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Book provides interfaith spiritual perspective on our ecological disaster

by John Dear

On the Road to Peace

"Everybody's told me over and over and over again it's a done deal, it's going to happen, how childish it is for everyone to protest it," Bill McKibben, founder of the group 350.org and one of our leading environmental activists, told *The New York Times* last week, referring to President Barack Obama's upcoming announcement about whether or not to go ahead with the destructive 1,700-mile cross-border Keystone XL pipeline.

"But it never seemed like a done deal to me because it's so illogical," McKibben continued. "This is the dirtiest oil anyone has ever managed to find on the face of the earth, and it's always seemed to me that given even a remotely fair hearing people would figure that out."

Anyone who is paying attention and cares for the Earth and not oil company profits realizes this pipeline will be an environmental disaster for North America and a huge threat to the global climate. As NASA scientist and prophetic leader James Hansen told McKibben a few years ago, the Keystone XL pipeline will be "game over for the planet."

I fully support the ongoing protests against the Keystone XL pipeline and hope and pray that the Obama administration will do the right thing and refuse to go ahead with it and make even tougher decisions to reduce carbon emissions and fossil fuels and protect creation.

That would be the conclusion of anyone who reads the wise new book *Spiritual Ecology: The Cry of the Earth*, a beautiful collection of interfaith essays by some of our greatest thinkers about the environment, spirituality and catastrophic climate change. Contributors include Thich Nhat Hanh, Joanna Macy, Wendell Berry, Franciscan Fr. Richard Rohr, Brian Swimme, Thomas Berry, Vandana Shiva, Bill Plotkin,

Dominican Sr. Miriam MacGillis and Winona LaDuke, among others.

"The world is not a problem to be solved; it is a living being to which we belong," editor Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee writes in his introduction. "The world is part of our own self and we are a part of its suffering wholeness. Until we go to the root of our image of separateness, there can be no healing ... Only when our feet learn once again how to walk in a sacred manner, and our hearts hear the real music of creation, can we bring the world back into balance."

Spiritual Ecology addresses one key aspect of our global environmental crisis: our forgetfulness of the sacred nature of creation and how this affects our relationship to the environment. It tries to articulate a spiritual response to the ecological disaster we have made and offers many stimulating insights.

"The bells of mindfulness are sounding," Buddhist master Nhat Hanh writes. "All over the earth, we are experiencing floods, droughts, and massive wildfires. Sea ice is melting in the Arctic and hurricanes and heat waves are killing thousands. The forests are fast disappearing, the deserts are growing, species are becoming extinct every day, and yet we continue to consume, ignoring the ringing bells.

"We need a collective awakening," Nhat Hanh continues. "Most people are still sleeping. We all have a great desire to be able to live in peace and to have environmental sustainability. What most of us don't yet have are concrete ways of making our commitment to sustainable living a reality in our daily lives. It's time for each of us to wake up and take action in our own lives. If we awaken to our true situation, there will be a change in our collective consciousness."

"We are moving from an era dominated by competing nation states to one that is birthing a sustainable multicultural planetary civilization," Mary Evelyn Tucker and Swimme write.

"There can never be world peace as long as you make war against Mother Earth," writes Chief Oren Lyons of the Onondaga Nation. "To make war against Mother Earth is to destroy and to corrupt, to kill, to poison. When we do that, we will not have peace. The first peace comes with your mother, Mother Earth."

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"The dream of an infinitely expandable planet placed entirely at our disposal was always just that, a dream, and it's fast becoming a nightmare," writes Zen teacher Susan Murphy. "Tumultuous change on a vast scale grows increasingly likely with every day of business as usual. The only question is what form it will take, which order of climate shocks and political crises will start to shake our world apart, and how people will react as the market collapses and the source of plenty evaporates."

"We are living in what must surely be the most daunting and arresting moment we have ever faced as a species," Murphy continues. "We face a developing reality that can either condemn human beings to oblivion or inspire us to wake up to our lives in a dramatically more interesting way. A way that begins in living soberly and creatively towards the crisis of our planet -- not as a problem to be solved by engineering an ever better, safer human 'bubble,' but as a constantly unfolding obligation to begin considering the remaking of ourselves as ecologically awakened human beings ... When the stakes are life on earth, all else is a diversion."

"I don't know what is going to happen," MacGillis of Genesis Farm confesses. "It's a great sorrow. Letting the pain of this into one's psyche -- it's a lot. ... What we're doing to each other, and whether we can possibly wake up in time ... You must do your little part, and you've got to be very, very humble and

realize that there are limitations. And yet the love that I experience for life -- I just want it to go on! That's all I care about."

"The Earth is going through terrible devastation, which is being caused by the society, and culture, and a way of life we are all implicated in," she continues. "We're not redeemed out of this. We're implicit, we're in it. We need all the wisdom, all the support we can get. We need each other? We also need the capacity to see that the present moment is not the final word, that there is always the possibility that we can transcend our own limitations -- the planet, the Earth, the society can do that. It's possible to believe that and work toward it. That's all we can do."

"The earth and its life systems, on which we all entirely depend (just like God!), might soon become the very thing that will convert us to a simple lifestyle, to necessary community, and to an inherent and universal sense of reverence for the Holy," Rohr writes. "We all breathe the same air and drink the same water. There are no Jewish, Christian, or Muslim versions of these universal elements."

"I know it is no longer words, doctrines, and mental belief systems that can or will reveal the fullness of this Cosmic Christ," he concludes. "This earth indeed is the very Body of God, and it is from this body that we are born, live, suffer and resurrect to eternal life. Either all is God's Great Project, or we may rightly wonder whether anything is."

"At the level of survival we are fast approaching, our attempts to distinguish ourselves by accidental and historical differences and theological subtleties -- while ignoring the clear 'bottom line' -- are becoming an almost blasphemous waste of time and a shocking disrespect for God's one, beautiful, and multitudinous life. I do still believe that grace is inherent to creation, and that God and goodness will still have the final word."

Spiritual Ecology helps me ponder our present ecological disaster and the future catastrophe we are bringing upon ourselves, to meditate on this scary reality through the wisdom of the world's religions and some of our best spiritual writers. I recommend it for those seeking spiritual understanding in light of this catastrophe and for all who are trying to simplify their lives, protest the Keystone XL pipeline and other destructive acts, and wake up to the needs of Mother Earth.

"May we remember our role as guardians of the Earth, custodians of its sacred ways, and return once again to live in harmony with its natural rhythms and laws." That's the final epilogue of the book -- a good prayer for all of us, and a way forward.

Next month, John Dear will speak at the Wild Goose Festival in Asheville, N.C. John will undertake a national speaking tour in the winter on his upcoming book, *The Nonviolent Life*. To see John's speaking schedule or to invite him to speak in your church or school, go to John Dear's website. John is now working with the Franciscan-based peace group Pace e Bene. He is profiled in *Doing Time for Peace* by Rosalie Riegle and with Daniel Berrigan and Roy Bourgeois in *Divine Rebels* by Deena Guzder. John's book *Lazarus, Come Forth!* and other recent books, including *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings*, *Put Down Your Sword* and *A Persistent Peace*, are available from Amazon.com.

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