



Introduction: “To Hear Within Ourselves the Sound of the Earth Crying”

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Our planet is in danger. We all know that on some level of our consciousness. The accelerating ecological crisis which threatens the survival of life on earth is evident now not only to professional biologists, botanists, environmental scientists, but to all of us.

It is evident in the quality of air we breathe, in the food we eat, in the rivers in which we can no longer fish or swim, in the waste dumps leaching their toxins into our water supplies, in news reports about oil spills and acid rain and holes in our protective ozone layer. The tragic disasters of Bhopal, Chernobyl, the Rhine are no longer seen as isolated aberrations, but as part and parcel of a progressive contamination occurring on a steady, mounting, daily basis.

We read staggering statistics: twenty-two acres of rainforest demolished each minute, an area the size of a

football field every second of every day. A million species of plants and animals will be extinct by the turn of the century, an average of a hundred a day. Dr. Mustafa Tolba, director-general of the United Nations Environment Program, says that the destruction of genetic material and environments has reached such a pitch that “we face, by the turn of the century, an environmental catastrophe as complete, as irreversible as any nuclear holocaust.” These figures and extrapolations of the scientists, combined with the evidences we experience daily are both mind-boggling and numbing. They are so real as to test all our capacities of denial, almost impossible to integrate into the *reality* of the humdrum of our daily lives.

They took on reality for me when I first participated in actions to protect some of the remaining rainforests near my home in New South Wales, Australia. Then I was able to embody, to bring to life, my intellectual knowings in interaction with other beings—protesters, loggers, police, and with the trees and other inhabitants of these forests. There and then I was gripped with an intense, profound realization of the depth of the bonds that connect us to the Earth, how deep are our feelings for these connections. I knew then that I was no longer acting on behalf of myself or my human ideas, but on behalf of the Earth . . . on behalf of my larger self, that I was literally part of the rainforest defending herself.

I knew then, and I know now that these connections—and the knowings and feelings that stem from these connections—are in all of us. I know that we must tap them if we are to stop the destruction and allow the Earth to heal herself. We must find ways to bring forth such realizations in their truth and power in order to arouse and sustain us in defending life on Earth.

I pondered this challenge, seemingly thrown up by the rainforest herself, with Joanna Macy after participating in one of her “Despair and Empowerment” rituals in Australia. We walked and talked in the forests of the

Nightcap Range near my home— the very forests that we had successfully defended some years before. Joanna's work over the years with people from all walks of life had convinced her that it was the destruction of our life-support systems that is the deepest and most pervasive source of anxiety in our time. It is not a hypothetical danger like nuclear war, for it is happening now . . . and people, as much as they would like to deny it, sense it, feel it, often on an inchoate level, in their bodies. The very enormity of the threat makes it harder to talk about it or confront it squarely.

Both of us had been inspired by the writings of Arne Naess, Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at Oslo University, and we understood peoples' widespread though semiconscious awareness of the environmental peril in terms of the deep ecology perspective Naess articulates. We wondered if we could combine "Despair and Empowerment" work and deep ecology in ways that would awaken people's commitment and courage to act for our planet. From our discussions emerged "The Council of All Beings." It is a form of group work which prepares and allows people to "hear within themselves the sounds of the earth crying" a phrase borrowed from Vietnamese Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh, and to let other life forms speak through them. It is a form which permits us to experience consciously both the pain and the power of our interconnectedness with all life.

Soon afterward, the first Council of All Beings took place in a rural setting outside of Sydney, Australia with forty humans participating, to the haunting earthy sounds of the aboriginal *didgeridoo*. Pat Fleming was on hand to assist. Since that early March day in 1985 this form of group work or ritual has been shared by Joanna, Pat, myself, and others with a wide audience in Australia, North America and Europe. The Council of All Beings has been convened in forests, conference centers, schoolrooms and in churches as a central part of the liturgy.

And it was written by people in far-flung places—I'm in Australia, Pat in England and Joanna in Tibet and then California. From letters and phone calls we have received from around the world, each experience has been profound and longlasting.

The Council of All Beings, as we have come to use the phrase both in our work and in this book, refers to both a particular ritual enactment and also to a set of group processes and practices of which the ritual is a part. It is to share this form with a wider public that we make this book available. But first let me explain a bit more about the two streams which flow together here in this new form of group work.

DESPAIR AND EMPOWERMENT

One root of the Council of All Beings is the Despair and Empowerment work developed by Joanna Macy and many others in the Interhelp Network.¹ Many activists who rouse us to the fact that our survival is at stake decry public apathy. They often assume, mistakenly, that people do not change because they lack *information* and that the main job of activists is to provide the missing information. The experience of despairwork suggests that such numbness and apathy does not stem from ignorance or indifference; on the contrary, most of us are aware of the destruction of our planet at the deepest level. But we do not face it, do not integrate it for fear of experiencing the despair that such information provokes. We fear it may overwhelm us. Moreover, our society has constructed taboos against the communication and expression of such anguish.

This refusal of feeling takes a heavy toll on us, impoverishing both our emotional and our sensory lives. It also impedes our capacity to process and respond to information as we screen out or filter anxiety-provoking data. But such feedback is precisely what we need to adapt and survive.

Experience with group work has shown that this despair, grief and anger can be confronted, experienced and creatively channelled. Far from being crushed by it, new energy, creativity and empowerment can be released. Unblocking these feelings also opens us to experiencing our fundamental interconnectedness with all life. Often after such experiences, people come together to form ongoing support groups or join existing groups to take action on peace and/or environmental issues.

DEEP ECOLOGY

Ecological thinking . . . requires a kind of vision across boundaries. The epidermis of the skin is ecologically like a pond surface or a forest soil, not a shell so much as delicate interpenetration. It reveals the self enobled and extended . . . as part of the landscape and the ecosystem, because the beauty and complexity of nature are continuous with ourselves . . . we must affirm that the world is a being, a part of our own body.²

The other root of the Council of All Beings, is a new philosophy of nature called “deep ecology.”³ In contrast to reform environmentalism which attempts only to treat some of the symptoms of the environmental crisis, deep ecology questions the fundamental premises and values of contemporary civilization. Our technological culture has coopted and absorbed all other criticism, so that parts may be questioned but not the whole, while deep ecology as a fountain of revolutionary thought subjects the core of our social existence and our thinking to piercing scrutiny. Deep ecology recognizes that nothing short of a total revolution in consciousness will be of lasting use in preserving the life-support systems of our planet.

Within the framework of deep ecology, and contrary to key assumptions of Judaeo-Christian/Marxist/humanist tradition, humans are not to be viewed as the ultimate measure of value or as the crown of creation. We are but “a plain member” of the biotic community and our

arrogance with respect to this community threatens not only ourselves but all of life. We must learn to “let beings be,” to allow other species to follow their separate evolutionary destinies without dominating them. We must come to understand that life-forms do not constitute a pyramid with our species at the apex, but rather a circle where everything is connected to everything else. We must realize that the environment is not “out there,” and that when we poison the air or the water or the soil, we poison ourselves because of the vast biological cycles within which we too are inextricably embedded. The themes of deep ecology echo the ancient earth wisdom of native peoples such as Chief Seattle (see page 67). They are further elaborated in this volume in “Beyond Anthropocentrism.” (See page 35.)

The intellectual acceptance of these concepts is difficult, as our entire socialization in western societies goes against them. An analysis of the political, economic, social and cultural block to a full appreciation of deep ecology would require a book in itself! Furthermore, intellectual acceptance of these concepts is not enough; enormous energies are needed for change to take place on a fundamental level. As Arne Naess points out in his chapter on “*Self* Realization,” this knowledge must permeate us and become part of our very identity. This is not to deny our identity as humans but rather, as Naess argues, to place this identity within its proper perspective, within the larger perspective of our “ecological *Self*.” But while full intellectual acceptance of the truths offered by deep ecology might be extremely difficult to attain, through the power of ritual we may be able to capture a glimpse of the possibilities of *Self* which are open to us.

RITUALS FOR TRANSFORMATION

Deep ecology writer and philosopher Dolores LaChapelle in *Earth Wisdom* notes:

. . . rock flour produced by long-ago glaciers has taken about 25,000 years to become fertile soil; yet here in the United States we have lost half of this productive topsoil of our country in about 150 years. Merely throwing these statistics out to be absorbed by the rational brain does little good; but, a ritual setting with chanting and dancing can bring understanding to the older levels of the brain and empathy with the soil itself, as was done in past ages by ritual celebrations.⁴

As within our age and culture our sense of self has shrunk, as anthropocentric religions and science have come to dominate our consciousness, our culture has also lost its understanding of the importance of ritual.

Rituals affirming the interconnectedness of the human and nonhuman worlds exist in every primitive culture. The existence of these rituals attests to the fact that our sense of separation has ancient roots in our species. Their existence also suggests that effort is needed to maintain our union with the rest of nature. They also point to directions where we can search to recover the lost connection. Or, as Dolores LaChapelle puts it, "Ritual . . . facilitates interaction between mind-within-the-skull and mind-outside-the-skull, the environment." We find that though we may be able to discard some of the *beliefs* of the culture into which we emerged, changing the *self* imprinted onto us from the moment of birth requires work. Our *self* was molded by this culture, and tremendous energy is needed to effect substantial transformation.

According to the psychologist Jung, all of the major activities of native peoples were entered into with ceremonies or chants, which:

quite obviously have the psychological aim of canalizing libido into the necessary activity. Complex ceremonies of the Pueblo Indians show how much is needed to divert the libido from its natural river-bed of everyday habit into some unaccustomed activity.⁵

All tribal cultures participate in such practices. As Gary Snyder says in “The Old Ways”:

The shaman speaks for wild animals, the spirits of plants, the spirits of mountains, of watersheds. He or she sings for them. They sing through her . . . the whole society consults the non-human powers and allows some individuals to step totally out of their human roles to put on the mask, costume and *mind* of Bison, Bear, Squash, Corn or Pleiades; to re-enter the human circle in that form and by song, mime and dance, convey a greeting from the other realm.⁶

Jung believed that modern mind was quite mistaken in thinking that it can dispense with such ceremonies and remember and act effectively upon our interconnectedness by a mere decision of the will. Without recourse to a universally shared religious spirit which reaffirms this interconnectedness and without recourse to a belief in human centeredness, it is left to ritual and “affective experiences” to effect this transformation at a profound level of our being.

In her book *Woman and Nature*, Susan Griffin expresses the possibilities of this transformation thus:

I love this bird, when I see the arc of her flight, I fly with her, enter her with my mind, leave myself, die for an instant, live in the body of this bird whom I cannot live without, as part of the body of the bird will enter my daughter's body, because I know I am made from this earth, as my mother's hands were made from this earth. . . . all that I know speaks to me through this earth and I long to tell you, you who are earth too, and listen as we speak to each other of what we know: the light is in us.⁷

EVOLUTIONARY REMEMBERING

There are many ways of evoking such change in our identity. Methods for inspiring the experience of deep ecology range from prayer to poetry, from wilderness vision quests to direct action in defense of the Earth to the ritual

work described in this book. In the Council of All Beings, we channel the energies released by despair and empowerment and other rituals into facilitating a profound change to deeply ecological awareness. In our experience, “affective education”—learning from the heart and body, and the Council of All Beings is just one example—goes much deeper than the exchange of ideas because it is based on the premise that we already possess within us the knowledge we need, and what is necessary is to bring it to conscious awareness.

The knowledge we require is embedded within us and needs to be awakened. In our mother’s womb, our embryonic bodies recapitulate the evolution of cellular life on Earth. We can begin to feel the inner body-sense of amphibian, reptile and lower mammal because these earlier stages of our life are literally part of the ontogenetic development of our neurological system.

Nonhuman memories can surface with particular intensity and authenticity when consciousness is altered by special patterns of breathing. Stanislav and Christina Grof have developed what they call “holotropic” breathing to permit subjects to recapture and resolve significant experiences surrounding their birth. They have found that the material which comes to light goes beyond the biographical and even the human realm to include phylogenetic sequences and episodes of conscious identification with other species and life-forms.

In the “Eco-Breath” workshops conducted in Australia, we have discovered that by employing such breathing rhythms in conjunction with strong *intentions* to transcend our solely human identification, the majority of participants experience remarkable identifications with nonhuman Nature. (See references to “Eco-Breath” work in the “Guidelines to the Council of All Beings Workshop,” page 108.)

If we wish to reunite with nature, the first requirement is that we have the *intention* to reestablish this contact. We

are descended from thousands of human generations who practiced rituals acknowledging our interconnectedness. Once we set the intention to end the separation we have created, the desired results come naturally from rituals that feel authentic to us. As some are already doing, we can begin to reclaim ancient rituals at the solstices and equinoxes affirming our connections to the changing cycles of the seasons. New rituals—enactments of our intentions—are open to all of us, regardless of our original traditions.

THE COUNCIL OF ALL BEINGS

In the Council of All Beings workshops, we participate in a series of processes that weave together three important themes: mourning, remembering and speaking from the perspective of other life-forms.

Deep ecology remains a concept without power to transform our awareness unless we allow ourselves to feel. The workshops provide a safe place to give voice to what we know is happening to our planet and to acknowledge the pain and begin to come to terms with it, to *mourn* our separation and our loss. Rage may also well up, and a passionate caring. When we stop repressing the pain, a sense of belonging and interconnectedness emerges.

There are many exercises which assist the *remembering* of our rootedness in nature. At each Council, we engage in several sensitizing activities shifting us away from our usual cerebral mode. Guided visualizations (see Gaia Meditation, page 41) make our four-and-one-half billion-year journey present and vivid. Body movements accompanying the evolutionary recapitulation (page 45) tap into our knowledge of previous stages of evolution embedded in our neurological systems.

The Council culminates in shedding our human identity and speaking from the perspective of another life-form. The Council of All Beings narrative (page 79) is an example

of the kind of interaction which can then take place. We take time alone to be chosen by a plant, animal or landscape feature that we will then represent at the Council. The structure created for the ritual councils allows for spontaneous expression. Creative suggestions for human action may emerge. Invocation of powers and knowledge of these other life-forms also empowers us.

RITUAL AND ACTION

The relationship between these rituals and the actions we take in defense of nature is complex. In spite of the conceptual dotted lines we superimpose, life is seamless and there is a continuity, flow and exchange between the inner and the outer.

These rituals are not in any way a substitute for other, more direct forms of action. Rather, the rituals prepare us and provide us with a larger context for action. When our strategies are formed and informed by a larger context than our narrow ego selves, when we realize we are acting not just from our own opinions or beliefs, but on behalf of a larger Self—the Earth—with the authority of more than four billion years of our planet's evolution behind us, then we are filled with new determination, courage and perseverance, less limited by self-doubt, narrow self-interest and discouragement. The apathy from which many of us suffer, the sense of paralysis, is a product of our shriveled sense of self. Working with the Council of All Beings, we have found that people experience a deepening identification with the Earth, a renewal of energy to struggle for the protection of wild Nature, and to work for peace.

Ritual also helps us be more aware of the ritualized character of virtually all nonviolent direct action, and thus helps us make these actions more powerful. While at times we may be defending a particular stand of trees or mountain ridge or stream, our defense is also symbolic in that we

are making our defense in the name of *all* trees, *all* mountain ridges, *all* streams which need defending, and we are asking all who understand these threats wherever they may be to stand with us. When we are attempting to protect nature against those who would destroy it, we are asking those who would destroy the earth to experience the same transformation which we have undergone, *to remember who they really are*, to step out of their *self-limiting* roles as police, politicians, developers, or consumers and act in defense of their larger *Self-interest*. It is the ritual character of nonviolent direct action which brings us closer to the universal realization, expressed by the feminist-pacifist writer Barbara Deming:

Spirit that hears each one of us,
 Hears all that is—
 Listens, listens, hears us out—
 Inspire us now!
 Our own pulse beats in every stranger's throat,
 And also there within the flowered ground beneath our
 feet,
 And—teach us to listen!—
 We can hear it in water, wood, and even in stone.
 We are earth of this earth, and we are bone of its bone.
 This is a prayer I sing, for we have forgotten this and so
 The earth is perishing.⁹

Once we have, to quote the poet Robinson Jeffers, “fallen in love outwards,” once we have experienced the fierce joy of life that attends extending our identity into nature, once we realize that the nature within and the nature without are continuous, then we too may share and manifest the exquisite beauty and effortless grace associated with the *natural* world, as the testimony of Graham Innes (page 91) makes all so clear. When we hear the earth speak to us, we are transformed and come to understand our actions from a new perspective. As Dave Foreman, founder of the Earth First! movement, so exquisitely puts it:

Those machines, you know, they're made out of the Earth and therefore they can speak to me and I can hear them because they're made out of the Earth itself. And they hate, I can tell you they hate being used to destroy the Earth. And they say to me "Dave, we really don't want to be doing this—we're tired of being reduced; help us to oxidize."¹⁰

FOOTNOTES

1. Joanna Macy. *Despair and Personal Power in the Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia, PA: New Society, 1983).
2. Paul Shepard. "Ecology and Man," in P. Shepard & D. McKinley (eds.), *The Subversive Science* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1969).
3. Bill Devall and George Sessions. *Deep Ecology* (Layton, UT: Peregrine Smith Books, Utah 1985).
4. Dolores LaChapelle. *Earth Wisdom* (Silverton, CO: Finn Hill Arts, 1984).
5. C. G. Jung, "On Psychical Energy," in *Contributions to Analytical Psychology* (London, UK: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1928).
6. Gary Snyder. *The Old Ways* (San Francisco, CA: City Light Books, 1977).
7. Susan Griffin. *Woman and Nature* (New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1979).
8. Gary Snyder. "Wild, Sacred, Good Land" in *Resurgence*. No. 38 (May/June, 1983).
9. Barbara Deming. "Spirit of Love," in Jane Meyerding (ed.), *We Are All Part of One Another: A Barbara Deming Reader* (Philadelphia, PA: New Society, 1984).
10. Jeni Kendell and Ed Buivids. *Earth First* (Sydney, Australia: Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 1987).