

19<sup>th</sup> November 2023

## Umwelt

**"Take a walk under my skies."**

James Keelaghan, lyric from 'My Skies'

I've just finished the most fascinating and informative book I've read in a long time. It's *An Immense World*, by Pulitzer-prize winner and science journalist, Ed Young, and it explores how animal senses reveal the hidden realms around us. The back-cover blurb suggests we should be "coaxed beyond the confines of our own senses", to see through other eyes.

*The earth teems with sights and textures, sounds and vibrations, smells and tastes, electric and magnetic fields. But every animal is enclosed within its own unique sensory bubble, perceiving but a tiny sliver of our immense world. This book welcomes us into a previously unfathomable dimension – the world as it is truly perceived by other animals.*

It's what German biologist Jakob Johann von Uexküll labelled *the umwelt* in the 1940s, the "self-centred world" in which all creatures exist. Each component of an *umwelt* has a meaning for that organism's model of the world, bird or fish, insect or animal, mammal or invertebrate. Understand the *umwelt* and you'll begin to understand how a creature functions.

When I worked in the hospice, I came to define good pastoral care, and especially the spiritual component of that, using song lyrics from Canadian singer-songwriter, James Keelaghan. The song is *My Skies*, from an album with that name (see <https://keelaghan.com/albums/my-skies/>).

*Take a walk under my skies, try to see it once the way I do.  
If you look out through my eyes, you'll find a different point of view.  
Everything changes, every fact wears some disguise.  
Cast off your troubles, take a walk under my skies.*

Here, surely, is the essence of effective spiritual care, and indeed care and compassion at any level. It's about understanding the *umwelt* of a person, the world they inhabit, the skies under which they walk, the structure of their existence. What do people need most? Not fixing or changing, clarifying or deconstructing. They yearn for someone to enter their world, to see things through their eyes, to walk with them under their skies. And if that's what compassion means, how amazing might it be to discover that every *umwelt* is a unique and fascinating place.

### **A prayer for today**

*Lord, you know my world. So call me to enter the world of others with your compassion.*