

## A SINGLE UNITY

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In the aftermath of the 7.4 magnitude Earthquake in Taiwan last month, the most enduring image of the destruction must surely be the ten-story building that's leaning perilously, teetering on collapse. The Earth had done what it's been doing for billions of years, its thin and mostly stable crust shifting occasionally to accommodate pressure from a molten and turbulent core. Human beings, arriving late on the scene of Earth's evolution, have mostly ignored risks arising from the deep and have often built comparatively fragile shelters. As the image intimates, there's something badly out of kilter in the relationship between human beings and this planet we call home.

The scene reminds me of cinematographer Godfrey Reggio's groundbreaking 1982 cult classic "Koyaanisqatsi," which translates as "Life Out Of Balance." If you haven't seen Koyaanisqatsi, I commend it to you. It's 86 minutes of stunning natural beauty, set against ironically impressive industrial brawn with a mesmerizing soundscape by composer Philip Glass. Both the beauty and the brawn are compelling to see — testimony to the indescribable bounty of life on Earth and the irrepressible ingenuity of human beings. But the relationship is badly out of balance. In diverse ways, and in every corner of the planet, advances in industry and technology have made our world more physically dangerous, more politically unstable, and more ecologically fragile than it has ever been.

On this point, I also commend to you the current photography and video exhibition at the Asia Society titled "Coal + Ice," which visualizes the causes and consequences of the climate crisis. The photographs are uniformly compelling, as are the immersive video installations. We see parched landscapes and shriveled crops in California's Central Valley. We see the everyday lives of migrant workers in small and often illegal coal mines in rural China. We see species and places that have gone extinct or will disappear within our lifetime if we do not act to protect them. We see overcrowded cityscapes and industrialized landscapes.

Photographer Camille Seaman, who grew up in the Shinnecock Nation on eastern Long Island, began photographing icebergs twenty years ago. Some years later, on one of her return trips to the polar regions, she discovered that every piece of ice she had initially photographed was gone — melted away. "I realized," she says, "that this was not some kind of science-fiction movie. This was my planet I was walking on."

A video installation by Gideon Mendel surrounds the viewer on all sides with four full-frame walls of videos depicting devastating floods. The viewer is surrounded by four different yet similar scenes of inundation from around the world — Pakistan, Thailand,

Nigeria, Germany, India, Brazil, the UK, the US. It's all around you in the videos and all around the world. It's everywhere and here too, in humble shacks and in stately houses – the water rising, rescuers arriving, people desperately saving treasured possessions, then water receding and clean-up beginning. The most compelling moments come when people pause in their inundated homes – standing waist-deep in their living rooms, kitchens, and bedrooms – and look steadily into the camera. They reveal an unsettling calm amid the catastrophe – “agency amidst the calamity,” as Gideon Mendel puts it.

That's what all of us need to discover – a sense of agency amidst the calamity that confronts our planet and its people. This is primarily a spiritual challenge. Our relationship to the natural world is out of kilter. It's out of balance – in large part, I believe, because we understand the natural world and the human world as separate, even relatively independent.

Alan Watts, who died 50 years ago last year, was one of the most widely read philosophers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He was best known as the leading Western interpreter of Eastern philosophy, especially Zen Buddhism. In 1971, Watts recorded a half-hour television program titled “A Conversation with Myself.”

The program features Watts wandering the hills and valleys of a remote region in California. He had been living there for some months, he says, to absorb an atmosphere different from the city, to discover the essential difference between the world of nature and the human world.

The difference between the two, Watts suggests, is a difference not of substance but of style. Even though human beings are themselves part of nature, he says, there is a difference of style between the things human beings do and the things nature does.

On the one hand, Watts says, nature is wiggly. Everything wiggles: the outline of the hills, the shape of the trees, the way the wind brushes the grass, the contour of the clouds, the track of streams – it all wiggles.

Human beings, Watts continues, find all this wiggleness too complicated. We want things to stop wiggling so we can measure them and map them. Keep still, we say; hold on. Let's straighten things out; let's get it ironed out; let's get it squared away.

Wherever human beings have done their thing, Watts observes, you find rectangles. We live in boxes; our streets are laid out in grid patterns. We think we understand things when we have translated them into straight lines and squares.

The problem, Watts says, is that we're trying to translate something that is vastly complicated – the world of nature – into terms that are crude enough and simple enough that the human mind can comprehend them. In fact, human beings are just as wiggly as nature. Our brains, for example, are an incredible mass of wiggles forming an elegant network of interconnected neurons.

Besides, all the elements of the natural world form a network. Flowers and bees, for example, are interdependent. Where there are no flowers, there are no bees; and where there are no bees, there are no flowers. The natural world is really one organism,

Watts insists. Everything in nature depends on everything else. The many patterns of interconnection lock together in a single unity.

The transformative element emerges when we deeply accept that we are part of this unity. In this vast and amazing universe, Watts says, I'm like a flower in a field. When you see a flower in a field, it's like the whole field is flowering, because the flower couldn't exist without the rest of the field. You only find flowers in places where they have surroundings that will support them. In the same way, you only find human beings on a planet of this kind, with an atmosphere of this kind, and a temperature of this kind supplied by a convenient neighboring star.

Just as the flower is a flowering of the field, Watts says, I feel that I am a peopling of the whole universe. I seem to be a center at which the entire energy of the universe realizes itself or comes alive: a sort of aperture through which the universe appears. Each one of us — not only human beings, but every leaf, every weed, everything whatsoever — exists as it does only because everything around it exists as it does. Each individual and its universe are inseparable.

In theological terms, the first principle of the universe, therefore, is not independence but its opposite. As humans, we rely completely upon the parents who conceived us, the plants and animals who give their lives daily for our nourishment, the trees that give us oxygen, and the sun that warms the atmosphere and lights our path. We depend upon governments to provide for the commonweal, teachers for education, friends for love and companionship, and so on. As the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead once put it, "We are dependent on the universe for every detail of our experience." This principle applies to everything whatsoever. Nothing — not a person, not a flower, and not even a star — is what it is strictly within itself.

The necessary religious response to this reality is gratitude. In my view, it's the defining element of our Unitarian Universalist faith. Gratitude links us to the past by revealing to us our identity: how we have become who we are. And it links us to the future by revealing to us our duty: what we owe back in return. This experience entails a discipline of gratitude, by which we continually become aware of the sources that make our lives possible. Our sense of duty requires an ethic of gratitude, which works to care for this planet — not only its people, animals, and plants, but also its air and its water, and even its rocks and its ruins.

Reflecting on the fate of the icebergs, photographer Camille Seaman recalled the teaching of her Shinnecock grandparents that all living things are interconnected. Speaking of our planet's polar regions, she says, "It was so powerful to understand the harshness of that environment and yet the fragility of it. All my grandfather's teachings were just flooding in — that we are made of this material, that we will return to this material, that none of us is separate. This idea that humans are somehow separate from nature is so flawed."

The capstone installation of the "Coal + Ice" exhibition at the Asia Society imagines two different futures for our planet and its people. Visitors first enter a dimly-

lit room smelling of smoke and echoing sounds of fire. The images projected onto the walls show a city where everything appears to be burning. The entire cityscape is washed with orange and red. The effect is oppressive, even claustrophobic. Life on planet Earth has burned itself out.

Then visitors step into the next room, where life is brimming with vitality. There is green everywhere — green walls, green roofs, green islands floating in the river — an abundance of plants, trees, and flowers. It's a plant-based city, and there are subtle signs lurking throughout the cityscape that the people in this city of the future mostly eat a plant-based diet.

The visual signs in the exposition are appropriately subtle, because the question of what we eat turns out to be emotionally fraught. To survive, we need to eat often, and our patterns of eating are deeply ingrained and firmly held. Many of humanity's longest standing religious rituals and obligations involve food. Our regular need for food establishes our closest connection to the Earth's creatures and plants. They become part of us.

For this reason, given the peril that confronts our planetary home, we need to take seriously how much energy and other resources are needed to grow our food and convert it into the forms we consume. Food made from animals exacts a vastly heavier toll upon the Earth, its creatures, and its people than food made from plants. And food that has been highly processed exacts a vastly heavier toll upon the Earth, its creatures, and its people than food that comes to us in more or less its original form. As individuals, the greatest leverage we have in changing the long-term fate of the planet concerns the food we eat — the sources of our sustenance.

We are all part of one magnificent and magnificently complex organism. Everything in nature — including human nature — depends on everything else. The many patterns of interconnection lock together in a single unity. We share a single destiny. Either we will all perish together, or we will all flourish together. As a human community, we can avert a catastrophe only by deeply embracing our agency.

Yes, the Earth is burning, but it need not burn itself out. Another future is possible — a future brimming with vitality. With this vision before us, we recommit ourselves to doing the work that is ours to do — on Earth Day and on every day.