

# Ruth's Story

I was born in London and I've lived most of my life here. The most important things about me, from my point of view, are that I'm a daughter, a sister, a mother, an auntie. I'm a friend, a neighbour, and at work I'm a mathematician.

When I was growing up we had a garden, about 10m by 10m, which my dad used to spend hours looking after. We three children thought it was a great joke when the ball we were kicking knocked the blossoms off his dahlias. We played a lot in the garden and local park, and took it for granted – we really didn't think much about it.

I don't have an exciting story to tell, where something dramatic happened to me that changed the way I see things. I have always had similar beliefs about the world and how we should behave in it. But over the years I have seen beyond the garden and Dad's dahlias, and the squirrels in the park, and thought more about the natural world and my place in it.

I said I have always had similar beliefs, and today I call myself a humanist because that describes my beliefs pretty well, though I only learnt the word a few years ago. I believe that the world around us has been made entirely through natural forces and laws; and that there is no divine being who made it. And I believe that we humans are responsible for our own actions, for living the best life we can and helping other people to get the most out of their lives too, because this is the only life we have.

Over time I have become more aware of the natural world, and its complexity, and more aware of how human activity – the human world of jobs, sport, music, friendship, births, marriages, deaths - affects the physical world we live in of animals and plants, air and water and soil.

And that not only is this the only life we have, but this is the only planet we have.

And what an amazing planet it is, with an amazing history. Four billion years ago, through a mix of chance and cosmological forces, the planet was created. Over the billions of years, geological forces shaped it – the hills and valleys, the seas and rivers. And over the last three billion years, life has evolved through repeated chemical and biological developments and extinctions, to today's microorganisms, plants and animals.

I have watched films and TV programmes about the natural world and been fascinated and delighted by films of meerkats looking after their babies, penguins on the long march across the frozen Antarctic to get food for their chicks, climbing plants reaching out for something to hold on to, scorpions mating. I have visited forests, lakes, sea, mountain-tops, and been stunned by their beauty, and felt the pleasure of breathing fresh unpolluted air and being surrounded by greenery and birdsong. I have learnt about the different ways of life of people around the world, and how dependent they are on the particular local environment – its animal and plant life, its geology and geography. And closer to home, most days I go for a walk in the local woods and feel myself relaxing and cheering up among the trees.

So, how does all this connect to my belief that we should be living the best life we can, and helping others to do the same? For me, this means being kind, helping those who are worse off than I am, not causing pain if I can avoid it, not being selfish, trying to avoid causing harm, and helping preserve this one planet we have. Not just for my friends and family, but for everyone around the world. Not just for people, but not causing unnecessary suffering to animals. Not just now, but for future generations.

Putting all this together, I'm a strong believer in doing what we can to protect the environment.

When I was a teenager, the Vietnam War was going on, and I was joining marches and campaigning to stop it. Countless wicked, cruel, inhumane acts took place, but one of the most upsetting was spraying chemicals to destroy the vegetation. These chemicals also caused lifelong health problems, including in unborn children, and no doubt also in wildlife, and permanently damaged the soil.

I got involved then as an anti-war campaigner, because of the cruelty. These days I am just as fiercely anti-war because of what it does to people, but I am also now concerned about the damage it does to the environment, and about all the other ways we are causing damage through our day-to-day activities.

What do I do about it? I use my vote, where I can, for politicians who are committed to protecting the environment. I donate to charities like 'Friends of the Earth' that work to save the environment. I join campaigns, because I think we can be more successful when we are all working together and when our leaders are going in the right direction. I try to be less destructive in my daily life.

I know I could do more, but to me what is most important is that we all try to do something. I believe that most human beings, whether or not they believe in a divine being, believe that we should be kind, sharing and non-destructive, and that our human desires mean that we all want to preserve the environment. I have huge hopes that together, we can persuade our leaders, those who can make the biggest difference, to do the right thing.

