

Earth, Spirit, and Action: The Deep Ecology Movement as Spiritual Engagement

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I once gave a talk at the Wilderness Society in Hobart, Australia, and immediately after I was done, an older woman said gruffly, "I like to win!" "Good on ya." I said. "I'm serious, I want to WIN!" she growled. "Win what, and at what cost?" I asked.

Of course, she was talking from the heart about the forests of Tasmania. Anybody with a love for nature who has stepped into the Styx or the Tarkine would also boldly state that they want to protect these forests. To step into these ancient unique forests is to love them, to yearn for them to continue to be.

I understand all too well the deep yearning to protect beautiful places. Years ago, when the deer came running into my yard as the private contractors put roads and houses into a previously pristine area, it was my desire to protect that forest that led me to become an environmental activist. But I ask myself, how do we balance our desire to protect a place with the deeper understanding that, in the long run, a greater shift in consciousness is needed? How do we work from a genuinely peaceful place, when we are filled with grief or anger, with frustration over the callous disregard for billions of years of evolution?

I've found a nature philosophy supporting the deep ecology movement to be extremely useful in providing some perspective on the world environmental crisis. The deep ecology platform principles state that all

life forms have intrinsic value, and that richness and diversity of cultures and life forms are good in themselves. The platform strongly critiques human centredness or anthropocentrism and asserts that we've forgotten who we truly are. We think we can extract, exploit, manipulate, and control the natural world without any consequence to ourselves. We've forgotten that, when we stretch the strands of the web of life to the breaking point, we are threatening the very life force that we depend on, its air, water, earth.

In a nutshell, the deep ecology movement reminds us that we are from the Earth, of the Earth and not separate from it. Its platform principles provide a way for Westerners to begin to understand our deep connections, and to experience, a little, the intimate relationship that many intact indigenous groups have with the natural world.

None of our good efforts in the world will be binding without a radical shift in consciousness, a transformation in which we see, know, and understand who we truly are. "Plain and simple members of the biota," as naturalist Aldo Leopold so aptly put it, although I prefer to say, "Beautiful Earthlings!" Changing awareness involves action.

As an activist, I rely heavily on "Despair and Empowerment" work to clearly address the emotional challenges that are intertwined with social and environmental justice work. For years, when I lived in the United States, I was overwhelmed with grief about the state of the world. I felt isolated in these strong feelings, as if I were the only one who felt this way. I was relieved when I discovered the approach of deep ecology supporter Joanna Macy. She explained that our feelings of anger, grief, fear, despair (any of these so-called "bad feelings") are healthy normal reactions to much of what's happening in the world today. When we wage war on each other, it is the normal reaction of a human to feel great distress about the cold-blooded killing. If someone threatens a forest that you have a deep connection to, it is natural and healthy to feel grief when it is hastily felled.

Instead, we are shamed for having such feelings from a very young age: "Oh, you're so sensitive! What a little cry baby!" By the time we are adults we may discover that we are living a life where a large part of our intelligence has been suppressed, and our energy bound up and constricted in keeping these feelings down.

Despair and Empowerment work affirms that our feelings matter and it allows our natural intelligence to flow. We then remember that intuitive feelings have been around a lot longer than the thinking typified by strategic planning. Intuition and feelings helped our ancestors to survive for millions of years. If we acknowledge our intuition and feelings, we are better able to find solutions and act in positive ways.

For me, it is extremely valuable to weave spiritual beliefs into environmental and social change work in what is called “Spiritual Engagement” or “Conscious Activism.” Spiritual Engagement shifts us out of the dominant goal-oriented ways of looking at our work in the world. It is about compassionate action, acting from a place of peace and love within us. This means that we choose to engage not from a place of shame and guilt, a place of “shoulds,” but rather because we feel strongly moved; because the work brings us joy and deep satisfaction.

Theologian Thomas Berry calls our work towards a harmonious Earth community, “The Great Work.” I believe that The Great Work starts with healing the relationships we have to ourselves and with each other. Our relationships to ourselves are often tinged with self-deprecation and flagellation and, at times, we speak most harshly to our dear loved ones. The Great Work reminds us to bring *loving kindness* into our daily lives. This is the inner revolution that must take place if any of our good efforts are to be binding.

For many, matters of the spirit and the soul are separate from action. But certainly this separation is illusory, much like the separation we feel between ourselves and the Earth, or ourselves and each other. Rather than sitting in a meditation room to find enlightenment, we can go like the Buddha, sit under a tree and touch the earth as we reach towards self-realization. We have the opportunity to make every act a beautiful prayer—this is always within our means. So if a campaign or a project is not going well as far as the final goal is concerned, we still can choose to act from the heart, to continue to care for ourselves and each other, and to intend that these beautiful efforts will ripple outwards across the globe.

After speaking for a number of years about the need for compassionate action on all fronts, I found myself very concerned that there might not be a truly peaceful action that we can take. Near where I live, we engaged in a Gandhi-style fast for a forest. Yet, I noticed that even these actions caused vexation to others. When we went into the State Forest office in Coffs Harbour, and sat in a circle praying and meditating for Pine Creek State Forest and the koalas that live there, the office workers were clearly distressed by our presence.

Even the most peaceful walk may cause distress to those with whom we publicly disagree. By merely saying “no” when they say “yes,” we create waves of disharmony. Yet, if each of us waited until we were fully peaceful inside, would we have a peace movement, let alone an environmental or human rights movement? After much reflection, I realized that we can first do our utmost to resolve feelings of anger and

frustration and then, with clear intentions, we can design actions that are as peaceful as possible.

As the Thai Buddhist activist Sulak Sivaraksa said a number of years ago, “If you’ve worked on loving the World Bank and extended this compassion to the Bank, and yet still they continue to do their destruction unabatedly, then you agitate.” I call this “Compassionate Agitation.” I reckon it’s a fine line to walk, but it is certainly worthwhile to put our prayers into action.

It’s not always obvious what Compassionate Agitation looks like. In 1979, a peaceful “hippy” protest to protect the precious rainforests occurred at Terania Creek in northern New South Wales. An amazing protest it was, as protesters sang their way through very tense situations while ancient trees were felled.

In the fourth week of the protest, a few people besought with frustration took matters into their own hands. They sawed up some of the logs due to be trucked out the next day. Many of their fellow protesters were very disappointed and claimed that this action was violent. The police chimed in saying that it was unacceptable. Yet, after this, the logging stopped at Terania Creek. These forests are now in the Nightcap National Park.

I don’t think that it is always violent to do economic harm to another. Sometimes when our words are not listened to, we might have to take stronger action. Much as we would remove a child’s hand from a stovetop, we might find a way to peacefully move the state aside from destroying the environment, local community, and so on.

The action at Terania Creek arose out of anger directed at the loggers and the government who took what they claimed as their property. Yet the forests were here long before the economic and political system that sold them to pulp and paper mills. Likewise, the Aboriginal people were here long, long before the White people arrived or set down their laws. Perhaps an action like this could have been done with great peace in the peoples’ hearts, as a group ritual with a prayer for the forests. Perhaps it could have been made into a conscious act of beauty.

It’s not always easy to decide on what Buddhism calls “right action,” especially when we are listening and watching while something beautiful is being systematically pulled apart. During the first blockade that I participated in, a state forest was recklessly logged. As the trees groaned under the roar of the chainsaws and the birds shrieked above me, I could not in any way determine what “right action” would protect the koalas and others that lived there. I still struggle with this issue all the time as places we love are being ruthlessly destroyed.

There are different lenses that we can look through to evaluate our actions. Through the lens of the current political and social systems, the laws and social mores, things are certainly messed up. Everywhere around us nature, basic human rights, and social justice are critically threatened. From this point of view, we do political lobbying and letter writing. We show awareness-raising videos and run media campaigns.

Then there is the wider lens of “deep time,” the 13.7 billion year spiraling flow of evolution from the Big Bang to current time. Planet Earth, 4.5 billion years old, is undergoing what some scientists are now calling a mass extinction spasm, unleashed by human enterprises. In previous upheavals on the planet, only one tenth of one percent of all species survived. Yet, after 5 to 10 million years, all the biological niches were once again filled up with new and extravagant forms of life.

Finally there is the *Unity* spiritual framework that states that we are all One. Everything is Consciousness or Self or God or, as quantum physics has discovered, all is energy and light waves. From this viewpoint, what we call reality is dualistic illusion. There is literally no difference between me and a tree and a logger and a star. From this viewpoint, there isn't a problem here on the Earth. Being in the midst of a mass extinction spasm, violent wars and global climate change isn't problematic, it's just the way it is.

While there is certainly some truth to this abstract perspective, there is an unfortunate way that this understanding is being misused to discourage people from taking action in the world. A woman attending one of my workshops recently confided to me that she is confused because her friends tell her she shouldn't bother to work toward change. Action is inferior, less enlightened than the more superior “everything-is-as-it's-meant-to-be” attitude.

Understanding the interdependence of all phenomena is certainly part of the journey to self-realization. However, regardless of our perspective, the times we live in call upon us to nurture fierce compassion. This too is part of the “enlightened self.” Through compassion, we are moved to engage in acts that ease suffering on the planet. Even if we find ourselves in the fortunate position of living in nirvana-like bliss, why not share it around a bit and help ease another being's suffering?

Since we've incarnated for such a brief notch in eternity, why not engage in acts of beauty and joy? We can certainly make a positive difference to the lives of other beings. In Loren Eisler's story, “The Star Thrower,” a young man throws stranded starfish back to the sea, even though another man confronts him saying it is utterly pointless since so

many starfish are destined to die when the tide goes out. The young man says, with deep satisfaction in his voice, "It matters to this one."

So I try to throw a starfish back into the ocean whenever I can. It matters. At the end of the day, this is what feels good. Money won't bring happiness in the last moments. It will be love, deep satisfaction, and friendships.

If we don't know which particular starfish to throw, we can keep our eyes and ears open, to witness what is happening on the Earth. We can make ourselves available and send it out to the Cosmos that we are ready. We can be on call for when we are needed.

The rest will fall easily into place.