

PRINCIPLES OF PLANETARY HOSPICE



by **Zhiwa Woodbury**

© (Reproduction for *other than* non-profit, educational use prohibited without express written authorization)

“Perhaps the most important reason for ‘lamenting’ is that it helps us to realize our oneness with all things, to know that all things are our relatives.”

~ Black Elk

[Cover Quote From: Brown, J. (ed.). 1953. *The Sacred Pipe: Black Elk's Account of the Seven Rites of the Oglala Sioux*. Norman, OK: Univ. of Oklahoma Press. (p. 46).]

The response to my paper *Planetary Hospice: Rebirthing Planet Earth*, has been really heartening, and also a little puzzling in places. Thanks to the generous endorsement by Joanna Macy, it quickly went viral - including overseas translations, which is a most hopeful sign. My paper seems to have provided a timely spark igniting what is now being referred to by many as a movement. So before delving deeper into some of the issues raised by my preliminary paper, which was purposely a mile wide and an inch deep, I'd like to acknowledge the real *leaders* of this 'movement' -- those wise 'elders'¹ that have been laying all the necessary groundwork for a planetary shift in attitudes revolving around the end of life as we know it on, and the beginning of a new relationship with, our mother, Earth.

Of course it is safe to say that Joanna's [Great Turning](#) -- "the epochal transition from empire to Earth community" -- is the mother ship for any Planetary Hospice Movement, but other luminaries blazing a trail of light into this new, uncertain future include: [Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee](#), who has just released a book entitled *Darkening of the Light: Witnessing the End of an Era*; Charles Eisenstein, who provides a sound philosophy for our movement in his brilliant book *A More Beautiful World Your Heart Knows Is Possible* (which is freely available on-line), [Carolyn Baker](#) and [Guy McPherson](#) (who, I believe, actually coined the term 'planetary hospice'), who have a new collaborative book due soon, [Extinction Dialogues](#), and another upcoming one tentatively entitled *Love In The Age Of Ecological Apocalypse: The Relationships We Need To Thrive* (due Jan. 2015); the [Griefwalker](#), Stephen Jenkinsen; eco-philosopher [David Loy](#); the amazing ecopsychologist and terrapsychologist [Craig Chalquist](#), and many others as

¹ Elders in the Buddhist sense of those ahead of us on the path we are treading.

well. Joanna has co-authored a new book with Chris Johnstone, *Active Hope*, and is (appropriately enough) about to release a revised version of her amazing book, *Coming Back to Life*, and Carolyn Baker graciously took over the recently departed and dearly missed Mike Ruppert's weekly radio program, *Lifeboat*. Clearly, this emergent literary genre is giving birth to a movement, and 'Planetary Hospice' is as good a name for it as any.

I bring a fairly unique perspective to this burgeoning movement, culled from many years on the front lines (as an eco-activist-attorney) battling the forces of darkness over preservation of public wild lands and wildlife (and advocating for climate sanity in the media as well), a deeply entrenched dharma practice, a decade of volunteer hospice service, and now, informed by all of that real-life-and-death experience, an advanced degree in ecopsychology.² I have begun to think of myself as an 'earthanatologist' (earth-thanatology, defined here as the study of the needs of people and communities during a time of heightened global mortality). My intention for the time being is to add flesh to the bones I strung together in the first paper. Based on the personal responses I have received to that paper, along with some of the reactions I have gleaned from surfing the Indra-net, it seems that there is a pressing need to be much more clear about how hospice principles might guide the development of this nascent movement.

As I am currently serving at the most amazing hospice in the U.S., if not the world - the Zen Hospice Project started by Suzuki Roshi in response to the AIDS crisis here in San Francisco in the 1980s, and warmly endorsed by H.H. Dalai Lama as well - I think it would be instructive to structure this exploration according to the five principles that we apply in our attendance to the

² Ecopsychology is meant to supplant, and not be co-opted by, mainstream 'psychology', which has increasingly become a part of the problem, and only incidentally a part of the solution. Thus, while I will never have or seek board certification, I consider myself an ecopsychologist, with an M.A. in East/West Psychology and a doctorate in natural law (J.D.).

dying and their loved ones here at ZHP. These guidelines for mindful engagement can provide a powerful container for all the swirling emotions, confusion, energies, hopes, and despair that seem to be engendered by the prevailing uncertainty over climate change.

I've seen so much unnecessary burn-out and disillusionment in my career as an advocate for natural ecosystems, and so much great energy and idealistic enthusiasm dissipated by those understandable, but misguided, emotional reactions, that I feel some urgency at this formative stage to forge and temper the spiritual container for the Planetary Hospice Movement, so that it may become large enough and powerful enough to collectively embody all of our virtuous aspirations and foster the kind of psychological 'ecoresiliency'³ we are being called upon to cultivate as we move forward on our own paths and within our collective 'heartsteads,' or ecocommunity circles.

Caregiving Principle #1: Practice Don't Know Mind

Uncertainty, when accepted, sheds a bright light on the power of intention. That is what you can count on: not the outcome, but the motivation you bring, the vision you hold, the compass setting you choose to follow.

~ Joanna Macy

I want to start here, because I was rather surprised to find some very thoughtful commentary on Planetary Hospice which represented my view as one of anticipating the extinction of the human species, and even *all life* on the planet! In my own circles, I am often accused of being dystopian. However, I actually strive to avoid assuming that worse-case scenarios will necessarily come to pass. To read this into Planetary Hospice is to misread our starting point. In truth, I am an eternal optimist, and I see these mischaracterizations as

³ Craig Chalquist's term - he is launching an [Ecoresilience Program](#) at Calif. Institute for Integral Studies this year.

reflecting a very deep, understandable strain of emotional reactivity possessed by those who reflexively cast these shadows onto my scrupulously sober reflections.

The terminal diagnosis that is the underlying premise of Planetary Hospice is, as I suppose I could have been more careful in describing, *the end of life as we have come to know it*. For an individual, a terminal diagnosis means impending death. But for 7 billion individuals - while I personally suspect that a severe population contraction is inevitable - the equivalent of an individual death sentence is the impending demise of the incredibly rich diversity of interdependent plant and animals species that we have enjoyed since 'the time when the memory of [humans] runneth not to the contrary' (the evocative legal definition of *time immemorial*).

As an ecopsychologist, I ponder a lot over just what it means to be 'human' - and if we do not in fact risk losing our humanity when we engender a world without grizzly and polar bears, penguins and walruses, tigers and snow leopards, [elephants](#) and rhinos, choral reefs and whales, or even, alas, [monarch butterflies](#). Africa happens to be on the [front burner](#) of climate change, and already what were once periodic droughts have become chronic droughts, and last-gasp water holes that matriarchal elephants have always depended on leading their herds to in the most extreme droughts have been erased from the landscape, if not their memory. Can we imagine anything sadder than that exhausted herd of elephants with babies in tow, after the long ordeal they must endure to survive, an ordeal they have always endured, arriving at a dry depression of earth where there has always been reliable water? This diminishes us as a species, as do polar bears drowning at sea for lack of ice and food, and over time these kind of diminutions in spirit will rob us of our own memories of life on earth. Africa is, after all, the

place we all emerged from, a place of great seasonal floods that precipitated and nourished the beginnings of agriculture, and there was once a Garden there...

So it is hardly necessary to presume the extinction of all life on the planet, and it seems rather incredulous to be so presumptuous as well. I think Thoreau got it right when he observed: “I have seen how the foundations of the world are laid, and I have not the least doubt that it will stand a good while.” To unnecessarily descend into the kind of extreme dystopianism that sees humans snuffing out all life on planet Earth itself suffers from the kind of hubris which has landed us in this predicament to begin with. In nearly three decades of advocating for environmental sanity, one of the most persistent foes I came up against was hubris: the idea that humans actually know what the hell we are doing and can predict how things will turn out.

I suppose it is a natural response to ridiculous climate change deniers to go to the other extreme, and I think it is a fine subject for cautionary myths and apocalyptic fictions, which have real utility in themselves. But what really concerns climate scientists the most is not so much what we know, which is that changing the chemistry of the atmosphere and oceans threatens the precarious balance that life as we know it evolved with and depends upon, as what we do NOT know -- which is how all the confounding and hidden variables might play out, and what will REALLY transpire once we increase the average global temperature by two degrees, let alone four degrees or more.

WE DO NOT REALLY KNOW! And isn't that the point here? For our purposes - alleviating unnecessary suffering - isn't it enough not to know the outcome?

We are conducting this grand experiment, like in *Cat's Cradle* by Kurt Vonnegut where someone drops a beaker full of the new compound 'ice-9' into the ocean, and it sets off an

unstoppable chain reaction that causes all the oceans of the world to freeze up. We have a pretty good idea that at 2 degrees C, which seems like the *best* case scenario now, the experiment will no longer be controllable, and even at that so-called “acceptable” level (i.e., the red-line presented to politicians by the IPCC), 20-30% of all plant and animal species face a significant risk of extinction. We even know that current extinction rates planet-wide are a thousand times greater than what would be expected naturally. But to say we know that will result in the end of all life on the planet is no different really than saying that climate change will actually make it easier to grow food and to live in what have always been inhospitable areas closer to the poles.

And, of course, even *this* analysis assumes that the IPCC can reliably predict average temperature rises for the future based upon projected carbon loads from fossil fuels, which my last paper attempted to show is itself another kind of hubris - one driven in part by the *need for politically acceptable consensus* from such a large body of cross-disciplinary scientists, knowing all the while that anything less than the most ‘conservative’ estimate leaves them vulnerable to the paid hacks of industry whose mission is to debunk climate change as a ‘theory.’ It is no coincidence, therefore, that the IPCC models consistently underestimate impacts of carbon emissions on climate, both in scope and timing.

Really, the *most* we can say with any real certainty is that things already look rather bleak at 1C average increase (melting, floods, fires, storms, extinctions, etc.), and given the 30-50 year lag time from emissions to impacts, things are going to get a whole lot worse before they get better. That’s a safe enough assumption. And operable -- what more do we really need to know? It is much like the Buddha’s allegory of the man who is hit with an arrow in his thigh. Does he

really need to know who fired the arrow, from where it was fired, and the motivation for shooting it into the air before having the arrow pulled and the wound treated?

It is understandable, and from a climate activist's standpoint probably necessary, to jump into the abyss of uncertainty regarding the future consequences of our present destructive actions. However, the Planetary Hospice Movement is not another kind of political activism. It is instead a kind of spiritual activism that is concerned only with appropriate responses to the realities we face - kind of a spiritual equivalent to Doctors Without Borders. The fact that the results of this global experiment are not predictable is actually what should *terrify* us the most (as it does the scientists), given the ubiquitous law of unintended consequences that has attended nearly every environmental manipulation we've ever pursued. But psychologically, we seem to have a defense mechanism against that abyss of uncertainty, which explains both denial and its opposite - pretending that we know how deep the abyss is, which here manifests as the tendency to assume that the world will surely end. I suspect the former, and more common, *utopian* reaction is typical of those who are unreasonably certain of their religious beliefs (read: 'insecure'), while dystopian emotional reactivity may be indicative of someone who lacks deeply held spiritual beliefs.

Both of these extremes, utopian denial and dystopian despair, seem to be emotional reactions to deep-seated fear. Fear is not a problem. Only unacknowledged fears create emotional disturbance. A big part of the spiritual work we each need to do on our own is to confront our fears and process through them, asking ourselves what their source is. One of the most powerful responses I got to my first paper was from a fellow hospice caregiver who told me, with wide-eyed wonder, that reading my paper put her in touch with her own denial.

This utopianism vs. dystopianism is an incarnation of the age-old *eternalism vs. nihilism* reactive world view dichotomy which prompted the Buddha to elucidate a more sensible middle way. As earthanatologists, we need to see both utopian denialism and dystopian fatalism as the twin causes of unnecessary suffering, and deal with each compassionately and wisely while hewing to a middle way that eschews moral judgment over such understandable emotional responses. Both views are symptomatic of an inadequate spiritual container. The whole point of Planetary Hospice is to offer an alternative framework, a spiritual container, which is up to the task of holding suffering, no matter what form it takes. That begins with each of us, and if those we encounter are inspired to meet us in the middle, so much the better.

When someone comes into hospice, there is a strong psychological predilection to think that they will die before we hospice workers will. But guess what? We don't know that! Sometimes people come into hospice and get better. Sometimes hospice workers die in car accidents on their way home. The most humane attitude we can adopt, therefore, is what Suzuki Roshi termed "don't know mind."

There is no question that climate change has already begun to cause widespread migration and mortality, just as the International Energy Agency predicted many years ago would happen. This much, we know. Here is a very apt summation of this fact from a rather [unlikely source](#) (an evangelical Christian blogger, bless his soul): ⁴

The catastrophic 2011-12 droughts in the Russian, Australian and American breadbaskets drove global spikes in grain prices that resulted in intense food riots in North Africa, later known as the Arab Spring. The multi-year drought in Syria drove a tide of small farmers off their land into urban slums, intensifying pressures that led to the bloody civil war that still rages there. The Darfur genocide of the

⁴ I say unlikely because of my perception that there is a strong tendency with Christian Evangelicals to quickly resort to end-times Biblical prophecy, which assumes of course that God, and not humans, is in control of the situation. It is encouraging to see something constructive like this instead.

last decade has been widely called the first climate change war, as Muslim pastoralists fleeing persistent drought clashed with Christian agrarian villagers.

And since Planetary Hospice was written, a report has been issued by the United Nations University's Institute for Environment and Human Security acknowledging that “[h]undreds of thousands of people are already migrating because of climate change...” Finally, there is no need to “predict” the extinction of salt-water fish species -- according to one of the lead researchers from an international study, it is happening “right now.”

So it is enough to simply recognize and acknowledge what is unfolding all around us, the very real suffering associated with these cascading developments and the prevalent absence of psychological tools for dealing with all of this calamity, without speculating about the survival of the human species. Regarding future outcomes, there is wisdom in the practice of “don't know” mind. This doesn't mean we don't acknowledge the whole range of unattractive possibilities. Rather, it means avoiding unnecessary fatalism regarding those future outcomes, and dealing instead with witnessing and accommodating what is unfolding in the present moment.

For this movement to take hold, which it must if we are to alleviate untold and ongoing suffering, then we must content ourselves with the already prodigious task of getting a handle on what is happening globally, locally, and individually *right now*. Leave the grandiose predictions to others, if you will. This is a compassion movement, not a political one. It requires humility, and there is no room for political, scientific, or spiritual hubris.

Hospice is a subset of palliative care, and the concern of the Planetary Hospice Movement is itself palliative.⁵ To ‘palliate’ means “to lessen the severity of (pain, disease, etc.) without curing... [to] alleviate; mitigate.” It doesn't mean that palliative care is incompatible

⁵ I suppose I could have avoided some misunderstandings by choosing this term rather than hospice, but it is important to push people's buttons on issues of impermanence, death, and species extinction.

with a course of treatment that may lead to a cure; rather, it is the physical, psychological, and spiritual suffering that is of concern to the palliative care team. That is the nature of the spiritual container for the Planetary Hospice Movement as well. It is concerned neither with saving nor condemning the world during this time of great dying and grieving. Instead, it's over-riding, if not sole, concern is to alleviate the suffering attended with these most unfortunate times.

At the risk of betraying just how jaded and pessimistic I *used* to be, I much confess that one of my favorite cartoons ever is weirdly instructive here. It shows Chicken Little seated at a bar with a beer in front of him, and he says: "Man, it's really coming down out there..."

Caregiving Principle #2: Be Integral in Your Approach

Perhaps the noblest private act is the unheralded effort to return: to open our hearts once they've closed, to open our souls once they've shied away, to soften our minds once they've been hardened by the storms of our day.

~ Mark Nepo ⁶

Everyone suffers. For those brave among us who are globally aware and empathically engaged, we are all hurting at this point in time. And it doesn't do a whit of good for any of us to stuff that wounded sensibility. We are not martyrs here. We're humans being. If we are holistic beings, then nature's wounds are our own. In fact, they are what unites us. Our weakness in the face of climate catastrophe can actually be a source of strength -- but only if we have the courage to acknowledge it. As anyone who has served in hospice or explored Buddhism knows, until we find it in our wounded hearts to have compassion for our own suffering, we can be of no real use to others. At the same time, however, we are not victims. We own our own pain, rather than looking outward to affix blame.

⁶ From *Hearing the Cries of the World*, excerpted from Mark Nepo's book in progress in the Summer 2013 *Parabola Magazine*.

Integrity walks hand-in-hand with humility. It requires us to integrate our strengths and weaknesses into our increasingly whole self. Before I first cross that sacred threshold into the room of someone who is dying, what helps me the most is to take just a moment to reconnect with my own sacred woundedness. The only way we can really be open-hearted, after all, is if our heart has been broken open. Most people contract tightly around a broken heart, letting it scab over and then fiercely protecting that scar. But if we are able instead to *accommodate* our wounded heart, which is a golden gateway to spiritual life, if we are able even to recall the pain from time to time without the contraction of emotional reactivity (our “buttons”), then we find that there is actually a sublimity to suffering which unites us with all who are ‘other.’

There is nobody walking this earth who has not had their heart broken. If we develop the spiritual container to carry that broken heart around in our life, to keep it fresh without feeling like a victim, to own up to our pain, then it becomes an amazing, inexhaustible source of compassion, nourishment, and even joy. I think this might be the secret to *Seva*, or service. I heard a Tibetan lama, Anam Thubten, once say that we should not be afraid to take on more and more suffering in *tonglen* (taking and giving) practice, because the human heart has an infinite capacity for expansion through compassion -- when it is open, that is. In a similar vein, Joanna Macy says that “[w]hen we open our eyes to what is happening, even when it breaks our hearts, we discover our true dimensions, for our heart, when it breaks open, can hold the whole universe” (Tricycle 2011). Certainly, nobody is a better example of this than His Holiness the Dalai Lama, whose heart breaks every day for what has happened, and is happening, to his people. And still, nobody’s joy for life is more infectious than the Dalai Lama’s.

I call this vital, responsive quality my “broke-open-heartedness.” By touching the rawness of this open-hearted awareness just before walking into the place of someone else’s suffering, I am able to simply be present with them, to do whatever it is I can for them in the moment. That often means just sitting with them silently. But if we are able to sit with compassionate presence, people invariably respond to it. There is no sense of fear or despair, and certainly no pity, from the side of the compassionate caregiver -- any one of which would act as an emotional wall. And if the hospice resident is experiencing fear or despair, or feeling sorry for themselves, then there is room in the caregiver to contain that, because we are not contracting around our own psychological suffering, closing ourselves off to the other’s difficult emotions. Simply stated, emotional reactivity blocks our capacity for empathetic responsiveness, because one is a contraction (in Buddhism, *dukkha*) while the other is an expansion (*sukkha*). They are mutually exclusionary.

This all may sound very basic and simple - because it is - but if someone is wanting to devote their time and energy, their life even, to alleviating the suffering and emotional turmoil that is now beginning to flow from ecological disruption, and will continue to build for at least a few more decades to flood stage, then it is essential that they begin right here, with the matter of their own wounded heart.

One of the founders of ecopsychology, [Theodore Roszak](#), called this capacity having a psyche (or heart) as big as the world. As Roszak put it, “freeing the ecological unconscious may be the key to sanity in our time.”⁷ This liberation of our eco-psyche begins with facing into the emotional storm inside us that is quite *literally* now our ‘wounded nature’ -- in order that we may

⁷ Roszak, T., from the book *Ecotherapy* (2009), edited by Buzzell & Chalquist (S.F., CA: Sierra Club Books), p. 36.

recover the full measure of our own sanity. In most of us, that storm is raging in the depths of our subconscious, and may actually be stored (stuffed) in the [neural tissue](#) of our heart.⁸ We must be able to stare into the abyss while maintaining our composure with grace. Once we have developed this capacity that connects our psyche (*anima*) to the Earth's wisdom (*anima mundi*), which is not quite as mysterious as it sounds, then no matter what we are doing to contribute to the necessary, compensatory transformations that are already starting to take hold in the world, this quality of compassionate integrity, this unity of weakness and strength, will strike a resonant chord with those around us. It will not only sustain us, allowing us to avoid burn-out, but will be a source of strength for others as well, resulting in a cascading benefits for the planet.

An important point needs to be made here, in the nature of a disclaimer. We cannot wait until we are whole, or fully healed, before tending to the healing of others. As long as our psyche is bound up in nature, as long as we remain heart-connected to our mother, Earth, we will never be fully healed. The point of getting in touch with our broken heart, or even picking the scab off an improperly healed heart, is not to finally heal it or even find closure. Rather, it is to learn to live in a state of constant healing, knowing that we can never be whole. That is a hard spiritual pill for some people to swallow.

What's the alternative? Exactly so. This is the only rational response. Even in that sobering acknowledgment, there is solace. And when we know we are doing all we can do, there is room for joy in our efforts. People who don't know about hospice have all kinds of funny ideas about it. They think it is a sober, solemn, even morbid thing to do. But people who work and serve in hospice know otherwise. It is actually a joyous form of service, though everyone

⁸ Neurocardiologists now tell us that over half of the cells in our heart are actually neural cells, not muscle cells as was previously believed.

comes into it with unresolved grief to work through. As a rule, people are incredibly sweet at the end of life. It's an extraordinary privilege to be allowed into that sacred space. We laugh a lot more than we cry. And when we do cry, it is almost always cathartic. We become a little more whole. Tears of laughter, joy, and sorrow all share the same salty sweetness. Hospice makes one *feel*, and in that feeling there is the fullness of humanity, that place where we are able to touch sacred ground. It's why so many volunteer caregivers keep coming back - it's so *fertile*.

Remember, the word "human" comes from the root "humus" - soil, the death and decay from which all life takes root. For some reason, we have increasingly segregated death from life in our culture. But sit in a grove of old growth trees in the middle of a forest, and we see no such separation. Instead, we see how nature uses death to nourish life. That is the nursery from which the Planetary Hospice Movement is emerging.

Caregiving Principle #3: Resistance is Futile!

*Though you hold fast, you cannot stay
What benefit is there
In being frightened and scared
of what is unalterable?*

~ Buddha

The growing sense I get from surveying the responses to *Planetary Hospice: Rebirthing Planet Earth* is that not everyone involved in this movement has really done this inner work, or perhaps hasn't gone as deep as they need to. And I'm not necessarily excluding myself here. In fact, what I think I am really beginning to understand is that denial is not an either/or proposition, but is instead an evolving state of mind that continues to shape-shift according to whatever fears remain unacknowledged inside us.

For example, it seems climate activists simply do not want to hear the word ‘hospice’ used in relation to the planetary situation - probably because they are too invested in the outcomes of their noble efforts. I suspect this is part of the reason the inconvenient truth of the 30-50 year lag time between what we do and the contribution of that action to climate change is rarely mentioned. People, especially those most concerned and most active in advocating for changes, are understandably afraid of the idea that things will continue to unravel for a period of decades on the already tenuous ground we currently stand on - *even if* we finally get a handle on fossil fuel emissions. What is at the core of that fear?

Joanna Macy believes we have become such control freaks with all the conditioning from pursuing manifest destiny that we are simply unwilling to admit that we are losing control over this ongoing global experiment. Politically, I think climate activists in particular justifiably fear that they will not be able to effect the necessary political changes if the rewards they are pushing for lie far in the future. As a long-time activist myself, I could never stomach dishonesty in political advocacy, without regard to the motives. Early in the Obama administration, there was a concerted effort to pass carbon-trading legislation that would have given the appearance of “solving” climate change without actually being anywhere near adequate. My response in opposing this was that if you are standing at the edge of a chasm, you don’t try to convince people to jump half-way across it on the basis that this is the best that can be accomplished. What is to be gained by selling false hope? Hospice teaches us it is far better to redefine hope from a more genuine perspective that honors life.

At its core, hospice is about learning what it means to bear witness to situations that we naturally, or at least reflexively, resist. In order to develop the kind of presence that allows us to

bear witness in a most powerful, healing way, we are called upon to reach deep inside and find the courage and wisdom to not just accept, but actually *welcome* distasteful truths. All of our aversions are the product of conditioning. To the extent we allow these conditioned responses to hold sway over us without deeply questioning their premises, we are not able to bear witness. Our presence becomes disempowered. *We feel* powerless. Despair is not far behind.

There is a lot of wonderful literature out there on bearing witness, and I will leave it up to anyone who wants to become an effective caregiver to research that topic if they are not already familiar with it. I will just offer a few insights from the planetary hospice perspective.

Usually when we speak of bearing witness, we use the term “to bear” in the sense of holding up, supporting, or remaining firm under the strain of some burden. This is useful in the context of bearing witness to social injustice from the perspective of one who is powerless to do anything about it. You might think that is the sense intended for a caregiver of the Earth as well, since it is common to feel powerless in the face of something as vast and complex as climate change. However, the sense of the term as used here is “to bring forth” or “to give birth to” (dictionary.com). Many people simply have overlooked, or chosen to ignore, that the subtitle of my paper *Planetary Hospice is Rebirthing Planet Earth*. In fact, the full title appears almost nowhere in the hundreds of citations and discussions across the internet. For instance, in a description of a talk by Dr. Taigen Dan Leighton from Roshi Halifax’s [Upaya web site](#), we read: “In contrast to the ‘Planetary Hospice’ point of view, *which sees the effects of climate change as terminal...* Taigen encourages us to follow [Joanna] Macy’s advice and meet the environmental damage with activism, social work... and changing the way we think and feel...”⁹

⁹ This is not to imply for a minute that Roshi Joan would make such a mistake herself - she is one of, if not *the*, most inspirational leaders of the Zen Hospice movement, and surely does not manage the *Upaya* web site herself!

So here, Macy's approach is depicted as optimistic, while Planetary Hospice is clearly being depicted as a pessimistic kind of despair -- this even though Macy herself recommended *Planetary Hospice* to all her colleagues as framing "our work in a way that can release fresh understandings and energy," and even though [the skillful talk itself](#) from Taigen Leighton *offers no such negative depiction*. I was very careful in that paper to specify that the *planetary equivalent* of an individual's terminal diagnosis was the end of life *as we know it* -- a distinction that is entirely lost by noting simply that the paper represents climate change as "terminal." And yet this is not an isolated instance. The thoughtful and insightful blogger referenced earlier starts out his [commentary](#) on the paper this way: "Environmental activist Zhiwa Woodbury concludes that climate change will lead to the extinction of life on our planet..." *Yowza!*

Please do not miss my point here. I have no interest in quibbling or 'setting the record straight.' Rather, it is simply fascinating to me what even thoughtful, intelligent people project onto an admittedly loaded term like 'planetary hospice.' If we steer clear of the 'he said/she said' silliness, there are some deep insights to be gleaned from these startling misrepresentations. If not from my paper or me, then where is the pessimism coming from? Why do people (Taigen Dan not among them, by the way) regularly leave out the rebirthing aspect of the title, when that was really the whole point of writing the paper?

Obviously, I chose the terminology of hospice in order to provoke deep feelings. We are all in a process of self-discovery, we all have unconscious tendencies and, I believe, share a collective unconscious as well. In hospice training, it is incumbent on us to bring some of these shadows to the surface, to acknowledge that we all carry unresolved grief inside. If left

unresolved, these shadows will obscure the light we bring to those in need. Awareness liberates and unites us. One way of cultivating awareness is to look at our projections.

I actually *do* consider myself an optimist, and I *do not* think that climate change will lead to the extinction of life. Of course, it is already causing untold numbers of species to go extinct, but that is hardly the same as saying it will extinguish all life on Planet Earth. Heck, even the most severe extinction events in the Earth's geologic history could not wipe out *all* life. And I happen to believe that humans will definitely survive climate change. For anyone to read my paper and come away with a contrary idea on that question is not, I believe, a reflection on the paper at all, but is instead a reflection of their own resistance to the nature and scope of what is unfolding (unravelling) right before our eyes.

So this is why it is important to understand the meaning of "to bear" in bearing witness to climate change and the havoc it is wreaking on Earth. One thing that has struck me in sitting with people who are actively dying is the similarity of the process with giving birth. In fact, the key indicator for even saying that someone is actively dying is that their breathing becomes *labored*. It sounds a lot like someone going into labor, and just as with birth, the length of time they remain in that labored state is completely unpredictable -- it can be minutes, or it can and often is days. From the scientific materialist point of view that we have all been conditioned to believe in modern society, consciousness arises from electro-chemical reactions in the material of the brain, and once the body dies, life is at an end. It would be extremely difficult to attend to an actively dying person if that was your belief.

From my own perspective, the *body* is dying, of that there can be no doubt, but at the same time it seems very apparent that something else is being borne. This is not just superstition,

either -- it is a more modern scientific view, a quantum view of non-local, non-temporal consciousness, in contrast to the outdated but still dominant view that dates back to Decartes. If you don't believe me, and there is no reason you should on this point, then maybe you would take the word of someone like cardiologist and researcher [Dr. Pim van Lommel, M.D.](#), [Dr. Ian Stevenson](#)¹⁰, [Dr. Robert Lanza](#) or many other skeptics who have been convinced by a large body of evidence that consciousness continues quite "consciously" after the body dies. Stated simply, modern quantum science supports a world view where matter (body) is an emergent property of consciousness (mind), and not the other way around - as science has assumed since Decartes.

Much more probably needs to be said on this, but for the purposes of this paper, just stop reading and think for a second the implications of that emerging quantum world view on how we think of the great dying involved in the climate crisis. Then combine that idea of bearing witness to some kind of spiritual rebirth with the 'don't-know' mind discussed earlier. What are we bearing witness to when somebody dies? We don't really know, but it is some kind of difficult birthing process we label "dying" based on the materialist (physical) evidence, and if we can just welcome the whole experience without rejecting the parts we've been conditioned to resist, if we can simply hold their hand and let them know they are loved and we are there for them, then we become spiritual midwives.

So now, apply this to the end of life as we know it that is unfolding with the climate crisis. What are we bearing witness to in this century of rapidly accelerating climate change? We don't really know, but it is some kind of difficult transformation of life on Earth we label 'ecocide' or 'the great dying' based upon the disappearance of species at unprecedented rates, or

¹⁰ The book *Life Before Life* is a fascinating treatment of the topic intended for more general audiences, and a must read for anyone who is interested in, but skeptical of, reincarnation.

‘climate catastrophe’ based upon the mass mortality and migrations of our species that are beginning to spread across the globe due to food and water scarcity.

The challenge of our time is to take a *really* long-term view, and welcome the *whole* experience as some kind of necessary (admittedly difficult) transition from the spiritual vacuity of the industrial age to the spiritual vibrancy of a post-industrial, non-exploitive human society. Welcoming the difficult parts does NOT mean we do not continue to advocate for sensible solutions, as progressive changes will continue to be necessary to minimize impacts to the greatest extent possible. There is nothing mutually exclusive about welcoming reality in all its messiness while continuing to work for a better future -- if anything, it is our refusal to accept the distasteful elements of a changing world that limits our effectiveness in adapting to it.

Imagine a situation where a midwife refused to acknowledge and accept the fact that a baby she was trying to deliver had the umbilical chord wrapped around its neck, in spite of all the evidence this was the case, simply because she didn’t want to believe that babies could even survive that kind of trauma (or should have to). Rebirthing the planet Earth is not going to be all that different than this metaphor. We’ve been wrapping that chord around our necks for some time now. It is time to acknowledge that this happens to be the situation we face, and focus on making the best of a difficult situation. It is an undeniable fact of human existence that it is through adversity that we grow. This is likely to be the greatest adversity we have ever faced as a species, and thus represents the greatest spiritual growth potential we have ever encountered.

Illness, pain, and death are all necessary aspects of the human experience. But suffering is not. This is the radical insight of Buddha’s awakening. Suffering is an emotional reaction to these inevitabilities, a way that we rage against impermanence, and only one way of responding.

By accepting reality and acknowledging our deepest fears, those very fears can be transformed into a source of fierce intelligence and wise power, liberating us in a way that releases us into service. By contrast, our reflexive contraction around a wounded sense of self, or around an unnecessary despair over the fact that we now are facing a difficult, even dark, age will only layer added suffering onto the pain of rebirth. We've experienced dark ages before.

While it is beyond the scope of this paper, this points to the importance of ritual and myth in meeting these challenges. There is a reason, for example, we bring a living tree into the warmth of our homes at the coldest time of the year, and decorate it with lights on the longest night. We have always, as a culturally vibrant species, been able to keep the light alive in the darkest of times, and there is no reason to think we will not do so again now. More to the point, what greater honor and calling can there be during such times than to be a keeper of the flame?

Caregiver Principle #4: Don't Hesitate

*May we realize that there is no time to waste,
Death being definite but the time of death indefinite.
What has gathered will separate, what has been
accumulated will be consumed without residue,
At the end of a rising comes descent,
the finality of birth is death.*

~ Losi Chokyi Gyeltsen (Panchen Lama)

Humans crave certainty, especially in relation to the future. I am quite certain that anyone reading this, and anyone they happen to love, will be dead 100 years from now. What the world will look like then, by contrast, is quite uncertain. Waiting for the future, like nostalgically dwelling on our past, robs of the rich experience and vibrancy of the present moment. What is the appropriate response to our justifiable concern that our beautiful national forests are increasingly at risk of extinction due to longer fire seasons, increased UV radiation, depleted

snowpacks, and the virulent beetle infestations resulting from an absence of prolonged cold-snaps? *To get out in the wilderness and enjoy its immense beauty!* Beauty, like life, is impermanent, and when we fully appreciate this, and stop taking it for granted, then our capacity for joy and awe in the face of beauty and life is immeasurably increased.

In the transformative documentary *Griefwalker*, Stephen Jenkinsen says that if we truly love someone, then we love them knowing from the start that they will die, and we even have to love - *not just accept* - their dying process when it comes. This is a truly radical idea for taking grief onto the spiritual path of our waking, daily life. If we think about what he is saying deeply, it is such an enlightening way of seeing our life. What we tend to do instead is fall in love with something that doesn't exist - our fantasy of what a human *should* be, or how the world *should* exist, which happens to include unchanging, eternal, ever present beauty. As one of my dear friends and former partners likes to say, "we should all over ourselves!" By loving something that does not exist, not only do we set ourselves up for terrible grief when the inevitable curtain of mortality begins to fall on the busy stage of our life, but we also rob ourselves of the opportunity to truly, deeply, *madly* love living being-ness from the start, with all its frailty.

As the Dalai Lama points out, everything and everyone arises containing the seeds of their own destruction. Were it otherwise, life would not be the miracle that it is. Once we see this, we appreciate the miracle, and we love out of a sense of awe and wonder rather than from a fixed and rather cramped psychological space of projection and expectation. Only then are we free to advocate for life while embracing the dying, to love humanity and the world while at the same time lamenting the banality of our collective malignity and the terrible loss of biodiversity.

It may seem perverse to some, but the fact is that we live at a time that offers us a wider spectrum of feeling and awe than at any previous time in human history. We are able to glimpse far into the cosmos, while losing sight of what is most important right in front of us. We are closer than ever to a grand theory of everything while at the same time we risk losing all ‘thingness.’ Even the internet has this double aspect to it, allowing us to finally see just how interconnected and interdependent we all are, permitting us to connect across the globe in ways unimaginable just a few decades ago, while at the same time permitting our corrupt governments to monitor everything we say and do.

It is not surprising, therefore, that some of us are paralyzed or numb with fear and trepidation, while others are experiencing an unprecedented depth of conscious inter-being, loving connection, and spiritual immersion. It is quite as if the living force of *axis mundi* that unites us at a deeply subconscious level is prompting us to make the collective, quantum leap in spirit that it will take for us to transform as a species to a more evolved, cooperative and compassionate state of being,¹¹ and all the messiness and mortality and disruption and turmoil are as much a part of that process as are the unprecedented levels of information and creative exchange and scientific wonder and spiritual compassion and wisdom.

And we are just at the start of this immense mystery of life and death! Those who hesitate will be left behind by the exigencies of circumstance. They will feel lost and bereft, bitter and remorseful. Those who engage at whatever levels and in whatever ways feel appropriate to the exigencies of the moment, with courage and open-heartedness and creativity and awe, will find themselves being called in exactly the direction the Earth needs them to go.

¹¹ For those who think this is “new age” speak: “This world is indeed a living being endowed with a soul and intelligence ... a single visible living entity containing all other living entities, which by their nature are all related.” ~ So saith Plato (!)

We must attend to our inner processing as if our house were on fire, and we must not wait to see how things are going to develop before we start engaging with our friends, families, and communities - including the global community that is coalescing right in our laps, on our laptops - in meaningful ways that are aimed at enriching our lives while at the same time attending to suffering wherever we encounter it and in whatever form.

Why wait? What have we got to lose??

Caregiver Principle #5: Carving Out Sacred Space

*Awakening is neither far nor near, and neither does it come nor go.
It's whether it is seen or not - right in the midst of our afflictions...*

~ Nāgārjuna

It is only in the darkest night of our souls that we learn the true meaning and value of refuge. As Stanislav and Christina Grof have clearly shown, hidden right in the heart of any spiritual emergency is our greatest potential for spiritual emergence.¹² Life teaches us that if we want to live a spiritual life, a life of meaning, then we must learn to carve sacred space out of the wicked turmoil of the profane world we find ourselves immersed in. We can't always wait to go home and sit on our cushion, or take solace from our loved ones, or retreat into the wilderness to find refuge from the storms in our turbulent lives. The whole point of developing a spiritual practice, including meditation, in the peace and quiet of our tidy home or temple is so that we can stabilize the peaceful ground that always lies within, learning how to access it at a moment's notice, and bring it to bear on the most difficult situations we encounter.

¹² See, e.g., [Viggiano & Krippner \(2010\)](#): "Spiritual emergency can be defined as a crisis involving religious, transpersonal, and/or spiritual issues that provides opportunities for growth. Spiritual emergence, meanwhile, lends itself to gentler transformation."

It is presumed when people volunteer for the Zen Hospice Project that they already have a spiritual foundation that includes a meditation practice. I know what an ineffective eco-activist I was until I became grounded in the spiritual tradition that made most sense to me. It should be presumed that anyone who comes to eco-activism has such spiritual grounding. Unfortunately, that is not the case, and it becomes pretty easy to identify those who will burn out quickly and never be heard from again. It is definitely presumed that anyone who is interested in becoming a Planetary Hospice Caregiver is spiritually centered, compassionate, open-hearted and committed to maintaining their composure while all those around them are losing theirs.

That is the whole point, really. The Earth may well be our witness, but she is calling us to be hers. To witness what is disfiguring her without turning away. To dress her wounds with love, and care for her children without regard for how naughty they have been. She is, after all, our mother. It is because of her nurturing bosom that we live. It is because of us, alone among species, that she has fallen ill. It is therefore up to us to nurse her back to health.

The following passage from a palliative care physician captures the symbiotic, sacred nature of this caring relationship quite evocatively. Please keep in mind that this is a metaphor, and it is the spirit of the relationship that is the point here. Read it first in its hospice context, and then think about how it might apply to your own spiritual activism, to Earthanatology, and to how we engage in service to others:

As we reach out to the other who is dying, and we help that other person to move into depth, we are simultaneously reaching out to the one who is mortally wounded and suffering in the depths of our own being. At that moment we are not there as altruistic heroes helping the victim other. *We and the other are both there as wounded ones, each searching for healing, and in this reaching out and reaching in we become wounded healers to self as we are wounded healers to other.* Until we recognize this inner dynamic for ourselves, we will either mistakenly continue to believe that we as caregivers always have the answers to

the other people's problems, or, as patients, continue searching in never ending circles for that someone or something 'out there' who will at last take all our pain away (Kearney, M., 1996, *Mortally Wounded*, p. 151).

I think that passage more than anything else I've found captures the true spirit of the Planetary Hospice Movement. It is a movement of wounded healers brave enough to have their hearts broken over and over again, to keep the wound fresh as long as needed to bring healing to the Earth and all its diverse inhabitants and, perhaps most significantly, to see dying not as some horrific ending, but as another form of healing more mysterious than all the rest. In sacred space, the boundaries between death and birth, self and other, living and dying, grieving and rejoicing, all dissolve in the blinding light that bursts forth and fills the room when the doors of perception are cleansed of all dualistic 'I/me/mine' thinking.

We and our mother, this sacred, living and dying planet, are both here as wounded ones, each searching for healing, for wholeness, and in this reaching out and reaching in we become wounded healers to self as we are wounded healers to other.

As Steven and Ondrea Levine teach in their lovely 'bible' for hospice caregivers, *Who Dies?* (1982), "As long as death is the enemy, life is a struggle" (p. 205). Before they can work with the dying, healers must open to death until "[l]ife and death are seen as the perfect expression of being, each in its own moment, in its appropriate time" (p. 203). 'Who dies?' is one of those koans we carry with us in hospice, like the question from Perceval that finally brings healing to the Fisher King's eternal wound in the Arthurian legend: "*What ails thee?*" It is by appreciating and holding questions such as these that we are able to hold open in our engagement with the world that sacred space we first carve out on a cushion in a corner of our home. While we may not ever really know the answers, we nonetheless act from an unshakable

faith in the mysterious and cyclical dance between death and life to bring open-hearted awareness into every situation.

~*~

This is the sacred spirit of the Planetary Hospice Movement. If you can feel it, please join us. Our numbers are legion. We are here to serve.

*Life is so fragile, no more than a bubble blown to and fro by the wind.
How astonishing to think that after an out-breath there will be an in-breath, or that we will awaken after a night's sleep.*

~ Nāgārjuna