

## Learning to Love the Cosmos

Welcome....

In the next 25 minutes I hope to scintillate your senses and nourish your neurons, and to communicate to you my faith. This faith has no saviour, no good book, no creed, no happy ending, and no money back guarantee. My faith is simply that despite the immense suffering and unravelling occurring in our world today, and a rather ominous looking future ahead... if we make the choice as individuals and a community to dive deeply into the fullness of our lived experience, its pains as well as its joys, we can live a life of profound presence, meaning and richness. A quiet faith that if we support each other to face into the reality of our lives, our full catastrophe, the darkness becomes a doorway, the pain, an invitation into a profound transformation of our sense of self, an adventure of cosmic proportions, nothing less than an initiation into a steamy love affair with the cosmos.

Preparing for this talk stirred up so much for me. I wrote and wrote, and read and read, got about 30,000 words down on paper. I wanted to be eloquent, comprehensive, to touch the depths and heights of our eco-psycho-social situation, our ethics, our spiritual potentials. I didn't have so much to say about professional practice. I wanted to write a talk of infallible reason, leaving us all with a clear sense of purpose and direction...and I think I failed in that.

What I have instead is a non linear, aromatic, post logical menagerie of my poetry and a short story about despair, seeking to bridge the universal and the personal, making the abstract particular, weaving them together with some semi coherent rambles, gesturing in the direction of what I feel ecospirituality to be. I want my words to feed your souls, stoke the fire of your own creativity, encourage you to express your take on the world in your own way, encourage an ecology of perspectives. I shall speak to three broad themes...

1. Connection, towards a sense of a self in union with the world...
2. Despair as initiation, the depths and valleys of the open heart.
3. The ecological crisis as a call to love, a passionate commitment to life....

## Connection

We find ourselves in the wonderfully bizarre situation that right here, right now, we are conscious participants in an unfolding universe, complicated primates, with toenails and eyeballs and thumbs, on a vast ball of molten rock, with its oceans and mountains and a multiplicity of other strange creatures, orbiting a burning ball of gas that we call the sun, at 100,000 kilometers an hours. We are alive in a universe of molecules and galaxies, meadows and waterfalls, and peacocks and amoebas and killer whales and frogs.

A universe of such subtlety and magnitude, of immeasurable interconnection, and we are creatures capable of feeling it from the inside out. Feeling the pleasure of the wind dancing across your skin, gazing into the miracle of a flower, the hot beating of your blood through your veins, able to melt into the tender embrace of your lover, and we are able to communicate our inner worlds with the other beings all around, through song and dance and words and touch. At times the beauty's almost too much to bear.

(pre-amble to poem)

## Seasons

How can I convey to you this joy  
The shift and pulsing of the seasons  
The rhythm of a body aligning with the land  
Of lying face down in the black earth loam  
Softened to silk by the potatoes growth and the digging,  
The buds,  
The blossoming fruit, a swelling harvest  
Sun ripened,  
Boundaries of belief subsumed in the turning of seasons,  
The melody of soil and of soul united  
My atrophied identity dissolving,  
And gladly, returning,  
to sweet, sweet, earth.

Contemporary science describes how we are part and parcel with the universe, how our bodies are composed of atoms formed in the birth and death of stars, how the air we breathe, the water we drink and the food we eat are part of vast cycles shared by all living creatures, how these creatures are relations on a single tree of life, how humanity are members in this dynamic community.

And our spiritual traditions, from indigenous cosmologies to the contemplative strands of the major religions, suggest that our typical sense of self, the sense of being a solid, enduring, isolated individual, in a universe of other equally separate others is an illusion, a distorted sense of who we really are. These traditions seem to say that we are in-fact a participant, a collaborator, a flowing movement in inextricably interwoven cosmos. As old wounds are healed, as we mature and integrate and release our defences and blocks, we begin to rest in a deeper, more compassionate, and peaceful way of being, realising and living from identity far beyond conventional notions of our personality, our lifespan, our species, and our fears....

**Pachamama walks upon herself**

It is me and I am it,  
Mitt to hand, hand to mitt,  
Senses and mind it has given me,  
To see itself and myself in thee  
Animate earth birthed from clay  
Giver of life me to you each day  
All I have has come from you,  
And you receive what I give too  
Support and rest, you permeate me,  
My eyes are suns, my tears the sea,  
10 trillion cells and pure energy  
Where do you end and where starts me  
There is such a fallacy in the divide,  
Of human and earth on separate sides,  
Every last thing your sister and brother,  
One cannot be one, without the other...

## Section 2... Despair... dun dun dun

If this possibility of feeling connection was all about blossoms and rainbows, expansion and ecstasy, there wouldn't be much of a problem... but as you well know this life has its horror too.... the fear of scarcity and abandonment, our vulnerability, the emotional wounding inflicted upon us by others, our anxiety and confusion, the pain that can rack our bodies to exhaustion. And as one begins to open to this wider sense of self, as we become increasingly aware our mutuality and relationship with other people and the natural world, the whole fabric of industrial society, our entire way of life, can be perceived as a violation against human and more than human nature. This can lead to a pervasive and debilitating well of despair. Scholar and activist Joanna Macy describes this complex of strong feelings that as, "our pain for the world."

"[There] is fear about the future based on what we're doing to each other and to our planet. Another is anger that we are knowingly wasting the world for those who come after us, destroying the legacy of our ancestors. Guilt and sorrow are in the complex. People in every walk of life, from every culture, feel grief over the condition of the world. Despair is this constellation of different feelings. One person may feel more fear or anger, another sorrow, and another guilt, but the common thread is a suffering on behalf of the world."

Any of that sound familiar to you?

In the face of these feelings, a common habit is to shut our sensitivity down, to try block them out and avoid the pain they cause. Our current society is geared towards this very thing, keeping emotional pain to a minimum, numbing it out, promoting consumption distractions, tranquilizers, anti-depressants, framing this natural outpouring of despair as an individual defect, a maladjustment... telling us to pull ourselves together, pop a pill, push on through, chill out, loosen up, get out of our minds, keep our chin up, our heads down, to stand on our own two feet, put one foot in-front of the other... no wonder we can get lost in the despair!

And why indeed would we want to feel this grief, this anger, this fear, and simply add more difficulty to our lives, unless it had some deep value. In my experience, if you want to feel your aliveness, to be vibrant, and sensitive and engaged with your experience, you've got to take the rough with the smooth, opening to the full gamut of emotional life, for like it or not, the terrible has already happened. And I believe that being willing to feel pain for the world is not a sign of personal failure, but is indicator of our empathy, our connection, our capacity for love. And when we can support each other to enter this terrain, to hold each other as feel it through, instead of paralysis, it becomes initiation, a rite of passage, guiding us toward what is truly of value...

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I shall share a short story I wrote last year that speaks to this dark side of our interconnection, the emotional furnace where our compassion is forged. I trust that the more we can name and honour these feelings in the community, the less shame and withdrawal we'll feel, and the more skilfully and compassionately we can respond when they arise.

## **Darkness**

I board the bus as night descends, Wellington to Auckland, 650km for 25 bucks. I'm seen off by my lover in a quick flurry of kisses, her heat and soft radiance and cheeks flushed and glowing. I'm fuelled by youth and the afterglow of lust as I depart with the fading embers of the day. Claiming a backseat, hoping to stretch out later, but the bus fills to brimming before we set off and out from the city streets, past the familiar corner-shops and folded hills of Wellington and onto the motorway and along the coast. The sun is setting, blood and russet, it sends ruby flickers across the sea and the scudding clouds, colours that dance into my eyes in fading shades of warmth. Then the darkness descends and we trundle on North.

I commit to my seat. I'll be here for a while, folded into cultured pleats at first, though I know that as the night matures I'll squirm and writhe and attempt armchair acrobatics and spine twisting contortions seeking comfort, my animal body rebelling against constraint.

My fellow passengers and I; silent, taciturn, faces unmoving as if carved, features defined by the reflected light from pages and the eerie glow of screens. We are eclectic, Maori, Asian, Pacifica, Caucasian. This is New Zealand gathered here, and New Zealand we pass through as the miles dissolve beneath us.

The landscape flashes past and there's not much to it, roadsides and strobing street lights and plain ol' New Zealand townships and barren pastures in naked expanse. The clock turns

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with the rolling of the earth and we pull up in Bulls for a piss stop and a smoke and a Kiwi cultural experience at the BP Express (24/7). We enter the white island of light intruding on the dark. Plastic signs and petrol pumps. The engine powers down and the door hisses open, we rise, semi-living, silent passengers with wooden faces, unpeeling from our chairs we shuffle out and into the shop.

And now another kind of darkness descends upon me and the distance increases further and the warmth has long since faded and I'm alone and I'm hungry. The "food". Arrayed neatly, profuse, bursting from the shelves in vivid packaged protrusions. Mince and cheese pies and custard squares and lamingtons and chocolate milk (what *do* they feed the cows?) and Moro-bars and Mizone the colour of radon (official drink of the All Blacks mind you) and Lift and 7 Up and liquid Weetbix (a meal in a drink), and so much choice and all of it poison. The chip isle looks the most promising, perhaps "Nature Zone! Fresh Food Naturally Cassava Vege Chips" but when I lose count of the numbers on the back I know I've been misled, this is no fresh food naturally. I settle on Kettles, spuds grown by farmer Joe down the road I'm told. I've always been a sucker for nostalgia. And a Whittaker's Peanut Slab, a kiwi classic I think? The peanuts are from China and the sugar from Paraguay and the soy from what remains of the Amazon and the cocoa is the impoverishment of Ghana but the milk is from here so that must be good right. Up to the counter and the drawn face of a half dead attendant and out into the night. The bus driver is playing solitaire on his phone, dragging on a cigarette between bouts of coughs.

"You winning?" I ask

"No luck mate. And it's four nights on, three days off, something to do I suppose and keeps me going."

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And what can I do but turn and walk away from the fluorescents and the humming pumps and along the street of asphalt and past the shop fronts of glass and polymers and concrete slabs and materials alien to me. I wonder how they got here and who made them. Where are the smoke stacks and the emptied beaches and the hollows in the earth and the factories and the mines? Is it too naïve to consider if they were made with love? And the whole town is facades and illusions and the surface of things and severed from place. I stumble against a tree and wrap myself around it, searching for something solid, but it's time to leave and I'm back on the bus and folding into my seat and it smells of deodorant and Mizone and pies and the engine starts again and we weren't made for this. I open my chips and my bar and I stuff it down and eating and eating as the tractors plough the land and the soil blows off and the sprays go on and the plantations grow and the machetes are wielded in the heat and my heart rate is soaring and it shouldn't be like this should it and I start to feel sick and the road goes on and on through the endless night. And the whole country is asphalt and the steel faced trucks howl past relentless, logging and cargo and cattle, logging, cargo, cattle. Life converted to money. The engine beneath my seat sends rough vibrations through my flesh, it seems unnatural yet it is here. And we are all silent and disjointed, fixated on screens, and what was wild is now strangled and is it just me who sees this?

I heard these fields were once forests. That the rivers ran so thick with fish as to be silver, the bird song so loud to be near deafening. But these are just stories now and who tells them any way and the bus rolls on through the dark. I contract and curl like a foetus on my seat, trying to shut it out and wishing there was such a thing as home, wanting to be annihilated into warmth and somewhere away from here, but there is nothing else, this culture is everywhere, and the road is relentless and yet somehow I sleep



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I wake to the Desert Road and a vast expanse. The luminous moon, full in repose, and Tongariro's silver shrouded silhouette, skirted by clouds. The high plateau and the tapestry of the sky unfolding into glittering infinitudes. My mind uncoils, expands beyond the seat and the bus and the road and all this mess and I gasp at the immensity and I look around for others who see this too, but they are fixed on their screens or behind the veils of sleep.

I want to shout it,

*Can you see the full moon dancing with the mountain? How it multiplies into glinting miracles on the streams, waters that stretch unbroken from the clouds to the sea and this water is in us. Behold those constellations! Can't you see that we are infinite?! Made from the fabric of galaxies and containing them! These bodies of ours connect to all of life and the ancestors are within us and this living Earth and we are part of this and these constituents are timeless!*

But my voice is choked and I stay silent and the road goes on and the land streaks past until the moon sinks and the darkness descends once again and was that just a dream? Past fields and wayward pines and the final remnants of the bush and streetlights and towns and again I sleep.

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Waking finally to the motorway and we are nearly here, driving into Auckland on the outer edge of night. Arriving in desolation. The warehouses, the lights the billboards. "Protect Your Investment, Wash Your Building", "One Ridiculous Ice-cream!", "A Magazine Subscription Makes the Greatest Gift" and "Rarotonga Would Be So Nice Right Now".

The dull glow of the city encroaches perniciously and they have the audacity to call it the Super City and these are the end times and we have fucked it all. We approach and now two dull glows. Is the city really that large? But as the road goes on and the earth turns, the glows diverge further, one becoming the brighter and the brighter and bigger and bigger and it's not the city it's above and beyond that, and the whole sky is aflame and that night that never ended is coming to a close and it's all ablaze now as us and the bus and the road and the city are consumed by something so much greater. The flaming plumes of a dawn we cannot touch.

## A Call to Love, a passionate commitment....

And here we are. Right now. We stand together on the precipice, the edge of the possible, on the brink of global collapse, or cultural renaissance, or both. All of us gathered here, with our hopes and fears, our bliss and our suffering, our visions, our gifts, our talents, our wounds. And we've made it to the final section of my talk, where I'm supposed to gather the loose strands, the ideas and the hopes, aspiring to weave a basket of inspiration that will carry us further on our journey of engagement. I'll give it a crack.

We have seen how many schools of contemporary science and spirituality point to an interconnected and non dualistic reality, an appreciation of world not as collection of objects, but a communion of subjects. I'm sure all of us here know this in our bones, have experienced moments or swathes of our life where our old sense of individuality loosens, blurs, dissolves, and our consciousness is flooded with a sense of connection with the wider world, intimations of timelessness, spacelessness and unbounded love. We know, in the fabric of our own bodies, hearts and minds, we are so much more than we were taught to believe.

And we have seen that this natural potential for communion is no quick fix, no magic bullet for our pains and concerns. How as we increasingly feel empathy and belonging in the world, so too we feel the horror, the alienation, the despair at how our civilisation is treating the world, and how we treat each other.

At the start of my talk, I said I had faith, a faith that despite the immensity of this challenge, we can approach the ecological crisis as an invitation, a transformation, an emotional alchemy. I have faith that as we deepen our engagement with our life in its entirety, its pleasure and pains, its agonies and ecstasies, we wake up to an identity that goes beyond our hopes and our fears. We begin to feel a solidarity, a belonging, an increasing compassion for the world and ourselves. I have faith that in the right context our wounds can become our healers, our fears, become our teachers. I have faith that together we can create spaces of authenticity, beauty, healing, honesty, creativity, expression, exploration, renewal, transformation. I have faith that despite the uncertain future, we can support each other to craft a wild diversity of approaches, helping each step into fullness of our existence, the pregnant potential we carry, as conscious participants in a miraculous universe.

## Can You

Can you touch the timeless in each breath  
and bear the flaming brand of love  
In the embers of your breast?

Can you soar amongst the stars,  
As your roots in soil do grow,  
Can you loosen the knots that bind  
Whilst deepening your bond to Earth?

Can you be strong enough,  
To treat yourself gently  
As civilisation tears itself to shreds,  
Can you be a weaver of tattered souls,

Can you look deep enough  
To see your reflection  
In each leaf, each tumbling cloud , each broken heart?

Can we be healers together,  
growing from the rubble,  
Honouring the ancestors whom we carry  
in each coil of chromosome?

Can we find wholeness together?