

“The Earth My Heart”

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“To live in the midst of environmental devastation
takes either great denial
or big heart and great faith”
—words of the psychologist John Davis.

This is a hard year to celebrate Earth Day.
We are becoming so painfully aware
that things are dangerously wrong.
We all read the headlines;
we know that the number of severe storms around the world
is increasing very quickly.
Hurricane Katrina is just the best-known example.
In the last 30 years,
the number of Category 4 and 5 hurricanes has doubled.¹
We know that the glaciers are shrinking around the world,
almost before our eyes.
Where there was snow and ice,
bare rock is showing through for the first time in thousands of years.

Scientists agree overwhelmingly:
global warming is real;
it is happening now.
If we don't change what we are doing, very quickly,
by 2050 there could be no ice at all during the summers
in the Arctic Ocean—
the *Arctic*, the land of ice and snow!²

¹ Emanuel, K. 2005. Increasing destructiveness of tropical cyclones over the past 30 years. *Nature* 436: 686-688.
Cited at <http://www.climatecrisis.net/thescience/>.

² Arctic Climate Impact Assessment. 2004. *Impacts of a Warming Arctic*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. Also quoted in *Time Magazine*, Vicious Cycles, Missy Adams, March 26, 2006. Cited at <http://www.climatecrisis.net/thescience/>.

Sea levels around the world could rise by 20 feet.³
I don't have to remind you that Stockton's elevation is, on average,
15 feet above sea level.⁴
This is not good!

You know all this; I know you do.
And even as I speak,
there's a part of my brain listening to my own words
and saying, "Blah, blah, blah, I've heard this all before."
I feel a strange disconnect within myself,
a distancing from reality
that feels very self-protective.

I've seen the pictures of the glaciers receding;
I've read about the polar bears who drown because the Arctic ice has
broken up and they can't find any ice to rest on.
Intellectually I understand this is happening, and I know you do too.
We know it's real;
we know we are causing it;
intellectually we know, or at least we hope and trust,
that we can stop it by changing our behavior.
But emotionally it's very difficult to absorb.
The idea of glaciers disappearing in decades, in our lifetime,
is terrifying.
The prospect of hundreds of thousands of species going extinct
because of global climate change—that is terrifying.
The possibility that our homes might be flooded by rising sea levels
is terrifying.
So we look away;
we tell ourselves, this can't be,
because the feelings of fear it creates in us are overwhelming.

As our society finally begins to face up to global warming,

³ Washington Post, "Debate on Climate Shifts to Issue of Irreparable Change," Juliet Eilperin, January 29, 2006, Page A1. Cited at <http://www.climatecrisis.net/thescience/>.

⁴ See <http://www.usacitiesonline.com/cacountystockton.htm>.

perhaps the most difficult obstacle in our way
is our own fear and denial.

We already have the basic scientific and industrial knowledge
to stabilize our carbon emissions over the next 50 years.⁵

We have the technology

to double the fuel efficiency of the world's cars.

We have the capacity to build workable public transportation systems
that get people where they want to go without driving.

We already know how to generate renewable energy
from wind power and solar power.

We already know how to increase energy efficiency
in our homes and workplaces.

We are already experimenting with carbon capture and storage.

We have the *knowledge* to control global warming.

Now what we need as a society is the courage and the will to do it.

Which raises the question:

why do we not yet *have* the courage and the will

to make the changes we know we need to make

to prevent the massive human and nonhuman suffering

that global warming *is* going to cause if we go on as we have been?

What is preventing us from just getting with the program

and doing what we've got to do?

There's a new field called ecopsychology

that says, look, this challenge is both individual and societal.

There is something about our society that makes us feel unable to
respond to the needs of the earth.

Joanna Macy speaks of how we "lead... a 'double life'":

taking care of our kids and going through the day,

all the while with a dim awareness

that we are living in an increasingly damaged world.⁶

⁵ Elizabeth Kolbert, "The Climate of Man III," *New Yorker* May 2005, excerpted in *Global Warming: Changing CO₂urse* (Northwest Earth Institute, 2007). See also http://www.princeton.edu/~cmi/resources/CMI_Resources_new_files/CMI_Stab_Wedges_Movie.swf.

But we feel strangely numbed, dissociated, cut off from what we know about what is happening.

We feel unable to respond to what we see and know—

the pollution of our air, our water, and our land,

the shrinking of habitat for nonhuman life,

the increasing chaos in our climate.

So many of us see but don't pay attention;

we don't take it in,

because the major institutions of our society

are all participating in the same dissociation.⁷

Our economy is based on maximizing immediate profits for a few shareholders, largely ignoring the many environmental costs of what we produce.

Our politics have been based on cut-throat competition, name-calling,

and simplistic black-and-white divisions,

rather than collaboration and mutual learning.

The way we live seems impossible to change.

We need our cars to get from place to place

in a landscape of suburban subdivisions and strip malls.

We need electricity to power our heaters and air conditioners

and refrigerators and computers and telephones.

Even when we *want* to live in a different way,

it's very hard without support from the rest of our society.

It hurts to see all this and know it and take it in.⁸

And our hearts are already so full—where is there room for more?

We are already dealing with the daily challenges in our own lives

and the lives of the people we love.

The news headlines grab our attention

and demand that we make room for the sorrow and pain of strangers.

And now we are asked to open our hearts even more

⁶ Joanna Macy, "Working through Environmental Despair," in *Ecopsychology*, ed. Theodore Roszak, Mary E. Gomes, and Allen D. Kanner (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1995), 243.

⁷ Ralph Metzner, *Green Psychology* (Rochester, VT: Park Street Press, 1999), p. 95.

⁸ Laura Sewall, *Sight and Sensibility: The Ecopsychology of Perception* (New York: Penguin Putnam, 1999), 67.

and leave ourselves exposed
to the possible devastation of our entire world.
How can we even take it in?
We fear if we really felt all that fear and pain and sorrow,
it would drown us!

We fear we'll be paralyzed,
We fear we won't be up to the challenge,
we fear we are too weak
to prevent all these horrendous things from coming to pass,
and if they're going to happen anyway
we'd better tune it out.
Turn up the TV and pass the potato chips.

It hurts to realize
there is a big part of ourselves that *doesn't* want to change,
despite all that we know and fear.
Or maybe it would be more accurate to say
we *can't* change without serious help
because we as a society have become *addicted* to the way we live.
We have built up an economy
that depends on convincing us we are flawed and unloved
and in need of more and more junk to make us feel OK again.
But of course that OK feeling never lasts,
because the economy needs us to buy more and more,
and thus it needs us to feel more and more dissatisfied
with what we have.
We have become a society of addicts.

Ralph Metzner is an ecopsychologist who says
our inability to change what we are doing to ourselves
and the environment is literally addictive behavior.
We as a society continue even though we know
our actions are destroying the very world we love.⁹

⁹ Metzner, *Green Psychology*, 89.

We continue even though we know we are killing *ourselves*.
And it's breaking our hearts.
We are ashamed and sad, and we don't know what to do.
We want to wake up and be strong and brave,
but we need help.

At this point we have to be very, very kind to ourselves.
We don't have to reproach ourselves.
We don't have to order ourselves to do better.
It's very difficult to do better individually
in a culture that doesn't yet offer enough good environmental choices
for individuals.

What is called for now
is being very quiet
and allowing ourselves to actually feel our feelings.
Our culture does not invite us to actually feel our grief
for what is happening to the earth.

From a psychological perspective,
therapists will too often deny
that our sadness about the environment is a real emotion.
They might tell us that's just a mask
for the so-called "real" issues of individual family life.¹⁰

In the realm of politics and social policy,
our culture is comfortable with leaping over emotions
and going right to technical solutions.
The attitude of "let's roll up our sleeves
and get to work to fix this problem"—
that's part of the American ethos, and it's not a bad thing.
But before we get going, could we just pause
and actually feel the depth of our sorrow and fear for the planet?

¹⁰ Theodore Roszak, quoted in D. Patrick Miller, *The Voice of the Earth: A Conversation with Theodore Roszak*, excerpted in *Exploring Deep Ecology* (Northwest Earth Institute, 2001), p. VI-6.

I'd like to share with you a poem called
"Keeping Quiet," by the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda.¹¹

And now we will count to twelve
and we will all keep still.

For once on the face of the earth,
let's not speak any language;
let's stop for one second,
and not move our arms so much.

It would be a delicious moment,
without hurry, without locomotives,
all of us would be together
in a sudden strangeness.

Fishermen in the cold sea
would not harm whales
and the man gathering salt
would look at his torn hands.

Those who prepare green wars,
wars of gas, wars of fire,
victories without survivors,
would put on clean clothing
and would walk alongside their brothers
in the shade, doing nothing.

What I want shouldn't be confused
with total inactivity.
(Life is what it is about;
I want nothing to do with death.)

¹¹ Adapted from the translations by Stephen Mitchell and Alastair Reed.

If we were not so singleminded
about keeping our lives moving,
and for once could do nothing,
perhaps a huge silence
might interrupt this sadness
of never understanding ourselves
and of threatening ourselves with death.

Perhaps the earth can teach us
as when everything seems to be dead
and then everything is alive....

(Silence)

Out of the stillness, what emerges?
Maybe sorrow.
It's OK to weep for what is happening.
It is even massively appropriate.

Maybe anger.
It is massively appropriate to feel anger and frustration
at being caught in a civilization whose most basic patterns
are no longer sustainable.

Maybe fear.
It's very frightening to realize how big the problem is.
We are just us.
Maybe all our efforts are just a drop in the bucket.
How could it be enough?

But, you know, my colleague Gordon McKeeman
has a wonderful response.
“Who asked you to *fill* the bucket—especially all alone?”¹²

¹² Gordon McKeeman, “A Drop in the Bucket,” in *Out of the Ordinary* (Boston: Skinner House, 2000), p. 20.

So many people are waking up just as we are.
It may be that “your drop in the bucket is one of the last ones needed”
to tip the balance.

Remember that an alternative culture of sustainability *is* taking root,
slowly but surely.

And not even so slowly any more!

We have farmers’ markets where you can buy beautiful local food.
You can buy organic food in the Safeway and even in the Wal-Mart.
And have you seen the signs in the Safeway gas station on Pacific Ave.,
announcing that the gas station’s electricity is produced entirely from
wind power? I find that a little ironic for a *gas* station, but it’s a good
thing!

We’re learning more about green building all the time.

Ten or fifteen years ago,

that phrase wasn’t even on the radar screen for most of us.

Target is stocking sustainably produced bamboo-fiber sheets now.

The state of California is heavily subsidizing solar power installations
for anyone who can invest in solar power for their home.

And even the more conservative elements in our society
are getting on board.

I’m sure you heard about the recent Supreme Court ruling
that the Environmental Protection Agency has the power
to regulate greenhouse gas emissions.

Just the other day,

a group of retired generals issued a report
strongly urging the U.S. government to cut greenhouse gas emissions
immediately on military grounds,

the fear being that global warming will increase hunger and disease
and make so many people refugees

that terrorism and civil war will be even more likely
in the developing world.

People are starting to listen and see and understand.

As many of you remember, our church voted a few months ago to join California Interfaith Power & Light, which is working with congregations all around the state to educate people and empower us to lobby for better laws to address global warming.

Also here at this church, a group of us have been meeting to study global warming and what we can do about it. A number of folks in this group have decided to keep meeting and start taking on some environmental and global warming projects. If you'd like to join us, you are more than welcome. We'll be getting together toward the end of May, and details will be in the May newsletter.

And today at the social hour we'll have a petition sponsored by our Unitarian Universalist Legislative Ministry of California, a petition to the U.S. Congress in support of an 80% reduction in carbon emissions by 2050. People all over the country are signing up to express their concern and insist that our federal government take serious action, as it has the power to do. I hope you'll consider signing too.

As we continue our efforts, if you need help or information or inspiration, please tell me. Let me know how the church can help. We want to help you realize that you can make a difference.

We are making a difference already. It's not too late. We can save the world we know and love if we choose to wake up and see

and act now.

“To live in the midst of environmental devastation
takes either great denial
or big heart and great faith.”

I believe our hearts are big enough.
We love our home,
we have each other,
and we are brave and strong.

May it be so!
Amen and blessed be.