

Trumpeter (1993)

ISSN: 0832-6193

Earth Within, Earth Without: Thoughts on Confronting
Environmental Distress

Chris Roth
Trumpeter

Chris Roth regularly contributes to Talking Leaves –a Eugene, Oregon based journal of deep ecology and spiritual activism, and to other publications. He is also an organic farmer and environmental educator. He is a graduate of the UC Santa Cruz Farm and Garden apprenticeship and the National Audubon Society Expedition Institute. He has lived on the Hopi Indian Reservation and in several land-based intentional communities, and has built numerous solar cookers at “sustainable living” demonstration sites in the United States and Canada. He currently resides at 79306 Replsleger Road, Cottage Grove, OR, 97424; (503) 942- 83790.

For a number of years, my response to feeling distress in my own life has often been to read about environmental or ecological issues. Whether the distress is general or specific, I have found that I can connect it to something larger than myself – thus “getting out of it” in a way and making it meaningful – by finding a reason or a parallel for it in the suffering of the natural World. I can find purpose in my life, fill gaps in my life (or so I think), by attempting to understand my own pain as the pain of the Earth, by spending a lot of time learning, thinking, and expressing opinions about the degradation of local and planetary ecosystems. What better purpose to which to dedicate oneself than the renewed integrity of the Earth? And if I do not start out in an unhappy state, when I sit down to read about our species’ effects on the natural world, I enter such a state very quickly.

Much of what I talk about and many of my actions (some of them setting me apart from others through such “ascetic” choices as veganism and not owning a car) concern or are responses to what I have learned about the pain of the Earth. Thus my feelings of life purpose or vision, distress, personal responsibility and self-justification, social interaction, and ecological degradation are all intimately interconnected. In a disturbing way, they feel almost interdependent as well. If I didn’t have the Earth’s dire crises to respond to, part of me fears, I would be alone with my own pain, which would be unbearable. To be concerned about the Earth is an acceptable, if sometimes unpopular, way to relate to other people – and also, conveniently, to lose my own “suffering” in the suffering of something greater.

I wonder how many writers for and readers of the environmental press experience similar motivations, how many environmental activists and supporters of the deep ecology movement are using the plight of and struggle for the Earth as “therapy”, as I seem to be. When we are talking about the Earth, what are we talking about? Are we talking about ourselves? Is this unhealthy or healthy? Is it desirable or even possible to make a distinction between personal and planetary distress?

Many freely admit that there can be no division between the pain of the self

and the pain of the planet; self is an expression of planet. To fight for wildness and wilderness without is to fight for those things within as well. The struggle for the Earth, from this viewpoint, is a celebration, a liberation both personal and ecological. In this life-affirming spirit, the translation of personal pain into ecocentric compassion is based, not on shame or a desire to subsume personal suffering (because it feels “unworthy” of attention), but on the logical and visceral connection of an individual human being’s joy and distress to the feelings and experiences of other life forms and the larger planetary body. That which oppresses the Earth oppresses us; what nurtures or restores a native species or an ecosystem is likely to nourish and heal us as well. We all, nonhuman and human alike, are the victims of ecological disharmony – whether manifested as car exhaust, noise pollution, loss of wilderness, ozone holes, desertification, radioactive waste, or the spiritual aridity attending and compounding all these – and we all benefit from every small move in the direction of ecological harmony. If we can feel and honor these interconnections in a holistic way, with love for ourselves as well as for the creatures and Earth for whom we believe we speak, then the personal-planetary connection of suffering and joy is complete and empowering.

This connection, however, can be made in unhealthy ways as well. I’d suggest the following questions: Is planetary concern and awareness an extension of self-acceptance and self-awareness, an expression of genuine, unapologetic love for all that is natural both within and outside of us? – or is it the only way we feel “ok” about talking about ourselves (in this case, in a kind of unconscious code language)? Do we make our ecological lifestyle choices seem exciting and attractive to others? – or do we, in some of our asceticism, convey a negative self-image that wins more converts to the other side than to ours? Do we participate in the struggle against the oppression of the natural world with a commitment to dealing with our own particular pain, in its unique forms, as well? – or are we latching onto the political/ecological as an escape from the personal, talking about the outer because we are ashamed of the inner?

In the latter case, it seems likely that, although others and even we ourselves may believe we are primarily concerned with the issues or causes to which we are directing our energies, we are in fact using these as a “short-cut” to a healing that we can only reach by looking within. Even as we sincerely espouse and act out of noble ideals, the actual compassion we allow ourselves to feel for other beings is limited because, having learned self-shame from our culture, we have no compassion for ourselves. Paradoxically, our attempts to be unselfish and outer-directed in response to our pain backfire, for we are far more unproductively self-involved below the surface (sometimes below the surface of consciousness) than those who refuse to “lose themselves” and who instead manifest the personal-planetary ecological connection in self-affirming rather than self-denying ways.

Typically, such people also appear to feel much less paralysed and depressed by the state of the world than those caught in the interdependent web of negativity

postulated earlier. If we have no experience of truly dealing with our own pain, what confidence can we have in dealing with the much greater pain we witness all around us? If we fear and fail to love ourselves, how can our love for the natural world escape the taint of that fear and insecurity? If oppression and self-oppression are our own familiar internal states, and we fail to struggle effectively against them, does the ecological oppression we see outside serve as a metaphor and an excuse for our distress, a companion which, on an unconscious level, we are equally afraid to truly overcome?

I don't mean to question the sincerity of anyone involved in the environmental movement. The intentions of all, from the relatively-personally-whole to the personally-fractured, are worthy and admirable. At this late date it appears there is no time to deal with personal pain. What I'm suggesting – and I need to take my own advice – is that we need to deal with both personal and planetary pain, otherwise our efforts in either arena will not be effective and possibly even counterproductive. Fleeing from personal issues may mean we never develop the considerable skills or compassion we need to be effective agents for social change. Enemies to ourselves, we may make others enemies to us and to our causes. If we are attempting to solve our personal problems by taking the entire world's problems onto our shoulders, the inevitable accompanying undercurrent of hopelessness is sure to be detectable. And hopelessness is contagious among those who have never overcome their own self-oppression. Anyone outside the environmental community with even a modicum of self-preservation instincts will steer clear of that maelstrom of hopelessness, sensing correctly that it could suck them in.

We do need to be honest. We need to accept, and embrace, feelings of despair, in order to move beyond them. But we need to embrace our own despair, not just that of the Fluvial Arctic Grayling or the Rocky Mountain Limpet Snail. Embracing and moving beyond despair is the opposite of hopelessness and denial. The temptation to “short-cut”, and “escape ourselves” is strong, but to yield to them will never make us effective personal or environmental healers. Accepting ourselves and our own pain is the only path to true compassion for others, nonhuman or human.

We can learn some other things in the process. Let's assume that the major ecological issues confronting our species are not merely questions of the “right” and “wrong” ways of dealing with the big pictures that we see, and that neither information, logic, common sense, economics, ideology, morality, nor what we usually call ecology have the necessary power to fundamentally change how we human beings are treating the planet. We have a clue that this is true if we further acknowledge that none of us – let alone the whole planet – is motivated by a detached, “objective” view of these big pictures (however accurate we believe our perspectives to be), and that our responses to the world, our belief systems, the positions we advocate, arise – whether we embrace this connection or not – from our personal experience of reality including our personal pain. Let's take

one more leap, and postulate that everyone's responses to the world, no matter what guises they take (cold logical ecocide, blatant greed, apathy, arrogance, irrelevance, confusion) arise from the same thing: personal experience, personal pain and joy.

We all pretend to be operating from the perspective of the "big picture" (and ecologists who have accepted and learned from the personal- planetary connection indeed in many ways are), yet we are all always also talking about ourselves. Even the reams of statistics, graphs, maps and plans issuing forth from Forest Service offices are merely sophisticated expressions of the cumulative personal experiences of the people who compiled them. When we fail to see the personal pain lurking behind these impersonal fragments of "measurement" and "logic", we fail to see the forest for the trees (and are thus no better off than the Forest Service). But when we remember the compelling power of our own personal distress in bringing us to the ecological understandings we have and act upon, we get a clue as to the power of the collective personal pain driving the apparently senseless techno-industrial machine.

Without the guidance that we were each fortunate enough to have at some time, which allowed us to hear the voice of the Earth above the din of our cacophonous civilization, we too might now be operating out of such fear and insecurity that the identities and attitudes that society would have given us had become our "own". If our escape from personal pain had been the social acceptance to be gained by being ultra-efficient, loyal, patriotically consumeristic eco-destroyers, no amount of logic, argumentation, or education about the "right" and "wrong" ways of addressing an ecological "big picture" would make us voluntarily give up that role to face the pain and self-doubt it is shielding us from. What I am suggesting is that, although it's necessary to deal with environmental/ecological issues from the perspective of "big pictures", it is also necessary to get to the "bottom" of the problem, to address the roots of behavior on a very personal level. "Right" and "wrong" are not, and cannot be, the primary concerns of scarred, scared human beings.

We need, of course, to start with ourselves. We cannot suggest that others deal honestly with their own pain (instead of burying it in consumerism, ecological destruction, addictions, etc.) if we refuse to confront ours (burning it instead in information overconsumption, destruction of our own spirits, and our own addictive patterns). If our environmental concern reflects self-escapism and fear (resulting in alienation) rather than self-acceptance and love (resulting in compassion), we will be poor examples for the personal-planetary paradigm we are proposing. And if, on the other hand, we are willing to acknowledge, experience, and grow through that very personal pain and fear, we will understand how these basic feelings, arising from our separation from the Earth, one another, and ourselves, can (when never confronted on their own terms) motivate the actions (especially the ecocidal actions) of most of the members of our currently out-of-balance society.

When we see “opponents” in environmental debates as wounded friends rather than as enemies – and when, probably through increasingly alarming “feedback”, the Earth speaks loudly and unmistakably enough for the majority of us to understand the necessity for radical change to avert or mitigate further calamity – then, the crying need for this compassionate personal-planetary paradigm may be present and obvious in every interaction at every moment in our lives. In whatever ways we can think of (without appearing as total fools to those not quite ready to wake up yet), we need to start living, that paradigm now. Maybe, like (but better than) hopelessness, it will be contagious.

Citation Format

Roth, Chris (1993) *Earth Within, Earth Without: Thoughts on Confronting Environmental Distress Trumpeter*: 10, 2. <http://www.icaap.org/iuicode?6.10.2.12>

Document generated from IXML by ICAAP conversion macros.
See the [ICAAP](#) web site or [software repository](#) for details