



“When we contemplate the whole globe as one great dewdrop, striped and dotted with continents and islands, flying through space with other stars all singing and shining together as one, the whole universe appears as an infinite storm of beauty.” —John Muir

A few weeks ago I sat down to write this article on the environmental crisis. After several unsuccessful attempts, writer’s block snuck into the already dimly lit office of my mind and turned off the lights. Unable to craft even one intelligible sentence, all I wanted to do was hurl my computer, notebooks, and pens into a raging bonfire.

To be honest, I felt intimidated by the subject. What could I possibly say about the state of affairs on planet Earth? It’s obvious that things are headed in a dire direction. The glaciers are melting like ghee in a cosmic skillet, and the doomsayers keep warning us about the end of the world. Only weather forecasters seem excit-

ed, as their jobs have gotten a lot more interesting.

One evening after countless hours at the computer, sleep summoned me away from my literary angst. As I slept, the ground shook fiercely on the other side of the globe. Immense waves stormed to shore, washing away entire towns. Thousands perished, many more lost loved ones, and I awoke to a new world. Images of the earthquake and tsunami in Japan stunned me into silence. Unable to grasp the destruction, I stared at my laptop screen in shock as my tears swept me out to sea.

It’s no mystery that we are in the midst of a major planetary upheaval. Natural disasters seem to occur

with greater frequency, and it's hard to know how to make sense of them—the extent of human suffering and ecological devastation is incomprehensible. At times like these, logic fails to appease our overwhelming sense of loss and grief. Although scientists and politicians theorize about what is happening, many of their views sound trite in the face of tragedy. Disasters humble us out of our narcissism into the realization that a far greater power is in charge.

An Intricate Web

No matter how far away from our doorstep such calamities occur, none of us remain untouched. As Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh, in his recent “message to friends in Japan,” explained: “The pain of one part of humankind is the pain of the whole of humankind. And the human species and the planet Earth are one body. What happens to one part of the body happens to the whole body.” Even though we often forget this, when the suffering of others is so great, the shell of separation shatters, and we touch the truth of our relatedness.

Today, the challenges we face seem greater than ever before: pollution, loss of biodiversity, overpopulation. Although we know what's at stake, the solutions are far from simple. Environmental problems don't exist in a vacuum, and multiple factors influence each issue. Science, economics, politics, and gender are just a few of the many spheres that are woven into a complex ecological web.

Unfortunately, there are no easy answers. To address these concerns from the root, an integral approach is necessary. If we simply remedy the symptoms, the results will be no more useful than giving the weeds in our garden a haircut.

The trouble is, we often view environmental issues in the same way that Western medicine views illness: as a physiological or biochemical problem to be fixed. While helpful at times, such a disease-based model does not acknowledge that we are multidimensional beings whose health depends on many factors, both seen and unseen. In the same way, if we look only for external solutions to our ecological challenges, we will never identify the subtle causes. To heal the whole person—and the whole planet—we must peer beneath the surface into the source of our pain.

While it may seem like environmental challenges are external to us, spiritual wisdom suggests that we really can't separate “out there” from “in here.” Sri Ramana Maharshi, the late South Indian sage, said, “The world rises with the mind and sets with the mind.” If this is so, then what we observe in the world actually

points us back to our own inner terrain. The more we recognize this, the more we experience a sense of responsibility for the land we inhabit.

The Ecology of Spirit

Over the past few decades, philosophers, ethicists, theologians, and spiritual leaders have lent their very relevant voices to the green conversation. Many of them have illuminated the importance of a values-based approach to the environmental crisis, one that draws on the rich wisdom of our religious and spiritual heritage. While policy, activism, and technology certainly have significant roles to play, contemplative traditions suggest that we must also look within and evaluate our moral priorities and belief systems.

Spiritual teachings have always emphasized the importance of living in harmony with nature, and the great saints and sages throughout history have illustrated the value of respecting life and caring for the earth. With their expansive vision and boundless hearts, enlightened beings saw the invisible threads that connect all things—from the smallest single-celled organism to the hugest humpback whale. They recognized that this dynamic universe is actually governed by an intelligence known by different names depending on the tradition.

We need only read stories of the world's religions to see that almost all of them weave the natural world into their narratives. The Taoist sage rests in his misty mountain dwelling, the Buddha sits under the Bodhi tree, and St. Francis talks to his animal friends. Muhammad meditates in a cave on Mount Hira, Moses meets a burning bush, and Krishna has a special bond with the cows. Nature consistently shows up in the scriptures and appears as an instrument of Spirit, imparting valuable messages and providing the space for divine revelations.

Along with organized religions, indigenous peoples across the globe continually demonstrate their reverence for the earth. Native Americans send their prayers to the Great Spirit through the smoke from their sacred pipes. Amazonian shamans utilize medicinal plants like ayahuasca in their ceremonies. The San people of southern Africa participate in ritual trance dances to heal people and to make rain. These cultures understand that we are as much a part of the planet as our head is a part of our body, and their cosmologies value life in all its expressions.

While the external forms of the world's diverse spiritual traditions may appear different, their inner essence is one and the same: compassion. Even mystics who have woken up to the illusory, dream-like nature of the world continue to feel profound love for creation. In their eyes, everything is drenched in sacredness. These wise beings tell us that the sense of separation we feel is a fallacy. From an absolute view, all phenomena are woven together in an intricate web of connection—a living, breathing matrix. Even scientists like James Lovelock affirm this perspective, suggesting that the planet—what he refers to as Gaia—is a self-regulating “super-organism.” Indeed, all things are interrelated. Just as a quake in one part of the world can trigger tsunami warnings on multiple continents, so too does one person's awakened heart ripple out into the farthest corners of the cosmos.

Still, for most people, the vital threads that unite us appear veiled beneath a shroud of ignorance. It's as if a giant cloak has been thrown over the truth, causing us to feel alienated and alone. In the Hindu tradition, Vedantins refer to this cloak as *maya*, the illusory power that makes us think the self is separate. A similar idea known as *tzimtzum* exists in Lurianic Kabbalah. According to this mystical Jewish perspective, God contracted his light so that we wouldn't be overwhelmed by it, thus leading us to believe that we have a finite, independent existence. However we look at it, the fundamental idea is that we've been duped! With the underlying unity hidden from view, we imagine ourselves to be isolated islands in a celestial sea. This misperception leads to a case of mistaken identity that no doubt contributes to the external challenges we face.

Nature As Mirror, Nature As Self

Sadly, waking up to who we really are is no simple task. After all, the question “Who am I?” is the quintessential inquiry of most spiritual systems and the driving force behind all seeking. Although once in awhile, people do trip over their true nature in an unforeseen gust of grace, most of us discover our infinite-ness only once we step down from the throne of I, me, and mine.

At the same time, we don't have to become a Buddha to imbibe the nectar of our true essence.

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When we spend time in nature, we meet our real beauty. The mountain evokes the solidness of our Self, and the sunset points to the colorful palette of our creative soul. When we gaze at the ocean with its perpetual ebb and flow or lie down in the soft grass and stare up at the sky, we see into ourselves. We *are* that space, that vastness. We are the lilac and we are the cloud. We are the mud as well as the moon. The entire galaxy lives within us, and when it banged into existence eons ago, so did we—our infinite potential concealed inside swirling seas of stardust. Walt Whitman intuited this truth when he wrote, “A leaf of grass is no less than the journey-work of the stars.”

In a sense, nature is the perfect mirror. She reflects our magnificence and our misery. Much like the mere presence of a loved one can illuminate our shadow, many of the things happening in the world correspond to our internal reality. Is there a difference between the ways we deplete our natural resources and exhaust our inner resources? Living in a fast-food world, our faces smooshed into gadgets, we want what we want, when we want it. Sophisticated technology has divorced us from the rhythms of nature and encouraged a life of convenience where instant gratification is the norm. We want our maté lattes, microwave meals, and emails *now*. We can’t waste time because we’re all sprinting to ... nowhere.

Although nature reminds us time and again that the simple joy of being is enough, we rarely believe it. The feeling that we constantly have to *do* something follows us around like a mosquito, forcing us to keep moving lest we pause and get bitten. Under this kind of pressure, it seems that pushing against life—instead of allowing it to unfold—is the only way to get ahead. But a flower can’t be coerced to open. Knowing that, why are we so impatient? Just as we force fruits to ripen before they’re ready, we want immediate transformation: Compassion now! Enlightenment now! The perfect partner now! Is this because we don’t trust the natural timing of things? Striving and straining may make us feel productive, but the inferno of overachievement hardens the heart and reduces our life force to ashes.

There’s no question: The world is heating up, and so are we. Tortured by countless negative emotions, fears, and desires, many of us live in a chronic state of tension. Such tension, which has a burning quality, is what the Buddha referred to as *dukkha*—suffering. Yet suffering can be a powerful catalyst for transformation. Just as the Buddha’s observation of old age, sickness, and death prompted him to renounce his palatial life, when we bear witness to pain, we can’t help but contemplate what it means. Stunned by the destruction caused by natural disasters, the sensitive heart naturally turns within and asks why. In this way, the crises taking place in our world serve as invitations to deeper inquiry. Looking inward, compassion arises and propels us into action; each path flows into the other.

Tender Heart, Sacred World

But what do all these nice ideas amount to? Does thinking about these concepts actually make a difference when it comes to the environmental crisis? Sometimes it doesn’t seem that way, especially when incomprehensible things occur, like entire towns vanishing from the map. How are we to view situations like these? Fall into despair? Shut down and look the other way? Either reaction is understandable. Ecological catastrophes remind us that our lives are fragile, that nothing is certain in this unpredictable world. They also shake us out of the illusion that we can always control what happens in life.

Sensing our helplessness, we have no choice but to surrender. We can’t figure life out anymore or compartmentalize things to appease our narrow mind. We can only open to the unknown and let go. At such times, we find ourselves in the wilderness of the soul, trekking through the dark night of our unconscious with all its repressions and fears. There, in the thick woodland of grief, we touch the depth of our collective pain. We mourn the disconnection we have felt for so long.

To truly understand what is happening to our planet, we must venture into the vast landscape of our consciousness. Just as we’ve plundered the wilderness, most of us have traded our wildness for lives of quiet conformity. Instead of exploring the unmarked trails of the heart, we prefer to control how much love we let in and give out. But at the end of the day, we cannot rein in the wind or domesticate our light. As Thoreau said, “In wilderness is the preservation of the world.” So too is it the preservation of the soul.

Though it is scary, without braving this raw underworld, we may never heed what poet John O’Donohue refers to as “our own mystery.” We must be willing to look with love at the darkness inside, for it is only when we touch the sediment of the shadow that we can bring in the light. For


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this, we need to trust that we have the fortitude to meet all that we are with unconditional kindness. As Yeats said, “Man needs reckless courage to descend into the abyss of himself.” Indeed we do. In these troubling times, “reckless courage” can help us feel our pain so we can heal our pain; there is no other way.

In her group process work known as “The Work That Reconnects,” eco-philosopher Joanna Macy advises us to feel our despair about what is happening on earth. By opening to such despair, instead of resisting it, we miraculously discover that we are not alone. Feeling what is alive in us, though it may not be comfortable, is the truest sign of bravery. As the Tibetan meditation master Trungpa Rinpoche taught, “If a person does not feel alone or sad, he cannot be a warrior at all.” The world is gravely in need of compassionate warriors who are not afraid to face their full humanity. Such warriors are, in Rinpoche’s words, those who understand that “real fearlessness is the product of tenderness.”

It is tenderness that enables us to experience our connection with the whole of existence. The root *ten* means “to stretch.” How true that when our defenses come down, we expand into greater openness. From that place, the world appears as it really is: sacred. Such sacredness is not something given to us; it is something we *give*. It is we who make things sacred by seeing them that way. This holy vision is the medicine we desperately need right now, for only when we restore a sense of sanctity to our terrestrial home will we feel compelled to treat it with love and care.

What we need is a renewed sense of wonder for our world, for out of wonder comes devotion. Who doesn’t wish to serve the object of her affection, be it a person, ideology, or the entire iridescent universe? To experience this devotion, we must make sure the beautiful qualities that make us human—sensitivity, vulnerability, self-awareness, empathy—do not become endangered. Now is the time to embrace all that we are, from the darkest depths to the brightest heights. Though we may feel afraid, we must return again and again to Rumi’s wise instruction: “Move within, but don’t move the way fear makes you move.”

It is time. We must move within and awaken the wild beauty of our tender heart. Only then will we heal this precious earth. 

Carrie Grossman is senior editor of Common Ground. TheLightInside.org