

Hope in Troubled Times
By Baruch Zeichner

I used to live in a three-story house in the green mountains, surrounded by land with a beaver pond, a garden, electricity, a wood stove, a huge library, and more. I left that a couple of years ago to travel. I crossed Canada, spent time in New Orleans after Katrina, and was in Europe for 6 months in 2007, among other things teaching workshops. Now I am in the mountains near the ocean north of San Francisco. Much of the reason for letting go of my house, my business, most of my possessions, and reducing my income by 90% is that I grew tired of participating in a system which leads to death and destruction of the world. (I might have written “the natural world” but the world is natural, and we are part of that nature. It’s that split, in the mind, from nature that is our downfall.) The more money I made, the more I paid in taxes which go to support war mongering, the slaughtering and enslavement of people around the world. This became intolerable to me. Now, instead of grossing \$80,000 a year and paying a bunch of taxes on that, I gross \$6000 a year and pay very little into the coffers of the greedy war machine. I share all this with you for the sake of background.

Here on Turtle Island, also called North America, we are at the heart of much that is happening in the world today. The politics, economy, and culture of “The USA” have become like great winds, blowing through most parts of the world, building empire at the expense of the health and well-being of Earth and all her life forms, even (maybe especially) us humans. The USA is not the only empire engaged in world wrecking, but it’s the one I grew up in, know well, and am partially responsible for.

Change is occurring. Earth tells us every day in countless ways. Whether or not humanity is the cause of climate change, it’s happening. Whatever roles humanity plays in the life cycles of Earth, the garden we grew up in is polluted, becoming more so every day. Global metabolisms of water, temperature, nutrient flow, waste elimination and transformation back into fertility, are all affected. Soon life on Earth, as we know it, will change dramatically for many populations. and much of what we are familiar with will cease to exist. If we delve into ourselves, deep down we can feel the imbalance, and see how we live is contributing to the destruction. Even when we are able to balance out much in our personal lives, the bigger picture is there for all to see if we are willing to look. It’s important to remember though that destruction is the precursor to new beginnings. The old must fall and decay in order for the new to spring forth, so even faced with great loss, know that something new will come out of the ruin we are wreaking.

I was talking with a friend recently and I articulated the following: my challenge is to hold a realistic view of what’s happening balanced with pro-active inspiration. I could choose denial, and/or despair, but those choices are no good for me. I’m not interested in pretending everything’s OK. Everything’s not OK. The cruelty of humans to each other and to much of life is there for all to see. The finite limits to this biosphere’s ability to sustain our kind of life is undeniable. These realities can easily pave the path to despair. I know. I’ve been there. I’ve had lots of company there. Despair can be a valuable

teacher, especially if one can be passing through the despairing place but despair is neither useful nor supportive spiritually as a place for long term residence.

The experiences of the last three years of my life have taught me much but most valuable of what I have been learning are joy and appreciation. Not mindless joy that doesn't discern beauty from ugliness. I may be a fool, but I'm not that great a fool. Ugliness is real. It's in all of us and we manifest it around us daily. We see it's fruits in the violence, poverty, exploitation, and grief portrayed hourly in the for-profit media. But even so, there is amazing beauty to appreciate and enjoy in every aspect of experience; a meal, a friend's smile, sharing tobacco, seeing a sunset even through polluted air, seeing and hearing birds wild or feeding by a polluted river. We each know where we find joy, and I daresay we each know we could find more joy if we pay more attention. Our senses are always bringing us the stories of our surroundings which we receive by seeing, listening, smelling, tasting, touching, and through the sixth sense, what I call the "witch sense" which is inner knowing. These stories tell of the wonder of life that is present everywhere, and all the time, however minute or grand in scale.

When I was a teenager I realized that part of my job in this life would be to serve as a witness. I did a lot of witnessing individuals and families when I practiced psychotherapy. Now I, along with you, bear witness to this period of global pan-human transition. No disinterested witnesses here, we are all part of what's happening and are affected by the events of the world.

We people of Earth have allowed the powers of policy to be held by those who are least qualified. If we examine political, business and religious leaders around the world, certainly those in the US and right here in Vermont, we see that for the most part those who want the power-over jobs, those who want to amass fortunes and to control others, are psychologically underdeveloped, lacking empathy, lacking awareness of the interconnectedness of all life. They tend to be stuck developmentally in a world where the use of fear and violence to control people is justified. If we assembled from around the world all those who wield the power of policy, we would find a group of moral midgets. Furthermore we have allowed accumulation of material wealth and concepts such as "profit" and "ownership" to distract us from what could be relatively idyllic lives on Earth. Now, again, still, much of humanity lives in slavery serving small elite classes of people, who are hoarding resources in the form of money, property, etc., and the ideologies they promulgate.

To most people reading this, there's little or no new information in what I'm saying. The wonderfully revolutionary aspect to all this is that we have choices about how we relate with what's in front of us. Who hasn't felt overwhelmed or despairing in the face of our global national species-wide self-made predicament? And there is nothing wrong with feeling that way. It seems like a healthy response to me...Ack! My home is going to shit and it appears that I am powerless to stop it! That certainly can immobilize one.

Now we've had our freakout, what do we do? How do we live? How do we bring meaning to our daily lives, to each moment of our experience, without just self

indulgently naval gazing, without being obsessed with eco-side, without giving up on the beauty of living?

Not only is it possible to live in and spread joy during these interesting times, it's imperative! Joy and love are the antidotes to the fear and lies that are pumped into hearts and minds through the media, political theatre, corporate demagogues, etc. to allow them to justify continued rape and pillaging of Earth, our mother and home.

It is both a solemn and a joyous path, to accept what is so, to observe one's reactions to what is so, and to choose to respond with the deep love and joy that is part of being human. To feel that within oneself is a great gift. To share it with others is truly loving and healing, and being part of a flow which is too great for us to comprehend with our human minds, but which we are part of nevertheless.