

Hope for the Environment

by Michael Gambino • www.natureandspirit.org

As a naturalist, I enjoy the wonder and beauty of the natural world. The vibrant landscapes, amazing plants, fascinating animals, and endless discoveries inspire and teach me so much about myself and about life. I also enjoy teaching others about the mysteries of animal tracking, the survival wisdom of our ancestors, and the complex relationships in nature – and I get excited contemplating the philosophical and spiritual aspects of these things with friends. These are energizing and joyful activities and experiences for me.

Yet there are times, as I read the newspaper headlines or web sites presenting dire environmental forecasts, scientific studies, and human conflicts, that the joy shrivels up like grapes forgotten on the vine. When I see many of our political leaders and corporations willfully destroying the environment on such a titanic scale, I sometimes feel utterly powerless to stop it. If they make me give up, the destroyers claim one more victory, and what I am left with is a miserable, hollow feeling and a sudden craving for a bittersweet chocolate bar made with 70% organic cacao and exotic spices.

If we are not careful, our

minds can be conditioned to see only the grim aspects of the world once we tally up the environmental damage reports. Much of what the media reports on are items that agitate, irritate, shock, offend, sadden, or anger us. Our own thoughts are shoved aside by what *they* want us to think about instead. While it's important to be informed about what's happening in our world, over-saturation can have an undesirable side-effect: *despair*.

The saying goes, “you are what you eat”, referring to



Hope for the future, hope for the environment: it comes from each one of us. “BLUEBIRD AT SUNRISE” BY MICHAEL GAMBINO ©1998

the fact that your body forms and rebuilds itself with the substances you consume. Taking this saying one step further, I say that what you watch, listen to, and think about shapes who you become and how you experience life.

It could be said that

despair is the result of consuming (consciously or not) too many thoughts that run counter to your heart's desire. If such negative thoughts accumulate, they can alter your emotions and shift your thinking to the pessimistic side of the street. Then, the actions you take (or don't take) in your life may follow suit. If the natural joy and optimism that is your birthright is squelched by despair for the future, it can suppress your “inner environment”, especially your body's immune system, allowing dis-ease to

set up shop in your life. In your “outer environment”, if you give up trying or stop caring, the people around you will also suffer in some way. How will the diseased thoughts and actions that influence the environment and society be replaced by healthier ones if you and I

give in to the gloom of hopelessness? Gandhi addressed this sort of personal turning-point in this quote: “*Almost anything you do will be insignificant, but it is very important that you do it.*” Why is it important? Because making a declaration by your action, especially in the face of despair, is powerful. If we want a better environment than what is being handed to us and the generations to come, you and I must actively shape it, *each to our own capacity*.

One of my spiritual teachers once asked me this question: “If you knew for sure that the earth would be destroyed one year from now, would you still try to save it? Would you continue teaching and trying to awaken others or would you forsake them?” That is a heavyweight question if ever there was one!

Despair instigates a cascade of consequences throughout our lives that can be subtle yet debilitating. We all go through tough times in life, yet we usually come through it and into a place of wisdom in our personal lives. How does this happen? How do we find our way back to the sunlight? Our innate ability to *find* and *sustain* hope leads us out of the wasteland of despair.

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Hope, as defined by Webster's Dictionary, means "to cherish a desire with expectation of fulfillment". This is a statement with a positive charge to it.

Hope is often overlooked as an *action* because it is such a subtle force. It doesn't slam us in the chest the way fear does. It doesn't rush over us the way passion or anger can. Hope may be confused with "wishful thinking" as in the phrase, "I hope it won't rain on our picnic." If despair is like a creeping fog, dampening our enthusiasm and positive mindset, then hope functions in our lives by cutting that fog and restoring a positive attitude.

So why am I writing about this stuff in this newsletter? Shouldn't I have just written an article about endearing animals or elegant plants? Well, to be honest, this topic just wouldn't go away. *Believe me*, I tried to find another article to write, but that voice inside me was persistent. So here we are, you and I. Writing from my heart is one way I hope to make a difference in life, so I honor such an intuitive nudge when it comes.

Now more than ever, I feel that hope coupled with action is vital to creating solutions to environmental, social, and humanitarian crises, and delivering a healthy future to the generations to come. I feel that being consciously hopeful is as important as any scientific study or campaign to stop habitat destruction. Perhaps more so because it must be the foundation upon which any worthy endeavor suc-

ceeds. If we lose hope, we stand to lose just about everything else.

Imagine how different the world might be if people like Mother Teresa let despair overtake her? Or if Gandhi gave up trying? What if all the ecologists, naturalists, and environmentalists over the last 150 years had said "Heck, the environment is already doomed, so we might as well spend our time playing checkers and drinking ale"?

***"You must not lose faith in humanity. Humanity is an ocean; if a few drops of the ocean are dirty, the ocean does not become dirty."* – MOHANDES GANDHI**

As a teacher, I sometimes wonder if I am making any difference in the world. When kids are saturated with hyper-stimulating distractions that supplant their craving for an understanding of the natural world, how can my delivering a two-hour program about animal tracking and ecological relationships do anything to help, let alone my writing an article like this?

How indeed. In truth, I rarely get to see if I have made a lasting impression, beyond providing an enjoyable program that people thank me for. Well, I *hope* (a verb) to make a difference and I *work* to make a difference. I trust the wisdom of the human spirit to take away what it needs from what I offer, even if it is simply a spark of inspiration or a fresh awareness that

people *are* nature, and not separate from it.

As a person who desires to protect the environment for the children yet to come, you should safeguard your hopefulness against a tide of negativity in the world. Do not waste your energy gerbil-wheeling about the bad news you hear. Instead, focus your thoughts on the way you want life to be and cultivate those things that bring joy. Simultaneously, take measurable steps (like voting, for instance) that begin to shape the world as your heart desires. Share your optimism with others especially those who have temporarily lost theirs. If your hope has been lost, seek others who have enough hope to borrow until you find yours once again. Make it a habit to actively think those thoughts that affirm what you *do* want rather than what you don't want. Your experience of life and the state of the world will improve. ❖

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