

Chase: A deeper form of environmentalism

Contributed by Debra Chase
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"Shall I not have intelligence with the Earth? Am I not partly leaves and vegetable mould myself?" — Henry David Thoreau, "On Walden's Pond";

You're taking a hike along your favorite wooded trail and gradually you realize that this is no ordinary walk. Suddenly your awareness is heightened and you hear, smell, taste and feel things that you have not encountered on previous walks through the same woods.

You notice more birds singing. The colors of their feathers are somehow brighter, bolder. You are hearing other movements in the forest depths. A squirrel shows itself to you scampering up a nearby tree. The insects are having a conversation and when you hear them speak your awareness shifts and then you see them: ants, beetles, flies, butterflies, moths and worms burrowing in the soil.

As you look up and see the sky, it is as if for the first time. You notice the unique whiteness of the clouds and the way they billow in and away, in and away. The sky is not just blue but many shades of blue — over here there is azure, and over there the color of a robin's egg, and here right above you sapphire as dazzling as the jewel.

The trees actually seem to be speaking, beckoning you to come closer to them and to touch the rough and smooth bark, the skin of the tree, the glistening leaves, the trees' fingers touching yours. You are one with this place.

You feel connected without a sense of ownership but with a firm belief that you are somehow a part of a larger family. Yet this family consists of beings other than your human self and this place, not yours but of you. In these woods you feel a connection; a deeper sense of place than that which you feel in your personal dwelling, with your human family.

Gratefulness then envelopes you. You want to shout out "THANK YOU" to every being that is around you, to all that you sense and hear and feel in this place of great beauty, this wooded trail, this place of beings that are not human.

You continue to walk and your heart is so overwhelmed with joy and gratitude for this place that your tears flow freely, dropping on the soft earth, moistening it with a piece of you. And then the trail leads you out of the woods, out to a prairie of grasses and scattered oak trees and chemise.

And once again you are noticing; seeing, hearing, feeling; tasting the wind on your tongue, feeling its touch on your face, cool and soft. The grasses are swaying with the wind as if they are being gently petted by some great unseen hand.

In the distance a herd of elk slowly grazing, gaining nourishment from the grasses, look to you and you sense rather than feel that the grasses are grateful for the elk eating them and you remember the circle of life.

As you continue walking you realize that this journey is coming to an end and the ordinariness begins to return. And yet, you have a knowing; intelligence has spoken to you, hearts have touched you. These beings are not of you yet are part of who you are and who you're becoming.

Your epiphany is this: Care for the environment is your greatest imperative. Realizing this you pledge to be of greater assistance in restoring and preserving this natural beauty.

You now know that environmental activism is just that, being active in protecting the natural environment. You remember all of the organizations and individuals who are dedicated to the protection of our natural world and your feelings of gratefulness return. You now know that this spirit you found in nature is deeply consonant with your greater capacities.

Your journey through the woods and the prairie has made you more deeply aware of your relationship with the world that surrounds you. This ego-transcending experience has given you a greater drive to preserve the earth's unspoiled places and to restore those places spoiled by the human hand. You are aware that what you have just experienced is a solidarity fundamental to your existence on this planet.

Because of this encounter you have a greater understanding of this deeper form of environmentalism and you have experienced the humble connection to the mystical oneness with nature such as what Muir and Thoreau experienced. Two American naturalists connecting to nature and inviting others to connect. This same inspiration is now leading you to action just as it led them to their work. Not as much of practicality as by a spiritual affinity with our natural world.

You're away from the prairie now and you see your car in the distance where you parked at the beginning of your hike. You approach and on the seat are books you have read many times but now you have a "knowing" and the truth of the words spoken in the books touch you more deeply, your resolve is strengthened and your faith returns.

"I used to envy the father of our race, dwelling as he did in contact with the new man-made fields and plants of Eden; but I do so no more, because I have discovered that I also live in 'creation's dawn.' The morning stars still sing together, and the world not yet half made, becomes more beautiful everyday." — John Muir

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agricultural heritage for future generations; visit the group at www.tuleyome.org. Chase resides on a small family farm in Colusa County.

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