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Flight over Canada's destruction of nature inspires environmental musician

Sharon Abercrombie | Jun. 5, 2012 Eco Catholic

In 2009, Jennifer Berezan took a plane ride with two friends over Edmondton, Alberta, Canada, the place where she grew up. Vast expanses of the area she loved so very much had once thrived as an ancient green boreal forest. But now it had been industrially raped and turned into a wasteland.

Berezan, an environmental musician, composer and social justice activist living in Berkeley, Calif., thought she had braced herself to withstand emotionally the ruinous devastation she would see, but the reality was soul-chilling. Remembering the ancient trees that used to roll "in green waves of motion," she now looked down at "a world on fire. No light. No land. Just black tar and sand."

Berezan was viewing the Canada's Athabasca tar sands operation in Fort McMurray, which help make Canada's oil reserves the second-largest [1] in the world after Saudi Arabia's. Almost as large as the state of Florida, the area supplies approximately 1 million barrels of oil to the United States every day.

The pipeline connection known as the Keystone XL is scheduled to extend through the United States to refineries on the Gulf Coast in Texas. The Obama administration rejected a permit Jan. 18 for the pipeline's construction, but Republicans in Congress continue to push for legislation to approve it. President Barack Obama says he is willing to revisit the project.

A July 16, 2010, report from the Environmental Protection Agency says the tar sands oil ranks among the most carbon-intensive oils on the planet. Production is three to four times more greenhouse-intensive than conventional oil and has the potential to increase carbon dioxide in the air by 27 million metric tons.

During the plane trip three years ago, Berezan's friends suffered, too. Joanna Macy, Buddhist ecophilosopher and writer, gasped, "My God, it's the landscape from hell, and it's the price we pay, all of us." The third aerial witness, Anne Symens-Bucher, a Catholic environmental peace activist from Oakland, Calif., was speechless at the sight. But a year later, Symens-Bucher expressed her views in a March 8, 2010, interview [2] with *The Catholic Voice*, Oakland's diocesan newspaper.

Saying she shares responsibility for what is transpiring in Alberta, Symens-Bucher said, "I am not separate from the destruction because my life style is based on cheap oil." Even taking the plane ride made her complicit, she said.

Last week, Berezan revisited their 2009 trip on her website, Edge of Wonder [3]. "All of us are involved in consuming oil daily," she wrote.

Berezan later released a six-minute YouTube video [4] of the flyover. Julia Lynx, the filmmaker who accompanied the three women, has created a vivid documentary. The visuals are heart-rending. Lynx pairs scenes of the area as it once was -- endless green forests and winding silver waters -- with what it looks like today -- a sterile landscape filled with belching smokestacks. Yellow machines three stories tall rip into the

earth to get to the bituminous oil beneath.

These machines erase the beauty that once was, poisoning the water and the wildlife in their wake, triggering cancer and environmental ills in the humans who work there and who live downstream.

The music in the film clip lands a second overlay of sadness. When Berezan returned to Berkeley, she took out her guitar and wrote "My Memory Forever -- the Alberta Tar Sands Disaster." It appears on her newest CD, "Home," and can be accessed on her website [3].

The lyrics of "Memories of Home" prick the listener's conscience with thorny questions: "How far will we go? Do you want to know? There is money for the families, but nobody listens to the stories they tell. How far will we go? Do you want to know?"

As the video played, some of Jim Conlon's oft-spoken words came to mind, recalled from the three semesters I was a graduate student at the old Institute in Culture and Creation Spirituality at Holy Names University in Oakland. "Become cultural workers," he would encourage us. Conlon, who co-directed the Institute, now leads the Sophia Center there. Jennifer Berezan is an Institute alumna and an adjunct faculty member at Sophia.

Sophia will sponsor its annual summer institute July 19-22. The program encourages students to transform the world's current cultural preoccupation with destruction in the name of profit to one of protecting humanity and bringing about a new era of well-being for the entire earth community, according to the program's website [5].

When Conlon talks about becoming cultural workers, he is asking his students to help change the prevailing paradigm that keeps us captive to the messages embedded in our present lifestyles. Money matters most. Business and jobs are supreme, no matter who and what suffer as a result. Earth is secondary.

Conlon's advice: Change this soul-killing paradigm through our storytelling, our poetry, our music, our spiritual rituals and our work.

Economist David Korten, author of *When Corporations Rule the World* and publisher of *YES!* magazine, offers parallel thoughts on his website [6]. Writing on the topic of cultural workers in July 2011, Korten refers to the competing pieces of information in our culture and how through them, "You are engaging in propagating stories that serve either to legitimate the devastation the old economy causes, or shining a light on the possibility of the new economy."

From religions to the arts, we have more influence than we think, Korten says: "The true artist is a truth teller who has the ability to see reality untainted by cultural filters. Artists can shake us out of the cultural trance that leads us to consume harmful products, play the mark in Wall Street con games, and support corrupt politics. Talented artists can help us see the beauty, meaning and possibility where it might otherwise escape our attention and liberate human consciousness."

Korten disputes the prevailing notion that cut-throat business and competition are sacred, unassailable truths. Rather, the human brain is wired to support creativity, cooperation and life in community. Empire versus ordinary people can and should be challenged.

Our Jennifer Berezans, Joanna Macys and Anne Symens-Buchers are some of these artists, prophets, challengers and truth-tellers who push us, in the words of the song's refrain, to answer, "How far can we go? Do we want to know?" And to look into our souls -- really look at what we are doing to ourselves and to the entire earth community.

(For information about Joanna Macy's life work, go to her website [7].)

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