

Finding Balance in an Unstable World by Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee

Photo by Diane Barker

The present pandemic, which in a few short months has wreaked havoc across our world, is most likely caused by an imbalance in the natural world, as loss of habitat and biodiversity is not only driving animals to extinction but directly causing animal viruses to spread to humans. In response our leaders are using the images of conflict: “We are at war with Covid 19,” we keep hearing; it is an “invisible enemy” we need to “vanquish.” But although this virus is disrupting our lives, causing sickness, death, and economic breakdown, it is itself a completely natural phenomenon, a living thing reproducing itself in the way nature intended. Are these images of conflict and conquest appropriate or even helpful? Do they help us to understand and to respond, to bring our world back into balance?

One of Carl Jung’s favorite stories was “The Rainmaker,” which was told to him by his friend Richard Wilhelm:

“There was a great drought [in the part of China] where Wilhelm lived; for months there had not been a drop of rain and the situation had become catastrophic. The Catholics made processions, the Protestants made prayers, and the Chinese burned joss-sticks and shot off guns to frighten away the demons of the drought, but with no result. Finally, the Chinese said, ‘We will fetch the rain-maker.’ And from another province a dried up old man appeared. The only thing he asked for was a quiet little house somewhere, and there he locked himself in for three days.

On the fourth day the clouds gathered and there was a great snow-storm at the time of year when no snow was expected, an unusual amount, and the town was so full of rumors about the wonderful rain-maker that Wilhelm went to ask the man how he did it.

In true European fashion he said: ‘They call you the rain-maker; will you tell me how you made the snow?’

And the rain-maker said: ‘I did not make the snow; I am not responsible.’

‘But what have you done these three days?’

‘Oh, I can explain that. I come from another country where things are in order. Here they are out of order; they are not as they should be by the ordinance of heaven. Therefore, the whole country is not in Tao, and I also am not in the natural order of things because I am in a disordered country. So, I had to wait three days until I was back in Tao and then

naturally the rain came.”¹

Where are today’s rainmakers, those who “come from another country where things are in order?” Did we banish them all too long ago, exile them from our world of science and rational thought? It was long common in indigenous cultures, when life went out of balance, to consult their shamans and dreams. But today we have few shamans and even our dreaming self has been censored, its stories relegated to our journals or the therapist’s couch.

We know how to struggle and fight, but not how to be silent and receptive. We have forgotten how to look and listen. And yet the signs are all around us—and for some, the best response to this pandemic might be, like the rainmaker, to retire to “a quiet little house,” where rather than bingeing on endless streaming shows, we might look inward, we might return to the Tao, to what is in balance with life’s natural flow.

For those brave enough to trust something deeper, to listen to the Earth and the old ways, the pandemic presents an opportunity to turn away from the clutter and distractions of our outer life, to the deeper roots of our being. Here our soul nourishes us, here we can be replenished, and here we can help replenish our world. The Earth is dying from the ravages of our culture’s materialistic nightmare that pollutes the air we breathe and the water we drink and starves our soul of its natural connection to the sacred. In the silence, we can drink deeply of the waters of life that are still pure; we can commune with the primal forces of nature; we can return to what is sacred and essential to our life and to the life of the Earth.

Here in this “other country” the air is not toxic, and the miasma of today’s world in this post-truth era does not blur our vision. The laughter of children rings true. Stillness is here, and the seasons are in balance. In our psyche and soul there are still wild places where there are no pesticides or poisons, and the ancient knowing of the Earth is still accessible.

As our world has been turned upside down by the spread of a virus, threatening our health and well-being, ruining our global economy and its vision of eternal economic growth, out here on the coast of Northern California it has been a most beautiful spring. Now the wild roses are falling pink over fence, foxgloves opening, and soon the clematis will flower purple. Just yesterday evening I saw a fawn and her mother emerge from the trees beside our house, the fawn tiny and still speckled. I watch nature telling me another story, one of regeneration and rebirth, of eternal cycles of change and becoming. And I am trying to listen, to attune to this deeper wisdom. These days I do not do much; I have slowed down as I have become older. I go for my morning walk, I water the young vegetable plants in the garden, wondering how the tomatoes will be this year. I am fortunate not to be on the front lines of the pandemic, not to be fearful for health or hunger. But I do sense there is a different way to be, not caught in consumerism or plans for a future that will never happen. Today there was a rainstorm, unusual for this time of year.

We do not know how this pandemic will change our lives, change the scenery of our world. For how long will “social distancing” remain? Will we ever return to cheap crowded flights? How long and desperate will the food lines get? It is as if someone has pulled the thread that held it all together, even as we struggle to “return to normal.” But the question is, what story are we trying to tell ourselves? Or are we between stories, in a state of unknowing and insecurity? What are our dreams telling us, what is the message of our hearts? As Leonard Cohen sings, “There is a crack in everything, That’s how the

light gets in.” Is this a moment when the light can come in through the cracks, through the structures in our civilization that have been shown to fail?

I do not expect any answers. Instead I try to return to the simplicity of what is, a branch bending in the wind, the dappled sunlight and shadows cast through the trees. I am grateful to live in the midst of nature, watching evening clouds pink across the bay, knowing that over the hill water is wilder, the ocean with its rip tides and currents. But even when I am staying in a city I try to find the ordinary, my neighbor walking her dog, a young mother pushing a child in a stroller. I like to walk to the store and buy milk and bread. Being older I have few desires left; life’s illusions have passed me by. Watching a woodpecker at the bird-feeder, a chipmunk scurrying to catch the fallen seeds—life is full of these moments.

We are living in a time of profound imbalance, extreme social and economic inequality even as the natural world is being thrown into climate collapse and ecocide. This is what happens when a civilization fails, when we come to the end of an era. And stuck in our present patterns of divisiveness, of competition and conflict, we do not have any real solutions. But there is different way to be, “another country” that is not so far away, but in the ground under our feet, in the movement of the wind and water flowing over stones. This is the wisdom of the Tao, of the feminine, life itself: mysterious, magical, waiting to be rediscovered.

So the question remains: if we are to walk into this different land—not the battle-scarred landscape of our drive to fight and control nature, of clear-cut forests and vast monoculture fields, but a return to wholeness, to a sustainability that reaches deep into the Earth—where will we begin? Could it be it as simple as returning, reconnecting with what is sacred and simple around us, the living connections that are already present but often overlooked?

Putting aside our daily concerns and our mind’s clutter, we can learn to be present to the presence of the sacred in each moment. Every moment is unique, offering its own way to connect to what is deepest within us, to the wonder and mystery of being fully alive. This belongs to the primal vision of the Tao, which recognizes the interconnected unity found everywhere:

How can the divine Oneness be seen?
In beautiful forms, breathtaking wonders,
awe-inspiring miracles?
The Tao is not obliged to present itself
in this way.

If you are willing to be lived by it, you will
see it everywhere, even in the most
ordinary things.
Lao Tzu

Will this solve the problems of our present time, the crisis of the pandemic and the coming darker days of climate collapse? Maybe there is a way to be that does not consider our present predicament as a problem to be solved, which is our conditioned mind-set, but as an opportunity to awaken from a dream that is killing us, destroying the fragile web of life that supports us, poisoning our souls. We have lived so long in the wasteland of this dream that we cannot image what it means to be awake. We have even

imprisoned our images of spirituality in the box of personal fulfillment, and have long forgotten that awakening belongs to life itself, as in the single white flower held up by the Buddha in the famous “Flower Sermon.”

Maybe then the simplest response is to return to what is real, to the “suchness of things.” This does not mean that we do not respond to the pain of the pandemic, or work to alleviate the climate crisis. But rather that we hold in our hearts and hands a different knowing, a different way to be. We rediscover what it means to be fully alive and present, awake in the world around us, in what is most simple and essential. Do we really need single-use plastic bottles for water, or global food supply chains so that we can eat avocados year-round? Or can we acknowledge what is most obvious, that this dying dream, this global civilization of exploitation and unnecessary consumption, is over?

This pandemic has already taught us something very simple, the value of care and community, the threads of love that connect us to each other and to life. This is one example of what we need in order to transition to the future that is waiting. To quote Richard Powers in a recent interview in Emergence Magazine:

We have to escape the life of commodity and replace it with the life of community. We have to give up this notion that human destiny is to manage and control and to dominate, and replace it with the idea that human destiny depends—as all other destinies do—on making ourselves better at adapting to the environment, because the environment is 99 percent living things.²

We are not separate but an integral part of the web of life, which is why we should not fight nature but find a way to co-operate, to work together with each other and the world around us. This might appear too simple in the face of life’s multiple challenges, the pandemic and our present political divisiveness, but it is an essential foundation for a way of life that is sustainable not just for ourselves but also for the other-than-human world to which we belong. It is a place of balance that belongs to the natural order of things.

As a postscript, the day after I had finished writing this article, a friend sent me the following beautiful poem by the New Zealand writer Nadine Anne Hura, who wrote it on the train home after the announcement of total lockdown was made in Aotearoa, New Zealand. It resonates so deeply with what I am trying to say (and says it much better). I love both the message of the poem and the synchronicity with which it arrived, an affirmation of what the Earth needs from us at this time.

Rest now, e Papatāngi nuku

Breathe easy and settle

Right here where you are

We’ll not move upon you

For awhile

We’ll stop, we’ll cease

We’ll slow down and stay home

Draw each other close and be kind

Kinder than we've ever been.

I wish we could say we were doing it for you

as much as ourselves

But hei aha

We're doing it anyway

It's right. It's time.

Time to return

Time to remember

Time to listen and forgive

Time to withhold judgment

Time to cry

Time to think

About others

Remove our shoes

Press hands to soil

Sift grains between fingers

Gentle palms

Time to plant

Time to wait

Time to notice

To whom we belong

For now it's just you

And the wind

And the forests and the oceans and the sky full of rain

Finally, it's raining!

Ka turuturu te wai kamo o Rangi ki runga i a koe

Embrace it

This sacrifice of solitude we have carved out for you

He iti noaiho — a small offering

People always said it wasn't possible

To ground flights and stay home and stop our habits of consumption

But it was

It always was.

We were just afraid of how much it was going to hurt

— and it IS hurting and it will hurt and continue to hurt

But not as much as you have been hurt.

So be still now

Wrap your hills around our absence

Loosen the concrete belt cinched tight at your waist

Rest.

Breathe.

Recover.

Heal —

And we will do the same.³ —†

1 C.J. Jung, *Mysterium Coniunctionis*, para. 604n.

2 <https://emergencemagazine.org>.

3 Reprinted by permission of Nadine Anne Hura.