

Earth Day: Finding Hope in Troubled Times

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This Earth Day Sunday,
I want to give you a message of hope
for this planet and for our own future on earth.
And I promise you I am going to do that,
even in these troubled times for our planet.
There is hope,
even in the darkest moments,
but to find it, we need to walk through some scary stuff first.

I don't have to tell you, these are scary times
for everyone worried about climate change.
The weather's getting really weird.
The land and the sea are changing right before our eyes.
In the first reading today, you heard Bill McKibben
spell out in pretty blunt terms where we are.
What he has to say is scary.
Global warming is already happening,
and we may not be able to stop it.
Today scientists agree the climate *will change*
when levels of atmospheric CO₂
get higher than 350 parts per million.¹
And here's the thing: we're already past that.
At this very moment we are at 390 parts per million and climbing.

The planet is already changing.
Glaciers are melting—
the beautiful, stark white glaciers in the coldest places on earth,
topping the tallest mountains—it's all melting.

¹ Bill McKibben, *Eaarth: Making a Life on a Tough New Planet* (New York: Times Books, 2010), p. 15.

Closer to home, despite all the snow we've gotten this year,
our own Sierra snowpack is starting to disappear.
All that frozen beauty is melting away into the sea,
to be transformed into hurricanes and typhoons
and, yes, tsunamis of ever greater destructive power.
The seas are warming;
sea levels are rising much faster than anyone expected,
so quickly that several island nations
with civilizations going back thousands of years
are making plans to evacuate their entire population
before their homes are swallowed by the ocean.
Around the world, farming is getting harder and harder
as the old predictable weather patterns begin to change.²
Poor people in the developing world are even more vulnerable now.

We have never experienced anything like this before.
We don't really know what's going to happen next.
Nobody really knows.
But most scientists are afraid the world is going to keep changing
in ways that will sorely tax our powers of adapting.
And maybe the scariest part is that it's going to be so very hard to fix,
if indeed we can fix it at all.
Our politicians have so little will to act;
they don't understand the urgency.
So much money has already been poured
into the fossil fuel industry. It's hard to change.
And even if every person in the world
were to change gears *right now*, stop burning oil and coal,
it still might not be enough
to stop the chain reactions we've unleashed.

It sounds like one of those summer adventure movies, doesn't it,
where Will Smith or Nicolas Cage saves the world at the last minute,
only this is real life and we truly don't know how the story ends.

² McKibben, pp. 45–46.

Let's take a breath here.

I can't tell you how much I wish
all this were not part of the message I have for you today.
So many painful emotions come up for me,
maybe for you too:
fear, sorrow, shame.

Fear of what might be in store for our world.
We wonder, are we going to be OK? We're afraid.
We feel sorrow for everything that has been lost,
everything even now slipping through our fingers.
And shame for everything we've done
to collude with what's happening to the planet—
every tank of gas we've pumped,
every ounce of coal that's been burned
to generate electricity for *us*—
for *our* homes, *our* refrigerators, *our* stuff.

We might feel despair,
that horrible sensation of everything crashing down around us
and nothing we can do to stop it.
We cast about, we want to beg for someone to tell us what to do,
how to make it stop.
And of course there *are* some things we can and should do to help.
All of us have a part to play.
We all need to conserve energy at home and at work.
We all need to keep up the calls and letters
to pressure our politicians to take this crisis seriously.

And yet—
do you ever feel afraid that none of this is going to be enough,
that maybe the world really is changing and we can't hold it back,
and we don't know what's coming
and we're afraid it's not going to be good,
and we truly just don't know what to do?

I feel that way.
Sometimes I feel afraid
that all the changing of lightbulbs to fluorescent
and saving up for an electric car
and skipping the A/C in the summer
and all the letters to my representatives are not going to be enough.
And if everything we do is not enough,
if life on earth is changing because of us
and we can't stop it,
where is our hope then?

Let me read to you again the words of Psalm 4,
as translated by Stephen Mitchell.³

*Even in the midst of great pain, Lord,
I praise you for that which is.
I will not refuse this grief
or close myself to this anguish.*

I praise you for what is.
I will not refuse this grief or close myself to this anguish.

Dear ones, have you ever felt in your sorrow
a deep and shimmering holiness,
something sacred shining dark
at the bottom of the well of your tears?
Do not fear your sorrow for the earth, for yourself,
for everyone who suffers.
Don't be afraid of this grief.

The psalmist continues:
*Let shallow men pray for ease:
"Comfort us; shield us from sorrow."*

³ Stephen Mitchell, *A Book of Psalms, Selected and Adapted from the Hebrew* (HarperPerennial, 1993), p. 4.

*I pray for whatever you send me,
and I ask to receive it as your gift.*

This is the hardest thing—
to let go of what we think we want
and trust that whatever is given us
is what we need to have.

And not only that—to receive it as a gift.
Are we brave enough to look inward
in the very moment of our suffering
and ask, How can this open my heart?
How can this suffering be my teacher?

Can it be that we are the ones, of all the generations on earth,
who have been given the fearsome gift
of truly seeing both the mighty extent
and the terrifying limits of our power?

Or can it be that enfolded in our suffering
is an invitation to soften our hearts
toward all our sisters and brothers in the developing world
who are going to feel this crisis more deeply than we,
those who are already suffering because water is getting scarce
and food doesn't grow as it used to?
Can we take this chance to become more tender toward others,
more courageous in service?
Because we *all* have to ask ourselves, how am *I* called
to help ease the suffering of my neighbors?
How am *I* called to act in a spirit of hope and love?
This is what the world needs now.
It's what our own heart needs too.

*You have put a joy in my heart [says the Psalmist]
greater than all the world's riches.
I lie down trusting the darkness,*

for I know that even now you are here.

Trusting the darkness, for even now you are here.
Friends, I want to share with you a comfort I have found
as I try to reach out and trust the darkness
of these times on planet Earth.
It's maybe a small thing, but to me it goes deep.
You all know it's become almost a cliché
to talk about the "weird weather"
that seems to be part of global warming.
The weather has been weird all over the country—
this year we got all that snow up in the foothills;
other places have had huge storms in the last couple of years,
floods, heat waves, cold snaps,
changing patterns that *feel* really weird.

But you know where that word "weird" comes from?
A thousand years ago it was a German word that meant
turning, becoming.
It's said there were three goddesses, the *weird sisters*,
goddesses of fate who controlled human destiny.⁴
The weird sisters, given that name
because they were goddesses of *becoming*.
Artists imaged them as strange, frightening to look at.
And who can blame them?
Becoming, changing, transforming can be terrifying.

Gradually we came to use that word "weird"
to mean strange, disconcerting, upsetting.
But at its root it means *becoming*.
And I wonder,
I wonder if what is happening now on earth
is a time of strange and upsetting *becoming*,
moving toward something new and unknown,

⁴ See <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/weird>.

as much as it is a time of loss and dying.

Sometimes I try to imagine what our world will be like millions of years from now.

Maybe people will still be here—I hope we will, or whatever we’ve evolved into by then.

Maybe those future people will look around them at the radiant, resplendent diversity of life on earth, all the plants and animals, fish and birds and four-footed and two-footed creatures, and they will look very different from the creatures we know, and they will be no less lovely and miraculous.

I imagine those future people loving their world as much as we love ours.

And this gives me hope.

Please don’t misunderstand me.

I love this earth the way is, the way it was when I was a girl playing in the woods, swimming in lakes, looking up at the sky and the stars.

I don’t want things to change.

I don’t want things to be lost.

The thought of creatures and plants and landscapes we have learned to love, the thought of their passing away is heartbreaking.

If we can save them, let us save them and rejoice.

But our hope has to run deeper than that.

Our hope cannot depend on things going the way *we* want them to.

*I lie down trusting the darkness,
for I know that even now you are here.*

I put *my* trust, and I believe you do too, in life itself—that limitless force which came before all things

and will still be there when everything we know has passed away,
that power behind the universe which is unimaginably strong,
as tiny as a seed,
as immense as galaxies unnumbered—
life itself, the life that gave us birth,
the grand and mighty life, so much stronger than ourselves,
of which we are a tiny, precious part.
Blessed be everything that lives and grows and loves.
Praise the life that endlessly creates and recreates itself
forever.

Amen.