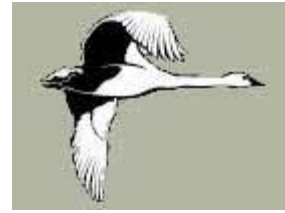


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A Letter to Environmentalists about Friendship

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What is missing from the environmental community is friendship. The great Roman orator Cicero said this about friendship:

All I can do is to urge you to regard friendship as the greatest thing in the world; for there is nothing which so fits in with our nature, or is so exactly what we want in prosperity or adversity.

Rather, the same scepticism and pessimism found in society at large also pervades the environmental community. Our love flows toward nature and little or none toward one another. There are at least two reasons for this.

Many environmentalists have turned away from human beings; a reaction to our species' effect on the Earth and its inhabitants. However, the wedge between saving the Earth and saving human beings is often driven by a misanthropic impulse. The idea that only a catastrophic crash of human civilization can effect radical change ignores the potential of human beings to transcend themselves.

Many of us have become hard-hearted as a result of intense fighting for ecological goals, creating a coldness within the environmental community. We wear a suit of armour to battle the voracious devourers of the Earth, and soon, because we are battling almost continually, we neglect to remove this suit of armour and it becomes, if not part of our character, at least comfortable or acceptable. This warrior-psychology, deeply ingrained in the movement and self-defeating, cuts us off from one another.

Without friendship our work is too much like a job-something we do because we have to. We are left with the business model of working together, where productivity and efficiency come first. Newcomers are welcome to the extent that they help us carry out our agenda. Since few newcomers have the political, legal, and scientific skills to be major players within the environmental community, they often fall by the wayside. There is great compassion in the movement for animals, and rightly so, however, there is little time and energy for a person experiencing the loneliness of a divorce; living in fear of poverty; or dealing with the drudgery and humiliation found in some workplaces. In short, deep concern for one another is not a high priority within the environmental community.

This is a big mistake as values alone-even important values, eco-values-are not strong enough to bind people. To build an effective environmental movement, we need the emotional bonds of friendship. Let our love for nature overflow to one another, creating a surplus of energy to complete the many tasks. We would be nourished by working together instead of worn down and burnt out. Without friendship, our dependence on more money and guilt to motivate us increases-insufficient factors for the long haul.

An environmentalist's focus on Life provides an opportunity for true friendship within the environmental community-much greater, for example, than among individuals sharing a game of chess. The ecological crisis is the great opportunity for creating new social relations among intellectually awake people. Yet, we have neglected the great potential of

friendship, not understanding that as few as four or five individuals who have attained true friendship, can be a powerful unit in their neighbourhood or locality.

I think it is possible for the environmental community to reach a level of friendship without a struggle for consensus. I envision a communication deeper than words, a collective consciousness (a Noosphere, as Pierre Teilhard de Chardin called it). It is only out of such a field of consciousness that the guidance/wisdom will emerge for solving the ecological crisis. Unfortunately, nobody has The Answer. Rather than staking out value-positions (regardless of how certain they may seem) and then defending them, we need to concentrate on friendship as the way to a more perfect vision. We cannot achieve agreement about ultimate values, or true vision, as a collection of atomized individuals or talking heads. True wisdom comes out of a community of individuals who know one another as complete human beings.

Approximating the goal of friendship among ourselves would speak volumes for our cause. Beneath the massive indifference and hostility of modern society there is intense loneliness. By offering people the opportunity to belong to a genuine community in service to the Earth, we might have mass appeal. But first we must achieve it within our own ranks.

Environmentalists need a better understanding of the deep motivational structure of the human being. The preservation of nature, by itself, will not become a mass movement, even though our very survival depends upon it. People are not motivated by a concern for survival alone, but there is a huge hunger within the general population for genuine community. Warm social relations amongst ourselves will draw many people. As they enter the circles of our friendship they will be led to the fire of nature that burns there, and they too, might become keepers of the fire.

When environmentalists are gathered around the fire, but are still cold, what kind of message are we sending to those we would have join us? Our message must be that we protect and care for life in all its forms; human and nonhuman. The energy source of nature can generate a whole new society, but we must prove it first amongst ourselves. Isn't it time to recognize that the real environmental movement is a cultural revolution entailing new relations with nature and new social relations as well?! There is no better place to begin this Cultural Revolution than in our own ranks.

We are wasting far too much energy in fighting politicians, bureaucrats and developers. Let us invest our energies in one another and form a community of friendship as the best strategy for empowering ourselves and influencing the consciousness of accessible people. This will help the movement qualitatively and quantitatively. Our rising river of life and love will flow into many political channels, but we must remain one movement.

Most environmentalists agree that we need more friendship. But this has proved to be a very difficult thing to achieve, for the ego-structure of modern individualism is in all of us. This ego understands itself as separate from everything, and experiences the world defensively, with little or no tolerance for the smallest offence or indiscretion from others. We desperately need to achieve distance from this ego-structure in order to become aware of the harm we are doing to one another and our cause. Whoever is dedicated to preserving his or her separate ego at any cost is doing the environmental movement a serious disservice. We must learn to identify less with our own empirical ego and more with the environmental community as a whole. This requires that we rise above personal insult and injury; otherwise, resentment builds and it will eventually destroy the environmental movement.

In traditional societies, friendships form naturally/spontaneously amongst people who share important values. But this is not happening within the environmental community despite our shared love of nature. What no longer occurs naturally must be consciously

decided on and acted on, if we really want it. For this reason, what the environmental community needs is a spiritual practise of friendship. This is not something to be confined to an agenda, although it should probably have a place there. What I have in mind is something that we can begin, now, and continue as daily practice.

It would be naive to treat everyone as a friend. However, let us attempt it among ourselves, again and again. Love of nature is proof that the human heart is at least partially open. The same life force, Eros, which attracts us to nature also attracts us to one another, if only we would obey the heart instead of the ego. Let go of the "tough guy" attitude, which is only a cover for the incredible hurt we feel for what is happening to the Earth and a cover for festering personal wounds that we received from other people, perhaps since childhood.

I turn now to articulate some necessary components of a spiritual practice of friendship: I do not think it is possible to overestimate the importance of listening. We must discipline ourselves to listen attentively to one another, not advise or analyse one another. The person who masters the art of listening is a healer, with the power to draw out the truth in others. Each of us can go a long way in solving personal and planetary problems, if another is willing to witness our soul searching. When someone is going down deep to find answers, the good listener does not interrupt. We all have a lot of wisdom down deep, but we have forgotten, or almost forgotten, much of it. By listening to one another we will learn from one another, know one another deeply, and advance group awareness or community intelligence. Excessive preoccupation with one's own thoughts and feelings, instead of listening receptively to others, makes us deaf to one another.

Another necessary component of the spiritual practice of friendship is respect for silence. If truth is an iceberg, then silence represents that portion of the truth that is underwater. Unless we respect silence, we will know only partial and surface truth. Periods of silence are usually ignored or filled up with words as soon as possible. Often, discussions reach an impasse, and the silence, which ensues, is a necessary part of new insight that is trying to emerge. Unfortunately this silence is not valued, and so it is not sustained. The Quakers have a spiritual exercise that consists of individuals sitting together in silence as a path to consensus. So little is silence valued among ourselves that as soon as someone falls into silence, perhaps to gather his or her thoughts, it is regarded as an opportunity to interrupt him or her. We must respect silence between us because it provides the time and space for truth to emerge. The greater truth is sometimes there in that which is not said.

Intimate talk is also a necessary component of the spiritual practice of friendship. It is better to say something insignificant, stupid, and even hostile than to hold back from saying what you feel like saying, or to disguise your true feelings. It matters a great deal that we are honest and sincere with one another. Speak from the heart, and the truth will eventually show itself. The Native American tradition of the "talking stick" would serve us well in this regard. It may well be that it is only through a full disclosure of the personal self that we can reach the true self. By pouring out one's personal self, emptying it, we can break through to a broader identity. How many people are packing around thoughts and feelings that they have never had the opportunity to share with anyone! Intimate talk can break the isolation of modern individualism and lead to the awareness that we are all essentially one.

The spiritual practice of friendship requires reaching out to one another. Do not always wait for others to come to you. Initiate contact. We must stop playing this game: "If you recognize me, then I will recognize you." Sometimes a simple nod or smile is enough; other times something more is needed. Ask questions, invite others to meetings, events, restaurants, and into your home. Overcome the fear of rejection!

Absorb personal blows from fellow environmentalists in a spirit of cooperation toward higher consciousness. That is how we communicate deeply with one another. To absorb a

personal insult from another is to say, in effect, to this other: "I know it is not the real you that strikes me now." We thus act as a mirror for the other. What does it prove that you were wrongly injured, except that the other is not yet your friend! Let us raise the bar of verbal and nonverbal dialogue above competing and combating egos.

Take each friendship as far as it will go at its own pace, but when it is strained, then back down to the previous level of compatibility or harmony. True friendship is always reciprocal, and we get into trouble when one person's needs and expectations get ahead of another's. When this happens, back off the relationship just enough to reset it in the right direction. Sometimes relationships get thin, and it is even necessary to start all over again. Develop a full spectrum of friendships across wide differences.

Keep the faith, or trust in one another. It only appears that a relationship has come down to nothing. Our shared love of nature still exists, and it will push up through the barren ground of our cultural conditioning and blossom in eco-friendship, if we patiently grow it. As Emerson said:

Let us approach our friend with an audacious trust in the truth of his heart,
in the breadth, impossible to be overturned, of his foundations.

When friendship fails, the ego-defensive move is to blame others. Ask yourself this question: Where did I go wrong to cause the relationship to arrive at this tragic point? Since it is almost always the case that each party in a dispute is to blame, at least to some degree, it is possible to set aside the issue of right and wrong altogether and focus on one's own failure. What might I have done differently to have made a friend? Assume that no environmentalist does intentional harm to another environmentalist. Either she or he is unaware of the offence, or is reacting, fighting back, to some perceived insult or injury. Use instances of rejection and hurt to look more deeply into the relationship. In doing so we purify ourselves for friendship and become more transparent to one another.

Without generosity there is no friendship. This does not necessarily mean having everything in common, but we all possess some gifts (time, energy, money, and opportunity) that we can bestow on one another. Friendship involves the free flow of gifts without concern for balancing the scales. No one has the right to demand or expect generosity from another. Demand and expect generosity from yourself. Let each person set the standard of his or her own gift giving. Ideally, we cannot have a genuine community of those who have too much wealth and those who have too little wealth.

Environmentalists are understandably sad, but we cannot afford to sink into depression and defeatism. Friendship is an antidote to despair because it revitalizes us. Each person who loves nature is a treasure to be explored; an occasion for cheerfulness. Of course we cannot forget the crises we face, which is all the more reason for celebrating the hope we find in one another. The art of friendship is about finding the positive in one another and sharing companionship.

The spiritual practice of friendship is, in my view, the social interaction that reaches beneath the chit-chat and humdrum of everyday life. It is a deeper communication, the opening of our inner places to one another. Living in our secret worlds causes our feelings of isolation and loneliness; our fear of exposing ourselves to strangers. Of course there is risk; there is safety in the privacy of these inner places. Here, one is untouchable. The problem is that these inner places contain the best and worst aspects of ourselves; everything is jumbled together and it is impossible to sort it out on our own. We need to heal one another. There is no real friendship without communication between our inner places, where the crucial decisions of life are made. We must stop writing off one another when we fail at genuine human contact, and stop storing these negative experiences in inaccessible inner places. The mysterious union of friendship will transform us and make us whole. In the words of the sixteenth century Frenchman Montaigne:

In the friendship I speak of, our souls mingle and blend with each other so completely that they efface the seam that joined them, and cannot find it again.

In sum, the environmental movement troubled because of mounting personality conflicts. We cannot get along well enough with one another to do what needs to be done. We do not need more facts, arguments, and ideas, but more friendship. The binding force of friendship can build the environmental movement, serving both to energize us and to draw in accessible people. Perhaps even stonehearted individuals will not be unaffected by our rising family of friendship. Although this is what needs to happen, it will be very difficult to accomplish because the selfishness, greed, competition, and paranoia endemic to modern society also exist inside the environmental community.

For this reason we need a spiritual practice of friendship, a discipline according to definite rules that bring out, manifest, the true self. The working premise is that we are all one, despite our differences: waves on the ocean. If this ocean is striving to become conscious of itself, then friendship is the instrument that will enable it to do so. Friendship is the way.

Some rules for a spiritual practice of friendship are:

1. Listen attentively
1. Respect silence
1. Speak intimately
1. Reach out
1. Absorb the blows
1. Back down
1. Keep the faith
1. Assume the blame
1. Give generously
1. Enjoy one another

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