

Living with Purpose in the End Times - Jamie McHugh

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"We know enough of our own history by now to be aware that people exploit what they have merely concluded to be of value, but they defend what they love." - Wendell Berry

I am by nature an optimistic person. Yet, with the bleak statistics about our environmental crisis, I have lost faith in a positive outcome for the planet. In fact, I have become convinced we are living in the end times. But this conclusion does not depress me as much as it makes me more committed to living now. And, as I know from my own life story, even statistics are not absolute predictions. 21 years ago, I was diagnosed with HIV disease. The diagnosis was considered a death sentence then, making me confront some challenging questions: How should I live if tomorrow is not guaranteed? If there is no treatment, how do I treat myself?

Humanity has been given a diagnosis - environmental catastrophe – and is facing similar questions. There is no cure on the horizon. So how do we live from day to day? What can we do individually and collectively to treat the illness? Human beings seem to be wired more for rapid response than for sustained action over time. A cancer diagnosis, like a tsunami, is an emergency, and requires immediate action. Environmental disease, like HIV, is a gradual process of immune dissolution. It's easy to become complacent and not feel the urgency on a day-to-day basis. In fact, many are not even aware they have been diagnosed. Living with a sense of separateness, they don't take the fate of the planet personally, even though they share the same lifeblood – the air, the water and the land.

When diagnosed, I had to wake up and take action on my own behalf, as the experts had no viable solutions at the time. I learned to truly love myself and make my health and well-being a priority. I became less inclined to project ahead into the future, and more willing to live a year at a time. I grew content living with less; having more open space for being in tune with my body's rhythms and my creative expression became a greater need than having material goods. Gradually, I found myself living more out of a love for life rather than from a fear of dying.

My friend and mentor George Solomon (one of the pioneers of PNI: psychoneuroimmunology) compiled the research in 1993 on long-term survivors of AIDS. This was prior to the breakthrough drugs, when there were no medical solutions for HIV. The four enduring themes he identified were:

- Healthy Self-care (I am responsible for my health and well-being)
- Sense of Perspective (I am going to die eventually, but not tomorrow)
- Sense of Purpose (I am here on this planet to do something of value)
- Healthy Relationships and Social Connectedness (I belong and am loved)

In looking back at these four criteria for health, I see how they can serve us as we all come to terms with our collective diagnosis, and the inevitable fear and hopelessness that arise with a terminal illness.

Healthy Self-care: This is a matter of making choices that are within the realm of my own agency. When I am in the city, I ride my bicycle to get aerobic activity as I live on top of a hill, and driving less is beneficial for the ecosystem of the city. I cook at home and eat well; all of my

vegetable scraps are composted and feed my garden. Eating organically is just as much for the health of the land and the water as it is for my body. I recycle and re-use as much as I can to conserve money and materials. My bodily practices of breath, sound, movement, contact and stillness are sustainable tools for tending to my inner ecosystem and conserving my own energy. My trade-off is using my car to drive every other week to my rural retreat - about 3 hours away. Being in nature, being close to the earth, shifts my self-perception.

Sense of perspective: When I am in the wilds, I feel both my insignificance and my vastness. I stand in awe of the power of the planet, and am also aware: this is my body! This perspective expands my self-definition and broadens my circle of awareness. An ongoing practice is to go to the ocean at the end of each day for a simple prayer. With arms outstretched as the sun slides into the ocean, I say aloud, "Thank you for this day." This spoken declaration affirms my gratefulness for being alive on this planet now. This becomes especially meaningful when it has been a difficult or dispiriting day. Expressing this statement daily is a consistent element in a ritual of renewing my contract with the natural world and forces unseen. Through this practice I am reminded of my own nature, my own place, in the mystery of life. Sensing larger forces and a greater intelligence at work reassures me that life on the planet will prevail in spite of our shenanigans.

*Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?* - Mary Oliver

Sense of Purpose: Two years ago, I was leading a retreat at the ocean. During a morning meditation, I heard a clear inner voice: "You need to go and live in nature now. You can't wait until you are partnered, or have a plan; just do it now!" So, off I went, bringing along a new digital camera, and found myself re-discovering my creativity through the focus of a lens. I have been photographing for the past 30 years, making art as a personal meditation. One thing led to the next, though, and within the year, I was commissioned to do a shoot, presented my first exhibit in San Francisco, and had three more shows lined up for the following year. My passion for artistic expression and for the planet intersected into a newfound purpose: being an emissary for nature.

Healthy Relationships and Social Connectedness: Integral to a sense of purpose is my place in culture as an artist and teacher, and the connection it provides me with a wide range of people. For years I have led retreats at Point Reyes National Seashore to support people in finding their own relationship to the natural environment through movement and the expressive arts. Creatively exploring the body awakens the senses to the body outside of our skin. Doom and gloom statistics seem to overwhelm people and increase anxiety and despair. A direct encounter with the natural world, on the other hand, re-awakens love and appreciation for the self and the planet. As a long time environmental educator shared with me at the end of a retreat, "I have been teaching the science of the environment for so long I had forgotten how deeply nature moves my soul. I want to use the arts and senses more from now on with the kids."

Nature is such powerful medicine, and I am moved to share this healing with others. As much as I enjoy taking groups out of the city into nature, I can reach more people by taking my large-format photographs into urban settings, particularly into hospitals and other therapeutic environments, where the soul of nature is needed.

Can we save the planet, and our species, in time? I am not sure, but this much I do know and trust: just as I had to find my own healing solutions and not depend upon experts when first diagnosed, I also need to live my own solutions now and continue to mindfully treat the Earth – materially and spiritually.

What good does it do if I eat organically and give money to environmental organizations if I am simultaneously complicit in fouling the air and water through the excesses of my lifestyle? Self-love connects me to my body, and love for the planet connects me to my larger body. The two bodies are really one and the same. If I live mindfully and remember my larger body, I am able to trust life more. If I forget the larger body, I am constrained by the limits of my individual conditioning, and more likely to fear the future. Walt Whitman said, “I become multitudes!” As the diagnosis taught me many years ago, survival depends upon participation and communion rather than withdrawal and separation. Creative expression in nature, involvement with the local community and my daily ritual are all powerful medicine and reminders: I am – and we are – all a necessary part of the unfolding Creation Story.

Author Note: Rereading this prescient essay (from 2008) fourteen years later is extremely poignant for me now as the End Times feel so much closer at hand. And I am aware of the glaring absence in the writing of being part of the larger social body on the planet coming together in community actions to hold politicians, corporations and the billionaire class accountable. Yes, we are in the midst of the 6th Great Extinction manufactured by humans, yes there will be the inevitable suffering and loss, and yes – we can also mitigate full on catastrophe through whatever steps each one of us takes personally and collectively.