

Mother, What Ails Thee? Imagining Chernobyl

written and adapted by Pamela S. Meidell,
to welcome a delegation of national and regional leaders of the Ukrainian environmental
association, Green World, to Berkeley, California in February 1998

Text adapted¹ from
Chernobyl: The Forbidden Truth by Alla Yaroshinskaya
and ***The Children of Chernobyl*** by Adi Roche

Inspired by “*Indian Reflections on the Castle of the Grail*,”
by Joseph Campbell in ***The Celtic Consciousness***,
read on the 1996 Atomic Mirror Pilgrimage, through England, Scotland, and Wales,
marking the 10th anniversary of the Chernobyl nuclear accident

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Narrator: On a pilgrimage through Britain in 1996 to mark the 10th anniversary of the Chernobyl nuclear accident, the Atomic Mirror pilgrims stopped one night in Glastonbury, the legendary site of Avalon, home of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. They stayed in an old inn, owned by a friend, and told each other again, the story of the Quest for the Holy Grail. How Perceval, the young would-be knight, came upon the enchanted castle of the grail, and met the ailing king. Though compassion urged him to ask the king, “Father, what ails thee?” the rules of knighthood forbade him to ask unnecessary questions. So he let the rules overcome his heart, and the moment was lost. He endured many trials, and searched for another five years before he met the king again, could again ask the question, and break the enchantment.

How is Perceval’s story and quest like our own? What question does compassion urge us to ask? Have we asked it? What will it take to break the enchantment of fear, confusion, and inaction around nuclear issues?

Tonight, we too embark upon a quest. We are not going back in time twenty years to April 26, 1986; rather, as we sit here together we will bring the events of April 26, 1986 forward into the present moment, where we can look at them calmly, with compassion and clarity. We bring them into this very moment, where we can see the reality in our midst, ask the right questions, and be restored to wholeness. What really happened to Perceval when he saw the Fisher King the first time? What arose in his heart? What arises in our hearts when we come face-to-face with pain and suffering? With the pain and suffering of the Nuclear Age?

The morning after the pilgrims read the story to each other, they passed around a beautiful glass blue globe of our planet. Each person held it as they spoke. As one of the pilgrims held it in her hands, she asked, “Mother, what ails thee?”

Chorus: Mother, what ails thee?

Narrator: When we look at our beautiful mother planet from space, we see a blue ball of oceans and clouds. A sphere very much like this one of blue glass. It looks solid, stable. But it is alive, changing, and breathing, just as we are.

Each week, a column appears in the newspaper called Diary of the Planet. It reports the major natural events of the last seven days. The storms of El Nino. Hurricanes. Mysterious beachings of whales. Erupting volcanoes. Earthquakes. Floods. Reading this column is like monitoring the heartbeat of our planet, or her pulse.

Chorus: Mother, what ails thee?

Narrator: In the rest of the paper, we read about human activities that affect our ecosystems, our homes, our political systems, our ability to resolve conflicts. We know that our actions, our fears and hopes, produce wounds in the body of our planet: war zones, clear-cut forests, toxic lakes.

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In certain places on our planet, the pain is acute, felt with every heartbeat or breath. But for most of us, far from the geographies of the Amazon, or Chernobyl, Iraq or Afghanistan, the pain is chronic. A dull ache. We have gotten used to it, like smog or bad dreams.

Chorus: Mother, what ails thee?]

Narrator: When someone is sick, a physician asks, “Where does it hurt?” This evening, we invite you to ask this question with us: “Mother, what ails thee? Mother, where does it hurt?” We invite you to come with us to Chernobyl and to listen. To hear the voices of the people, the voices of the very land and rivers and trees, and the voice of your own heart asking:

Chorus: Mother, what ails thee?

Voice #1: Empty yourself and be quiet. Listen to what cannot be heard, in everything²

Voice #2: If you listen to the spirit rumbling, strangely from the depths, you can recognize voices that are yours as well. Perhaps they speak for all of us, in all our variations. Beyond distracting noises, the world needs to hear itself via its most intimate voices.³

Voice #3: The world needs to see itself through our imaginations. How do we imagine catastrophe? How do we imagine the pain of future generations? How do we imagine Chernobyl?

Chorus: Mother, what ails thee?

Poetic voice:

Just after midnight
On April 26, 1986,
At 1:24 a.m.
In a remote village
Called Chernobyl...

Unit four
A nuclear power station
Safety tests
An accident
Worker error
Faulty design
cooling water evaporates
An explosion
Thirty fires
The reactor core exposed
Another explosion
Radioactive debris flames one mile into the sky
The reactor catches fire

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And burns,
And burns
And burns

Narrator: From across the Soviet Union, over 600,000 young men are drafted to put out those fires, to “liquidate” the radiation at Chernobyl. 13,000 have since died, 2,600 by committing suicide. 70,000 are disabled for life.

Natasha, wife of a liquidator⁴: My husband was beautiful. He was a great sportsman, very healthy, never ill. He volunteered to work as a ‘liquidator’ and left us in mid-April 1986. He never returned. I saw my lovely husband for the last time, standing at our door hugging our two children, smiling. They tell me he died in 1991 of a massive heart attack at the age of 34. I don't know the truth. He never phoned from that place because of some secrecy. Some of the men told me afterwards that he had been making special dumps for things that got radiation, like buses, tractors, bulldozers and such things. I think he got poisoned from that place. What are we to do now? No father, no husband.

Poetic voice:

Silently
A cloud of vapor
Radioactive vapor
Rises into the night sky

Alarms sound
Bells ring
People scurry about
Calling firefighters
Calling authorities
Trying to shut it down
trying to stop it

The cloud rises higher
Joins the winds
Blowing north and west
Scattering south and east
Hour by hour exposing
Sleeping cities
Countries below.

Narrator: The wind carries the radioactive cloud over Ukraine, Belarus, Russia, and beyond. According to the State Committee for Hydrology and Meteorology, four regions of Russia, five regions of Ukraine, and five of Belarus are submitted to intense radiation...⁵

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Nicolai Kuleshov: I was 13 on that very day of Chernobyl. We were gathering cherries and all of a sudden, a very, very strong wind blew and a lot of bright red clouds appeared in the sky. We got frightened and ran into the house.

Narrator: In the first few days after the accident, 116,000 people are evacuated.⁶ Everything within 30 kilometers of Chernobyl becomes a zone of emptiness and death. Over 400,000 people are relocated, their villages evacuated. In the new villages, nobody plants trees. Imagine it. It is terrible for the people of all these villages to leave and abandon everything. Their hearts break at the thought.⁷

Julia Philipenko: We were evacuated to Druzhny. My parents rushed to my kindergarten and took me home and I was forbidden to go out. My mother's eyes were full of tears when I was six. I hate being ill. I have a sick heart, thyroid and tonsils.⁸

Vladimir Bugaryes, Soviet filmmaker: As I flew over an evacuated village, the sun was shining brightly... everything was a brilliant white. But in the village, there was no life. Not a single path to be seen across the snow, not a single chimney smoking. That's what Chernobyl means in human terms.

Poetic voice:

After the accident,
Morning comes
It is like every other morning
But it is not.

The red clouds spread
Drifting over the Atlantic Ocean
Joining with winds encircling our world
Until the clouds of Chernobyl
Sweep around our whole earth.

Sensing stations pick up data
Reports come in
From Sweden
High levels of radiation

People ask questions
In Kiev
Denmark
New York
Japan

Moscow is silent
Decisions are made

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Family decisions:

In Kiev,

Workers call wives, mothers,

Tell them to get out

To take iodine

Something has happened

We don't know what

Just that it's bad

Official decisions:

In Moscow,

Government officials

Convene committees

Raise the allowed levels of radiation

Try to contain the truth

When they cannot contain the cloud itself.

Nikolai Rizhkov: I am Nikolai Rizhkov, head of the Politburo operational group of the former USSR, signer of the Forty Secret Protocols that covered up the accident.⁹

Here is Secret Protocol No. 9, issued May 8, 1986:

Chorus: The Ministry of Health of the USSR has adopted new levels of radiation, which can be tolerated by the population. Now it is safe for pregnant women and children to be exposed to levels ten or fifty times higher than what is allowed for nuclear plant workers.

Nikolai Rizhkov: Here is Secret Protocol No. 32, issued August 22, 1986:

Chorus: We raise the permissible levels of radioactive matter in milk and meat. Two million tons of milk and 47,500 tons of contaminated meat are now safe.

Nikolai Rizhkov: Here is Secret Protocol No. 3, issued May 1, 1986:

Chorus: We authorize the sending of Soviet journalists to the region around the Chernobyl power station, to prepare materials demonstrating normal activities in the area.¹⁰

Alla Yaroshinskaya, Ukrainian journalist: The most dangerous isotope to escape from the bleeding mouth of the reactor will never appear on the periodic chemistry scale. It is 'lie 86.'¹¹

Nicolai Vorontsov, Geneticist, Chair of the State Committee for the Protection of Nature, and later Soviet Minister of the Environment: In a way, the entire world is in the Chernobyl zone.¹²

Narrator: Four years after the accident, the Soviet Union's State Committee of Experts call the accident at the Chernobyl nuclear power station ...

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Chorus: ... the “greatest catastrophe of the modern era.”¹³

Alla Yaroshinskaya, Ukrainian journalist: What does this mean? Imagine the life span of our blue planet, estimated at ten to twelve billion years. More than a third of this time has already passed. Mother Earth is aging. Throughout this first third of her life, only one event, the Chernobyl accident, has such far-reaching and devastating consequences.¹⁴

Narrator: Imagine it.

Imagine the infant volcanic earth

Cooling to form continents.

Imagine the Ice Age.

Imagine the extinction of the dinosaurs.

None of these events affected our earth as much as Chernobyl.

Chorus: Mother, what ails thee?

Narrator: The statistical litany of the United Nations:

Chorus: The Chernobyl disaster affected an estimated nine million people in Ukraine, Belarus and Russia alone. Three to four million of them are children. These nine million people received the highest known exposure to radiation in the history of the atomic age. No people have ever before been continuously exposed to such long-lived, man-made radiation.¹⁵ The levels of caesium-137 alone equal 300 Hiroshimas.¹⁶

Alexei Yablokov, USSR Academy of Sciences: What are these catastrophic consequences? What are the effects? Let us start with the emotional aspect. The most terrible effects are not mutant animals--blind piglets, a foal with eight legs, calves without tails and with harelips, cats and dogs with all sorts of monstrosities. The most terrible thing is the cry of a young woman: ‘I want to live, I'm still young!’ And the cry that pierces your heart: ‘Our children are dying! Help!’ Even more terrible are the tears of doctors....¹⁷

Narrator: For eight years after the accident, the entire Belarussian population breathed and consumed food laden with Iodine 131. One in four of all infants will contract thyroid cancer; the normal rate is one in a million.¹⁸

Mags Whiting, Chernobyl Aid worker and poet: Children who receive the operation for thyroid cancer are left with a red scar encircling their necks, known as the "Belarussian necklace."

Chorus:

Four young frightened girls

Waiting for their turn

Will it hurt? Will I survive?

The lessons quickly learned

They lie there in their beds of fear

It could be you or me, but they must pay the price

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for man's inhumanity.

Chorus: Mother, what ails thee? Mother, who will protect your children?

Andrei Areshchenko, aged 13: I live in the contaminated zone and suffer with my thyroid. We are not allowed to eat fish from our rivers or vegetables from our own gardens.

Sosura Efimovich, aged 11: I know that it is forbidden to eat berries that grow in our forest.

Helen Protchenko, aged 11: Mother tells me that radiation is an invisible enemy; that's why it's very dangerous.

Helen Klyga, aged 11: My granny doesn't allow me to go to the forest any more to gather berries and mushrooms.

Chorus: In Ukraine, in Belarus, in Russia, life before Chernobyl was very different.

Alla Yaroshinskaya, Ukrainian Journalist: My family lives in Zhitomir, a small forest town in the Ukraine. It's a very old Slavic land, where the first traces of human presence date from as long ago as two thousand BC. My ancestors tilled this land in the Bronze Age, and at the beginning of the Iron Age. The name of the town is formed from two words, *zhito* and *mir*, which in Ukrainian mean "rye" and "peace." Thus the town's name encapsulates a whole philosophy of life, which all people can understand.

The thick forests which surrounded Zhitomir were rich in game, wild fruits, mushrooms and edible roots. The rivers on whose steep banks the town was built teemed with fish. With a mysterious, infallible talent, our ancestors chose the most enchanting places to build their towns and temples. For eternity.

These were the thoughts that passed through my head on that day, April 26, 1986, as I walked through the woods with my family. We did not know that a few hours later something would happen which would transform forever this ancient wonderland, this forest, these fields and meadows, our whole lives. And that from now on, life on earth would not only be divided into epochs and eras, civilizations, religions and political systems, but also into "before" and "after" Chernobyl. The earth would never be the same as it had been before April 26, 1986 at twenty-four minutes past one...

Religious persona: A reading from *The New Testament: The Revelation of Saint John the Divine*, Chapter 8, Verses 10-11: "And the third angel sounded, and there fell a great star from heaven, burning as it were a lamp, and it fell upon the third part of the rivers, and upon the fountains of waters; and the name of the star is called Wormwood: and the third part of the waters became wormwood; and many men died of the waters, because they were made bitter."¹⁹

Narrator: In the Dictionary of the Russian Language, the word "*Chernobylnik*" is defined as "a variety of wormwood..."²⁰

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Chorus: Mother, what ails thee?

Chorus: In our world everyday, 486 nuclear power stations boil water with radioactive fuel to generate power. Where will the next accident happen? When? How?

The ashes of Hiroshima are beating into our hearts
The ashes of Nagasaki are beating into our hearts
The ashes of Chernobyl are beating into our hearts
Are beating into our hearts.²¹

Voice #1: Out of the depths of your own heart, ask the question.

Chorus: Mother, what ails thee?

Voice #2: Stand on your own land, under a tree, or near the sea, and break the spell.

Chorus: Mother, what ails thee?

Voice #3: Speak for all of us, in all our variations, and break the spell.

Chorus: Mother, what ails thee?

Voice #1: The world needs to hear itself beyond distracting noises. Ask the question.

Chorus: Mother, what ails thee?

Voice #2: Break the enchantment. Ask the question. Make us whole.

Chorus: May the Earth continue to live.
May the heavens above continue to live.
May the rains continue to dampen the land
May the wet forests continue to grow
And the flowers shall bloom
And we people shall live again.²²

Acknowledgements:

This script would never have been written without the courageous actions and great hearts of Alla Yaroshinskaya and Adi Roche. The world and all future generations owe them deep gratitude for seeing the nuclear reality of Chernobyl clearly, and for responding with compassion, wisdom, and great skill. Because they took great risks on our behalf, we have the information and opportunities to make informed decisions about our future.

Thank you to the pilgrims of the Atomic Mirror Pilgrimage in Britain, and especially to Janet Bloomfield who organized it, and later became the British Coordinator of the Atomic Mirror. Her partnership continues to make it all possible. In the preparation of the script and the initial performance, I am indebted to Edie Hartshorne and Vijali Hamilton, with whom I presented the piece to Green World in February 1998. Edie's scoring of the script, and musical partnership, carried the difficult truths of the story into peoples' hearts that night. Thank you to Fran Macy and Enid Schreiber of The Center for Safe Energy for inviting us to prepare something to welcome the activists of Green World to California. Our deep gratitude to everyone who sat in the Hartshorne living room that evening, bearing witness to truths that most of the world shies from facing. We especially honor the ongoing work and the presence that night of Green World, in their efforts to create a clean, and sustainable community and environment for the people and life in Ukraine. Their response overwhelmed us, and we felt great respect for their willingness to share with us their personal experiences after the accident. At the end of a long evening, after a deeply felt "exchange of views," one member of the audience asked the inevitable question: How do you maintain your morale in the face of tragedy on such a vast scale? Natasha answered: "We need to be optimistic to survive and save our children." Victor said: "The human body has incredible energy. We are trying to use that energy." Carol said: "Everyone understands we live for the next generation. We understand our responsibility." Maya said: "We don't think about it every moment or we would go mad! Our country is beautiful. Our culture is wonderful. Our people are incredible. Come and see us. We are going to win!"

In 2004, the Permanent Mission of Ukraine, agreed to sponsor a performance of this piece in the Dag Hammarskjold Auditorium of the United Nations on April 26. Many people work hard to bring this event about, especially Sergey Savchuk, Third Secretary, and the Honorable Valeriy Kuchinsk, Ambassador of the Permanent Mission of Ukraine to the United Nations; Gary DeRosa and Michael Cassandra of the Department of Disarmament Affairs at the UN; New York musicians Margot Leverett and Richard Stout; and photographer, Gabriela Bulisova. Rabbi Lynn Gottlieb and Kathleen Sullivan carefully read the script and made insightful suggestions that improved it immeasurably. Graphic designer, Clare Yerbury, worked tirelessly to prepare the script, program, and special documents for the event. At the 11th hour, the opportunity arose to show the 2004 Academy Award winning documentary, *Chernobyl Heart*, by Maryann DeLeo, in the hall of the General Assembly, with the filmmaker and both Adi Roche and Alla Yaroshinskaya present. We bowed out to this extraordinary event, grateful that this difficult issue had such a spectacular forum. Thank you to everyone whose hands and hearts went into bringing the truths of Chernobyl to the world, that night and every day.

To those who have believed in the work of the Atomic Mirror and supported it financially and in more intangible ways, I offer my ongoing gratitude, especially to Andrew Beath and the

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EarthWays Foundation. Final responsibilities for the script rest, of course, with me. Thank you to everyone who made it possible.

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² Tao Te Ching

³ Danilo Dolci, Sicilian activist

⁴ Roche, Adi, *The Children of Chernobyl*, 1996, p. 50

⁵ Yaroshinskaya, Alla, *Chernobyl: The Forbidden Truth*, University of Nebraska Press, 1995, p. 76

⁶ Yaroshinskaya, Alla, *ibid*, p. 76

⁷ Yaroshinskaya, Alla, *ibid*, p. 122

⁸ Roche, Adi, *ibid*, p. 54

⁹ Yaroshinskaya, Alla, *ibid*, p. 123

¹⁰ Yaroshinskaya, Alla, *ibid*, p. 131

¹¹ Yaroshinskaya, Alla, Permanent People's Tribunal, International Medical Commission on Chernobyl (IMC), Environmental, Health And Human Rights Implications, Vienna, Austria, 12-15 April 1996,

<http://www.icucec.org/art-chernobylrem.html>

¹² Yaroshinskaya, Alla, *ibid*, p. 75

¹³ Yaroshinskaya, Alla, *ibid*, p. 74

¹⁴ Yaroshinskaya, Alla, *ibid*, p. 74

¹⁵ Children of Chernobyl brochure, Cork, Ireland, 1995.

¹⁶ Yaroshinskaya, Alla, *ibid*, p. 75

¹⁷ Yaroshinskaya, Alla, *ibid*, p. 58

¹⁸ Children of Chernobyl brochure, Cork, Ireland, 1995.

¹⁹ Revelations of St. John the Divine, Chapter 8

²⁰ Yaroshinskaya, Alla, *ibid*, p. i

²¹ Unknown Flemish poet

²² Traditional Hawai'ian blessing chant