

“To Embrace the World Rather than Conquer It”

Dogbane Campion (David Watson)

1991

a review of

Thinking Like a Mountain: Towards a Council of All Beings, by Joanna Macy, John Seed, et al, illustrations by Dailan Pugh, New Society Publishers, 122 pages, paper, \$8.95

“The earth is perishing,” this book warns, and attempts to aid in answering the inevitable next utterance: how to respond? What it makes very clear from the start is that more political economy, more detailed scientific data, more facts, more theory are inadequate. This slim manual on what the authors call “despair work” argues that people will change not when they have received certain information but when they have confronted despair. They don’t change because society has institutionalized “taboos against the communication of expression of such anguish,” and thus its release and the healthy renewal of energies of resistance and change.

The book offers a means of confronting that anguish, the need (in the by now famous words of Vietnamese poet Thich Nhat Hanh) to “hear within ourselves the sounds of the earth crying.” The Council of All Beings, a ritual practice made up of various workshop techniques but hardly limited to what that term might imply, helps the participants to achieve a state of mind (or being, perhaps) in which they are ready, as contributor Arne Naess puts it (after the Buddhist tradition) “to embrace the world rather than to conquer it.”

The book is made up of poetry, essays, invocations, and practical suggestions on doing the workshop/council. Some activities included are an “evolutionary remembering” (a lovely text emphasizing our continuity with the rest of creation from the origins of the universe), meditative time in a natural setting (it says it is possible to do the workshop indoors but I can’t believe it would be anywhere near as effective), and a bestiary/list of threatened species with participants speaking on behalf of other species, both protesting their destruction and offering gifts to aid in our reconciliation with them and our attempts to save the earth. It may sound a little hokey (or what west coast people have aptly dubbed “woo woo”), but it has tremendous potential; much of the invocation and response, the taking of roles and evoking the planet through humility, imagination and creative anthropomorphization, is very moving.

Some of the anthropomorphism goes too far, I think—for example the invocation to bring “the presence of the spirit. of Gaia,” as if the planetary organism were something so trivial as a single distinct goddess figure, rather than what a taoist might describe as the deep “self-so” that is nature, the strivingless striving of life. When this goes too far, more is lost than gained. But all in all, the collection does not suffer too much from this flaw; the enhanced sense of connection to life is worth the excesses.

What the book emphasizes is more a poetic naturalism that can provide spiritual strength and insights beyond facts, that will lead to John Seed’s remark that one goes from protecting the rainforest as other to seeing oneself as that part of the forest “recently emerged into thinking” that is protecting itself. This is one of the best insights of deep ecology (taken essentially from native peoples’ spirituality), and why, despite other problems with the perspective, it remains a presence in ecological thinking and practice. (The book offers nothing, apart from an intuition of our separation from the rest of nature, in the way of theoretical understanding of the social context or sources of ecological destruction, and—refreshingly for deep ecology literature—makes no forceful claim to do so.)

The book states clearly that the practices it describes are no substitute for activism. “Rather, the rituals prepare us and provide us with a larger context for action...” filling us with “new determination, courage and perseverance. One hopes so, since we all need renewal. “For we are in a hard time, a fearful time,” writes Joanna Macy. “And it is the knowledge of the bigger story that is going to carry us through.”

I have often thought that such exercises that give us a glimpse of our larger self in context with the natural world can galvanize and radicalize people by affecting what might be called their “species being.” Following this intuition, I have engaged in similar exercises, mostly with high school students. I’m skeptical on certain levels (and Desert Storm’s horrible effect on some of the young people I saw just beginning to open up to radical political ecology who later switched to U.S. flag tee shirts only heightened my skepticism along with my sense of gloom and doom). But I think these councils, like communal meals, singing, dancing, and other forms of celebration and contemplation are absolutely necessary to sustain us.

I’m certainly not of the opinion that a ritual (or game, or dramatic presentation, etc.) is a lie that prevents us from confronting the real. We have plenty of the real. Ritual can be a form of meditative focus and a cleansing as long as its limitations are recognized. This focus and renewal is what the authors claim they have experienced and facilitated in others. To be sure, many other young people I worked with in similar activities were radicalized and came out against the war (partly because we did the exercises, but we also talked politics).

There is a tremendous amount of pain out there—crippling, paralyzing pain. If these practices help, I’m all for them. In some circumstances, I can imagine that people will use them as a substitute for practical action against the megamachine, but that doesn’t mean that they can’t work for us, or can’t bring some people to cross the line. If we aren’t going to buckle once and for all under the treads of the New World Reich and its war against life on earth, we’re going to have to continue to explore ways to heal and sustain our aching spirits.

One criticism worth mentioning is the use (even with a disclaimer recognizing that it is not an authentic text) of the celebrated message of Chief Seattle (we have quoted it in the past, just like everyone else). There, the venerable Chief intones, “Man does not weave the web of life; he is merely a strand in it...” This is a beautiful message, but it was written by a scriptwriter in the 1960s, not recorded from a Duwamish elder. The text is becoming increasingly insulting to Native Americans (though I once even saw it cited in a Native American Legal Defense Fund fundraising mailing I received—we have all been fooled), and one can understand why.

I found out that it was apocryphal last year when a friend gave me an issue of *Natural Rights* (the newsletter of the Natural Rights Center, POB 90, Summertown TN 38483-0090) which traces the history of text. I can’t agree with the newsletter that the intrinsic value of the words “is so enormous that it hardly matters who wrote them.” It does matter how they have been presented and that they are in the terms in which they are expressed. (“So we will consider your offer to buy our land,” one reads.) Knowing what we now know, the text rings hollow, it mocks the real victims of imperial expansion, and it could be readily replaced by authentic statements of original peoples all over the earth. Whatever the merits of the text, a certain circumspection conscious of history should lead us to abandon it.

I would also like to see more poetry by other poets, too, in some future edition, for example Gary Snyder or the particularly revelatory work of W.S. Merwin’s *The Rain in the Trees* or *The Lice*.

Read this outside somewhere, away from human artifacts, face to woods, meadow, stream. Then do it.

fifth Estate

Dogbane Champion (David Watson)
"To Embrace the World Rather than Conquer It"
1991

<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/337-late-summer-1991/to-embrace-the-world-rather-than-conquer-it>
Fifth Estate #337, Late Summer, 1991

fifthestate.anarchistlibraries.net