that as you drove faster and faster, in the car headlight beams they would start to seem like snowflakes, and in some occasions they would almost seem like a blizzard; there would seem to be — there was a snowstorm of moths. And this was only made visible by the invention of the automobile. We've only known about it for 100 years, because even if you went out —

MS. TIPPETT: [laughs] We had to smash them with something.

MR. MCCARTHY: Well, even if you went out at night on a summer's evening, you wouldn't really see that. But in automobile headlights, we could see that. And the whole point

about the phenomenon of what you guys might refer to as the windshield phenomenon, what I'm referring to in England as the "moth snowstorm" — the whole point about it is that it has gone. It has vanished. It does not exist as a phenomenon anymore. You cannot now drive down a country lane in the countryside in England on a muggy summer's night and see what you could see, in terms of the abundance of flying insects 50 years ago. That phenomenon has disappeared.

And I use that as a symbol of — well, you said, the word I use for British wildlife is the great "thinning" that is taking place. And the point is, we would all be shouting and screaming about this if it was extinctions, because extinction is the metric that we all instinctively use to recognize wildlife decline. You've got the Endangered Species Act —

MS. TIPPETT: Right, when there are 50 left.

MR. MCCARTHY: And if something goes extinct, it's on the front pages, and if something's about to go extinct, we bend over backwards to try and save it. But in England, in the British countryside, it was more subtle than that. It wasn't a disappearance of species, it was a disappearance of numbers. It was the fact that —

MS. TIPPETT: Of abundance.

MR. MCCARTHY: Well, year after year after year, there was simply less of everything, partly because we were pouring pesticides all over the land. And once you do that, once you have pesticides, there aren't only gonna be no more pests, but there aren't gonna be any more insects of any other type. And as you know, insects — they're at the bottom of food chains. And you instanced yourself, five minutes ago, this amazing study from Germany, last October, which has gone around the world, by this little society, which showed that in 63 nature reserves, the abundance of flying insects since the fall of the Berlin Wall had gone down by 76 percent.

MS. TIPPETT: And in nature reserves; that's the astonishing thing about that.

MR. MCCARTHY: Absolutely. So what's it done in the wider countryside? What's it done outside nature reserves? So Germany has lost three-quarters of its flying insects.

MS. TIPPETT: I wonder if you would tell us — there are so many factors, obviously. But there's a story you tell about the decline of the sparrow.

MR. MCCARTHY: The house sparrow in London, in particular. I've got American birder friends, and I say, "Our sparrows have gone," and they say, "Well, you can have ours."

MS. TIPPETT: There you go. [laughs]

MR. MCCARTHY: Especially in New York. Well, yeah, it's very strange. On my newspaper, which was The Independent, which is online now, but it used to be a broadsheet newspaper, but we started — in the year 2000, we started to highlight the fact that the house sparrow had basically disappeared from Central London. And 20 years earlier, there were hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of house sparrows. You could go in St. James's Park near Buckingham Palace, and there'd be guys who'd be selling you a little bag of seed, and you'd get 50 sparrows on your arm. And over the course of about 20 years, they all disappeared. And the thing was that even to this day, nearly 20 years after we first started to highlight it, no one really knows why it happened. So it's a great ecological mystery.

MS. TIPPETT: And I think the larger point that you're making in all of this is, as you say, we don't track all of this. We don't track most of it. It's just — it's almost something that you notice in its absence, that abundance that was there. But you had this interesting conversation with Max Nicholson, an ornithologist.

MR. MCCARTHY: He was the granddaddy of them all. He was the founding father of nature conservation after the Second World War. He was a government administrator, but he was also a very senior biologist. And he had a particular interest in the decline of the house sparrow, because when he was a young man, he and his brother, in 1925 — well, I think it was November 1st — had counted all the sparrows in Kensington Gardens in London, which is an extension of St. James's Park. And the number they came up with was 2,603. And 75 years later, I went with him, to the day, to Kensington Gardens to try to count sparrows with members of the London Natural History Society, and the number they came up with was eight.

And when I went to see him, he had a peculiar theory of his own, which was that as they started to decline, he thought that there might come a point where the colony sort of committed suicide. And this phenomenon has a scientific name; it's called the Allee effect, after an American biologist from the 1930s called Warder Allee, which is — and the theory is that the declines in socially breeding species become self-reinforcing. As they start to thin, there'll come a point where they just break up. And he thought that might have been what was happening, because sparrows are colonial; they nest in colonies. And he said — he couldn't prove it, but he said, then, a lot of things that happen in the world can't be proved, but they're still real.

MS. TIPPETT: So just to come back to this larger framing of this and the way we discuss things like this when it becomes a debate, when it becomes about problems to solve or whether they need solving, and I could imagine, somebody could say, "Well, we can live without house sparrows." Obviously, London has gone on without house sparrows. I think your argument is that if we should lose nature, that we become less than whole; that we be less than we evolved to be. You even say that we would find true peace impossible.

MR. MCCARTHY: That's what I personally think. Many people, I'm sure, wouldn't share that view, perhaps because — I wouldn't want to be patronizing to people who don't share that view, but you might say that because they don't see a lot of nature, and they haven't seen what nature can do for human beings. But I, personally, think that the natural world is where we evolved. It's where our minds evolved. It's where we became who we truly are, and it's where, really, we are most at home.

Even if — think about it — even if you're a multimillionaire, and you go on your expensive holidays, you like the sunset, don't you? You say, "Darling, come and see the sunset, it's phenomenal" — that even when you are, as it were, insulated by wealth or whatever, from nature itself, moments still happen when nature impresses itself upon you greatly. I think, with many people, it doesn't happen, because that age-old connection with the natural world — which I believe we have and which is empirically real, not just a philosophical construct but actually real — it's covered over, isn't it. It's not only covered over by 500 generations of civilization, but it's covered over by the frenzy of modern life.

My contention is not that we all love nature, but my contention certainly is that we are all capable of loving nature, because in us, at the very deepest level, in the bottom of our psyches, we have a link to the natural world, which really goes to the essence of who we are.

[music: “Passage” by Lowercase Noises]

MS. TIPPETT: I'm Krista Tippett, and this is On Being. Today, with naturalist and journalist Michael McCarthy.

[music: “Passage” by Lowercase Noises]

MS. TIPPETT: There is an emergence of literature of public health, about contact with the natural world and human well-being.

MR. MCCARTHY: Oh, absolutely. There’s a huge literature on it, especially in America, as well.

MS. TIPPETT: Especially — yeah, and another thing I’ve been looking at, just because I’ve been working with this idea recently — there’s this whole new science of awe, and how awe is this defining human experience that actually has consequences —

MR. MCCARTHY: The word “awe.”

MS. TIPPETT: Awe; that actually — and these are scientists who are studying this, and they’re not religious people — but that this human experience of awe, more than other emotions, actually leads people to cooperate and share resources and sacrifice for others, so that there’s a link between awe and altruism. But what’s interesting to me, because I knew I was gonna talk to you, is that when they give the examples of how humans experience awe, just about all of them are experiences of being in the natural world, just about every single one of them. It’s —

MR. MCCARTHY: Go on, go on. I think that’s interesting.

MS. TIPPETT: Yeah, so I’m aware of that, and also, just what I think is provocative in your thought — you say that humanism, in fact, our legacy of humanism is actually part of the problem; that we’ve had this vision of our own goodness and that our morality is anthropocentric and that that actually complicates things at a moment like this.

MR. MCCARTHY: Well, I gave my own naming to it. I said, the philosophy by which we in the West have certainly lived our lives since the end of the Second World War, I think I said, I think you could term liberal secular humanism. And I said that this was a creed which had a single and honorable aim, which was everywhere to advance human welfare — it wants everyone to be free from hunger and fear and disease and live happy and fulfilled lives as far as possible — but that there was a gap at its core, which is, it does not recognize that humans are not necessarily good. And are there any limits on what we can do or what we should do? No, none at all. But yet, there are. And so we are not able, in this belief system, properly to face up to what we are actually doing to the world by development and everything else, which is that we are destroying our own home and the philosophical system by which we, at the moment, live, which does not recognize that, as human beings, we have a tendency to do very bad things. And because of that, we are not able to confront that tendency.

MS. TIPPETT: I have seen you using the word “redemption” as —

MR. MCCARTHY: Well, that’s the old Christian in me.

MS. TIPPETT: That's the old Catholic in you. But also, I think, with echoes of our potential to be destructive, but that — and what is spring about, right? Spring is this narrative of birth, death, resurrection; it's not coincidental that that's when Easter happens. Whether anybody's going to church or not, that's the narrative. And I do see you — I feel like that is your hope, that redemption is possible for us in this relationship with the natural world; as you say, our home.

MR. MCCARTHY: Sometimes I think there's hope; sometimes I think there isn't any hope. Maybe that's a condition of being human, to think that. But certainly, to me, the greatest aspect of Christianity is redemption. In our society, we all celebrate Christmas, don't we, or we did, and we didn't really give two thoughts to Easter. But the great ceremony of Christianity, really, is Easter. And it's the fact that there is — even for the greatest sinners, there is forgiveness, which is an extraordinary concept, really. Whether or not there is forgiveness for humankind as they continue to march across the face of the earth, trashing it left, right, and center, I do not know.

MS. TIPPETT: You end your book on love, a new kind of love, which is interwoven with a story about your mother, your relationship with your mother. But also, you're actually injecting that word, also, into an imagination about what our new relationship with the natural world might be. Is that right?

MR. MCCARTHY: Yeah; many of us can have a love of nature. Many, many, many people have the love of nature. And I just take the view that if people not only loved it in a simplistic way, which is fine — I've got nothing against that; I do it myself — but if it could also be loved in an informed way, I think that that could be a very powerful force, if it was a love — a love of nature that realized what nature means to us, that realized just how essential it is to our spirits, to our souls, to our very beings, and that realized that at a time when it's being destroyed all over the world. Were that able to be harnessed in some way, it could be a very powerful force, because even one person who feels like that is good. Even a single love like that, I say, has real worth. But thousands of loves like that have real power, since ordinary people's feelings are the beginnings of political will.

MS. TIPPETT: I wrote down, when I was — "fierce." That's why, also, the conjunction of that with your mother, the fierce love — would you tell the story about how — we spoke in the beginning about your love of nature actually began in that very hard time, early in your life, when she was taken away from you for a while and then, later, was back, not only in your life but came back to herself in some ways; and that story of your mother and how that went together, for you, with the Great British Butterfly Hunt.

MR. MCCARTHY: Well, my brother and I — my brother, John, was a year older than me, and we had an experience that must be common to many people: My mother had a mental breakdown when I was seven and my brother John was eight, and she went away to a mental hospital, which, in those days, you didn't often come back from, but she did come back. She had sort of recovered, and she was damaged on the surface, but she wasn't damaged in her core as, alas, many people are who undergo mental trauma. And gradually, as I went into my adolescence and my teens and my adulthood, I came to love her very, very much. And I rebuilt my relationship with her.

But it all came crashing down in 1982, when I was 35, because my mother died at the age of 68, and I found, then, to my absolute amazement, that I could not mourn her and that, just as I felt nothing when she went away in 1954 when I was seven, now, when she went away forever, I couldn't feel anything either. And I did not know how to react to this; it was — to have your grief taken away from you is a very, very strange situation.

And I came to understand what had happened, and the fact was that when my mother had gone away when I was seven, I had hated her for that. I had hated her because she hadn't said farewell to us or anything like that; she'd just gone away and left me, although my psyche did not allow me to admit that, so it turned into indifference. And similarly, when she went away forever, when she died, the same feeling kicked in. I hated her because she had gone away again. I hated my mother because she was dead. And these are the sorts of tangled bits of your psyche that psychotherapy — which has lots of critics, but sometimes can help you actually sort out, and it did in my case. And so I was greatly thrilled to have recovered my feelings for my mother and to have understood what happened in my childhood, which had seemed so confused.

But I had no way of marking that. I didn't have a way of commemorating this really big thing in my life. We like meaning-making, don't we; that's why we have ceremonies. We have ceremonies for christening; most of all, we have ceremonies for marriage, and we have ceremonies for funerals. We don't let people be buried or cremated, just like that. We want to have some sort of solemnity, some sort of meaning-making. But I did not have one.

But eventually, I came across one, which is when I took my children to see my mother's grave. We were standing by the grave, and what I thought was a dead leaf came blowing along the wind — this was on a March day, and it fell on my mother's grave, and it was actually a peacock butterfly when it opened its wings. And that just set in me the idea of a memorial to my mother. And the memorial was to go and see every single British butterfly species over the course of a summer, and there are 58 of them, and then to dedicate every one of them to her. And because I was the environment editor of a major national newspaper, I suggested that as a summer feature for the paper.

MS. TIPPETT: You were able to get a lot of people involved in that with you. [laughs]

MR. MCCARTHY: Well, we suggested that readers might like to do this, and there would be a prize for it. We called it, as you mentioned, the Great British Butterfly Hunt. And it was very successful, and it was great fun, and all the rest of it. But what it was about, for me, was giving my mother something to recognize what a magnificent person she had been; and what I gave her was all the butterflies of my country.

MS. TIPPETT: You do, of course, realize how — that the metaphor there, the allusion of that love for your mother and where we come from and how we can't feel our grief at the loss of our insects and our birds and our blossoms, it's — I don't know; I hear it now more, having you tell the story, than I did when I read it, even.

MR. MCCARTHY: I hadn't — I think, instinctively, but I didn't make the explicit connection. I'll make it now that you say it.

MS. TIPPETT: I spoke, once, with a Buddhist teacher, Joanna Macy. I don't know if you're familiar with her. She's been — she was involved in environmentalism before the word was coined. And she talks about, also, our "fierce love for the world" and that when we — when someone you love is sick, is in the hospital, is ailing, is dying, you don't — you go sit with them, and you don't say, "Well, I'm busy." But with the world that we love, with our insects and our birds and our blossoms, it's so overwhelming, we turn away. And yet, I think you're making that connection too, that — what is that bond, you say, that bond we have with the natural world? If we could take that seriously, that could keep us, also, attending, and then healing, participating.

If I ask you to start — this vast question, what does it mean to be human, as you've lived your life and the things you've cared about, the observations you've made, how would you begin to speak about how your understanding of that has evolved, what it means to be human?

MR. MCCARTHY: Well, the single greatest thing in our lives is the love for another person, that's what I think, whoever we are and whoever the other person is. But human love is transcendent. I think it's the single greatest experience we can have, and I rejoice when anyone has it and finds it, and if I could wave a wand, the thing I would do is let every individual find the love of another individual. I think that's what I would do.

But in terms of the context in which we've been talking, clearly, we humans come from somewhere. And where we came from, where we emerged from is the natural world. And for 50,000 generations, we were wildlife. Well, we don't think we are, anymore, and probably, we're not. But we were just another species. I think — for myself, I cannot see our identity as humans as separate from the natural world from which we emerged. And what I think is that in the end, our spirits have an urge; they have a longing, still, to be part of it. And I think this longing can surprise you; it could suddenly leap out in certain circumstances; you could suddenly realize you're surprised by the strength of your feelings. But I do feel that to be fully human is to recognize that the natural world is where we came from, and it remains part of us. And without it, being fully human is something we cannot do.

[music: "Reverence" by Songs of Water]

MS. TIPPETT: Michael McCarthy was longtime environment editor of The Independent and environment correspondent for The Times. He now contributes articles to The Guardian. His books include Say Goodbye to the Cuckoo and The Moth Snowstorm: Nature and Joy.

[music: "Reverence" by Songs of Water]

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MS. TIPPETT: Our lovely theme music is provided and composed by Zoë Keating. And the last voice that you hear singing our final credits in each show, is hip-hop artist Lizzo.

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