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THE COSMIC DANCE- PAIN AND DESTRUCTION

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*The difficulty is that...
we began to think of the universe
as a collection of objects
rather than as a communion of subjects.*

- Thomas Berry

As we get to know the sea, mountains, people, creatures and other inhabitants of Earth, we learn their stories, see where they have been weakened by illness and accidents, discover the pains they have endured in the storms and struggles of life and unexpected events. We learn that death is inevitable, no matter how closely and carefully people and nature are guarded and tended. Natural disasters such as earthquakes, tornadoes and hurricanes occur because of climatic and seasonal changes. Animals and plants feed on one another in order to live. Everything ages and weakens. Life and death follow one another in a natural cycle and from this cycle new life is eventually birthed.

However, a tremendous amount of pain and destruction is cruel and often preventable. Deaths, meaningless deaths, unwarranted deaths, careless deaths and deliberately callous deaths - they happen all the time. Humans do this to one another and they do this to their environment as well. Soil is washed away due to careless farming practices. Fish die because large factories pollute their waters with refuse. Birds and sea creatures struggle helplessly in huge spills of oil tankers. Limbs of orphaned children are blown to bits by land mines. Humans are lined up and murdered, their bodies thrown into mass graves. The priceless life of many is cut short, all because of attitudes and actions that hasten death and cause needless, excruciating suffering.

Humans have long thought of themselves as superior to the rest of creation and this thinking has promulgated a false sense of authority and dominance, creating the illusion that humans are "better than" and "apart from", rather than intimately connected with the rest of life. Rachel Carson, who first awakened society to the harm that humans were wreaking upon the land through pesticides, wrote: "The *control of*

nature is a phrase conceived in arrogance born out of the Neanderthal age...when it was supposed that nature exists for the convenience of man.”ⁱ

Thomas Berry observed that many humans see the world as a collection of things rather than as sacred sources of existence, as individual objects rather than as a part of one great organism in which the experience of each affects the life of all.ⁱⁱ Humans have become used to taking what they want from Earth without considering the consequences. Much of the unnecessary planetary pain today is caused by humans seeking their own convenience and comfort at the expense of Earth. “Forget the trees, air, water, soil, and creatures,” human actions seem to say, “just let us have more shopping malls, larger houses, numerous electrical gadgets, wider highways, water fountains in desert cities...”

Something that has helped me in changing my own “dominance attitude” was learning how to “think like a mountain.”ⁱⁱⁱ With this approach, I discovered a way to enter into the life and death of nature by trying to “get inside,” what nature was experiencing. I did this by pausing and being present, thinking what it must be like to be a tree enduring many seasons and then quickly cut down, to be the sea with tons of garbage continually shoved into it, to be a mountain when the ancient stones and soil are roughly cut aside to form a road, to be an elk hunted and killed, to be a sea otter whose family faces extinction. When I began to think in this way, I discovered a creation composed not of “things,” or “objects,” but of sacred companions with as much a right to live and exist as I have.

Because of my changed consciousness, I had a whole different awareness when I read about the grizzly bear’s struggle for survival and learned that these great bears have seen their habitat shrink to less than one percent of their former range. I could imagine their loss and hunger as they searched to find a home and enough food for survival. I thought: “It’s like if I had been living in a huge estate and now had to live in a closet.”

Likewise, I understood the anguish in the voice of a farmer in Wales as she described her sorrow in having her whole herd of cows, three generations of Herefords, shot and killed at the time of the Foot and Mouth epidemic. With tears streaming down her cheeks she said she knew each of the cows by name and that even if she was blindfolded she would know them by touching their udders from her years of milking them. She knew they had to be killed because they were dying, the skin on their tongues and udders was falling off from the disease.

I understood her grief as well as the suffering of her cows because each part of Earth pains in its own way. All of life is sacred and deserves to be treated with dignity and respect. When creatures and plants generously give their lives so that others might live, those who receive life from them need to do so with awareness and gratitude, remembering the sacrifice that has been made for them.

The pain of Earth and the destructive tendencies of humans are many and will not be easily solved. There are no quick solutions to the problems that exist. For example, how can we make a choice between large river dams that supply vast amounts of electricity and needed irrigation, and the destruction of habitat for millions of fish and other creatures that these dams create? How can we protect the Arctic coastal plains of Alaska, still untamed and rich with herds of caribou, wolves, bears, birds and other wildlife, and also find a

way to meet the need of fuel consumers by drilling intrusive oil wells in that area? Creative solutions to the many environmental dilemmas must be sought with unselfish compromise, with an attitude of what is best for ALL involved, always with an awareness of the oneness of life that we share.

We cannot go on as before, none of us. Each action we take has an influence on the rest of life on the planet. Nothing we do remains isolated. Each influences the other. It is a tremendous gift and also, an enormous challenge. As long as Earth remains an "it", a "thing", rather than a living, vibrant reservoir of life, humans will continue to use and abuse her. We need a loving relationship with this generous, vulnerable planet on which we live. Only then will we allow her songs of rich abundance to dance in the rhythms of our lives, only then will we respond with reverent care and live with daily gratitude.



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Endnotes

ⁱ *Silent Spring*, Rachel Carson. Houghton Mifflin Co., New York, 1962. P. 297

ⁱⁱ *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future*, Thomas Berry. Bell Tower, New York: 1999.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Thinking Like a Mountain*, John Seed, Joanna Macy, Pat Fleming, Arne Naess. New Society Publ, PA., 1988.