

Can scary environmental stories get us moving?

Carol Meyer | Dec. 7, 2010 Eco Catholic

One thing I know that WON'T move us into environmental action is believing that everything is okay. We simply must face the horrible truth of what we are doing to our planet, even if it's excruciatingly painful or provokes despair.

I often hear environmentalists say we have to soft pedal the bad news because otherwise people won't listen to us. I understand that reasoning if that's ALL we focus on, but I don't see how anything constructive can come out of denial about the awful truth and the seriousness of the situation.

I know that every time I learn of some new environmental horror, I become more motivated to make Earth care a priority in my life. Sometimes it's one little image — a beautiful polar bear stranded on a single ice floe in an expanse of arctic water — that can touch my heart and move me into action. I find that facing the truth is good for the soul. A sense of aliveness emerges even in the pain, whereas refusing to face reality only dulls the soul and makes for superficial living.

I think it's important that we do more than present the bad news. If people get trapped in hopelessness, they retreat into inertia. An excellent book that does a good job of marrying bad news and hope is *Half the Sky*. This book about the oppression of women worldwide is specific, graphic, and searingly honest about the horror that many women endure. But what makes reading the book bearable are stories of courageous women who are bucking the system, making changes in their communities, and raising consciousness. Likewise, I think most people are willing to face the scary reality of the state of the planet if they are also given solutions, positive role models, and stories of hope.

Here's another perspective on despair. I once heard a talk by an environmental activist who spent a lot of time trying to prevail against the logging industry. He said each time his efforts failed and a tree plunged to its death, his heart sank a little more, until all he felt was despair. Then he said that an amazing thing happened — when he gave up hoping, he was able to carry on with even greater zeal. This many seem counter-intuitive, but I think I understand it. When we are attached to outcome and don't see it happening, we lose energy. But when we work against seemingly impossible odds just because it's the right thing to do without being so concerned about observable results, then something almost magical happens. It's similar to situations in which you are so far down and have nothing to lose, that you'll try anything and find you have reserves of strength and energy, a David conquering Goliath.

When we courageously face the details of heart-wrenching environmental destruction, something transformative can happen. Our hearts can be broken open in compassion, our souls can dig deep to mine hidden faith, and our weary arms and legs can be infused with new vigor to carry on anew.

The truth will indeed set us free.

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