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AN INTERVIEW WITH JOHN SEED, APRIL 17, 1991

Ram Dass

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About the participants: *Ram Dass* is the author of numerous books and tapes, and has been a wandering teacher for many years. One of his best know books is *Be Here Now*. *John Seed* is a long time environmental activist who is also a wandering teacher who has led Councils of all Beings all over the world. He is centered at the Rainforest Information Center in Australia and is one of the authors of *Thinking Like a Mountain: Toward a Council of All Beings* published by New Society Publishers, Philadelphia 1988.

Ram Dass, Interviewer

RD: John, yesterday, I was following a truck and it had a sign on the back saying,, "I am polluting the atmosphere." I had never seen a sign like that acknowledging the part we're playing. As the time clocks about the environment run on, how do we get a sense of the catastrophic implications? How does humanity begin to sense what's going on?

JS: That's the fundamental question, isn't it? Because if we were able to fully acknowledge what was happening, then surely we would have the necessary will to prevent it from happening. The technology certainly exists and there'd be nothing standing in our way of living sustainably on the planet. We know how to grow food properly, we know how to control population, we know all of these things, but the will doesn't exist because the penny hasn't dropped and we don't really believe that this is happening to us yet.

RD: How do we come to really believe it?

JS: Well, I believe that loss of the ceremonies and rituals that acknowledge and nurture our interconnectedness with nature is a large part of the problem. We modern humans are the only culture as far as I've been able to find out who have ever attempted to live without these ceremonies and rituals as an integral part of our societies. The people who place great importance upon such rituals and ceremonies are people who live in very, very close connection with nature; hunter-gatherer societies for instance, where people are immersed, imbedded in nature all of the time. If we consider that they find it necessary to guarantee that connectedness by performing such ceremonies, how much more we, living such denatured lives, must need to do this. And so, since those things have been given up, and perhaps not willingly, perhaps we're forced to give them up by inquisitions and other things, we have now pushed "the environment" somewhere "out there." Even though we may know intellectually that this isn't the case, all we have to do is hold our breath for about a minute to prove that the environment isn't really "out there," but that there's a constant exchange not just of air, of course, but of moisture and of soil into our bodies. We don't feel

it; we don't experience ourselves in this way. Our experience of ourselves is still mediated by thousands of years of Judeo-Christian brainwashing, which makes us feel that the real reality is somewhere else. It's in heaven. It's anywhere but here on this Earth.

RD: I recall Florence Kluckhohn, the anthropologist, who differentiated between cultures that were human under nature, human in nature, and human over nature. And I associate most of the rituals you're talking about as something to, in a way, appease the forces of the universe, which came out of the human under nature trying to calm everything down by honoring. And I think you're more talking about the human in nature cultures. What are examples of those kinds of cultures?

JS: Well, I'm thinking in particular of some dances and ceremonies that I saw among the Hopi Indians on those mesas a couple of years ago. I was particularly interested in them because they seemed so like the *Council of All Beings*, which is the particular form that I've been mainly involved in, where a hundred dancers were dressed from top to toe with different animal features, animal masks and feathers and all kinds of things. And I realized then that these people, in what I think is the oldest continuously inhabited village in the Western hemisphere, had been performing these ceremonies and rituals without break for thousands and thousands of years. So this isn't a process that you complete. It's not as though, "Well, we are alienated therefore we need these therapies and then we'll be okay." It's more like being okay is to realize that these ceremonies have to have a space in our lives. It's not something that we're ever finished with. So I'm thinking of that and the Penan in Sarawak who are the last nomadic hunter-gatherers in Southeast Asia, who also speak for the other voices of nature just to make sure that everyone remembers those voices.

RD: When I think about where the culture is, what's feeding the continuity of the culture we're in that denies this reality, the whole urban power of the intellect kind of preoccupation, will it take incredible crisis to awaken that consciousness or can you see it seeping in from the edges?

JS: I think the problem with trauma is that at the moment things seem so precarious for the Earth that if the traumas that we've already had aren't sufficient, then I'm afraid that any trauma that would be sufficient would also be lethal. For instance, the Director General of the United Nations Environment Program, Dr. Mostafa Tolba, says in his introduction to World Conservation Strategy that at the current rate of destruction, "we face by the turn of this century an environmental catastrophe as complete and as irreversible as any nuclear holocaust." And this is echoed by many scientists. So if this is true, that in the next ten years or so this will take place, it's hard to imagine any trauma sufficient to turn the huge inertia of this whole way of being around that wouldn't also just be a death blow to the planet. So then if not that, what can we hope for? And the only thing is something that I sort of feel... It seems I have been evolving on this planet for four thousand million years. I've looked at

the evidence, and it seems that as a creation myth this has advantages over an old man with a white beard creating everything six thousand years ago, or even a turtle with all of this growing on its back. -The composition of my blood, and the relationship of that to the composition of sea water four hundred million years ago when we left the oceans, the whole growth of the human fetus with the vestigial tail and the gills, so, so many clues indicate that this is actually a true story of where we came from. And if that's the case, then I have been successful through all of that time. That whole road is littered with the bones of those who couldn't adapt, who couldn't adjust to the crisis of their time, whatever it was. But somehow I feel like we have this perfect pedigree, and that we must have some hidden resources that we're not aware of yet. And what could trigger us off so that we begin to identify with that larger body of ourselves rather than merely this tunnel vision that we have now, looking only at this very immediate time? So in the end nothing but a miracle would be of any use at this time. When you look at the rate of destruction, whether it's of the rainforest or the ozone layer, the climate, all of these things that are happening, and if you were to multiply all of the efforts of conservationists by a factor of ten or even a hundred, it wouldn't be enough. So there's nothing on the horizon that can help us, you know. And so then you think well, what kind of a miracle would that be? Well, it would be a very simple one, really. All that it would need would be for human beings to wake up one day different than they were the day before and realizing that this is the end unless we make these changes, and then deciding to make the change. That doesn't seem like a very likely thing to happen, but on the other hand the whole road that we've travelled is so littered with miracles that it's only our strange kind of modern psyche that refuses to see it. I mean the miracle of being descended from a fish that chose to leave the water and walk on the land, well, anyone with a pedigree like that, you can't lose hope.

RD: Is that process of your awakening to your relation of ontogeny and phylogeny and all that a rational process? Is it intuitive? Is it a cellular wisdom? What level of awakening are we talking about when we talk about that miraculous awakening?

JS: Well, I think it has to be all of those things because though our concepts may be of some use to us, in fact reality has no seams, you know. My own awakening shall we say started when I left my job as a systems engineer for IBM and I dropped out and was living on the land. I had no interest in ecology but then I found myself, just through circumstance, involved in the defense of a particular forest. And in that forest I was gripped emotionally and much against my beliefs at that time, I found myself defending that forest. Once I started to do that I also started to become intellectually interested in the subject, and then I discovered that this rainforest that I was defending was in fact the place where I had evolved for the last hundred and thirty million years, and therefore it wasn't in the least surprising that it was able to get inside me and affect me so powerfully and use me in this way. So it kind of makes sense on every

level. And when we do, for instance, one of the processes in the Council of All Beings, where we recapitulate our evolutionary journey, what we're hoping for is that the intellectual agreement that this is indeed what we did, coupled with the physical involvement of our bodies through dancing and crawling and gliding - this whole process will awaken the deep memories. I think there's a lot of evidence from rebirthing and LSD research and so on that the cellular memories do exist, but through our conceptual frame work and filters we shut them off from ourselves most of the time. That's where ceremonies and rituals really have the power to release us from those normal filters and to allow these other realities to enter us.

RD: There are two scenarios of that miracle. One is that the inevitability of evolution forces it, and what humans think they're doing is kind of irrelevant. The other is that there's a key moment where what humans think they're doing is critical. Where are you standing in that place? I'm hearing right in between.

JS: I guess I haven't really looked at that because I feel that my own journey is one where I continually make that surrender to the larger picture whenever I am at any kind of a crossroads - then I look at it and I make that surrender and I don't need to know that. My own sense is that the Earth is undoubtedly alive, the Earth is undoubtedly intelligent, much more intelligent than me, and in fact my intelligence is only the tiniest fragment of the intelligence of the Earth. I'm just a leaf growing on this tree. And so it's safe for me to just surrender and allow the sap to come from the tree and move me where it will. So I don't know and in a way I don't need to know.

RD: So if I try to think of the catastrophes that force change, I'm looking at the interaction between human consciousness now and some time clock process. Like Three Mile Island wasn't enough. Chernobyl wasn't enough. The combination of Three Mile Island-Chernobyl wasn't enough, so we're getting graded catastrophe and there's some probably critical moment where behavior changes. And then the only question is, is it too late, is it irreversible? And it's interesting how the data about irreversibility continually is disputed by other scientists who say, oh these are all nay sayers, and technology will solve the problems. How do you talk to those people?

JS: Well, that's really difficult because technology's so good at covering up the problem that it's very, very difficult even to see the problem in certain places. I mean it's possible to hide oneself from the problem so easily, and especially for the powerful and the people with vested interest, they can distance themselves a great deal. But I feel like there's no evidence that we can actually create the things that we need. For instance, the medicines that we use are derived from rainforest plants. These plants invent the medicine over billions of years in their genetic material. We can then synthesize those same medicines. We don't need those plants any longer once we've unlocked the combination, but we can't ever create any of that ourselves. To give an example of the scale of the destruction that's going on, the present Minister of Environment in Brazil,

Jose Lutzenberger, was one of the great environmentalists in Brazil and was appointed Environment Minister as an answer to Brazil's critics, I suppose. So he quoted some studies a year or two ago of the amount of solar energy that was captured by the jungle in the Amazon necessary to lift the amount of water up into the atmosphere that was taking place there. We have in the Amazon this huge river, but the hydrological cycle in the Amazon is five times as much water as the Amazon River itself. It was calculated that the amount of energy required was the equivalent of two thousand hydrogen bombs a day of solar energy that was captured by the vegetation to lift this water into the air. So this is a huge heat engine that drives the winds of the world, those winds that the ancient mariners knew and the same winds that deliver moisture regularly and predictably to this country and to Europe. They don't just exist, they're not "just there" the way that we think, but they're actually continuously being created and maintained by the large biological systems. This is one of the vital organs of Gaia, the living planet. Lutzenberger says that if we lose as little as one third of the Amazon, it will irreversibly disrupt this process. First of all the rest of the Amazon will start dying back because the immediate hydrological regime will have been disrupted, and then of course the climate everywhere around the world will be disrupted. So what this says is that to save a huge national park here and a huge national park there - even if we could do it, which we're not even successful in doing because the national parks are being colonized and burnt before our eyes, but even if we could do that - it's not enough. It's based upon a false metaphor of what life is and what the Earth is. A better metaphor I think was described by Lovelock, the British scientist who popularized the Gaia hypothesis, when he said that what we're doing to the Amazon is as if the brain were to decide it was the most important organ in the body and it started to mine the liver for some benefits that it might get from it. Once we realize the connection, we realize deeply that we can't do that any longer because we know that it can't be in the interest of the brain to mine the liver or in the interest of a leaf to destroy the tree on which it's growing. And so we have to say this - national parks are just not enough. People may reply, "Well how can you say this, because we're having enough trouble getting a hundred thousand acres or two hundred thousand acres here and there as a national park, and you say all the cutting has to stop?". But still it has to be said. It may be impossible, but nothing less than that is going to be of any use to us. *To try and keep the Earth alive with a few representative areas of natural places is like trying to keep a tree alive by leaving a few pieces of bark on its surface or trying to keep the human body alive with a few pieces of skin;Bj.* I feel that if this was understood, then everything else would fall into place. So then the question is, "How can this understanding reach people?"

RD: How much do you feel it's useful to put your energies into political consciousness like the United Nations and how much to do it at the local level or at the Earth First! or Council of All Beings kinds of levels? How are you deciding how to make this statement?

JS: Well, I feel that I wouldn't know how to evaluate or how to make a rational decision. What I do is I lie down in the forest and cover myself in leaves, and I say, "Mother, I surrender to you," and I deliberately allow all of my energies to sink into the Earth and to be aligned by the Earth. Then when I get up, whatever I want to do, that's what I do. Then I can just behave spontaneously, and I get more and more confidence as time goes on, and I'm able to look back at the results of those spontaneous actions to see that there's an order there, that I do make my flight or I do make that connection, and I just feel supported in this work. When I look back over the last year for instance, I'd say I spent about half my time doing workshops spiritual-psychological workshops, which is also fundraising because all of the money from these workshops goes back into the rainforest, and as more and more people become interested in this that part of it grows. And about half of my time is spent on political action including large projects to protect rainforests in Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands and Ecuador that I'm involved in and supporting, and on direct action like chaining myself by the neck underneath a vehicle to prevent it from moving into the forest. And I don't know how I budget that time - I just do what I feel like doing.

RD: I experience you as becoming an instrument for the Earth. You're a pseudopod that comes out of the Earth and speaks for it. You speak for the trees, you speak for Gaia, and you're kind of surrendering, not even intentionally, and I can feel how that transformation might have occurred in you. Can you talk about the change in your self-consciousness as you become more and more surrendered into that intuitive way or expressing the needs of the Earth to be heard?

JS: Well, once I understand intellectually that my relationship to the Earth is that of a leaf to a tree, the needs of the tree have priority over the needs of the leaf; The tree can exist without the leaf but the leaf can't exist without the tree. New leaves can come, you know. So once I know that intellectually and then once I discover the tools for taking that knowledge and allowing it to sink more deeply into my being to that place where my values are made where my intuitive moment-to-moment decisions are made, and I practice those things, then I feel like I start to partake of the nature of everything else, which is just total ordinariness. It's not as though there's anything special about this way of being: I think about a certain species of butterfly that I saw on a television program in the Amazon where one flock which flies together is made up of two different colored individuals, I think black and orange. And when they land on a stalk of grass, the black ones all land to make a perfect circle and the orange ones form these petals around it disguising themselves as a flower that fools their predator. Now the black ones didn't decide, hey I'm a black one, I'm going to go in the center. They just did what they wanted to do, they just did what they did. And I'm made out of the same material as those butterflies. I'm related to them, you know, I've been around here since exactly the same time that they've been around here and we're all made out of the same aboriginal

substance. For a longtime, because of this big bulge here [touching forehead], I forgot a lot of that, and I have this propensity to forget. The butterfly never, never forgets who it is and what it wants, but I can easily forget. Therefore for me to spend my weekends acknowledging and searching for and finding and loving my rootedness in the Earth and accepting my dependency on the Earth, accepting that I'm not an independent spiritual being but that my spiritual being grows out of a complex and exquisite biology, then I just become an ordinary miraculous butterfly-like creature.

RD: You're talking about being a butterfly with prefrontal lobes as opposed to the older brain which is much more instinctual. Is the prefrontal lobe the enemy of evolution? Or is it...?

JS: Well, that remains to be seen of course, the wheel still spins. If I was a gambling man, I'd have to say that the odds are that we're going to succeed in destroying complex life on Earth. All the scientific evidence that's coming in now suggests that time is growing very, very short for this huge turning that we will have to take. But I really like Thomas Berry's idea, and Matthew Fox's, that we're here to somehow be able to reflect back upon the Earth, that we are the Earth coming into this reflective mode, and that there's a certain risk in that. I mean it's the birth of something new, and birth is attendant with the risk of death and I assume that the Earth must know what it's doing to take such a huge risk, and I just surrender to that wisdom.

RD: Tom Berry has this beautiful sense of the revelation which includes us manifesting. He's trying very hard to hold onto his Catholic identity and also this ecological perspective, and I can feel it's quite a tension for him. Is there some role that an institution like existing religious structures can play?

JS: I feel that all of the existing religions have their growing points, ecological growing points. The Christians have Thomas Berry and they have some Quaker thinkers like Marshall Massey, and there is Matthew Fox's *Original Blessing* and things like that. I feel it's very important to nurture those growing points in every possible way, because for most people to give up that kind of infrastructure of their whole psychological and spiritual lives is too difficult a task. If there's no other way perhaps they can do it, but if there's some way that they can start from where they are and grow into a love of Earth then that's much easier.

RD: But basically they're doing what Tom Berry talks about as following a dysfunctional cosmology.

JS: Well, that's so, and especially the Judeo-Christian cosmology compiled with our immense technological power is a terribly dangerous thing. As long as we think that we can subdue and dominate nature, and conquer nature, and we don't remember that we are also part of the nature that's being conquered - that's a very dangerous situation. But on the other hand there are other interpretations of Christianity which needed to be supported, and in particular

I'm thinking of a reading that the covenant wasn't between God and the Jews, but between God, the Jews and Nature. The creation was the third party to that covenant, and a lot of things have been forgotten and perhaps require rehabilitation or reinterpretation now because it's hard to see how most people are going to find their way - it's too big a leap from where they are now.

RD: You're suggesting spiritual practices that would awaken people to their relation to the Earth like rituals, and you would see practices which involve extricating yourself from an identity with form as counterproductive now.

JS: That's so, but these rituals and ceremonies; the Council of All Beings and Evolutionary Journey and the like, are really fairly recent for me, and my own changes took place before I knew about these things. For me all of this started with the non-violent direct action in defense of nature, which I didn't see as being a ritual at the beginning. But when I think about it now it actually seems to me to be a ritual activity - to go to that place where humankind meets wild nature, that line where nature's being bulldozed and plowed and pushed back, and to stand right on that line, not looking at nature with the eye to conquest but looking back as part of nature saying "No" to this whole thing. That was really the biggest turning point of my life, the first time that I was involved in something like that. And the reason that I believe this to be ritual is that I can't really take it seriously now on its own terms - you can't save a forest, you can't save a tree. Today with the ozone layer disappearing with the atmosphere changing, with global warming, all the forests, all the trees are going to be gone. The ones that you saved in 1979 or 1989 are going to go along with everything else. Unless you can save the whole thing, you can't save any of the pieces. So any attempt to be saving a little piece here and a little piece there can only be seen as a kind of a prayer. You know a prayer for the awakening of people.

RD: I hear. But as a symbolic statement also it's very powerful. Give me an example. Let's talk about Papua New Guinea.

JS: This is the most recent work we're engaged in - in fact this is taking place as we're talking now. For ten years or so our main activity in those jungles was to stop bad things from happening. Always we went everywhere to stop this and stop that. It was a struggle all the time. In the Pacific, in New Guinea and the Solomon Islands, in Vanuatu, where the people do have land rights, the decisions about the fate of the forests are much less in the hands of governments than in the hands of communities who've traditionally owned the lands. The only way to protect the forest in the end is to offer those people some alternative economic development that doesn't require the destruction of the forest. You can't expect them, having no economic life whatsoever, to take a lofty view of these things. They don't want to see the forest logged but they see themselves as having no alternative. The problem is that they don't have the skills or the kind of infrastructure that allows them economic development. So one of the things that we noticed was that there was a small portable sawmill

called the "walkabout," that was being manufactured in Papua, New Guinea. There were about 300 of them around the country, and wherever these sawmills were the logging companies couldn't get a contract because all of a sudden the people found that the trees had value for them. So the first thing we did was an ecological audit of existing walkabout sawmills and we discovered, as we'd suspected, that the worst of them was an order of magnitude better for the forest than the best of the large logging companies, mainly because the sawmills require no bulldozers and heavy machinery compacting the soil is even more damaging than the removal of the trees.

RD: And also the logging companies cut everything don't they?

JS: They do cut everything, but even in cases where the walkabout sawmill was being used in too small an area and where everything was cut, even then the regeneration was much better because the bulldozers weren't present. So then we were funded by the Australian government aid agency and we produced manuals to go with future sawmills that were sold so that people would know what their options were in terms of forest management, and then we found an area to intervene using these sawmills. This was in Morobe Province in Papua New Guinea where a large logging company was about to sign a contract with the Zia tribe. This company had moved its way along that stretch of coast clear-cutting its way along, and it was so confident of getting this contract for about 250,000 acres that it had already built a wharf and a fuel dump, and it was a matter of weeks before the contract was finished and signed. We came in and offered the people a choice, saying if we could provide them with three of these small sawmills, one for each of the villages in that community, and a management plan to go with them so that they could rotate around through a small section of forest in a sustainable way, and also a guaranteed market for the sawn timber would they agree to spurn the advantages of the logging company which they did. So four months later, we now are handing over those sawmills this week. The Australian High Commissioner, I believe, is over there as part of that ceremony. The people are getting 200 times as much for each tree they saw as they would have got for the logs from the logging company, and although in the short term they're not getting as much of a windfall in 1991, they can see that this is going to go on sustainably. Each sawmill only cuts seven acres a year, and we believe that on a 50 year rotation they'll be able to go back to the first site again and keep logging. So that's 350 acres per sawmill for three sawmills out of the 250,000 acres that were at threat from the logging company. So we feel like this is now a model and we're looking for other places where we can use the sawmill in this way, and also other modes of sustainable development that we can provide using Australian aid, and other funding sources.

RD: What have been your dealings with the lumber companies themselves? Is there any way, any effort to have them redirect their energies into small sustainable operations? What happened? Do you get stonewalled? Is this just

such a hard economic reality that there's no space in it, or what?

JS: So far we haven't had any success at all with the logging companies. Last week in New York I had a meeting with executives of Mitsubishi from their timber subsidiary because we're about to crank up a boycott campaign. I'm going to Japan now for a series of presentations and press conferences and then for a demonstration outside Mitsubishi, and this will be happening worldwide. But there was no comprehension on their part. For them it was a public relations problem they didn't see it any other way.

RD: They don't have any ecological consciousness at all, or they don't want to, or they can't possibly see it?

JS: Well, the individuals may. We had a two hour meeting with them in New York and one of the women in our group in trying to explain her concerns began to weep. And I could see that this actually changed something, that something shifted in the room, but it only changed something personally and really they weren't speaking for themselves as persons, they were speaking as cogs in a much larger machine, and very quickly they regained their composure and were able to continue.

RD: That's a far out story, right at the edge of where you have to go, because what you're doing mainly is dealing with individuals shifts of heart, and yet we're talking about that kind of impersonal amoral corporate entity that is really where the perpetuation of the problem lies. I guess boycotting and the public relations issue is the only entre you have at the moment.

JS: Well, with that particular group. This was the same with Burger King in 1987 when Rainforest Action Network discovered that Burger King was responsible for more than 80

RD: This is so on the edge of what civilization's about, and where civilization falls short. It's just so painful to see who we aren't, to see how our economic necessities have gotten to rule us by the standard of living we've created. John, what does the term, "deep ecology" refer to?

JS: Well, I would just have to tell you what it means to me because it's kind of a problematic term that means a lot of different things, but to me it refers to the biocentric as opposed to the human-centered approach to things. It means rather than seeing the world as a pyramid with human beings on the top, we see the world as a web and the humans as just one strand in that web. So it's the kind of deep questioning, using the intellectual science of ecology as almost a spiritual truth, to allow those truths to become personal. The contrast is with a resource based environmentalism which sees the world as being composed of human beings on the one hand and resources for human beings on the other hand. Now some people might just lay those resources to waste while other more responsible and dutiful people might say, well we shouldn't destroy these

resources, we should preserve them for future generations of human beings. But I don't see the world as being composed that way, I don't think that that's the right way to describe the world. The world contains 10 to 30 million species of plants and animals, and we are one of those.

RD: So you're saying that the idea of being responsible to save resources isn't really the motivation out of which ecological consciousness finally arises and feeds people.

JS: It may work for a few people, but on the whole we're not capable of making the necessary sacrifices. When we look at how difficult it is to make the tiniest change in our behavior, people see therapists for years for the smallest change, how are we going to make the huge changes that are going to be required of us in order to live sustainably on the Earth, again? I feel as Arne Naess, the professor of philosophy from Oslo University who coined the term "deep ecology movement" about 22 years ago, said, "Responsibility or duty is a treacherous basis for conservation." Because we're not capable of this high moral elevation, most of us, not in a sustained way. How many of us are Gandhis? What the rituals do and what just being in nature does, is to provide us with new sources of joy that replaces all the stuff we try and fill our lives with. When you consider 5,000 million human beings all aspiring to this so-called high standard of living, the Earth obviously can't support it. We have to dig up the Earth and turn it into hair dryers and automobiles and all of these things. And then we stuff- our lives with these things thinking that somehow we can find satisfaction this way, that somehow we can fill that gaping hole, but it never works - you never see anyone who finally comes to the end of that process. And in a way it seems to be a kind of displacement. The real desire is not for these material things, the real desire is for a psychological or spiritual state and we hope to find that. We're led to believe by advertising and other things that we can find that in a material way, but this isn't true and it's very destructive. Whereas if we can experience great joy and ecstasy even, just from being alive on the Earth and from being related to all this other life, and from experiencing the interconnectedness and the flow, then this is a very harmless way of finding that satisfaction.

RD: Can you experience that feeling even in the face of the hopelessness of the situation?

JS: Well, it's funny, because in a way it's mainly the hopelessness of the situation that makes this feeling accessible to me. As I said, I was working at IBM as a systems engineer. If it hadn't been that there was something wrong, I'd probably still be there and somehow the hopelessness is all incredible opportunity because it's like how, I think Robinson Jeffers said, "How can one have ambitions in a paper forest?" Who wants wealth or who wants fame, or whatever it is, once one has seen this, you know? So in a way it makes it very, very simple. The kind of huge obstacles to spiritual development of the past, the intense glare of what's coming down towards us really burns those things away, and then it leaves us very open to being able to experience this joy. And then to do everything that

one can for the Earth, I think that it's a very joyful position to be in. And to invite the despair and the rage and the sorrow and to partake of that, to feel the pain of the earth, As Thich Nhat Hanh said, "The most important thing we can do is to hear within ourselves the sounds of the Earth dying." Because when we do that then our compassion is out there, we're out there with all of the rest of it, we feel interconnection, but also we then begin to be in a position to be able to do something about it. Without that pain there's not enough motivation. Our ideas aren't enough motivation to do anything.

RD: It seems that we've been under the assumption that our happiness lies in denying the suffering and the pain of other people, of other forces and entities, like the Earth. Now the data are in that that doesn't work, and yet we go on denying it.

JS: Well, I think the culture has a lot invested in that denial. What we find in one of the processes in the Council of All Beings is a deep mourning, where we start to grieve the loss of things that are being lost from the Earth, our favorite little piece of nature that's now covered by a freeway or whatever it is, and people begin to weep and howl and wail about what's being lost. We're so afraid that we're going to be crushed by these feelings, we've been led to believe that we'll be crushed by them, but certainly in this context of a supportive group of people who are encouraging each other to do things, the opposite is always the case. What we discover is that all of those huge amounts of our psychological energy that were necessary to hold that denial in place are released and we find ourselves joyful and empowered, and what seems to be the case is that if we allow that sorrow to carve out a space inside us, that is the very space that can then be filled with bliss and with other emotions that we were seeking before. We were seeking those things, we were trying to run away from their opposite, but all that we did was make ourselves numb and make ourselves shallow.

RD: In activist groups there is really quite a bifurcation between those people whose motivation comes out of anger and those whose comes out of the joy of participatory identity with the whole. Are you noticing that, and how do you work with it?

JS: I do notice that, and I think it's a dangerous thing because it's not the anger itself, it's the suppressed anger that I feel and also a lot of depression as well. Sometimes the peace and environment movements are represented by people who are wearing themselves out, depressed, slightly hysterical, desperate or putting out a vibe like, "Where were you while I was addressing envelopes all night anyway?" There's something so unattractive that even someone like me, I just want to distance myself immediately. My reflex is to pull back from that, and it's very counterproductive. So we feel guilty, we are destroying the Earth, we beat ourselves, we have to feel bad because of this, you know, and it pushes people away. So what has to happen is that everybody has to take part of the suffering into themselves and feel it so that we can allow our behavior to change, and we who are already doing this have to be so attractive that in

spite of the pain, people still want to do whatever it is that we're doing. So it becomes our duty in a way to be life affirming and joyful.

RD: It's got to be true joy, it can't be phoney joy.

JS: It does, but we also have to convince ourselves that it's okay to do this.

RD: Yes, I understand. I think that Trungpa Rinpoche talked about standing right between hope and hopelessness, an interesting, metaphysical place to stand in relation to one's acts. And not being attached to how it comes out but just doing it because it's one's part to play as part of the Earth's identity manifesting itself.

JS: Well, I hope that what we're experiencing is the Earth's immune system cutting in, and if that was to happen, why it could sweep everything away.

RD: It could, it could. I love the image of miracle, that any moment the whole game can change. That's very exciting, that it can change that fast. Without trauma.

JS: It would have to be that way, because it's very difficult to see any other way that it could be. Now whether that will happen or not is another matter, and what it depends on is another matter too.

RD: And that's beyond us, we can just play our part.

JS: It is. But it may be that it's one of those situations like the hundredth monkey or whatever, where if there are twelve honest men in Sodom - if there are enough people who badly and seriously and earnestly and with their whole lives say, we've been here for four thousand million years on this beautiful planet and we want to continue, we don't want to stop now - the Lord will spare the city. For most people it's just too hard. They know that it's coming to an end, but somehow there's not enough perspective. But maybe if there's enough people who say, "It's not too hard, we'll do whatever we have to do," then it could be that that's the condition for that miracle.

RD: Or we'll just stop doing whatever we have to stop, which is a little more like it.

JS: More to the point.

RD: Yeah... Tell me a little bit more about how people can engage in some ritual that would help them, as Aldo Leopold says, "Think like a mountain," and start to open to the joy that comes from this identity.

JS: It's my experience that this is something which is much, much easier when it's done in community than when it's done individually, so the first thing I'd say is find a group of people with whom you can share the intention to heal that sense of separation and isolation and alienation from the living Earth that all

of us feel. Find a group of people to do that with and then be very conscious in your intentions. The first thing we do in our rituals is a sharing of what our intention is, and how we see things. Then you suddenly find yourself together with a group of people who love this Earth and have the intention to heal the Earth and to heal our separation from the Earth. After that almost anything that you do becomes a vehicle, so it can be as corny as you like. Everyone can go and hug a tree for half an hour. Most people haven't ever hugged a tree for half an hour, and maybe even if you just go off and do it by yourself, it might work for you. But if you're with a group of people and you do this and then you come back together in a circle again and share your experiences, you'll find that half of those people have had some very, very profound experience during that time. Or you can put your face really close to the ground and take a one hundred inch exploration of a little piece of earth, with your nose right on the ground and just inching forward. Explore a hundred inches of ground over half an hour and then get together with the group and discuss what you've discovered. To spend a day together just doing anything at all which is bringing us into contact with nature and looking at these things, every single person in that group will undergo some shift, some transformation. That's what I found. It's really amazing. As a workshop leader people try and put it onto me as though I'm in some way responsible for that experience. And no matter how far I pull myself back from it there's that tendency to do it so it's really best if it's done without a leader or with so many leaders that no one can actually pin it on anyone. The amazing thing is that any time we make this gesture towards the Earth, the Earth always responds to us, because it's in her nature to do so. The Earth is incredibly powerful and the Earth is full of miracles. The Earth hears us, the Earth hears us and responds. If we want to dig up the Earth and turn it into a long wire to carry our messages, she says, "Yes." If we have this hard root that we break our teeth on and we want to turn it into a big fat carrot She says, "Yes." She says "Yes" to every question that we ask and it's just that we're so stupid in the questions that we're asking at the moment - we're not asking the right questions. Because of our arrogance and this anthropocentrism and human-centeredness, all we see is the miracle inside ourselves and we refuse to see the miracle in that dirt that's capable of transforming itself into juicy carrots and bits of wire and anything else that we want. When we see this, we see also the utter generosity of the Earth giving us everything we ask for and, to the extent that we can extend our identity beyond the merely human and experience ourselves as part of the Earth, to that extent we can share in, partake of, express that miraculous generosity.

RD: When you think about this it almost seems like the human species is a kind of parasitic virus. Are you tempted to work for the annihilation of the human in order to preserve the Earth?

JS: Well, I would have no problem with it in the sense that the humans have only been around for about five million years or so as far as we can judge. The Earth has been around for four thousand million years and if you had to choose

between losing the leaf or losing the tree on which it grows, well you'd have to let go of the leaf, even if you were part of that leaf yourself, which in this case I am. But it's too theoretical a question because it's not a choice that we have. First of all, every attempt to destroy humans destroys everything else as well, and secondly we're now in the amazing position where the amounts of radioactive waste that exist on the Earth are such that suicide isn't an option for us anymore. If we were to disappear, whether by suicide or by some other way, then all of that radioactive waste would get loose. We now have no choice but to be the guardians of that radioactive waste for the next 250,000 years and that's all there is to it. It may be that we're going to disappear, and it may be that all complex life is going to disappear from Earth, but to get rid of the humans isn't an alternative.

RD: Yeah. Although 250,000 years is [snap] like that within the system.

JS: Oh, that's true.

RD: And then it would start again.

JS: Well, something would start again, but the romantic notion that if we could get rid of the humans everything would be perfect, well I don't see that.

RD: Not immediately anyway.

JS: Yeah.

RD: What are the fundamental premises and values of contemporary civilization that are wrong, that are defeating this purpose at the moment? Which ones would you go after first?

JS: Well, I think that the first one is that chauvinism which sees human beings as being at the center of everything. It's the same spirit that had astronomers being executed a few centuries ago for refusing to acknowledge that the Earth was the center of the universe, and it's that idea that we are special - well, of course we're special - but that we are more special than anything else. So that seems to me to be the fundamental error. But it's like we don't really feel superior. What we really feel is, we feel inferior, we feel invalid and therefore we puff ourselves up in this way. When we let go of that we see that our role for the future of the Earth is far less important than the role of, say, the decomposing bacteria. It's easy to imagine the Earth going on without us, but without the decomposing bacteria it's hard to see how anything could happen. And so once we let go of that and see that we are just a plain member of the biota, nothing special, then we can see that everything is incredibly special, including us. Do you know? And then there can be real pride, but it's not a pride of superiority, of pushing against other things or making other things be low in order to be high. It's just to realize how high everything is.

RD: Right... Do you experience integrity in your game? Like you travel by jets,

and so on. How do you deal with the lack of integrity in the system?

JS: Well, first of all I feel like the change that we're praying for is not a change that I ever claim to have undergone or to be demonstrating in my life. I try as hard as I can to have that integrity, but as you say, I travelled by plane to be here today and I use all of this fuel. And the only thing that helps me in this is a metaphor from an archetypal cowboy movie from my childhood. All the cowboys were asleep and the fire's gone out and the clouds come over and there's a bolt of lightening and all the cattle start stampeding towards the cliff. The cowboys jump on their horses and they don't ride in the opposite direction, they ride straight towards the cliff, and they ride even faster than the cattle. Now their aim is not to go over the cliff, but they realize that it's only by keeping pace with the whole thing that they're going to be in a position to lean on the herd and turn them around before they reach the edge. So I use a computer and I know the chips were cleaned using CFC's, but there is no harmless way to live these days, really. Or if there is, way out in the woods somewhere, it seems pretty irrelevant to me. I'm prepared to get my hands dirty with sawmills and airplanes and anything at all, but I'm also, I believe, prepared to let go of them like that as soon as... They'll wither away after the revolution, that's all I can say.

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