

Humility before the forces of nature

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Don't underestimate Mother Nature. She may invoke images of a goddess-like maiden with flowers in her golden hair dancing in the fields, which seems harmless enough. But what if she's really more like a determined matriarch, with her children behind her, wielding her broom, fire in her eyes, daring anyone to harm her brood? We'd know to steer clear, because her protective instinct once aroused, makes for a dangerous woman. How, then, did we fail to take into account just who or what we were dealing with when we plundered the Earth? It's probably one more manifestation of the patriarchal mentality, dismissing the Earth as a powerless feminine reality.

As a result, we haven't seen the connection between God and creation. We have been taught to "fear" God, meaning to take God seriously, to reverence God who clearly has power over us. But we never thought that applied to what God has created, even though creation does God's bidding, is embedded with God's characteristics, and partakes of the nature of God. Thus we are learning the hard way that we cannot get away with our transgressions against nature, so perhaps it's time for some appropriate humility.

Make no mistake about it: In a battle between Mother Nature and us, Nature will prevail! Listen to these sobering words by theologian Diarmuid O'Murchu: "In the evolutionary story — ours and that of Planet Earth — the planet always wins out. Mother Earth has an amazing resilience, a very profound intelligence, and can be quite ruthless in maintaining her integrity. In Gaian terms, we are just another species, neither the owners nor the stewards of the planet."

"What?" we exclaim in horror. "Just another species? Surely not." There goes everything we've been taught to believe about ourselves and our special status in creation. After all, we have souls and thus are like God and have been given dominion by divine authority. It would be too much to bear to have all that privilege stripped away from us. I'm reminded of a conversation with my neighbor in which I suggested we need to simplify our life style in response to the environmental crisis. Her indignant response went something like this, "We don't want to return to the old days when people had nothing. I'm used to my comforts. I deserve them and want to keep them!" It was an apt articulation of how spoiled we are and attached to our entitlement no matter what the cost.

Throughout recent human history, we've had an unbelievably arrogant stance toward nature, believing we were vastly superior and could "tame" and dominate it without penalty. It was merely there for our use, with no intrinsic worth of its own. We've acted like every dominator and tyrant in history, feeling invincible and making no effort to understand those or what they lord over. We've just had our way with nature, assuming it had nothing to teach us and was powerless to mete out retribution. In our quest for progress, growth, and riches at the expense of the Earth, we seemingly had the upper hand. We conquered in the short haul, but we should have known it was just a question of time before the resistance and uprising began. The oppressed and enslaved never submit willingly and neither does Earth.

We are now starting to feel more potently the force of Mother Nature fighting back. It's not personal. She still loves us. She simply does what she has to, what her laws dictate. Bill McKibben says in his latest, must-read

book Eearth: "We're moving quickly from a world where we push nature around to a world where nature pushes back—and with far more power." The sooner we realize this, the better, because there is still time to learn our hard lessons and change our thinking and our ways.

We can start learning how nature works and seek to fit in as part of a balanced whole, reverencing its innate intelligence and perfection as the Native peoples have done, rather than bulldozing in, thinking we can impose our ways. And we definitely need to stop viewing ourselves as outside of nature and separate from it.

We emerged from the natural world, are formed of the same elements, and are subject to its laws. We are water, air, soil, energy, light, and consciousness in human form. That's all. And that's more than enough. We don't need an elite status to feel worthwhile. Being a creature is miracle enough. We don't have to pine for God-like status, standing over and above the rest of creation. Isn't that what the story of Adam and Eve is trying to tell us? They weren't content, didn't see the gift they already had, and had to ruin everything by trying to be equal to God.

This Earth is God's, not ours. We don't stand next to God, proudly asserting that we are the creators of the planet. No, we humbly stand amid the rest of creation, knowing we are one with it and dependent on it and God. What we do to creation, we do to ourselves. Let's call a truce with Mother Nature, admitting defeat and submitting to her terms, repenting in sackcloth and ashes. Then maybe we have a chance to survive and flourish.

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