

Let me begin with a confession. It’s taken me a long time to claim environmental issues as “my cause.” Oh, of course I cared. I could see the problem. But it wasn’t quite real to me. It didn’t pack the emotional weight with me that many other issues did: hunger and homelessness, human rights, the plight of prisoners and immigrants, racism and oppression of LGBT people.

This was probably because environmental degradation had no face. It wasn’t standing on the corner with a sign asking for food or work. I looked around me and saw the blue sky, the green trees. I breathed fresh air and drank clean water. Of course, I knew that the rainforest was dwindling. Of course, I knew that the ozone layer had holes in it and our weather was getting hotter and stormier. I knew that the sea was rising. But, surely, if the dire predictions were true, other people were doing something about it. Surely, our leaders, the people who held the power, wouldn’t let this happen. After all, the alternative was unthinkable.

That was the problem: the truth was too awful to think about.

It was the polar bears that finally got me. I’d always felt a special fondness for polar bears. I could relate to this – the image of polar bears without solid ice on which to hunt, on which to rest and raise their young.

I’ve always been a sucker for nature shows. I love these glimpses into the secret and mysterious lives of creatures so magnificent, so perfect, so complete – so unlike myself. But I’ve had to turn the channel when the waters dried up and the elephants began dying; when the forests disappeared and the tiger and the gorilla had nowhere to hide or find food; when the seabirds covered in oil lay struggling on the beach. I just couldn’t bear it. I turned the channel. But the melting of the icecaps... the polar bears... I can no longer turn the channel.

What would this world be without polar bears and gorillas and tigers? I’ve seen these fellow-beings in zoos and in pictures and on TV, but it’s not like they’re a part of my everyday life. Or are they? I’ve come to recognize that, in scientific terms, they are. I’ve come to understand that what happens to the icecaps and the rainforest and the oceans does affect me. The interdependent web is a reality, not just a pretty metaphor. What happens to the climate in Antarctica or Brazil or Polynesia or Egypt does make a difference to all life on earth, to my life. But you know these things. Others with much better scientific credentials than I can expound upon that.

What I know about is what the existence of these creatures means to my spirit. What I know about is my need – our need – for the Sacred. And this earth and the life it sustains is sacred. And what we are doing to it is sacrilege.

What I mean by sacred is this: that which fills me with wonder, with admiration, with awe. That which sustains my inner life. That which makes my life worth living,

which moves me, comforts me, shakes me to the core by reminding me of all that I do not control or even understand and to which I am yet connected. The earth and the sky, the sun and the ocean. Fireflies and mountains, stars and hummingbirds, winds and rain. And polar bears. You. And the source of all these things, the Source of Life... whatever that may be, however we understand it. If God, if the Spirit of Life, has a body, it is these things... this Earth and the mysteries that surround it and fill it. It is through these wonders that we experience the Sacred.

There was a time in my life, many years ago, when my life was filled with dread. Dread of each new day, each dreary obligation, each unsatisfying exchange. I hope you have never known such a time. I suspect that many of you have. My coworkers and boss were hostile and my job a constant struggle. I was losing the one who had been the great love of my life. To face each day took a heroic effort of will. My spirit was parched and empty, my courage used up, my joy – I could barely remember joy.

My healing came in the spring – exactly at this time of year, as a matter of fact. It happened when I stepped outside into the sun and air and sky and trees. It was so beautiful. There is no other way to describe it. It was an ordinary setting... but so alive, so welcoming. I felt held by the sun, soothed by the breeze, supported by the ground under my feet. I breathed deeply. And the words of a hymn came to me... a hymn I had grown up with in my Unitarian church...

“For the beauty of the earth, for the splendor of the skies, for the love which from our birth, over and around us lies: Source of all, to thee we raise, this our hymn of grateful praise.” The beauty of the earth. This was enough. This was all I really needed – nothing less than a reason for living. To fall back into love with life. The beauty of the earth *is* enough.

Here is a poem by Mary Oliver, called “Goldfinches.”

In the fields we let them have – in the fields we don’t want yet –  
Where thistles rise out of the marshlands of spring, and spring open –  
Each bud a settlement of riches –  
A coin of reddish fire –  
the finches wait for midsummer, for the long days,  
For the brass heat, for the seeds to begin to form in the hardening thistles,  
dazzling as the teeth of mice, but black,  
Filling the face of every flower.

Then they drop from the sky,  
A buttery gold, they swing on the thistles, they gather  
The silvery down, they carry it in their finchy beaks to the edges of the fields,  
to the trees, as though their minds were on fire with the flower of one perfect idea

–

And there they build their nests and lay their pale-blue eggs,  
Every year,  
and every year  
The hatchlings wake in the swaying branches,  
In the silver baskets,  
And love the world.

Is it necessary to say any more?  
Have you heard them singing in the wind, above the final fields?  
Have you ever been so happy in your life?

This is sacred. This is enough. This is everything.

Amen