

Hope and Despair in a Time of Climate Change

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Despair is real in our times and especially when talking about climate change as it seems so vast an undertaking to take on climate itself and to take on those powerful forces that are involved in bringing on climate change—our entire transportation industry including cars, trucks, airplanes and the oil and coal industries along with Wall Street. It seems impossibly idealistic to imagine all that can be altered in a short enough time to make a difference. The rise of Trump and trumpism which seems to, among other things, deny climate change is also food for despair.

Lovelock's most recent book (and he was right in his earlier book about Gaia or Earth as a single organism) presents a wildly apocalyptic scenario when he declares that the future of humanity staring us in the face is this: In a few decades we will move from being 9 billion people to being just a few million and those few million will be living at the north pole while the rest of the earth will be like Mars. Such images do not inspire hope to say the least. They might freeze us like a deer in headlights. On the other hand, they might inspire what is needed most of all which is a fire in our belly that is hot enough to get us out of our coach potatoes and do something about political/economic gridlock.

The brilliant medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas said that injustice is the worst of all sins but that despair is the "most dangerous" of all sins. Why? Because when we succumb to despair we give up loving ourselves and can therefore love no one else. Despair kills caring and compassion. He warns that "the worst thing one can do is to teach despair." Despair, which is the opposite of hope, is a dangerous disease that needs addressing. And what is hope in a time of climate disaster? Well, certainly it is NOT denial.

Consider how the current (Republican) governor of Florida says that climate change is not happening—a "What me worry?" message and with that message he is only currently trailing his gubernatorial opponent by a few percentage points. In other words, it seems that Denial is in fact a rather successful political course to take in our times. Denial has lots going for it—it means that essentially we don't have to change anything very much, that things are really going along just fine, band aids will do, and our addictions to shopping, eating, drinking, tv-watching, work, making more money and polluting the earth and atmosphere can all proceed unabated. It means those who are making off like bandits can continue on their merry way no matter what Main Street is suffering in terms of unemployment, underemployment, bailing out Wall Street as it did six years ago and picking up their bills while all the while the "winners" are free to park their fat earnings in off shore accounts to avoid paying their share of taxes that pay for their use of such infrastructure as education, roads, police, military and more.

We remain in complete denial about the economic and financial system we are engaged in currently and that collapsed utterly (and to the surprise of our anointed economic pooh-bears and their utterly discredited priesthoods) just a few years ago and that we have taped together with string and scotch tape without asking the real question: Can we create an economic system that works for *everyone on*

the planet—not only the two-legged ones but also the oceans and forests and soil and four-legged ones and more? The answer is Yes; we are capable of such creativity and people like David Korten have been working on same for decades. Yet voices for a new economics remain gagged by the media which after all is making its macho profits from the current system that is working so well for them. Voices for a new economics receive no invites from the White house for example to come and make their point of *Why* we need a new economic system and *How* it can come about. The power of denial cannot be overestimated.

But the great fourteenth century mystic Meister Eckhart speaks about Denial when he says: “God is the denial of denial.” Which to me means that until we can let go of denial, cut through denial, melt denial, the Divine cannot flow. The creativity to create alternatives cannot flow. Justice and Compassion cannot flow. Love cannot flow.

Back to the governor of Florida. At the same time he says “what me worry?” about global warming in his state, I am told that you can go to south Miami today and find six inches of water covering the sidewalks! Yes, Florida is already “sinking” under the reality of climate change and the governor remains in denial. Do not underestimate the power of ideology to wall one off from reality, to keep denial alive.

The opposite of Despair is hope. And what is hope? I like David Orr’s definition the best: Hope is a verb with the sleeves rolled up. Action gives hope. Not just any action, but thought-out action, strategy, a movement, making of alliances, shared values, taking the fight to the streets and airwaves and internet and to activists who have also developed a contemplative life so that protest is not just born of reptilian brain win-at-all costs mentality but out of genuine care and love. It is the enlisting of more and more justice-oriented people who genuinely care about the future of our great-great grandchildren and the health and beauty and diversity of this amazing planet. Once our religions move beyond the ideology of private salvation they can contribute to this movement of spiritually motivated defenders of Mother Earth, mystic-warriors, contemplative prophets working out of both moral outrage and love and creativity to forge new ways that we human can live responsibly and sustainably on this Earth. Let us not underestimate our powers of creativity that so set us off from many other species. Creativity gives hope. As the great Otto Rank puts it, “pessimism comes from the repression of creativity.”

Despair is about the impossible; hope is about the possible. Creativity makes many things possible that we never thought of before. Powering cars on compressed air is such a thing; so too is a planet where human energy needs are brought about without polluting the environment. Do not underestimate the power of human creativity—when motivated. When Native Americans stood up at Standing Rock on behalf of the sacredness of water good things happened and many others joined them. A return to what is sacred is one of the most powerful movements of our time. It puts perspective on all our choices and decisions.

So a burst of creativity is what is needed to reinvent the way we do energy and this is happening in our time. Now solar and wind energy costs have tumbled to be truly competitive with other, more co2-producing ways of old. In India they have invented a car that runs on air—compressed air—it feeds zero emissions back into the atmosphere. In Norway and in Paraguay (?) 100% of their energy needs are now

pollution free. We have to put creativity forward; it needs to be the very basis of our educational systems everywhere. The future lies with those who are creative *and* using their creativity to implement values that matter. We need to put creativity to work in creating rituals and ceremonies that allow us to get over denial and to go deeper in a collective way into our shared joy, our shared grief, our shared passion for life and existence and creation. Creativity is needed everywhere. God *is* the work of creativity, the Holy Spirit is creativity in action. If young people saw creativity being put to use to save the planet, not just to make more gee-whiz gadgets and consumer items, they would be motivated and excited, not depressed and anxious. They would want to get on board and undertake the discipline that learning takes to become full allies and partners in the struggle to melt denial and pessimism. A new depth of community would be experienced since community is primarily born of the common work we do together. And saving the planet as we know it is such a common work par excellence. Universities are divesting themselves of investments in fossil fuel companies; people in Colorado and in Germany have voted to take control of their energy needs from private corporations, etc. etc.

Theologically speaking I disagree with Michael Lerner's characterization of the Christian role as one of "stewardship." Stewardship implies a subject/object relationship with creation. We don't need more such tired relationships in religion's name. For decades I have been putting forth a different spiritual basis for an eco-theology and that is that of the "Cosmic Christ" tradition where the Cosmic Christ is *the light in every being in the universe, the image of God that every being in the universe is*. (The "Buddha Nature" is a parallel name in the East). In that context religion is not just talking about a *duty* to be a steward, not just operating from a minimal stance of ethics, but from a far deeper place of *being* and of spirituality and of interdependence. If every being is another Christ, another Buddha, then to destroy rainforests, to render elephants, polar bears, tigers, lions, whales, oceans, soil extinct is to crucify the Christ all over again. I propose here as I have been proposing for years, that *here is where the future of an eco-theology lies*—not in more stewardship talk but with a perspective of the Cosmic Christ. The issue is the Sacredness of creation that has to be regained. Here is where a "cosmic Christ" theology comes in.

Recently a major work on eco-theology has emerged from within the heart of the Jewish tradition. Rabbi David Seidenberg has examined in depth the history of the "image of God" concept in the Torah, Midrash and Kabbalah. Here lies a companion teaching to that of the "Buddha Nature" of all beings or the "Cosmic Christ" presence in all beings. Some of rabbi David's conclusions follow.

The motif of the world being in God's image is woven throughout the history of Jewish thought and Kabbalah....It is completely consonant with the rabbinic tradition and Kabbalah to regard both the whole universe and the Earth as being created in God's image. (p 313)

For Kabbalah, there are sparks of the dimension of divinity in all things, whether inanimate or living, whether wholly of nature or human-made. All things in this sense have some intrinsic value. [We need to] recognize divine sparks everywhere. (p. 382)

"God's creative pattern, as big as the universe, is expressed in all its detail within the human frame, is a kind of miracle...This pattern is the divine image. (379)

[We are to] complete the process of ‘bringing the Shekhinah down’, through concrete ecological action and through theological and spiritual insight. (409)

[Perhaps] what it means to be in in God’s image is that we see the image in all creatures. (411)

Tselem [God’s image] according to the rabbis is not limited to human beings....Later rabbinic texts equated the idea of God’s image with imitating God, another important ground for a deep ecotheology. [It means we act] with compassion towards the other creatures and [see] the image of God in them. These larger conclusions reframe tradition and scripture and open new paths of understanding. (414)

Amen. Indeed they do!

According to Lester Brown, the number one obstacle to an ecological revolution is *apathy*. The number one issue then is waking people up, getting us out of our armchairs and comfort places to respond to the dire news of our time. How cure apathy? Thomas Aquinas says that “zeal comes from an intense experience of the beauty of things.” It is this falling in love with the earth and its beauty that will in turn awaken the Green Man and Green Woman in us all who is after all the archetype of being a defender, a warrior, a prophet to stand up for Mother Earth and all her creatures. We need Green Men and Green Women today. We need a new version of masculinity—not one who goes to war or wins at sports—but spiritual warriors who employ wakefulness and love to change the ways we work and live on the earth.

There are many feeling the vocation to defend the planet today. How to organize them? I propose a new spiritual (not religious) order, a loosely connected federation of allies, brothers and sisters of all ages and lifestyles, nations and professions, religious traditions or no religious traditions, who see it as their task to save Mother Earth. Let us support one another by taking a vow to be mystics and prophets (or warriors) defending Mother Earth. The mystic in us is the lover—lovers of Earth *and* of future dwellers on Earth seven generations hence. The warrior or the prophet interferes (Heschel) in order to defend what the mystic cherishes. Let us take vows like this: “I promise to be the best mystic and the best warrior I can be by doing my inner work and my study and by putting my skills and resources into practice to defend Mother Earth and to battle climate change.” Let us be allies in community and create living rituals that render us courageous and alive, generous and loving, but also effective in making a difference.