

***The Problem of Painlessness:
What Leprosy Can Teach Us About Caring for the Earth***

by Alf Seegert

The deeper that sorrow carves into your being, the more joy you can contain.
—Kahlil Gibran

Pain hurts. As a result we try to avoid it, and when we talk about the problem of pain our goal is generally to find a better way to get rid of it. I would like to do something different here by instead considering *the problem of painlessness*. What happens to ourselves and to the world when we close ourselves off from the experience of painful feedback? (Be warned: the following brief example is not pleasant reading, but it is I think necessary to show the seriousness of the problem.)

In his book *The Gift Nobody Wants*, Dr. Paul Brand relates the following true story. Tanya, a seventeen-month old girl, was left alone in her playpen laughing and playing while her mother cooked in the kitchen. A few minutes later the mother walked into Tanya's room to find her daughter "fingerpainting red swirls on the white plastic sheet." The mother didn't understand where the paint came from at first, but when she did she screamed. The little girl's fingertip was mangled and bleeding. Tanya had bitten off the tip of her finger and was now using it as a plaything for making designs with her own blood on the sheets.

Dr. Brand discovered that Tanya felt no discomfort in performing such a self-mutilating behavior because of a rare genetic defect that rendered her indifferent to pain. Although Tanya's parents did what they could to keep their daughter from biting off the

tips of her fingers, no pleading seemed to work, and even spankings only induced laughter. When Tanya twisted an ankle, she didn't limp; instead she only twisted the limb further and further. By the time she was eleven years old, Tanya had lost both legs from amputation, as well as most of her fingers. Both elbows were dislocated and her tongue, which she chewed constantly, was lacerated.

This grim and startling picture would strike many of us as unfathomably painful. The irony here, however, is that this kind of intense, self-destructive suffering occurs only in a life where physical pain is *absent*.

I use this gruesome anecdote because it provides a harsh and instructive example of how our sense of self, our capacity for pain, and our responsiveness to injury are all intertwined. Tanya's self-mutilating behavior hints that how we experience ourselves has no small effect on how we take care of that which we call "self" in the first place. Proponents of deep ecology, for instance, argue that a truncated sense of self goes hand in hand with ecological devastation. They contend that our present environmental crisis is fundamentally a crisis not of ethics but of perception, where we narrowly and mistakenly identify ourselves with our particle-like egos. Doing so introduces a subject/object split between the human and the more-than-human world that is not only illusory, but also dangerous. By conceiving nature as "radically other" and separate, we instrumentalize it and consign it to "thinghood," thereby reducing the more-than-human-world to the status of raw material valuable only in terms of its use. The perhaps unsurprising consequence of such an isolated, dualistic sense of self is an ecological holocaust unrivaled by anything that the planet has seen for over 65 million years.

But there is a way to get around what Alan Watts called “The Taboo Against Knowing Who You Are.” Instead of identifying ourselves as narrow, particle-like substances, we can undergo a metaphysical shift that allows us to “identify widely” with our ecological context. In such a view we come to recognize that interactions with things outside our bodies are not merely relationships that we *have*, but are rather what make us who we fundamentally *are*. This is to say that we are more than just our bodies; we exist at the intersection of countless interactions with our fellow beings, with the air and water, with the ecosystems that sustain us, and ultimately with our planet and the cosmos. Every time you gulp down a mouthful of water or suck in a lungful of air, your body absorbs and assimilates a new set of particles; you become your environment. Exhale, perspire, take a pee; your environment becomes you. More accurately, it was all part of your wider identity in the first place.

According to Arne Naess, deep ecology’s founding philosopher, the result of “identifying widely” is that you will spontaneously behave in an Earth-friendly manner because the Earth is understood to be part of your wider Self (that’s “Self” with a capital “S”). If you experience your “Self” in this way, you won’t need to be moralized or legislated into not injuring the planet, because you will instinctively take care of what you perceive to be part of who you are.

This is where the significance of pain enters the picture. In his work with lepers, Dr. Paul Brand discovered that because they felt no pain in their extremities, people suffering from leprosy would (like Tanya) use their bodies to perform acts that bodies are simply not intended to do. He relates how one leper would retrieve food cooked in hot coals with his

bare hands (his hands were just suppurating knobs at this point, really) *because he didn't feel himself being burned*. Dr. Brand lectured the man about how important it was to take care of his hands, but the man didn't seem to care. He encountered another leper who was running—seemingly unaware—on a badly dislocated ankle. Such cases were typical of Brand's experience with leprosy, and they had in common what Brand called “an utter nonchalance toward self-destruction.”

But why? Why do Tanya and the lepers of whom Brand speaks behave in a manner that is so deliberately self-mutilating? I think that the reason is because they do not construe their behaviors as mutilations of *themselves* at all, for the mental distinction we make between self and other is grounded most basically in our physical sensations. Lacking the experience of pain in their limbs, they understood their own hands and feet and even their entire bodies as Other. Because no pain registered for her, the little girl Tanya perceived her own fingers as objects to be manipulated at will—as things separate from herself—and not as parts of her own precious being.

I believe that the same mechanisms are at work in how we as human beings interact with the planet. Like lepers, we overwhelmingly express an “utter nonchalance” toward global self-destruction because our nerve endings terminate at the skin and we allow our self-identification to (for the most part) stop there; we therefore don't experience the feedback necessary to recognize and respond to the damage that we are doing to our wider, ecosystemic Self. Like Tanya, who used her own bloody fingers as paints, we continue as a species to channel and dam our rivers, pour toxins into our air and water, and wantonly cut our forests, all the while not recognizing that it is ourselves that we destroy. We mangle our

world as Tanya did her fingertips, not because we are evil people (usually), but simply because we misperceive where our selves start and end. As ecological pioneer Aldo Leopold put it, “We only grieve for what we know.”

Because the capacity for experiencing feedback is critical in determining what we experience as "self," it would appear that a necessary condition for global healing is that we go beyond the skin and somehow extend the reach of our nervous systems. For we will only treat as self what we experience as self. We therefore need to be willing and able to feel the pain of the world as our own pain and to embrace the earth's joy as our joy—in order that we can respond to suffering with healing, and respond to healing with celebration.

Unfortunately, our incapacity to feel is not confined to our physical sensations; truncated senses can also prevent us from perceiving what is beautiful, an experience we badly need in order to care for beautiful things in peril. We tend to think of beauty in the same way that we too often think about nature: namely, as something “extra,” as something that we can live without. This is how the hero—or rather, anti-hero—expresses the problem in Stephen R. Donaldson's epic fantasy series *The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant*. Covenant is a leper who is thrown with all his numbness into an alternate world where the health of the Land enters directly into the awareness of those who belong to it. Where his leprosy had previously kept him from even registering changes to his own body, the healing powers of *hurtloam* quickly extend his capacity for feeling far beyond the boundaries of his skin, causing him to experience impressions of health and pain—and beauty—that permeate the earth itself.

"Where I come from we don't see— If you don't know the annual cycles of the plants, you can't tell the difference between spring and summer. If you don't have a—have a standard of comparison, you can't recognize— But the world is beautiful—what's left of it, what we haven't damaged." Images of Haven Farm sprang irrefusably across his mind. He could not restrain the mordancy of his tone as he concluded, "We have beauty, too. We call it 'scenery'."

"Scenery." Mhoram echoed. "The word is strange to me--but I do not like the sound."

Covenant felt oddly shaken, as if he has just looked over his shoulder and found himself standing too close to a precipice. "It means that beauty is something extra," he rasped. "It's nice, but we can live without it."

"Without?" Mhoram's gaze glittered dangerously.

And from behind him Foamfollower breathed in astonishment, "Life without beauty? Ah, my friend! How do you resist despair?"

So how *do* we resist despair? How do we become capable of extending our nerves outward to feel the pain, joy, and beauty of our Earth? There are, of course, many ways to answer this question—but I think there is a lot of room for hope in this respect. One thing often overlooked is how we already tend to identify more widely than we might initially think. When someone we love rejoices, we are overcome with sympathetic delight; when a loved one is suffering, we feel pain involuntarily; our own self has been afflicted whether we like it or not. We already identify ourselves not just in terms of our bodies but also in terms of our interactions, our loves, our aspirations, our frustrations, our joys and sorrows. Our nerves already reach well beyond our fingertips. Thus I would argue that realizing our ecological selves by “widely identifying” is not different in kind from what we already do regularly. It is only different in degree.

Making the transition from *ego-* to *eco-*consciousness is, however, not a logical but a

psychological procedure—and a difficult one. In our techno-savvy culture we are so primed to eliminate pain and discomfort that we rarely question why we're experiencing it in the first place. Think how we unreflectively pop a pill when we feel a headache coming on. How we clearcut our forests but divorce this fact from our awareness by leaving thin "buffer-strips" of trees in place along roads. Same story. But pain happens (usually) for a good reason, namely to protect each of us from injury: it combines fact with value in such a way that it can't merely be ignored. When your hand makes contact with boiling water, your body does not merely inform you of this fact; it instead ensures that you value such an experience so negatively that you remove your hand reflexively. Pain can therefore be a powerful ally; by creating suffering that demands an immediate response it provides the means for avoiding even greater suffering. Denying pain its power to speak is like putting masking tape over your car's oil light when it happens to light up. It doesn't make the problem go away.

Of course, opening yourself to the experience of a wider range of feedback introduces a serious potential for overload (as it did for Thomas Covenant). When you become existentially and not merely intellectually aware that you live in a world of wounds, the pain can be overwhelming. And despite one's best attempts to identify widely, still one must *act* from within the finitude of a particular skin-encapsulated body. Such awareness can lead to despair, a feeling that is as unhelpful as it is unpleasant. Consequently, I think that a good place to start might just be in that clichéd, overused, and absolutely essential domain of relevant action: one's own backyard (I mean this both literally and figuratively). One of many ways to help deepen and widen your sense of self would be to interact

concretely with your ecological context, working to become intimately aware of your shared identity with it.

For instance: grow a garden; plant a tree; trace where the water in your tap finds its origin; say grace and mean it; volunteer in your neighborhood; plant native species and other vegetation in your yard appropriate for your bioregion; follow the weather by looking up—not at a TV; wait expectantly for the hummingbirds to return each spring and greet them with beakers brimming with sugar-water; honor dates that the sky celebrates—solstices, new moons, full moons, equinoxes—not just holidays marked on human calendars; get out of your car and walk. Allow beauty to assail you.

With respect to widening and deepening one's sense of self, moreover, the way out is the way in. Without a grounded inner spiritual practice (a skill that comes very slowly for me) you can easily find yourself trying to carry the weight of limitless suffering on the shoulders of a fragile, ill-equipped ego—a certain recipe for neurosis. You can only act as a vessel of healing if you surrender yourself to a divine power solid enough to bear such sorrow, spacious enough to contain such joy.

We are enmeshed in a web of relatedness with all life. To cut ourselves off, through denial, from this flow of relationship to our hearts is indeed to cut off the pain of the senseless destruction of other living beings. In doing so we not only enable such destruction to continue but we also, beyond that, doom ourselves to the frigid and numbing waters of isolation and alienation. In contrast, to reconnect our isolated selves to the larger unity of earth's ecology can indeed open us to the messengers of pain and so motivate us to care for the planet. And it can do more. Reconnection can also remove the painful chill of

alienation and put within our reach the warmth and fulfillment of connectedness that our spirits hunger for. In nourishing life around us, we ourselves are nourished.

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