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Helen Wilson talks to *Game of Thrones* actor and Viva! Patron, Jerome Flynn about how life on earth can move forward from the crucial point we have now reached

I might be the first to admit that I haven't watched *Game of Thrones* – violence and blood are not really my kind of entertainment. But I know many people who have followed it religiously and speak passionately about how much they loved Jerome Flynn's performance as Bronn, the sellsword, or mercenary. His portrayal of the tough but sensitive Sgt Bennet Drake in *Ripper Street* has had them reaching for superlatives.

Throughout my years of involvement with Viva!, Jerome's has become a familiar face and I tend to know him more as an animal lover and advocate for veganism than as a film star.

So, when I arrange a Zoom meeting with him, it is the caring animal advocate who looks back at me from the screen. And I quickly learn that this articulate and thoughtful man is not afraid to speak from the heart.

How on earth do you start a conversation these days without mentioning coronavirus? It's the issue that has eclipsed normal life as we know it but in reality, it is just one strand of a series of environmental crises facing us.

Chatting virtually, from our respective corners of Wales, it quickly becomes obvious that it is these wider threats that concern Jerome, the implications of which are far greater than just this particular virus.

He surprises me by saying that this unusual time should be seen as a great milestone for change. "If the death of over 40,000 people from Covid-19 isn't enough of a motivator, then I do wonder what hope there is at all.

"My prayer is – and I know it's shared by many people – that we've been afforded a gift and we should pause and consider where we've come to in our relationship with all living things; with the planet that sustains us; with this beautiful home we have. I have lost people close to me to this virus and of course I would want them back but my hope is that their lives are not wasted.

"Both my sense and my experience tell me that nature has a supreme intelligence. Just the fact that we are here, living and breathing in this life is testimony to the miracle of the creative energy that has brought us here. Viruses historically have come at times when we have disregarded nature – and specifically our treatment of our beloved animals.

"We have jeopardised sustainable life on earth and need to acknowledging the precipice that we are now standing on. I consider it a gentle warning and an

The **waking up** happening in our world

extraordinary opportunity to consider how we are living. We have forgotten who we are. We have fallen out of love with life.”

Jerome believes that change needs to start with young people being taught to understand the connection between life and nature and how to live in harmony with it. His message is both political and compassionate.

“There is a huge groundswell of change and as always, those who sit at the top of society feel they have the most to lose. Our consciousness has been colonised in much the same way that the world was colonised and that has produced a materialistic, capitalist society and any connection to our land and how it relates to us has been wiped out.

“How do we move forward? We can’t force change from the same consciousness that caused the problem – it has to come from our own hearts and our understanding of who we are. Only then will we naturally want to care for the sanctity of the life that surrounds us and upon which we rely”.

I see his vision, as I think most of the people I work with do, because we all understand that veganism is much more than a diet. I admire his optimism that the human race has the capacity to do this – to change.

“Too many people are disconnected from life, from the natural world that supports us and that includes our relationship with animals. It is hard to believe that in 2020 we are still cramming millions of animals into desperate conditions, taking away from them all their freedoms, allowing them not even a taste of a natural life and giving them only suffering in return. But there is an awakening happening.

“There has been a huge swing to veganism and with it has come much more education about the reality of the lives of the animals we’ve been eating. Compared to 10 years ago, there is enormous change.

“Just one per cent of people on this planet have 90 per cent of the wealth but I am certain that the one per cent is not truly happy. A new opportunity to fall back in love with life is there for everyone, for the entire planet, including these people. We could be living in bliss compared to where we’re at now. I feel we need to grasp this opportunity to immerse ourselves in nature again and come back home to her.”

Jerome tells me he recognises that there are many people stepping forward from all ages who are calling for widespread transformation of the systems that are failing us. I think he might be referring to Greta Thunberg as I recall he joined the Climate Strike in London last year.

He believes there’s a blueprint within us and within nature that will bring us back to a state of harmony with the earth.

“I see it like a garden planet. One of the things that gives us the most joy in life is to walk around a garden where man is living in concert with nature. There are some wild parts and some parts where we are working with nature to amplify its beauty. I feel this is the highest vision and it’s inbuilt in our creativity, it’s within us, it’s in our hearts and it’s in nature.”

As he speaks, I can’t help but think of his big, rambling walled garden in West Wales, with its fruit and vegetables coexisting alongside wild plants in a wonderful hotch-potch of tamed and untamed. And in the centre is the pool – it is a swimming pool without tiles or concrete but a deep, natural pool filled and flushed by spring water, crystal clear and which you share with bright green water plants at one end and undoubtedly, the odd water boatman.

“Look at what this crisis has brought out in people – there is so much love there”

“Part of it is having our hearts broken; it makes us vulnerable to allow emotion and suffering in but it’s important for the heart to break so the love can awaken and allow nature to do its thing – to restore us. There’s an extraordinary marriage waiting. The mother is waiting for us to come back to the most beautiful relationship there is. I think it’s entirely possible. It can seem like a long, long way but look at what this crisis has brought out in people – there is so much love there”.

Jerome’s vision leaves me somewhat lost for words. He has managed to encapsulate the desperate need for action and change that many of us have been feeling throughout these worrying times. Speaking with him has certainly left me feeling more optimistic for the future of this planet and its animals.

Jerome Flynn has narrated the commentary to Viva!’s documentary, *HOGWOOD: a modern horror story*, which was released in June this year.

You can listen to my full interview with Jerome in the June episode of The Viva! Vegan Podcast.

