

Caring for Climate by Changing our Consciousness

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My daughter Katie, now 18 months old, is offering me a new way to think about how we might respond to climate change. It was just a month ago, as the first crocuses appeared, that Katie took her first steps. Wishing to celebrate her newfound mobility, I took her outside to walk on the thawing ground. Only now do I realize that this was a kind of initiation right. For the first time, Katie was on her own two feet—walking on Earth—taking her own steps, shaping her own destiny!

Ever since that day, the first thing Katie does when she wakes up each morning is to press her nose against the glass of our backdoor window and repeat “owwwh, owwwh”—her vocalization for “outside.”

I have noted that when we go outside together it is often Katie who is the first to see Cat, Squirrel, Crow. So it was no surprise a few days ago that she was the first to spot the stiff body of a dead mourning dove lying in our garden. She pointed down to the bird. Then she registered a look of confusion. Next, she pointed up to the sky and, then, to my astonishment, she began to whimper softly and, as I sought to console her, a solitary tear ran down her cheek.

It seems that Katie, like indigenous peoples, knows that she belongs to Earth. She understands Darwin’s great truth that “Everything is kin.” It was this I believe that caused her distress when she came upon Mourning Dove laying lifeless in the garden.

To connect all this to climate change consider this question: Do you live *on* Earth or *in* Earth? Though saying that you live *on* Earth may sound right, the truth is that we all live *in* Earth. If you doubt this, go out in the afternoon and lie on your back and look up at the sky. In particular, observe the clouds and consider that at our latitude Earth is spinning at more than 500 miles per hour to the East. So why aren’t those clouds up there racing across the sky to the West at hundreds of miles per hour? The answer is that all the stuff up there that we blithely refer to as “atmosphere” is part of Earth. You and I live *in* Earth. Yes, that’s Earth up there! If you still doubt this, hold your breath! Just as a fish is utterly dependent on water for life, our life medium is the atmosphere.

My point is that the language that we use shapes our perceptions and this, in turn, determines how we act or fail to act. To explore this more deeply, go out at night and again lay on your back looking *up* at the night sky. As you do this, consider that you are not really looking *up*. Indeed, *up* and *down* are human constructs. This means that when we stand on Earth, we are not standing *up* so much as sticking *out* into space. So as you lie there it is just as legitimate to think of yourself as looking *down* into the star-studded night sky. If you achieve this perceptual shift, you will be surprised that you are not falling down to join the stars below you. Of course, you don’t fall because of something called *gravity*, the powerful attractive force between the body of Earth and your body. This mutual allurements between two bodies sounds to me a lot like *eros*—the Greek word for love. If we use one word—gravity—the world is rendered silent, mechanical, dead; if we use another word—eros—the world becomes juicy, sensuous, alive!

It is the same with our perception of air. The prevailing consciousness leads us to simply see “air” as empty space or, if you are of a scientific disposition, to define the atmosphere as a complex mix of gases. Caught in this limited world view, we hear things

such as, “Humans can only pump so many tons of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere each year without disturbing Earth’s climate systems.”

Sadly, this way of speaking fails to acknowledge that each of us is intimately entangled with this stuff called “atmosphere.” Our body/mind/spirit is imbued with atmosphere.

The upshot of all this, in my view, is that we will not make genuine progress in mitigating climate change until we learn to speak of the atmosphere from the inside, understanding it as the breath of life. In short, what is needed is a reverential ecology—a way of seeing that reminds us that Earth doesn’t belong to us, but rather, that we belong to Earth!

Let us substitute hubris with humility, recognizing, as David Abrams, points out, that “our breathing bodies are simply our part of the exuberant flesh of Earth.”