

# Loving the Insects as a Pathway to World Peace

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Dear Reader, let me begin by asking you: “What are the first words that spring to mind when you hear: “INSECTS?” When I asked the students in my Environmental Science class at Penn State this question recently, they responded: *gross, annoying, creepy, itchy, frightening*.. No one said: *beautiful, remarkable, helpful, cool, friendly, teachers*.

Hearing their responses, I mused aloud: “Is it really true that insects are gross, annoying, creepy and all the rest? Where does such a belief come from? And how does holding this belief affect one’s behavior?” Still musing I thought about the entomologist who observed that whenever local residents brought him an insect to identify, it arrived dead, usually with the explanation, “I didn’t know what it was, so I killed it.”

Does this tendency to fear and even kill what is unknown—what is OTHER-- point to something larger at work in our culture? Joanne Lauck in her remarkable book, The Voice of the Infinite in the Small writes “Fear is a powerful force that shapes how we see the world and respond to it. Our eyes are not machines that simply reflect the world back to us without distortion.” What we see “out there” is always a mirror of what is happening inside us.

I have a new “theory” that is as far-fetched and reaching as any theory ever devised: the examination by humans of our culturally transmitted beliefs about insects (read: that they should be feared and held in contempt) will contribute to world peace.

Before you dismiss my theory, consider this. When asked what he thought was the most important thing to teach our children, his Holiness the Dalai Lama responded, “Teach them to love the insects!” Imagine, here’s a man who’s been forced into exile, whose country has been ravaged, with countless citizens murdered and culture imperiled and he could answer anything, ANYTHING at all. When he might have called our attention on any aspect of human existence--compassion, justice, hope, duty, etc.--the Dalai Lama focused on love of insects. Go figure.

So taking this holy man seriously, how do you come to love—to be open to and accepting of—insects? I suspect it begins with an invitation to be in relationship with them. No, I’m not kidding. Relationship. May it be that world peace depends on our ability to be in relationship with, of all beings, cockroaches?

Each semester, I offer this invitation to relationship to my students by giving them an opportunity to hold a cockroach. A Yale University study cites that of all insects, the cockroach is the one that most evokes terror in Americans. . We see them as sinister creatures, crawling around behind our walls.... operating in darkness.... spreading disease and filth. Our beliefs about cockroaches evoke fear in us. Even terror!.

Yet, if truth be told, cockroaches don’t bite or sting; they have never been linked (according to Lauck) to an infectious disease. Indeed, they are fastidious when it comes to cleanliness, spending much of their time grooming themselves (e.g., washing themselves vigorously after being touched by human beings). And those who have kept cockroaches as pets observe that they have uniquely individual dispositions—some curious, others cautious.

My students are also surprised to hear that not all cultures are “freaked out” by cockroaches. Among Polynesian peoples, cockroaches have an iconic status; Jamaicans create folklore in which cockroaches are revered. In contrast, by observing the facial contortions and terror-ridden exclamations of adults, children within our culture see contempt and fear. And in this way, an aversion to insects, the utterly OTHER, is “learned.”

In the end it is our thinking—specifically, our unexamined beliefs—that terrorize us, and this holds whether we are speaking about insects or “terrorists”. The desire to “exterminate,” to extinguish, to crush, squelch, and kill, regardless if in the home, in the homeland, or in some far distant place, unchecked and unexamined, only enlarges the thirst for war.

In the national discussion on what should constitute “post “9/11 consciousness,” to be sure neither the “doves” nor the “hawks” will focus, as did the Dalai Lama, on insects. Nor, I suspect, will our leaders examine the belief that security and serenity can only be achieved by killing. “Terrorists,” quite simply, are sinister, dark, deranged, neither rational nor be-friendable. They must be killed. And, this “consciousness” holds true as well for the insects.

Back to my theory: the examination by humans (should this say Americans ?) of our culturally transmitted beliefs about insects (read: that they should be feared and held in contempt) will contribute to world peace. Addendum: By seeking to nourish relationships to all those “Others” in the world, our fears become diminished, our love expands, peace within our hearts and within the world grows.

On second thought, this isn’t a new theory at all.