

A Journey of Appreciation, Pain and Response-Ability

For the past month I have been away from my usual island paradise home of Dominica and visiting Atlanta, USA. It's interesting being in an urban environment again with tall city buildings as the horizon and neon luminescence lighting up the night sky instead of stars. But amidst the cars and pollution, the noise and the concrete the voice of nature is still present and I give thanks for her strength and beauty, which continues to breathe life to all. I appreciate and give thanks for nature wherever I find her and all is valued, cherished and enjoyed.

One of my great joys since being here is in riding my bike. Once my behind is on the seat and put my feet on the pedals I am a child again exploring a world full of wonder and adventure. Who knows what is around the next corner? I am part of the outside, engaged with the entire world when I ride – people, places, trees and flowers everything is noticed, felt and experienced. Overhanging branches comb through my hair as I pass underneath their reach. I smell fragrances of rose petals, dirty diesel engines, freshly cut grass and food from restaurants in the breeze. I see spiders webs cast over hedges and spun at length in between branches. Despite roads and pavements nature knows no bounds - tree roots disturb flat concrete paths forming ridges through which other plants settle into and creeping ivy gradually takes over the walkway. The expansive sky is exceptionally bright and blue and I see a half moon in the noontime sunshine. Autumnal leaves cascade towards the ground and I watch the trees to see squirrels running up and down the trunks, bobbing their tails and stuffing their faces with acorns a-plenty. Higher up the tree is an abandoned birds nest, which once held tiny eggs that hatched, grew and flew away and somewhere else another nest is being built.

My ears are filled with sounds of these birds whistling their songs of praise and communication alongside crickets chirping mating calls in the tall green grass by the roadside. The soundtrack of my journey changes in every moment as I hear the sounds of all that I pass - laughter, conversations, music from car stereos “boom, boom, boom” - I love that bass sound!! My heartbeat pounds strongly in my chest, I feel it throbbing in my head as waves of blood circulate rapidly to deliver vital oxygen to my cells - I am fully alive! The wind blows through my hair and screams in my ears as I fly full speed down the hill, my smile is wide and tears stream out from the corners of my eyes as the cool air blows inside them. I stand up on my pedals and shout “Freedom!” The hot-sweaty-upward climb, out of breath with burning legs, using several gear changes and sheer determination was worth every minute for the sweet reward of this exhilaration! My lungs and joy are expanded, my body and soul are strengthened, and my mind and spirit are renewed.

I seek out quieter roads to enjoy the natural scenery and prevent my lungs from being overloaded with pollution. However on some journeys I find myself in 3 lanes of city traffic with 12-tyre trucks roaring by. I feel like a bike riding warrior in amongst gas guzzling SUV's and FedEx vans - this is pedal power! The cars and trucks thunder over the bridge whilst I stop to watch the delicate flow of a river trickling underneath – acknowledging it's presence and feeling our unity knowing that it is the same water that flows through my veins.

By holding this sense of wonder and appreciation for all that is good and flourishing and sharing this excitement with others, I/we give them the possibility to see with new eyes. The joy of celebration is infectious and provides much needed balance to the bad news and battles we face on behalf of the natural world. Since more people want to go to a party than a lecture by reconnecting them with nature in joyful, fun and creative ways

they are more likely to engage with and continue the work. And once people learn to love nature (including themselves) then they are much more likely to want to preserve and restore it. However, this celebration and feel-good joyousness is in fact only part of the journey to restore the health of our psyche and the planet. The underlying reason why many people are unable to express or even see and feel the inherent joy and love in and with nature and themselves is because it is locked down under repressed fear and pain. Interestingly whilst in the midst of creating this article I went for a ride and had a minor accident. I fell off my bike and bashed my head, shoulder and leg and left my body with a few sore cuts and bruises. Ouch! Now I have a choice – do I let the fear of falling and being hurt prevent me from experiencing the immense joy and pleasure I get from cycling or do I allow myself to feel the fear and do it anyway? Deep ecologist and activist Joanna Macy explains that because we are scared to feel the hurts of the abuse we have inflicted on the natural world and worried that by admitting to even the slightest form of anguish we will unleash an overwhelming flood of guilt, shame and despair we tend to keep all these emotions heavily guarded. Unfortunately, in attempting to diminish our pain we simultaneously crush the life force of love and light inside of us.

One of the main reasons for denial of pain is the desire to remain socially acceptable. For instance, an employee would be perfectly justified in taking a sick day off work for a migraine or bad back and usually work colleagues are understanding enough when a person takes a few days off to look after a member of the family or mourn their passing but imagine calling the boss and announcing that you were not coming in to work today as the pain deforestation, air pollution and extreme ecological injustice was hurting you too much to be able to do your job effectively. At the very best you would be ridiculed and more realistically you are likely to be fired! However, because we are connected to the earth we do feel the pain as she does and maybe it is time to do something as radical as the previous example in order to gain recognition for this!

The web of life is completely interwoven and when we realise that the pain, sadness or depression we may feel in our lives are more than personal neurosis but are symptoms of a planetary crisis we can move forward to dealing with the root cause of the problem rather than attempting to treat the symptoms with palliatives. The emerging field of Eco-psychology is now broadening the causal factors for our psychological functions and dysfunctions to a wider realm. This allows us to realize that many of our feelings result from more than personal issues and far from being problematic they are a normal response to our ecological situation. Our ability to experience pain is a natural and highly functional part of our design – a feedback mechanism, which allows us to move to more life affirming situations and solutions when faced with threat or danger. Just like the burning heat of fire causes us to recoil for self preservation, if we admit to feeling the feverish heat of the planet we will be moved to do something about it. By ignoring the increasing temperature, hoping it will go away or doing all that is possible to distract from the reality we are simply going to get very burnt! Our sensitivity is a gift that needs expression not suppression. If we do not acknowledge dangers or fears then we are liable to become overwhelmed, make foolish choices, and ultimately be destroyed by them. In denial of our collective suffering we are stuck like a fox in headlights seeing the dangers looming ahead but paralysed and unable to move or create effective solutions.

Thankfully the process is not all doom and gloom! Sharing our fears connects us with each other and allows a space for creative community movement and proactive choice. As Macy states “The very distress that, when we hid it, seemed to separate us from other people, now uncovers the connective tissue now bonding us.” She skillfully demonstrates with her inspirational and interactive work the importance of acknowledging and connecting to the pain as part of the process of healing and in her book ‘Coming Back to Life’ with co-author Molly Brown outlines numerous ways to

engage with this process. This sharing rather than making us weak or unattractive opens us to greater strength and honesty. The idea is to not get overcome or by fear but to feel it and use it as a platform to push you into new realms. Once we admit to that which we are afraid of its power over us is diminished and we can then move forward with full awareness of our fears yet not allow them to take over our joy. Rather than getting caught in the pit of pessimistic misery with the formidable triplets of Shame, Blame and Guilt we find the courage to climb on their shoulders and move upwards and onwards into brighter possibilities!

Onelove

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Post Script: A few days after my bike fall I received a timely reminder in an email newsletter by Suzen Larsen King that "Every period of growth is accompanied by bangs and bruises. Welcome these signs of life in yourself and rejoice in your own courage to push into unknown territory!" So I'm ready to face and be unafraid of my fears, be fully in the present in order to grow into future of our creation!

Natural connection activity.

Sit in a natural place either alone or as a group; take a notebook and pen(s) with you. Meditatively let all other daily thought flow away and be in the present moment. Look around you then close your eyes, breathe deeply, feel natural surfaces - maybe a tree or the grass (be careful not to touch anything which may cause a reaction!) Fully experience where you are. Listen, Listen, Listen with all your senses and with your heart. After 5-10 minutes of this sensory awareness write or draw what you heard from this natural area - what is its story? Let it tell you its fears and write your own - express your pain, anger, shame in words or images - it's okay to cry or display feelings of upset. When you have exhausted this perspective take a deep breathe and start to write and draw all the things you appreciate about this place, nature, this moment, be in full appreciation of everything and list all the good things that are present and available to you. When complete ask yourself or discuss as a group your feelings from both lists. Share your sorrows and joys, listening to one another with minimal interruption. Then look at what can be done in your lives to move from the first list to the second. Identify at least three things you can do in your own life within the next week that will make a positive impact on the issues raised in list one and allow you to more fully experience the joys and pleasures of list two. Commit yourself to achieving these things by stating your intentions to your group or sharing them with someone else after the session and enjoy the process of moving from pain to response-ability & empowerment.