

Earth Day

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The publication of Rachel Carson's book, *Silent Spring*, was probably the most potent single event that led to the creation of Earth Day eight years later. Published in 1962, its powerful description of the effects of pesticides on species and ecosystems was so impactful that they could never again be ignored. It begins with an essay she calls, "A Fable for Tomorrow."

Carson wrote, *"There was once a town in the heart of America where all life seemed to live in harmony with its surroundings. The town lay in the midst of a checkerboard of prosperous farms, with fields of grain and hillsides of orchards where, in spring, white clouds of bloom drifted above the green fields. In autumn, oak and maple and birch set up a blaze of color that flamed and flickered across a backdrop of pines. Then foxes barked in the hills and deer silently crossed the fields, half hidden in the mists of the fall mornings.*

"Along the roads, laurel, viburnum and alder, great ferns and wildflowers delighted the traveler's eye through much of the year. Even in winter the roadsides were places of beauty, where countless birds came to feed on the berries and on the seed heads of the dried weeds rising above the snow. The countryside was, in fact, famous for the abundance and variety of its bird life, and when the flood of migrants was pouring through in spring and fall people traveled from great distances to observe them. Others came to fish the streams, which flowed clear and cold out of the hills and contained shady pools where trout lay. So it had been from the days many years ago when the first settlers raised their houses, sank their wells, and built their barns.

"Then a strange blight crept over the area and everything began to change. Some evil spell had settled on the community: mysterious maladies swept the flocks of chickens; the cattle and sheep sickened and died. Everywhere was a shadow of death. The farmers spoke of much illness among their families. In the town the doctors had become more and more puzzled by new kinds of sickness appearing among their patients. There had been several sudden and unexplained deaths, not only among

adults but even among children, who would be stricken suddenly while at play and die within a few hours.

“There was a strange stillness. The birds, for example – where had they gone? Many people spoke of them, puzzled and disturbed. The feeding stations in the backyards were deserted. The few birds seen anywhere were moribund; they trembled violently and could not fly. It was a spring without voices. On the mornings that had once throbbed with the dawn chorus of robins, catbirds, doves, jays, wrens, and scores of other bird voices there was now no sound; only silence lay over the fields and woods and marsh.

“On the farms the hens brooded, but no chicks hatched. The farmers complained that they were unable to raise any pigs – the litters were small and the young survived only a few days. The apple trees were coming into bloom but no bees droned among the blossoms, so there was no pollination and there would be no fruit. The roadsides, once so attractive, were now lined with browned and withered vegetation as though swept by fire. These, too, were silent, deserted by all living things. Even the streams were now lifeless. Anglers no longer visited them, for all the fish had died.

“In the gutters under the eaves and between the shingles of the roofs, a white granular powder still showed a few patches; some weeks before it had fallen like snow upon the roofs and the lawns, the fields and streams. No witchcraft, no enemy action had silenced the rebirth of new life in this stricken world. The people had done it themselves.”

Carson closes her essay, saying, “This town does not actually exist, but it might easily have a thousand counterparts in America or elsewhere in the world. I know of no community that has experienced all the misfortunes I describe. Yet every one of these disasters has actually happened somewhere, and many real communities have already suffered a substantial number of them. A grim spector has crept upon us almost unnoticed, and this imagined tragedy may easily become a stark reality we all shall know. What has already silenced the voices of spring in countless towns in America? This book is an attempt to explain.”

Growing up in the 1950's and 60's, I knew none of this. We lived under the spector of nuclear war, just miles from a major Air Force base. I often fantasized

about the flash and the boom and total fiery devastation that an atomic bomb would wreak upon my neighborhood. People were building fallout shelters in hopes of survival. They were buying guns, too, to protect them from each other.

We did love the DDT, though. One of the first signs of spring was the arrival of crop duster planes flying low over the forests and fields that surrounded our neighborhood, releasing vast clouds of pesticide. It was a good thing! We didn't have to worry about mosquitoes, which was quite different from when we went camping up in the Adirondacks each summer. Up there, we used vast quantities of a foul-smelling green liquid called "6-12". It was gross, but you got used to it and it kept the mosquitoes away. We loved the woods and mountains but liked coming home because we could live without those stinging pests.

Back home, being mosquito-free, being virtually bug-free, was an unquestioned good thing. This was way back in the era of galvanized steel garbage cans without plastic bags, so by the end of the week, they were often filled with the stench of rotting food and teeming with maggots. Yes, maggots. As an enterprising young lad, my first business venture was in pest control. I had a hand-pump pesticide sprayer that I filled from a can of liquid death pesticide, with which I would spray our neighbors garbage cans for \$.50 a week. It was a lordly sum back then, and my pockets grew fat with cash from the 3 or 4 neighbor families I served.

Poison was good. DDT was better. It wasn't until Rachel Carson pointed out the devastating side effects that the perception began to change. But it wasn't banned until 1972, two years after the first Earth Day. In fact, the banning of DDT was the first great victory for which Earth Day could take credit for advocating.

I can remember the news of the impending extinction of so many species, just as Carson had predicted. And, as the extinctions caused by DDT and other pesticides grew more and more certain, a kind of fatalistic pessimism gripped the conversation. The California Condor was on its way out, as was the Bald Eagle. There seemed to be no way to prevent their demise. This sentiment was clear in 1971, a year before DDT was banned, when a band called The New Riders of the Purple Sage released an album containing the song, "Last Lonely Eagle." Its chorus said, *"And take a last, flying look at the last lonely eagle. He's soaring the length of the land. Shed a tear for the fate of the last lonely eagle, for you know that he never will land."*

The banning of DDT led to a great celebration by the Earth Day crowd, excited with their improbable success. Heady with victory, the movement gained momentum, but only in a certain direction: banning the use of toxins which were poisoning our ecosystems. And, with the help of the EPA and other agencies, a great deal has been accomplished in this area. But the decades since then have revealed that those victories, though genuine, are only partial.

We had thought that the problem was the use of the wrong tools in our exploitative domination of the planet, but it turned out that it wasn't just a matter of using the wrong tools, like DDT. The issue is rooted in the very nature of our relationship with the planet Earth. Climate change, deforestation, and loss of habitat have shown that the problems are far greater and more deeply entrenched than we had thought.

We certainly never suspected that the urgency with which we approached the first Earth Day would turn out to have been naively simplistic, but we now know that's just what it was.

One way to illustrate the problem is to reflect on what has been called "the tragedy of the commons," which refers to an economic theory where individuals acting independently and rationally according to their own self-interest behave contrary to the common good of all by depleting a shared resource. An example of this is, when a group of farmers share a common grazing area which can support a certain number of cattle, there's a tendency for one or more of them to put out more cattle, trying to get all they can out of the system. Though this may be profitable for a few in the short run, it depletes the resources and causes degradation that eventually hurts everyone.

This is where we find ourselves today. Our economic system is based on exactly the kind of self-interest that assumes an exploitative relationship with the earth and its resources. We want to prosper, so we take all we can, whether it is water, oil, minerals, or any of the thousands of things we want from the earth. And since our system rewards short-term profits far more than long-term perspectives, we find ourselves caught in an endless cycle of extraction, use, and depletion that has brought about the crises facing our planet and our species at this time in history.

So what do we do about it? So far, we've been using the same kind of approach that was so successful against DDT. We find a problem, look for its immediate cause and try to address it. But we now know that this approach is woefully inadequate because it doesn't address the root causes of the situation. As long as we maintain the status quo of our planetary economic system, we will be unable to address the environmental issues that plague us in the twenty-first century.

As I quoted from *Tikkun* magazine last week, *"When faced with the enormity of the environmental crisis that advanced industrial societies have played a major role in creating, the temptation is to take a little piece of the crisis and see what we can do to fix it. Recycle here, stop fracking there, or oppose a new oil pipeline. Yet for every struggle won, the dynamics of capitalist economies – which must continually find new raw materials and create new markets – guarantee that larger forms of destruction will continue."*

I support their call for *"a New Bottom Line so that all our social, economic, and political systems and institutions are judged 'efficient, rational, or productive,' not to the extent that they maximize money and power . . . but to the extent that they maximize love, generosity, environmental sanity, and sustainability, and enhance our capacity to transcend a narrow utilitarian or instrumental attitude toward each other by treating one another as embodiments of the sacred and toward Nature by responding to it with awe, wonder, and radical amazement, rather than just exploiting it."*

There's more than a little irony here, in that this is exactly what the great spiritual teachers of all the ages have told us: that there is an optimal way for humans to thrive, and it is through a joyous selflessness that delights in deep connections with other humans and the planet. And, as *Tikkun* pointed out, *"by treating one another as embodiments of the sacred and toward Nature by responding to it with awe, wonder, and radical amazement, rather than just exploiting it."*

This is no secret whatsoever, but incredibly, nearly every religion that has been derived from these simple but revolutionary teachings has distorted them into ossified hierarchical systems rooted in the primacy of human survival. And all such survival-based systems are inevitably energized by the dynamics of fear. And this global economic system is fated to embody the tragedy of the commons over and

over and over again until our beloved Earth is depleted and can no longer support the equally sacred lives for which we're responsible.

So what are we to do on this, the 46th Earth Day? I think it's time for Earth Day to grow up and stop preoccupying itself with paltry little adjustments to the toxic tragedy of the commons that our planet has become. The recent Paris Agreement on Climate Change that was signed last Friday is a history-making effort, in that 175 nations came together to agree on the urgency of greenhouse gas reduction. But, although it represents a very important step forward, it still fails to address the underlying causes of our situation.

So it's time to take responsibility for living in such a way that can make a true global healing possible. And there's absolutely no secret as to what we need to do. We need to take the advice of the great sages of all times and repent – repent as individuals and as nations.

But when I say, “repent,” I don't mean the common usage that refers to guilt and confession and mere behavioral change. By “repent,” I mean to use the original meaning of *metanoia* in the Greek. “Meta” means greater, and “noia” means frame or state of mind. So “metanoia” means for us to adopt a larger frame of mind, to see the bigger picture rather than putting the short-term interests of ourselves before the long-term well being of the entire planet, where our own true well being ultimately resides.

Is this easy? Absolutely not. It can be hard for an individual to do, much less the whole world. But is it possible? Absolutely. There have been people who accomplished this joyful transformation in every age and time of human history, and there's at least one thing they have all shared in common: the certainty that it is possible for anyone and everyone who discovers this most joyful and abundant pathway through life on Earth. I invite you to join me in this radical transformation of values, transformation of the heart, the transformation of humanity that will bring about the longed-for realization of the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth.

May it be so.