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The earth means the world to me

John Dear | May. 22, 2007 On the Road to Peace

A few years ago when I moved into a handmade house, off the utility grid, powered by solar panels, no potable water in the taps, atop a mesa, in the high desert of New Mexico, I took a deliberate step toward reconnecting with the earth.

Now and then, like a desert father, I walk the austere mesa and look out on the effects of a ravaging drought. And the connections turn in my mind -- between global warming and war, poverty and nuclear weapons. An ancient truth comes to mind ever more vividly: "Blessed are the meek, the gentle, the nonviolent. They shall inherit the earth."

More and more, people are making the same connections, and from that I take heart. , On the other hand, I'm disheartened for the destruction of the earth proceeds at a rate that alarms me; reports from across the world chill my heart.

Take for example the report from the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, a 1,572-page tome. "From the poles to the tropics," soberly said the authors, "the earth's climate and ecosystems are already being shaped by the atmospheric buildup of greenhouse gases and face inevitable, possibly profound, alternation."

The panel predicts widespread droughts in southern Europe and the Middle East, sub-Saharan Africa, the U.S. Southwest and Mexico, and flooding that could imperil low-lying islands and the crowded river deltas of southern Asia.

The report stressed that many of the regions facing the greatest risks were among the world's poorest. While limits on smokestack and tailpipe emissions could lower risks, vulnerable regions must make immediate changes to deal with shifting weather patterns, climatic and coastal hazards and rising seas, the report concluded.

The report concurs with scientists around the world. A temperature rise of 3 to 5 degrees Fahrenheit over the next century will likely lead to the submersion of coasts and islands. The heating will bring about massive droughts that will kill crops and cause untold famine. Ice caps will melt further, hurricanes and typhoons will pack much stronger forces. And in the end the crisis could cause the death of millions, maybe hundreds of millions of people.

Shortly put: We are ears deep in a planetary emergency.

What to do? Everything must change. We need a culture that does not rely on fossil fuels, that does not hurt the environment, that does not poison the land, that does not use depeleted uranium or dump radioactive waste, that does not test or build nuclear weapons, that seeks to feed everyone and protect the planet itself with new nonviolent institutions.

Some reports say we could easily manufacture electric cars with battery stations (where you stop into at your local car shop to get a new recharged battery in the same time it now takes to fill up a tank). We surely need a new mass transportation system, much less airplane travel, massive new solar and wind energy systems, and so much more.

But most of all, we need the political will to demand change. The current administration, indeed the entire U.S. system, serves the corporate giants. These powers unto themselves look covetously upon the world's resources and wreak havoc on the earth. They urge war on Iraq and bring in millions building nuclear weapons at Los Alamos and elsewhere. They remain numb to the starving masses. Corporate principalities and powers and their acolytes in government, they're hastening the planetary emergency.

People of faith and conscience need to demand new policies and laws that would protect the earth and the earth's children and creatures. Our country should work cooperatively with all the world's nations to cut all greenhouse gases by at least 60 percent in 30 years.

But that means making the connections. If we care for the earth, we must abolish nuclear weapons once and for all. If we care for the earth, we must stop the war on Iraq and all wars. If we care for the earth, we must end both corporate greed and extreme poverty.

As we make these connections, we will deepen our spiritual understanding of reality and see everything as a spiritual issue, a life-and-death issue. We are not allowed to destroy the Creator's creation; we are not allowed to wreak such havoc on the earth or on God's children. We are called to practice nonviolence in every aspect of life.

Jesus says if we go deep enough into nonviolence, we will protect the earth, love the earth, and in the process inherit the earth as a blessing. It seems an anachronism to say it, but Jesus was surely an environmentalist. His observations from contemplative reflection on creation run throughout the Gospels: "Consider the lilies of the field ? learn a lesson from the fig tree ? Notice the ravens ?" This was someone who spent time in the mountains, who strolled the land, understood the basics of farming -- and could walk on water.

St. Francis understood these connections better than any disciple. He gave away his possessions, served lepers and the poor, created a community of peace, practiced nonviolence, loved his enemies, journeyed into enemy territory to meet the sultan at a time of war -- and all the while slept outdoors, studied the stars, learned the name of every tree and bird, celebrated creation, and praised the Creator for creation. He was meek, gentle and nonviolent, and he inherited the earth. He died in its embrace.

We too can make those connections, like our Native American sisters and brothers, who have long respected "Mother Earth." Like the Buddhists, with their philosophy of compassion toward all sentient beings and creation itself.

My friends at the Jesuit Center near Guelph [1], Canada, have begun a serious project to protect the earth and reflect on its spiritual teachings. My friend and fellow Jesuit Jim Profit runs a 600-acre plot of land, home to a retreat center, an organic farm, and a wetlands-and-bush project. He studies the connection between Christian spirituality and ecology. Quite a creative Gospel endeavor, in my view.

Back home, as I walk the desert, ponder the night sky, feel the ground giving back the day's heat, I see the effects of global warming at my front door. And I long to make the link between Gospel nonviolence and creation. It will mean, I think, my entering ever more deeply the unity of creation. It will mean my becoming yet more in tune with nature, all of humanity, and the Holy. An ever widening nonviolence, as it were. This is our common way forward, if we desire that promised blessing.

John Dear's new book, *Transfiguration* (Doubleday, with a foreword by Archbishop Tutu) is available from **www.amazon.com [2]**. His trial for a recent antiwar protest has been rescheduled for June 14 in Albuquerque. For more information, see:
www.johndear.org [3].

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