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World leaders need to think like a planet

Sharon Abercrombie | Oct. 28, 2011 Eco Catholic

Envision for a moment the healing that could wash over our suffering planet if the entrenched ruling establishment were to come together for a very special one-day gathering at a retreat center deep within the California redwoods.

These retreatants would be comprised of an assortment of political leaders, lobbyists, bankers, CEOs of GMO research facilities, the military, and members of the oil, natural gas, nuclear weapons , timber and coal mining industries. Factory farm corporations would be there, too.

Imagine them shedding their initial sheepishness, contempt and self-consciousness at being invited "to do WHAT KIND OF STUFF?" Watch as they sink into a numinous space where the agenda includes drumming, chanting, meditating and mask making.

With your mind's eye, envision these power brokers abandoning their Blackberries for construction paper, crayons, paints, clay , feathers, leaves and cardboard. Earlier that day, they had walked in the forest and "let themselves be chosen by another life form," in the words of Buddhist writer Joanna Macy, describing such a retreat day: They had wandered off alone outside "to happen onto the identity they will assume. They take time to contemplate this life form, imagining its rhythms, and pleasures and needs. They ask the non-human creature's permission to speak for it."

Now, observe these men and women sitting in quiet corners of the room. They are busy creating masks. Likenesses of penguins, polar bears, tigers, mountains -- maybe even a gopher or an earthworm -- begin taking shape.

After an hour or so, half of the group dons masks. They sit in a circle, facing outward. A second circle forms around them, looking inwards. One by one, the masked figures begin telling of the pain they have suffered because of the thoughtlessness and greed of human beings. The outer circle then takes it turn to move to the inner circle with their own stories and identities.

Perhaps what will transpire will be a miracle of tears, regret, deep sadness and a vow to change. And if so, they will be the results of having walked in the footsteps of a nonhuman for a little while.

This is what the Council of All Beings is about. Macy and John Seed created what they call a communal ritual in early 1985, during a weekend workshop for social and environmental activists in Australia.

Macy, an author, teacher and antinuclear activist, learned she had a lot in common with her co-facilitator, John Seed, founder of the Rainforest Information Center.

"We discovered that we shared a passionate interest in deep ecology and the writings of Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess about the 'Ecological self,'" Macy explains on rainforestinfo.org [1]. "As Buddhists we both resonated with these concepts, finding them close to the Buddha's core teachings on the interdependence of all

life. John expressed the wish that my workshops include a 'deep ecological' group experience to directly challenge the anthropocentrism of industrial society."

Together, Macy and Seed invented the Council of All Beings. It was introduced shortly afterward at a camp north of Sydney, on huge flat rocks by a waterfall. About 40 people took part.

Within a year, the Council of All Beings had spread by word of mouth across the globe, through Macy and Seed's workshops. She recalls: "People were gathering to shed their personae as humans and give voice to the plight of the Earth. They spoke as whale and wolf and wind, aspen and marsh, and any other nonhuman they felt called to represent."

Joanna Macy maintains that without emotions, truly realizing the interconnectedness of all life stays stuck at the intellectual level. Mental concepts alone do not affect our attitudes and behaviors.

"We need to feel (the interconnectedness) and our capacity to feel is stunted if we block out the pain within us over what is happening to our world. Furthermore, if we proceed to take part in the Council per se, speaking on behalf of other life-forms, without first acknowledging our sorrow for what others beings are suffering at human hands, we risk being superficial ?"

According to Macy, humans' connections to other life forms are based on more than the emotional attachments to places and beings we have loved.

"They are also organic, woven by shared ancestries, embedded in our bodies. Each atom in each molecule of our being goes back to the beginning of life and has belonged to far more ancient and varied forms of life than our own. The human form we wear now is just the latest and briefest chapter of a long evolutionary journey."

In *The Dream of the Earth*, Fr. Thomas Berry refers to the "shamanic personality," which can understand and speak for other life forms, Macy said.

"It is essential to our survival," she said. "It helps us to ? dispel the trance of industrial civilization."

Berry writes that the life-giving powers shaping creation from the beginning of time are still present within us, existing as "deep spontaneities" accessible through the imagination. And imagination is what the Council of All Beings is about.

Since its inception, the council has evolved into many forms, Macy said. It exists as a one- or two-day retreat, as part of a church service or Mass, and even as a sermon or a liturgy of the word.

And now, the question comes back to our hypothetical group of world movers and shakers: Would a one-day retreat be sufficient to break through their trances? Since we are calling upon the power of imagination, where anything goes, humor us and say a resounding 'yes.' Time is irrelevant. Grace can happen in a moment. Or a day.

Remember that First Century guy who was persecuting Christians? In one blinding, instantaneous second, he was knocked off his horse, and encountered the Divine.

Perhaps some of these powerful big-wigs might begin to see that their constant regime of boardrooms, financial ledgers, competition and warring do not feed soul and spirit or nurture the Earth and all its inhabitants.

Returning to the words of poet James Bertolino, featured in our last column, now is the time for the power brokers to consider what must be done to insure Earth's survival. They must let their "minds taste redwood and agate, octopi, bat and in the bat's mouth, insect." The Council of All Beings might be a way for them to begin thinking like a planet.

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Links:
[1] http://www.rainforestinfo.org