

Gaia Disrobed

by Wanda Ballentine

Gaia wraps herself in a fleecy lightweight peignoir.

I do not know if it is the fashionable wear for planets-Venus chooses a greatcoat that does not reveal her face; Saturn wears rings on all his fingers and not much else. But Earth's choice of dress is very functional-at least for us. The only life forms to be found in our corner of the universe-at least in any form we can relate to-are found here on Planet Earth. And it's all because of Gaia's taste in clothing-trios of infinitesimally tiny oxygen atoms holding hands to form ozone molecules-zillions of them. They sop up the searing ultraviolet radiation from the sun. Shielded from that punishment, life was able to evolve. And only that shield stands between us and planetary ecocide. Gaia unclothed would not be bare, but barren. But we've been throwing acid on her robe. It's full of holes; it looks like a hospital gown-but it's our collective ass that's hanging out. It may already be too late to prevent it from becoming a shroud-but few people seem to be paying much attention.

Every few months the headlines blare that our security blanket is unraveling at an ever-increasing rate, and I walk out expecting to see people wailing in the streets, calling for a stop to the acid bath. But it's business as usual. People walk about, performing their daily tasks, greeting each other, passing pleasantries. I feel like I'm watching a performance of robots. I want to scream. I want to shake them.

But I don't. I am just as hemmed in by inertia and apathy as they. They might take me for a fool, after all. God forbid. I could scream to warn of an out-of-control automobile and be a heroine, but if I scream that everything on the planet is in mortal danger of a slow-motion fry, people would make little circles with their forefingers in the vicinity of their ears and avert their eyes.

Maybe they are all grieving too-in shock-maybe they want to shake me! I watch their eyes for signs of life. I venture a comment, "Did you see the headlines this morning? About the ozone?" A gleam of recognition-but the mind closes-what can we do about it, after all?...

We've got rent to pay, careers to advance, lovers to sweet-talk, children to care for. All are urgent now. The ozone, our invisible shield, is 20 miles up, out of sight, out of mind, out of consciousness. That urgency isn't in our faces. But if we don't face this unseeable disaster NOW, the unthinkable will happen THEN. We are experiencing NOW the results of our actions 20 years ago. And we've hardly been idle since then. The ozone depletion will hit its peak in 20-30 years-we think. It will be gradual-we think. It will be more evident some places.

Those predictions were made just last year, but an alarm went off at NASA last month when they found the current situation is far worse than predicted. The hole in the ozone had been mainly over the poles. Now there are rents in Gaia's gown over London and Boston, Moscow and Amsterdam.

The fact is that the scientists don't really know--their predictions and models have been woefully off. The sudden emergence of the Antarctic ozone hole demonstrates that massive ozone loss can occur rapidly and unpredictably. We have to face NOW-the unthinkable THEN. It has been said by many teachers that to live life well and fully and purposefully, we must live with the awareness of our death. I like to think I can face my own death with relative ease-but the demise of the whole planet?

What does one do when a loved one has a life-threatening illness?--there's denial--there's panic. All priorities are up-ended. The whole aim of existence becomes saving the life of the beloved, making her comfortable, badgering the doctors, seeking miracles, grasping at straws. Money is no object.

Life requires that we function with broken hearts--how else can the heart open to the pain of this embattled world? Some lash out, become embittered. Others soften, expand, develop compassion. Which mode will we choose?

In 1991, it was estimated that if the Montreal Protocols, the international agreement by 93 countries to ban all CFC use by the year 2000, were successful, Gaia's gown still would not be mended for another century.

I came face-to-face with these words after a month of considering the disintegration of the invisible shield that protects the Earth from deadly radiation--after a month of considering the effects on this planet, my home, this beautiful blue-green jewel that pirouettes around the Sun--after a month of considering how the Monarch butterfly will respond, the Great Horned Owl, the Sequoia, the grasshopper; how the amber waves of grain will continue, the fruited plain, the buttercup, the cobra--all the myriad, remarkable, glorious creatures, all the sweet-scented blossoms, all the sustaining bounty. How might they survive encountering the Sun face-to-face, full strength? The Sun is the source of all energy and life, but it has been said that we cannot bear to look upon the face of God.

I also came face-to-face with those words after having spent the better part of four days at the International Public Environmental LAW (Land-Air-Water) Conference in Eugene listening to people from all over the world speak about environmental devastation.

"Expect the end of the world," the poet advises. "Laugh. Laughter is immeasurable. Be joyful though you have considered all the facts."

Those words are the words of Wendell Berry, that rare and wonderful spokesperson for the Earth, for life, for all that is holy.

I burst into tears.

The facts are that the Earth, as we know it, is terminally ill. To deny that is to deny any possibility for the necessary triage, remission and cure. It is enormously self-healing, if given the chance.

Will we not act until strange growths appear on our skins? Until we find we are more and more susceptible to every virus that comes along? Until the plants in our front yards curl up their leaves? Until we find cataracts on our cat's eyes and notice that the birds seem to have lost their sense of direction?

Like Carl Sandburg's famous fog, the effects of disintegrating ozone come on little cat feet, insidious and slow-motion. Unlike fog, it isn't visible. It isn't like AIDS or a flu epidemic. A rise in skin cancer rate is the most telling sign we humans have.

In Australia the rate of skin cancer has jumped astronomically; most people over 50 have had skin cancers removed, but the age level is dropping. Aussies live in fear of the light of day. They are warned to wear protective covering at all times and not to go outside in midday; but these precautions will not protect their immune systems, which are also assaulted and weakened by UV radiation. Their crops are damaged. One report predicts they might be living beneath domes by 2000. But where do the kangaroos, wallabies and kukaburras go? Not likely waltzing Matilda.

But Australia is half a world away.

In California, highway patrol officers have traded in their small-brimmed hats for wide-brimmed ones for protection. And in Alaska, native hunters are suffering from sunburn after a day's hunt, and their children are being forced to use sunscreen.

The Ozone Hole is like God--It Requires Belief in the Unseen.

And if we wish to placate that dark god, there are some new commandments. Do we, the children of Gaia, have the collective foresight to look beyond the moment? Do we have the political will to demand that use of death-dealing chemicals stop immediately? More to the point, do we have the will and fortitude to live without the technological "advances" and the "advantages" they have brought us, or the accompanying worsening of the economic situation?

Do we have the collective will to put healing the ozone layer at the forefront, to educate ourselves, educate others, to check products on sale locally, to question local business and industries as to their use of these chemicals, to enact local restrictive legislation as needed, to demand national restrictive legislation and compliance from industry and the military; to demand the necessary aid for Third World countries to get their CFCs, HCFCs and halon under control?

The facts are:

That the stratospheric ozone that protects all life from devastating ultraviolet radiation is disintegrating at an alarming rate.

The facts are:

That world population is on the rise again with projections of 92 million more people a year, but we have 2242 billion tons less top soil, decreasing water resources, and no one knows how much less biodiversity. The extinction of at least 10,000 species is guaranteed.

The facts are:

That with that many more people, the demand for energy and other resources will increase exponentially, obliterating any achievements made in energy efficiency, improved agricultural techniques & "wise use" technologies.

And we are in denial about these facts!

And if you deny facts, you can't deal with them.

Terry Tempest Williams speaks eloquently of her struggle with denial in talking of her mother's cancer--the result of living downwind from the Nevada nuclear test site--and connects them with her Mother's cancer--the result of innumerable tests, nuclear and otherwise:

"I go to the lake for a compass reading, to orient myself once again in the midst of change. Each trip is unique. The lake is different. I am different. But the gulls are always here, ordinary--black, white and gray.

"I have refused to believe that mother will die, and by denying her cancer, even her death, I deny her life. Denial stops us from listening. I cannot hear what Mother is saying. I can only hear what I want.

"But denial lies. It protects us from the potency of a truth we cannot yet bear to accept. It takes our hand and leads us to places of comfort. Denial flourishes in the familiar. It seduces us with our own desires and cleverly constructs walls around us to keep us "safe."

"I want the walls down. Mother's rage over our inability to face her illness has burned away my defenses. I am left with guilt, guilt I cannot tolerate because it has no courage. I hurt Mother through my own desire to be cured.

"I continue to watch the gulls. Their pilgrimage from saltwater to fresh becomes my own." We each have our pilgrimage

Some time after the NASA ozone report, I saw myself stitching up the hole in the ozone--but when I stitched it here it would tear there, so I had to methodically stretch it to cover all the

holes. Not easy to do-if all the ozone in the stratosphere should fall to Earth like snow, the layer would only be a quarter inch thick. Just that quarter-inch thickness between us and oblivion. Amazing. Amazing grace.

I have been obsessed with ozone ever since.

I've felt the radiation for the last two or three years-the arm that likes to hang out the window would feel immediate burning. This March, I felt my face burn walking outside early in the morning. To me, the unraveling of the shield is palpable.

Sometimes, with no warning, tears well up. I close the door of my office, lie down on the floor, breathe deeply and let them flow. When I find no personal cause, I know it's the "GGs," the global griefs, for it feels as if the Earth itself were weeping through me.

These episodes move through me quickly. If I resisted them, the pain would fossilize into a wall that would bar joy as well and make of me the walking dead. If I let them play through me, I can move on.

We can't deny what's happening--people tell me they just don't want to hear about it. They think hearing the facts would make joy impossible.

That doesn't have to be true. Pain comes from insisting that the world must be the way we want it to be. Joy comes from facing up to what is with grace and goodwill, courage and heart. "People who cannot suffer... can never discover who they are." (James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*.) In the process of discovering who we are, we discover our connectedness with all things, and our own cause becomes universal.

Alice Walker speaks of those who endure great pain and oppression, "...there was absolutely no self-pity. In fact, there was a greeting that habitues of our house used on encountering each other: 'All those at the banquet!' they'd say, and shake hands or hug. Sometimes they said this laughing, sometimes they said it in tears. But that they were still at the banquet of life was always affirmed."

The Salvadoran peasants brought their repressive and murderous government to the bargaining table despite the fact that the U.S. was funding the latter to the tune of \$1.5 million/day. The documentary film, "Maria," demonstrated that they did it with laughter and hugs, faith and determination, as much as with bullets and strategy.

The most positive speaker at the environmental law conference was Winona LaDuke, of the Ojibway tribe, heiress to 500 years of genocide. The Native Americans have survived against horrendous odds, at great cost, and their struggle for survival continues-yet she thinks we can pull this mess out of the fire. I'll vote with her.

It is often the people who have faced the most grinding circumstances who seem to have not only the greatest courage and perseverance, but also the greatest capacity for joy, the most insightful humor, the greatest acknowledgment and appreciation of beauty. They get more

out of the moment because they live in it. Of course, we're talking about the survivors, the ones who made it through the fire with an open heart, allowing it to anneal their souls.

Enlistment is academic.

Many of us are driven to massive denial just to survive in this lop-sided society. For 20 years, we've complacently endured the insanities of a mad dog government while sleep-walking in the shopping malls.

Talk matter-of-factly about ozone depletion, and people's eyes glaze over. Speak with passion-it's "too intense" ...as if there were etiquette involved-psychology to be considered-procedure to follow in informing someone his house is on fire.

"Everyone can't be an activist." True, and everyone is not a soldier. But when the battlefield is in your own backyard--or over it--enlistment is academic.

"Activists are some of the most harsh, unloving people I have known." Can't deny it. When we get stuck in our rage and do not honor our sorrow, we fall into self-righteousness, project culpability, and forget our own complicity.

Gary Reiss, a veteran of the herbicide wars, is very much against herbicides, but he came away from one meeting wondering which would have been worse--to listen to environmentalists rage about herbicides--or to be sprayed by one.

Our rage and our fear pick up the flavor of the very thing we're fighting.

Our faults do not cancel out the facts.

Oh, Lord, this is a demanding place. It demands a constant stretch, with a mean torque. It demands walking around trying to keep your mind functioning and your heart open when the former is reeling and the latter is broken.

We can't fool ourselves any longer about the "good guys" and the "bad guys." In the drama of life, none of us take just one role-we circulate in and out of all of them. Sure I'm an "activist," but there is a part of me that wants to forget the whole thing. Part of me wants to shoot the president of DuPont, and another part would like nothing more than to come in out of the heat and wallow in the air conditioning. Part of me cannot fathom how people are able to ignore what's happening, and part of me is sick and tired of the stream of desperate pleas and dire warnings flowing through my mailbox from 100 different environmental groups. Part of me says we have to quit concentrating energy on the negative and focus on what's good, and another part shouts "denial." Part of me takes the cosmic view that what's happening is just part of the Earth's evolution, and that other part roars out that that's the most sophisticated form of denial yet. And there's truth in all of it. Somewhere in me there's an idiot with an aerosol can, and somewhere in the president of DuPont, there's a made environmentalist wanting out. The healing involves listening to all the parts, within and without.

We've got one foot on a banana peel and the other in Eternity. A bone-shaking undulation rises in the soul at the thought that all we have known may be no longer be. There is an unnamable and searing sorrow for the unique and marvelous being we have never even met, who simply disappeared in some quiet, hidden niche of which we have no ken.

We are called to the hero/ine's journey, to perform impossible tasks despite insurmountable odds. And to do it with joy, and humor, and non-attachment as much as possible--which means full acknowledgment of the rage and fear and sorrow.

The Earth will survive with or without us. The fate of the world does not depend on me--or you--but it's counting on us nevertheless--and we need to count on ourselves.

It is the time of the Rainbow Warriors, the Warriors of the Heart. Take joy. Take heart. Take action.

There are many suggestions in this newspaper as to what each of us might do to help the Earth. If each of us committed to one action weekly and encouraging others to do likewise... It's called grassroots. It is an act of faith, a form of prayer, it is joy.

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