

Why Love Is the Answer

A sermon by Bennett Mitten

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Reading:

A man goes to sleep in the town where he has always lived
and he dreams he's living in another town.

In the dream, he doesn't remember
the town he's sleeping in; his bed. He believes
the reality of the dream town.

The world is that kind of sleep.

The dust of many crumbled cities
settles over us like a forgetful doze,
but we are older than those cities.

We began as a mineral.
We emerged into plant life
and into the animal state, and then into being human,
and always we have forgotten our former states,
except in early spring when we slightly recall
being green again.

That's how a young person turns
toward a teacher. That's how a baby leans
toward the breast, without knowing the secret
of its desire, yet turning instinctively.

Humankind is being led along an evolving course,
through this migration of intelligences,
and though we seem to be sleeping,
there is an inner wakefulness
that directs the dream,

and that will eventually startle us back
to the truth of who we are.

from *The Dream That Must Be Interpreted*
by Jalāl ad-Dīn Muhammad Rūmī

What I am going to try to do today is to tell a story, or rather, a set of nested stories, to help us orient ourselves at this absolutely crucial time in the history of our species, our planet, and the universe itself. I'm also going to try to make the most convincing and forceful case I can as to why I believe that love is the only thing left that can possibly save us.

Now, whenever I deliver a sermon I like to begin with a joke and, as I always say, I do this for two reasons. The first is that I like the way a joke wakes us up out of the day-dreamy distractions of our daily lives into a vibrantly embodied Here and Now, and that it does so collectively, taking a disparate group of isolated "Me-s" and opening a portal to our larger, truer self – the mystery and wonder of "We."

The second reason I begin with a joke is to caution you not to take anything I have to say too seriously. Now, this may sound absurd coming from a lay-preacher standing in a pulpit but what *I* think doesn't matter. What matters is what *you* think, and my role, as I see it, is simply to prompt you into a place of questioning; a realm, if you will, of radiant unknowing.

And a joke is perfect for this. A good joke draws us into an imaginary world with just a hint of tension and then, snap! – like a magic trick or judo throw – flips us over into an unexpected world. It's the paradigm of all true storytelling and in its comic nature it's an affirmation of life itself even with all its manifold horror and suffering. A good joke, like a good story, is an inspiration; an aspiration to be and become something better than we presently are; something surprising; something joyously divine.

So here goes. A man dies and goes to hell. He wakes up, so to speak, to find himself standing before the gates of hell and to his surprise they are the most beautiful thing he has ever seen. Waiting for him is Satan, the loveliest, most gracious angel of kindness-and-light, and the angel says, "Welcome! Welcome to hell!"

The angel opens the gates and together they enter, and hell ... is absolutely beautiful. There are gentle rolling green hills, meadows filled with wildflowers and bees. There are babbling brooks, rivers, lakes and ponds. Off in the distance are

vast emerald forests, blue snow-capped mountains, and shining silver seas. The sky is filled with birds; the air with butterflies, and everywhere the man sees animals grazing and capering. Strolling about, he spots small groups of people laughing and chatting. There are children playing and folks snoozing in the shade.

In astonishment the man turns to the angel and says, "I'm absolutely gobsmacked! This isn't anything like what I imagined."

"Yes, I know," says the angel. "We hear that a lot."

But just then, the man spies what seems to be an acrid black column of smoke rising up in the distance; it begins to resolve itself as they draw closer. Soon he can make out the source of the reeking pall; it's what appears to be the upper half of an enormous demonic iron Ferris wheel slowly turning in a sulfurous pit of fire. The exposed portion of the wheel must be two miles high at least, and drawing closer still he begins to make out what appear to be tiny human figures chained to its dark girders. Soon they are near enough to hear the terrified screams of the hapless victims as they are plunged down into the flames; their still-living forms emerging broken and charred on the other side.

Shaken to his core the man turns to the angel and stammers, "I don't understand. Everything I've seen so far is so lovely. What in the name of mercy is this and who are those poor people?"

"Oh," replied the angel sadly, "those I'm afraid are the fundamentalists. It's something they absolutely insist upon."

Now, lest we're tempted to feel the weensiest bit self-righteous, the truth is, this joke has nothing to do with fundamentalists. This joke is about us and about what we as a species, both individually and collectively, are doing to the world; our one and our only home. In our childish distraction and narcissistic self-absorption we are busily turning Paradise into a living Hell.

This is most especially true of each and every one of us here today, myself included. There are no innocents among us, we're ALL complicit – minor courtiers in the palace of the first world distractedly frittering away our children's

inheritance, a visibly invisible treasure of inestimable value and delicacy. Why? Because we insist on remaining as we are.

And let's get one thing crystal clear; the figures on that wheel, they are *our* victims; "the least among us"; the Earth's poor and the generations yet to come; hapless human offerings sacrificed to maintain our privileged indolence.

Not that we admit it. We're too busy with other things. Our jobs, family dynamics, politics, even spirituality; anything to avoid having to really face up to the implications of our behavior; to Al Gore's fast-fading "Inconvenient Truth"; yesterday's news.

Ironically, it's our capacity to use "reason" in the manipulation of the forms of time, space, and abstract thinking which allows us to shield ourselves from any deep recognition of the full horror of what we are bringing about. We are perpetrating a crime, what the physicist James Hansen has described as "an intergenerational human rights violation" on a planetary scale. (More pragmatically it is what he has called "the greatest free-market failure of all time.")

Our species is behaving like a disease. We seem to have become like some kind of hominid locust swarm; a bad case of trumped-up "chimposis." In the twinkling of an eye, a millionth of a millionth of the history of the Earth, according to Sir Martin Rees (the Astronomer Royal), we have emerged seemingly from nowhere swarming over the face of the Earth consuming everything in our wake; plants, animals, air, water, even the very soil. Humankind, for example, now moves more earth than the planet's own weathering cycle and according to our own science, there isn't a single meter of our globe that does not now bear the imprint of our feverish activity; from the depths of the oceans to the vault of heaven itself.

For example, there is so much plastic loose in the seas that oceanographers are now describing them as "plastic soup," while high above, orbiting us even now, there float somewhere in excess of four-hundred thousand bits of human space-junk ranging from dying satellites to tools dropped by careless astronauts (according to the latest figures from NASA).

We're now sending expeditions to the top of Mount Everest, the world's highest peak, just to haul away the groaning piles of garbage, bodies, and poo left behind by the ever increasing number of well-off humans "in search of themselves." The fingerprints of our relentless hillbilly busyness can even be detected in the radioactive tick of Strontium 90 found in the bones of every higher organism; a man-made isotope absent from the globe until the orgy of thermonuclear bully-boy firework dumb-assedness of the last half of the twentieth century. Like poopy-diaper children, we're soiling the only monkey nest we have.

The weird thing is, we know exactly what we're doing. We've always known. It's business as usual.

According to paleoarcheologists, our earliest human ancestors after leaving behind the deprivations of the last ice age and having perfected the arts of stone tool making and group hunting embarked on what the anthropologist Ronald Wright called (in his Massey lecture of a few years back) "an all-you-can-eat wildlife barbecue," routinely slaughtering far more game than they could either consume or preserve. We "lived high for a time and then crashed." It's what Wright has described as "the first 'progress trap,'" for it was not the failure of hunting but its stunning success that eliminated hunting as a lifestyle for all but a very few (such as the Inuit) and drove us back to gathering and toward the development of agriculture.

The oldest intact high-culture narrative we have, "The Epic of Gilgamesh," tells the story of how the gods tried to prevent a human king, Gilgamesh, from attaining immortality and logging the sacred forests of Lebanon for cedar with which to build and ornament his palace at Uruk. Through a combination of wetlands draining and the overuse of irrigation, the people of the ancient Near East managed in a matter a few dozen generations to reduce that once-verdant land to a saltpan.

Likewise the ancient Greek historian Thucydides describes how the various city states of the Hellenic world destroyed their once thickly wooded archipelago through relentless deforestation for firewood, shelter, and watercraft, finishing things off with the overgrazing of goats. Rome near its end managed to strip the

whole of north Africa of wild animals to feed its insatiable appetite for novel forms of blood sport as mass public entertainment, and major Roman harbors such as Ostia silted-up as a result of urbanization and the over management of the surrounding countryside.

Jared Diamond, in his book *Collapse*, details one incident after another from the apocalyptic demise of the ancient kingdoms of the Mayan due, as always, to deforestation and the near industrial-scale production of plaster with which to ornament their ever growing complexes of temples and royal palaces, to the brutal cannibalistic fall of the Easter Islanders lost in a fever-dream of ancestor worship and clan status competition.

Well, as devastating as these various examples may have been, they remained isolated, intermittent outbreaks of human destructiveness. There was after all only so much we could accomplish given our small numbers and our reliance on water power, wind, domesticated pack animals, horses, and slaves. Appearances to the contrary, life in fourteenth-century Europe wasn't all that different from life in tenth-century Arabia, eighth-century China, or even in ancient Egypt. But, as destiny would have it, all that changed sometime in the late 1600s with the arrival of the European Enlightenment, the discovery of coal, and the advent of the Industrial Revolution.

Within a few years we were hearing Romantic poets such as William Blake and Victorian Novelists such as Mary Shelley and Charles Dickens describing the horrors of blast furnaces, foundries, factories, satanic weaving mills – and the emergence of vast squalidly gaudy cities choking under soot-darkened skies.

Soon came the age of oil, the rise of the airplane, the automobile, the mushroom cloud, and the techno-mesmerism of television, the internet, and now the smartphone. On we swarm, faster and faster, caught in an onrush like a junky jonesing for our next thrillingly mind-bending, must-have fetish-fix. Biotechnology, genetic enhancement, nanotechnology, artificial intelligence, quantum computing, geo-engineering, worm-hole warp-drive; our finest-and-brightest apparently incapable of stopping themselves.

Through it all we seem to have learned nothing from history, caught-up as we are in the glittering thrall; the abundance; the convenience; the mundanely routine sumptuousness of this, our glorious, thrust into the future.

As I said in my opening remarks (not included here), I've been on something of a sabbatical for much of the last year, reading and listening to some of the best minds among us, and so far as I can tell, the overwhelming consensus among the legitimate scientific and scholarly community is that we are now trembling along the knife-edge of our probable demise.

Three or four books in particular come most immediately to mind: James Lovelock's *The Vanishing Face of Gaia*, which is subtitled *A Final Warning: Enjoy It While You Can*, James Hansen's *Storms of My Grandchildren: The Truth About the Coming Climate Catastrophe and Our Last Chance to Save Humanity*, Clive Hamilton's *Requiem for a Species: Why We Resist the Truth About Climate Change*, and Sir Martin Rees's *Our Final Century* (which in America is called *Our Final Hour*).

What emerges from these thinkers and from many, many more is the following: unless we somehow manage to get control of ourselves and radically alter our present thinking *and* behavior, we will likely wipe ourselves out sometime in the next century or century-and-a-half either through global warming or technological overreach, or through some combination of the two.

The most prosaic of these scourges is global warming. Bill McKibben, one voice among a growing chorus of increasingly terrified scientists, has identified an atmospheric temperature rise of just two degrees centigrade – associated with 350 parts per million of carbon dioxide – as being a kind of climactic event horizon beyond which planetary feedback loops such as massive methane releases and the loss of the Greenland and arctic ice sheets will set in motion a runaway flip to a steady hot-state unlike anything seen in tens of millions of years. If we pull that particular trigger, humankind will be helpless to prevent the collapse of all we know or have ever known, yet even now, as we gather together here, we stand at somewhere around 390 parts per million of carbon dioxide and rising. Just this summer we have detected and confirmed periods of four degrees

temperature rise in some of the coldest and most sensitive parts of our planet and according to GRACE, the Gravitational Recovery and Climatic Experiment satellite launched in 2002, we're already losing the battle with ice-sheet melting and sea-rise. Things have now reached the point that such radically "conservative" institutional bodies as the World Bank, The Financial Times, and the US military are blithely predicting three-to-six degrees of warming by the end of this century.

When I was born in 1959, there were roughly three billion people on earth. Just a little over halfway through my life I find that we've now more than doubled in number to just over seven billion. According to the most recent estimates, we are conservatively expected to add another two to two-and-a-half billion human souls to somehow or other feed, cloth, and house by 2050. What's left of the developing world is expected to have feverishly industrialized by then, including China, India, Brazil, and parts of Africa, in a mad rush to emulate our Canadian/American lifestyle.

Twenty percent of the earth's species are expected to be gone by that time; the oceans essentially fished and polluted into extinction, save for uncontrollable masses of jellyfish. The planet's coral reefs, the source of the of the ocean's basic biodiversity, are expected to be reduced to lifeless carcasses slowly dissolving in an increasingly acidic sea. Not one large-scale forest is expected to remain intact, including what's left of the Amazon. Earth's pollinators, already stressed to the breaking point by monoculture, pesticides, fertilizers, and parasites, will likely be gone soon after, taking global industrial agriculture along with them. There will be rising seas, routine super-storms unlike anything we have yet seen, massive refugee flows, together, for good measure, with the increasing likelihood of global pandemics preying on weakened, planetarily interconnected populations.

And these aren't the fantastical prophecies of mad evangelical eco-greenies; these are the generally expected outcomes predicted by such mainstream bodies as the German government, the World Watch Institute, the Brookings Institute, the Ford Foundation, the UN, Atlantic Monthly, the Economist, the New York

Times, and the Pentagon. In the words of Wednesday Adams, “Be afraid, be very afraid.”

Now, whenever I’ve tried to chat with people about these concerns I get one of two responses: either fury or a kind of cynical resignation. The fury, oddly enough, comes from self-identified environmentalists. I’ve lost track of the number of times I’ve been told, “You can’t say such things.” “If people think it’s hopeless they’ll just give-up, amuse themselves, and go shopping.” “People can’t handle too much truth; they need hope. You’ve *got* to give people a hopeful message.”

Well, what exactly do environmentalists think is happening now? All anyone’s doing, especially in the affluent first world, *is* amusing themselves and going shopping, either that or working themselves to death so that they or their offspring can shop and loaf-off just like their workaholic, idle-rich celebrity heroes. Hope, so far as I can see, *has* become the enemy; what Clive Hamilton has called a kind of maladaptive coping mechanism. In my opinion, most of what passes for hope is little more than magical thinking: “Oh well, science will find an answer.” “We’re a tough, resilient species. Don’t you worry. When the chips are down we’ll find a way; we always have. Remember World War II?” (Frankly, I find it sickening.)

What this naive hopefulness really amounts to, so far as I can tell, is a weird kind of climate warming denial on the part of the very people who claim to be the most concerned and informed. The truth is, the environmental movement has been a cataclysmic failure. You can talk all you want about sustainable development, green technology, photoelectric windmills, light bulbs, weather-stripping, hemp shopping bags, and compostable recycling, but at this point none of these things have substantially altered our collective global trajectory over the edge of a fast approaching cliff like *Thelma and Louise* – only vegan.

Speaking of which, when exactly are we as a church community going to finally decide to give up our cars? When are we going to pull up our lawn and start growing food, and when are we going to get the church off the grid, especially natural gas? Ever? Ever? You can complain all you want about the

Alberta tar-sands, but until we do these three things, we're just a bunch of well-meaning, left-liberal hypocrites, myself included!

The other response I hear, as I said, is a kind of cynical resignation which usually takes the form of blame-shifting. "Oh well, you know, as long as rich people think they can make money ..." "It's the corporations, the oil companies; they control the government." "It's the primitive self-deluded thinking of fundamentalist, end-times "Left-Behind" Islamo-Narnia fanatics" "Nobody cares anyway, all they want to do is to party and get wasted." Or: "We're an aggressive, short-term-thinking species born in an ancestral environment of scarcity and want, and you can't change human nature."

Well, as in the first case, I think this too is a kind of maladaptive coping mechanism, a kind of self-permissive pass.

Now, none of these people are bad people. In many ways we are the most kind and civilized humans who have ever lived; cooperative, unbelievably disciplined, educated, decent. Just try for instance to imagine a human peasant, not to mention an aristocrat, from a thousand years ago, dropped down unexpectedly into our world and having to somehow or other muster the patience and forbearance to put up with all the chaotic sensory overload and stress of post-post-modern life, let alone manage to sit still for six to ten hours at a keyboard-and-screen day after day before going berserk and killing everyone in the office.

Quite frankly, I don't know how we do it. No wonder we're all on medication, drinking, meditating, practicing yoga, overeating, and praying for our lives.

Now, my own personal "come to Jesus moment," as we say down south, with regard to global warming happened in 2009 when I heard the CBC Ideas broadcast of Gwynne Dyer's *Climate Wars*, and what I heard, if you'll forgive my language, scared me shitless. I'm not sure that I've ever experienced anything quite like it. I felt as if I had suddenly awakened within some kind of hostile and alien land. The world rolled on as before but for me everything, absolutely everything, had changed and changed utterly. It was all I could think about for

months, and in some ways it's pretty much all I think about even now, some four years later.

For some unknown reason, I had the presence of mind, even within my panic, to realize that the story of global warming is just that: a story that we are bringing into existence. But, it's not the *only* story, and what I subsequently found myself doing was frantically searching for larger, better stories within which to place the narrative of global warming. Instinctively, I turned back to the works of my earliest adult mentors – chiefly Joseph Campbell and Karen Armstrong. Doing so has radically altered how I think.

In a way I'm still as terrified as ever, but I've come to the conclusion that global warming isn't really the problem. The problem isn't species loss, the destruction of the biosphere, or overpopulation. Neither is it overconsumption, economic inequity, exploitation, or mass violence. These are only symptoms, the outer manifestation of an inner disturbance; a disturbance unlike anything humankind has ever experienced with one exception: that long, liminal moment lost in the mists of prehistory, when our species first emerged out of the sheltering sleep-walk of our animal nature.

Nowhere, in my opinion, is the trauma of that earlier moment of crisis better captured than in the Biblical story of the fall in the garden of Eden, and you can hear there still the echoed cry of pain at our ancestors' ancient break with that earlier form of being.

Prior to our awakening we lived within a kind of protective dream. Like all animals we suffered yet we did not *know* we suffered. What changed for us was our consciousness: the emergence of cortical self-awareness, sundering us from our previously unconscious submersion in the world round about.

Our name for our kind is *Homo sapiens sapiens*, which means the animal who knows and *knows* it knows. From the moment we first became distinctly human we have, as it were, been burdened with the knowledge of both our suffering and of our mortality. It is our existential wound.

As Campbell has suggested, that initial rupture can be thought of mythologically, as the separation from the great mother – the problematic

dominance of our biological, material nature. As a result we have found ourselves expelled from the once-sheltering womb of unconsciousness like a screaming newborn baby, adrift now in the bewilderingly other realm of the father – the realm of our *immaterial* nature – pattern making, abstract thinking, concepts, beliefs, theories, and ideologies.

For a time we came to believe that these would save and protect us. Through thinking, and the arts of thinking: laws, moral codes, creedal statements, oaths, treaties, constitutions – and later still – math, science, technology, and free markets, we came to imagine that through their salvific application we might enter again some lost paradise.

Many among us still cling to this hope, a hope captured in the stories we tell ourselves and one another – stories of fixed truths, of progress, and of mastery. As the last of the true believers, ideologues of all stripes defend these stories to the death, killing and dying in the name of sacred – and sacredly secular – truth claims. But these truths – these stories of truth – are dying along with God. Having lost, long ago, the enveloping assurance of our great mother, we are now losing the protective certainty of our spirit-father, leaving us alone and bereft, naked and vulnerable.

We believe things by taking them into ourselves, identifying with them. As a result we become dependent upon those beliefs, mistaking our notions and our feelings *about* the world with who we imagine we actually are, for our core identity. This, I've come to suspect, is what is meant by the sin of idolatry – the substitution of some specific concept about reality for reality itself. We do so in the vain attempt to escape from the harshness of a fully adult acceptance of suffering and of death, of pain, and of the dark void of nonexistence.

Our crisis is a crisis of consciousness. But it's also a crisis of story. To paraphrase a quote from the writer Thomas Berry, "We are in trouble just now because we [we no longer] have a good story. We are between stories. The old story, the account of how the world came to be and how we fit into it, is no longer effective."

Our task now is to face the cosmos squarely and to finally grow up, taking full responsibility for who we are and what we do, both in the world and to one another. We must also acknowledge the difficulty and the magnitude of this imaginative task. Today, as our childish dreams die around us taking our planet with them, we find ourselves, as the poet Dante suggested, caught in the midst of a kind of species-wide midlife crisis.

Dante began writing his masterwork *The Divine Comedy* in what, for us, now seems like another world – another reality – the comparatively stable universe of the high Middle Ages. Like some preternaturally farsighted sage, he seems to have intuitively felt the early tremors of our present dilemma. It was the year 1300, which was then thought to be the midpoint in the life of the universe. Dante himself was 35 years old at the time, which he considered the midpoint of his own life, and the synchronicity of the two dates seems to have triggered in him a kind of disorientation.

“In the middle of the road of life” he wrote, “I found myself in the midst of a dark wood, and the true way was wholly lost. Ah, how hard it is to tell the nature of that wood, savage, dense and harsh – the very thought of it renews my fear! It is so bitter death is hardly more so ...”

Some three centuries later Carl Jung wrote the following, describing for us what we have lost,

“How totally different did the world appear to medieval man. For him the Earth was eternally fixed and at rest in the center of the universe encircled by the course of a sun that solicitously bestowed its warmth. Men were all children of God under the loving care of the most High, who prepared them for eternal blessedness, and all knew exactly what they should do and how they should conduct themselves in order to rise from a corruptible world to an incorruptible and joyous existence. Such a life no longer seems real to us, even in our dreams. Natural science has long ago torn this lovely veil to shreds.”

The great prophet of our modern moment was Friedrich Nietzsche, and his account of our crisis can be found in his famous story of the madman.

“Have you not heard of the madman who on a bright morning lit a lantern and ran to the market-place calling out unceasingly: ‘I seek God! I seek God!’ ...

“Where is God gone?’ he called out. ‘I mean to tell you! We have killed him, you and I! We are all his murderers! But how have we done it? How were we able to drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the whole horizon? What did we do when we loosened this Earth from its sun? Whither does it now move? Whither do we move? Away from all suns? ... Is there still an above and below? Do we not stray, as through infinite nothingness? ... God is dead! God remains dead! And we have killed him! How shall we console ourselves, the most murderous of all murderers? ... Who will wipe the blood from us? ... Shall we not ourselves have to become Gods, merely to seem worthy of it? There never was a greater event – and on account of it, all who are born after us belong to a higher history than any history hitherto!’”

As I said, our crisis is a crisis of consciousness, and as Albert Einstein observed, “You cannot solve a problem with the same consciousness that created it.” “Having climbed to the top of the ladder,” in the words of Joseph Campbell, “we have suddenly found that it is leaning against the wrong wall.” We must now muster the courage and wit to climb back down from a precipice of our own making.

I believe that if we wish to change our consciousness and save our world we must begin by changing our stories, realizing this time that they are not the end but only a means toward an end. We must resist the temptation to either identify with them or worship them.

Somewhere or other, I came across a quote (which I believe is from the poet Muriel Rukeyser) which goes as follows: “Language ... does not merely name

[reality] but also brings reality into being, a conjuring act achieved by means of words and by means of those accounts of reality's events that we call stories." Or as the first nations storyteller Thomas King once said, "If you want to change the world, change the stories." The stories we now need are not the stories of our childhood, of nature spirits and of God; they are our own story.

I heard Joseph Campbell observe once that, given a long enough life we all eventually find ourselves parent-less; mommy and daddy are gone. The task then is to internalize our identification with both parents while also identifying with ourselves as fully autonomous adult beings, no longer children yearning for some false sense of fixed security. Such is now the case with me having lost both of my parents, and painful though that was and in some sense still is, it has nonetheless only been with the passing of both my mother and my father that I have begun to fully become myself.

I've come to suspect that hidden within this paradigm is the deeper psychological meaning behind the mythic image of the Christian trinity. Stripping the symbols of their ancient, patriarchal overlay, they cease to function as strangely incomprehensible theocratic statements of belief and become instead poetic insights into our specifically human nature and relevant to our time. The father becomes our mother, that is to say, nature or the universe. The spirit becomes our father, abstract imagination and the realm of stories, the world glimpsed by the mind, our third eye; and the son becomes ourselves, the mortally-divine sacred hero who, through the sacrifice of our separate ego-self for the sake of others, redeems and saves the world. Much the same image can be found in Buddhism in the figure of the Bodhisattva surrendering her desire for personal salvation in order to fully enter the sorrowful world of time and space on behalf of the world itself.

In classical Hindu thinking there are four categories of being, or rather, the consciousness of being. The first category is: "It is or it is not." This is the consciousness of dualism – good and bad, right and wrong, me and not-me. This is equated with waking consciousness and is considered the most primitive or basic of the four categories. The next category is: "It both is and is not." This is

the consciousness of metaphor; of poetry and myth; the realm of sympathetic identification. This is associated with dream consciousness and the imagination, and for the Western mind, as in popular thinking in general, these two categories are thought to exhaust all the possibilities of being. These are the levels of consciousness which suffuse politics, the economy, science, entertainment, popular religion, and so forth. They are also the realm of our childish ego-self, the fear of death, the desire for happiness, and the will to power. These are the forms of consciousness which are now killing us; the forms of consciousness we must transcend and relinquish if we are to save ourselves.

The next category is: "It neither is nor is it not." This is mystical consciousness; the realm of inarticulate insight. It is the place of emptiness, of Socratic unknowing, of Zen, and of the experience of satori. This level is associated with deep dreamless sleep and with undifferentiated, unitary consciousness. The final category is the silence or darkness enveloping and imbuing the previous levels of consciousness, and this we are told is our true and eternal nature; our destiny. This is where we return to the world, freely and skillfully flowing between all three of the previous consciousnesses; mortally-divine, seeking only the best for others and for the world round about.

One of the most stunning achievements of humankind was the insight of Nicolaus Copernicus: the imaginative realization that contrary to all appearances the Earth moves about the sun rather than the other way round; and it took four centuries until the arrival of Einstein to fully understand the deep physics behind the embodied illusion of a stationary Earth.

Today I believe we are on the verge of another such paradoxical insight – the realization that each of us *is* the whole of reality. All things are one, and the One is all things. Stranger still, all things are one another. By realizing the truth in this strange contradiction, we realize as well that the golden rule is not an injunction, it is a methodological insight – whatever we do or don't do to others, we do to ourselves. Love or compassion is the lived application of this insight.

What we as a species most cryingly need now, it seems to me, is a new set of compellingly visionary stories, new software as it were for our jammy monkey

hard drives, which enables us to begin to ground and stabilize ourselves in a larger, richer experience and expression of consciousness. The acceptance of evanescence, paradox, doubt, and unknowing as release and as spaciousness rather than as threat. We need stories which help release us from our ancient childish obsessions with the tiny confines and comforts of dualistic absolutisms and the narcissistically inflected wish-projection fantasies masking our secret idolatry of self.

Needed too are visionary, aspirational descriptions of reality which assist us to transcend and free ourselves from our ancestrally popular compulsion for small-group exclusivity, the salacious titillation of scandal, self-righteous outrage, gossip, the primitivism of politics as a spectacle of war: conflict and violence as pornographic, orgiastic onanism.

Finally and perhaps most challengingly, it really is time to let go of our infantile dreams of afterlives, of spirit beings, of angel-alien visitations, and most importantly ... of God as some kind of being outside of ourselves and our world. Whether drawn from venerable high-culture orthodoxies, touchy-feely new-age nostrums, antiseptic secularisms, or some personalized mashup, all, I feel, must now be relinquished for the sake of others for, in truth, *all is god* and always has been. Otherwise I see no way of us growing up in time to sacrifice our lifestyles of self-concern, convenience, and comfort necessary to save our children's hopes for a decent future, perhaps even their very lives. If we love them at all and love our world as we claim, we must change and do so NOW! We must at last become what we and only we can become, mature humane beings rather than mere human animals stewing in sentimentality and lazy magical thinking. To do so we MUST place love at the center of our being.

Living in this way is not easy. It's hugely difficult and it does not happen on its own. But it can be learned through diligence and practice. Today we tend to imagine that love has to do with feeling. We associate it with certain emotions, especially happiness, but nothing could be further from the truth. Love is the willingness to discipline our speech and our behavior for the sake of others, especially the sick, the poor, and the oppressed, no matter how unlovable or how

badly behaved. And love is the willingness as well to forgo our own satisfaction and convenience, even our own fulfillment, to insure that future generations will inherit a viable world, able to live their lives as they choose.

We can begin by picking up a copy of Karen Armstrong's book on compassion and then getting together with a group of friends to start the practice of putting the steps into action, "all day and every day," in the words of Confucius, (the first person known to have articulated the Golden Rule.)

I honestly do not know whether we still have enough time to save our world and our kind, and frankly I no longer care. All things vanish away eventually. What I do care about is trying, not so much for the sake of any specific outcome but for the sake of trying itself – a gesture too beautiful for words. I want to be a certain kind of person and I have no idea whether I will succeed or not, but then, to paraphrase Woody Allen, "If you're not failing every now and again, it's a [sure] sign you're not doing anything very [interesting]."

Closing words:

"We stand today at a crossroads: One path leads to despair and utter hopelessness. The other leads to total extinction. Let us hope we have the wisdom to make the right choice." Woody Allen

"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has." Margaret Mead

a list of resources follows

Websites:

Charter for Compassion
The World Watch institute
David Suzuki Foundation

YouTube Lecturers:

Karen Armstrong
Clive Hamilton
James Hansen
James Lovelock
David Suzuki
Jared Diamond
Martin Rees

Books:

Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life by Karen Armstrong
The Age of Empathy by Frans de Waal.
The Spirit Level: Why Equality is Better for Everyone by Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett
The Vanishing Face of Gaia by James Lovelock
Storms of My Grandchildren by James Hansen
Climate Wars by Gwynne Dyer
Requiem for a Species by Clive Hamilton
Our Final Hour by Martin Rees
Collapse by Jared Diamond