

Peace Sinks

There was a time when I felt guilty to live in a regular Western society, living a regular Western middle-class life. I felt guilty not having to struggle through daily existence in deprived circumstances, not having to suffer the hell of war in my own backyard or, more potently, in a newly non-existent living room. I felt guilty not having to make decisions related to ensuring the basic survival of my children in or out of war zones – decisions about whether to stay, to leave. I even felt guilty that I had never had to cope with the distress of being an exile or refugee from my homeland, faced with an unknown future in a foreign country – a place where language, culture or any other of a myriad factors (the social stigmatisation of poverty, for example) could be an insurmountable barrier to integration. All this fuelled my guilt. And, such was its power, its intensity, that it would not have surprised me to wake up one morning and find that I had been transplanted to just such a location and circumstance, trapped by as singularly unambiguous a fate as Kafka's metamorphosis. At the very least, it would have relieved me of said guilt.

No less powerful was my other emotional response – sadness, *melancholia* pure with all the black bile it is capable of producing in one so-afflicted. A deep-seated misery, a literal heart's ache pervaded each moment I confronted suffering writ large in the daily press and beyond – the war zones, poverty zones, wastelands and pits of paranoia; all conspiring to drown dear Gaia and her countless inhabitants in a fetid pool of hate and fear and power and greed. More than a decade has passed since I stood in front of a television screen in shock at the horror of 9/11, more than a decade since Laleima spoke her words of truth: *There is not enough love in the world*. And in that time, little has changed in the material world we inhabit. We still wake to morning news reports rent by tragedies small and large. Yet much has changed in my reaction to same. An epiphany of sorts stumbled over my lamentable threshold whose effect was to dissolve all previous emotional reactivity in a flash. Of course I can say it was an instant of blinding clarity, but no doubt it had been building, building, building all the years since the event. For although at the level of surface consciousness guilt and sadness remained a daily diet, at the deepest part of my self, work was being done, work which finally saw an opportunity for uplift from deepest inner to radiant outer on a bright autumn's day in 2012.

If, as the American writer Richard Rodriguez holds, an essay is the biography of an idea – as much in how it reveals itself to the *writer* in the process of being written as to the *reader* in the process of being read (Rodriguez 2013) – then this essay is a personalised biography of how I moved from guilt and *melancholia* at my overwhelming good fortune to an understanding of the fundamental purpose of why it is necessary for lives of good fortune to exist in this world; lives lived without guilt or sadness but still with humility and grace for the causes and conditions granted to occasion such blessings. Accordingly, this essay necessitates the uplift of a very private history, a succession of Woolfian *moments of being* haphazardly chronologised on a plane of intimate exteriority, circumnambulating a centre at times nearer and more lucid, at times further away. Nevertheless I write. To remember. And in the remembering to give thanks for this singular gift of grace – to see with eyes unclouded.

Conjugating compassion

From the Latin *to suffer with*, a bald dictionary definition of compassion – ‘feeling of sorrow or pity for the sufferings or misfortunes of another’ (Macquarie 3rd edition 2001) – little describes its place as the highest of virtues, ‘the hallmark of all the major religions formed in the Axial Age’ (Armstrong 1999, p.57), and an expression of divine love (see Corbin 1998a&b). Loving another as oneself, without condition – indeed, to take on another's suffering as one's own speaks to this unconditional care – was known in pre-modern English as ‘charity’ (Armstrong 1999, p.460, Huxley 2009, p.82) and the heart considered the organ of love. Also described as ‘mother-love’, the rendering of a specific type of mother-of-God icon, *Kardiotissa* (of the heart), intends to convey the essence of compassion's reach (see Cormack 2000). The Dalai Lama writes: ‘Compassion is *essentially* concern for others' welfare’ (Dalai Lama 2001, p.82). The Vietnamese Buddhist peace activist Thich Nhat Hahn writes: ‘Those who are without compassion cannot see what is seen with the eyes of compassion’ (Forest 2008, p.108).

Such is my *felt* experience of compassion, not the mind-led response achieved by following the logic of Buddhist scholars such as Shantideva et al. The eyes of compassion are the eyes of the heart, and the heart the ‘source of the intimate’ (Irigaray 2002, p.44). Compassion, for me, has thus always been an embodied knowing, a felt-sense. But when I first became *conscious* of this expression of divine love working its magic in my own body I can date very accurately to the fifth month of my first pregnancy. Watching the nightly news suddenly became impossible. The quickening in my belly had also quickened my heart. I felt too deeply the pain and suffering portrayed in whichever war zone was being documented at the time to be able to bear witness any longer.

My experience is far from unusual. ‘Mother-love’ cannot be otherwise than taking on another’s suffering as one’s own; such an auto-response to the suffering of one’s child – and by extension to any child – is deeply innate. I have experienced milk leaking from my breasts at hearing another babe’s hungry cries, tears welling in my eyes to witness another’s child injured or fractious, a literal arrow to the heart to be present at a severe scolding. Of its own accord, compassion seems to well from the source to flood every pore, every sense reaction. Any one could be my son, my daughter, fruit sprung from my womb. It is only a small step, therefore, from this realisation to recognising the right of all life, all sentient beings, to be included in the circle of one’s compassion. I could find no adequate answer to the question: *How can any expression of life be any less deserving of care or respect than another?* And in so doing, arrived in the selfsame place as our Buddhist scholars – but led there by my heart, my body, rather than my mind.

There is a small medieval chapel not far from my home, dedicated to *Sogn Gieri*. Gothic frescoes grace both walls and ceiling of this Romanesque structure – every surface is covered. Truly it is a *biblia paupera*, a bible of the poor – for those unable to read, the parables and miracles were instead told in paint so they still may know the teachings. It was here that I found the *Madonna of Mercy* who offers any and all, without discrimination, without question, protection and shelter from suffering under her cloak. I sat with her quite some time, on thousand-year-old hand-hewn oak benches raised no more than a few inches above the flagged stone floor. I looked long at her, looked long at her cloak – folds upon folds that could stretch as high and wide as the world if need be, a cloak inseparable from her very self, it seemed, a cloak as vast as her compassion, as vast as her unconditional mother-love.



As I looked, I was reminded of all the personifications of the goddess archetype throughout history – from the Palaeolithic onwards. But sitting with the Madonna in this tiny chapel, I didn’t think she cared about such distinctions. She has done her work no matter what name signified her or incarnation graced her since beginningless time. Indeed I felt her presence in this space beyond any cultural or religious marker-of-place. Her spirit verily transcended the font of her iconography and I was drawn into it, plunged deep into the wellspring of the earth and projected high beyond the realm of clouds in equal measure. I felt her, thus, as an omnipresent return to source, an expression of the care and grace we should all give thanks to for our very existence. A singular rendering of the divine feminine, nevertheless this Madonna took me fully into the heart of Gaia herself – her cloak the clean air we breathe, the fresh water we drink, the shelter afforded by the very atmosphere of this beautiful blue-blue planet, the life we may live only because of her protection sustaining us second-by-evolving-second.

In that moment I thought further, to humanity’s persistent rending and cinderling of her cloak despite the clarity of her message – that the *Madonna of Mercy* speaks to the interdependence of *all* life, *each* equal within her sight. Yet like any mother, I know she stays true, never failing to offer her love and protection to all, regardless of how cruelly or ignorantly we children treat her gifts of grace. Thus did I

commune with the fresco, her presence behind appearances, and suffer with her, my 'being-with' mother-love pure, I her intimate as she mine: 'It is in the intimate of ourselves that a dwelling place must be safeguarded for them, a dwelling place where we unite in us sky and earth, divinities and mortals ... where we discover as proper to us the near that lives in us and that remains foreign to us' (Irigaray 2002, p.51).

Because of our reciprocal recognition in that moment, I knew, deep-knew, that the pervasive guilt and *melancholia* I experienced at the tragedies of our times did nothing to help her work. How ironic that my self-made suffering because of others' suffering rendered me less-than-useful to alleviate said suffering: 'When we are angry, we *ourselves* are anger. When we are happy, we *ourselves* are happiness. When we have certain thoughts, *we are those thoughts*' (Nhat Hanh 2008, p.40). It was as if I diluted, even *contaminated* my compassion with the thoughts which overlaid it. My wallowing around in a depressive stewpe (runnier than stew, gloopier than soup) was as self-absorbed and self-focussed as any other disturbing emotion that hamstrings us from truly leading an other-centred life. Thus did my communion with the *Sogn Gieri* Madonna represent a first step beyond this pit of my own making. I knew there had to be a way out of the conundrum, but of all the places that could possibly hold the key to my guilt-gilded door it was a complete surprise that I would find it (or rather, it would find me!) on a mountaintop one sun-drenched September day.

The lesson of carbon

A beautiful day for ascending the world – blue-skied, light-breezed, warm but not too warm. Arriving atop this particular peak after a steady climb of several hours to picnic amongst other groups of sated hikers, I sat with binoculars trained on each other mountainside around. There I remarked climbers likewise soaking in the majesty of high places. A wondrous sight, but at the time I had a typical guilt/sadness 'self-thought' that it was such a shame there were so many people/places in the world without the opportunity to partake of such joy (either self- or circumstance-imposed) when a flurry of words formed tripped over the top of them, crowding out my self-thought with school-masterly sternness: "*God is smiling on you today; God is wanting you to enjoy the beauty of this world, not drown such joy in sadness at others' plight – here, now, mirror His joy!*" At that, a vision formed in my mind of this small alpine country as a 'peace-sink' – that like a carbon sink, the collective peace and tranquillity of a stable nation with beautiful natural places is actually *sequestered* in the subtle bones of the land.

To be clear how I use the term, a carbon sink is a reservoir that accumulates and stores carbon dioxide, its primary intent to maintain ecological balance in the world. Carbon is stored naturally in terrestrial and marine environments – our oceans, forests, grasslands and soils. Meanwhile, in a fundamental biological exchange, photosynthesis amply describes a process whereby the conversion of sunlight into chemical energy for growth requires a plant to breathe in carbon dioxide and breath out oxygen. It is nothing less than a beautiful harmonising action fundamental to sustaining life on earth. Twinning these thoughts – of carbon's process as well as its capture – delivered me the analogy. Peace is the 'good air' breathed out by peaceful countries, peaceful peoples, just as forests (for example) deliver oxygen into the atmosphere from their carbon sequestration activities.

So – a momentary vision while resting on a mountaintop brought into being by some scolding 'words formed'. Nothing special, really. Yet in that brief space-of-a-breath, I understood that everyone simply enjoying their day represented an *unconscious* form of subtle activism with the potential to generate a vibration of peace out into the world from this site-specific reservoir of peaceful co-habitation that they themselves had contributed to 'filling' with their non-confrontational, non-violent, non-stressed presence. The opportunity to heighten/extend this vibration through *conscious* thanksgiving was also clear to me in the moment. That evening I wrote in my journal: "I can imagine a time when peace and love is consciously directed out into the Gaiasphere to be circulated by the subtle energies of the world and sent where it is most needed. Maybe my prayer – *for peace, love and the light of Your grace to infuse every heart in this world* – could be sent up into the aetheric to rain down elsewhere?"

Over time I explored the notion of peace-sinks more and found I could see further into the possibilities afforded by their differing ‘levels’. Much like a subtle archaeological dig, I drilled in – down – and saw how humanity’s contribution was much like an uppermost layer, topsoil so easily prone to erosion if not managed ‘correctly’, if not *wedded* to a deeper sense of presence, to the overarching spirit or *genius loci* of a place – substrata I think of as ‘deep-nature’. Indeed, I found myself plunged to the Earth Mother bedrock herself, felt the strength and simple beingness of this ‘space’, and understood that embedding our human roots deep in the earth via the conscious recognition of the very *miracle* of our material incarnation, rather than floating in existential ambivalence around on the surface of her face, delivers more *sustainable* joy and peace into our own self-reservoirs while at the same time contributing to the infilling of existing deep-nature peace-sinks. Voila – exactly as I was instructed with the original ‘words formed’ – to *mirror* joy here, now.

Thich Nhat Hanh describes so beautifully his own mirroring actions thus: ‘I like to walk alone on country paths, rice plants and wild grasses on both sides, putting each foot down on the earth in mindfulness, knowing that I walk on the wondrous earth. ... People usually consider walking on water or in thin air a miracle. But I think the real miracle is ... to walk on earth. Every day we are engaged in a miracle which we don’t even recognise: a blue sky, white clouds, green leaves ... All is a miracle’ (Nhat Hanh 2008, p.12). In this way subtle activism, especially if consciously engaged, does indeed help ‘make the air OK to breathe’ as I explored in the short fiction, *On Boys and Plants*.

It is the relationship that our body has with the earth – to be touched by, to touch – that I find so profound. A veritable miracle is the functional ability of a deep-nature peace-sink to naturally dispel or dissolve disturbing emotions – I had my first experience of same on the way home from that alpine hike, at a motorway rest stop of all places! But on the other side of the world I found it equally manifest in a coastal locale – a spirit-of-place which hummed in the sea, the sand, the wind, the waves. People just happy there, plain peacefully happy, any orneryness dissipating, fragmenting as a simple matter-of-course in the face of the latent joy seeping up through the sand. There, the energy of the whole was balanced, its spirit acting to calm all stresses – naturally, of itself.

I am blessed to steward just such a classic deep-nature peace-sink, a small parcel of forest in a quiet corner of the world. Recently I had the opportunity to walk the block with two ecologists. Spontaneously I found myself connected to the sink (frankly all I had said was: *Hello, I’m home*), literally feeling the swirling spirals of energy up through the earth, up through and *into* me. But the intriguing thing was that this embodied knowing of the purity of her fount matched the ecologists’ scientific knowing at a different level – with clipboards of endangered species lists before them, they were equally as uplifted by the *physical*



evidence as I was by my *subtle*. Here we had touched bedrock, here the next generation of peace ambassadors could sew their own connective threads into the welcoming embrace of her soil.

*Maleny dreaming:
each earth child with a task; each
sky child hovering.*

Pathways to peace

Somehow I had come full circle to the *Sogn Gieri* Madonna and her billowing cloak. The spirit of this forest had just such a feel to her. I sensed the ability of her protective loving presence to expand as wide as the world in her joy at my children's peaceful work in her space, themselves *pathways* of connection. What I had learnt atop a Swiss mountain was being played out as I watched, as I committed to word and image the record of their work, silently, reverently undertaken in her presence. Indeed it could not be otherwise – she engendered such a workflow with her simple beingness.

In just this way we are all pathways to peace, pathways to joy – we ourselves the means of connection, reservoirs each-and-everyone but contributors to the vaster repositories that exist in the very *nature* of our sacred earth. Of course we could say that such purity-of-connection is best in places where human impact is minimal, in non-high trafficked areas of deep natural beauty like the ones described. This may be so at our present moment-in-time, but what I learnt atop that mountain is that humankind is a necessary and longer-than element in the equation – to maintain and build, to energise peace-sinks with our ability to *consciously* mirror joy. Just as forests grow as carbon sinks when they increase in density or area, we have the wonderful opportunity to contribute to *increasing* peace-sink energy here in the world, densifying existing sinks as well as helping them expand. Atop that mountain I felt actively called to serve, to help, to foster my connection to the energy that nurtures and heals the world, to share it out in the world. The more conscious we are as pathways, the more positive the flow, the more harmony extends. And the more we shall move toward peace – with each in-breath, each out-breath, mirroring joy, engaging wonder, naturally.