

Do more or do less? Responsibility for a world in crisis

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As crises arise all over the world, I am noticing a growing sense of instability and alarm in people. Whether we like it or not, global challenges are now impacting our own communities. I am urging *all of us* to be *responsible*. I am asking us to assess what needs support in our individual and collective lives and then to act accordingly.

Climate chaos, social unrest, and the risk of pandemics—while seemingly unrelated—are all symptoms of a critical imbalance. Our capitalist/colonial/industrial civilisation, which exists within and as a part of the living world, is making humans and all of life on Earth extremely unwell.

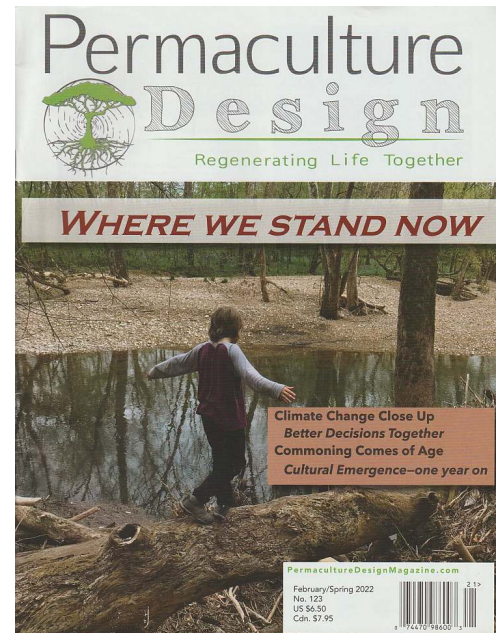
It's been a deeply painful time for many. In the last couple of years on Turtle Island (also known as North America), significant events include George Floyd's murder by Minneapolis police, the confirmation of mass graves on the sites of Canadian Residential Schools, and the attempted expansion of the Coastal GasLink pipeline through Wet'suwet'en territory.

In addition, extreme weather events have been widespread, including: the “heat dome” in the Pacific Northwest (the temperature in Lytton, British Columbia reaching 49.5 degrees Celsius/121 degrees Fahrenheit and breaking the heat record for all of Canada¹); “megadrought” and wildfires in California; record rainfalls and extreme flooding in British Columbia; Hurricane Ida on the Atlantic coast (which intensified from a Category 1 to a Category 4 storm, increasing by about 60 miles per hour in a day²); and 70 tornado-like events in the Midwest in one day.³

To add insult to injury, as the world still grapples with the COVID-19 crisis and experts warn of the potential for future pandemics, business continues as usual. Indeed, “Pandemics ... are a predictable and predicted outcome of how people source and grow food, trade and consume animals, and alter environments.”⁴ Biodiversity loss and extinction increase the likelihood of pandemics.⁵ Scientists assert that “Protecting forests and changing agricultural practices are essential, cost-effective actions to prevent pandemics.”⁶ Meanwhile, old-growth logging continues. In British Columbia, “Premier Horgan’s failure to keep his promise has now fueled the largest act of civil disobedience in Canada’s history ... People know that clearcutting the last old-growth is unforgivable.”⁷

Self-Care

In my book *Embers of Hope: Embracing Life in an Age of Ecological Destruction and Climate Chaos* I encourage us to start with self-care, because acknowledging these painful realities both in our heads and in our hearts can be overwhelming for many of us. We do the hard work of confronting what is at stake in order to live purposefully and to make a difference in our lives.



So let's pause now. What do we notice in this moment?

I notice a heaviness in my shoulders and some tension in my throat and belly. My breathing is shallow. I feel sad, frustrated, tired, and a bit helpless.

What sensations do you observe in your body? What emotions are present for you? Be present with that for a moment.

Please take three breaths, inhaling slowly and exhaling gently. Notice your body making solid contact with whatever surface you're sitting or lying on.

Now I invite you to tune in to your love for life, your deep gratitude for Mother Earth, your yearning for all to be safe and well. Sense this filling your heart, nourishing and empowering you.

Whenever you need more support, please pause to reconnect in this way.

Let's take one more breath and return to the bigger picture.

As social, financial, political, and ecological challenges intensify, I believe many community organisers and activists are being pushed into overdrive. To them I want to say, "I get that everything seems urgent—and please slow down. Please do less for others right now. Taking care of yourself is critical, because the world really needs you and the work you do."

At the same time, many people are just starting to learn about the gravity of our collective predicament. Despite being caring individuals, they may still stand by idly, not knowing how to become part of the solution. To them I want to say, "So much is unravelling and I understand you're worried. There is ample reason for concern. Please do more. Please do as much as you can, because the life around us is sorely crying out for help."

When I first reflected on these thoughts, I wondered if I was contradicting myself. How was it fair to ask some people to help themselves while asking others to help the world?

Several years ago, I had the joy of working with Andrea Most, environmental activist, professor, and director of the Persephone Project which is based at the University of Toronto. Her team noticed that many women "were suffering from an epidemic of fatigue, depression, ... and chronic illness. [They] saw a connection between the exhaustion of these women and environmental resource collapse: whether draining bodies or aquifers, a culture predicated on the myth of individual autonomy and the rampant depletion of resources was by definition unsustainable".⁸ I began to recognise that the capitalist/colonial worldview promotes the depletion of the planet and of people, and I could hear echoes of this in my own attitudes and old beliefs.

Similarly, I think our tendency to compartmentalise and perceive things as separate keeps us stuck. As people with compassion and empathy, when we learn to extend our perception of "self" to also include our communities, the greater world, and all of life on Mother Earth, it necessarily shifts how we live. Knowing that we are all interdependent and part of one whole leads us towards greater responsibility and care for everything. An expanded sense of self, to include the entire living world, also gives new meaning to the notions of "self-preservation" and "self-care."

Four Seasons

I want to take care of myself along with the people, animals, plants, land, water, and air. Yet as much as I long to, I cannot do everything (because that leads to burnout). Where is my precious energy and time best applied?

As I ponder this today, here in Perth, Ontario (which is unceded Algonquin/Anishinabe/Omamawinini territory), we are approaching the winter solstice. Outside my window, the deciduous trees are bare and the midday sun is low in the sky. The squirrels have been busy for weeks storing black walnuts around our garden, like they do every autumn. The heavy snows and bone-chilling winds of winter will soon be on their way.

I used to treat winter like an awful time to bear. I still wait with eagerness for the first spring shoots to break through the cold soil and for the first tastes of perennials and annual “weeds” to fill my belly. The summer is my favourite season when our garden overflows with food and plants; with the vibrant energy, the long days, and the heat, my body feels best.

I find it easy to want to cast aside the winter. Nonetheless, having been on the edge of burnout a couple of times showed me that I am not of much service from that place. Over the years, I've been learning to receive this cold, dark season as a time to slow my busy pace, to rest, to nurture myself, and to let my plans stew.

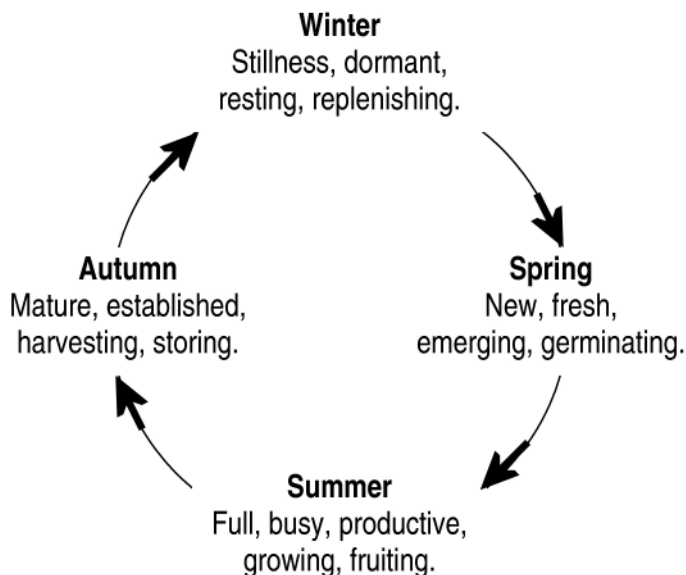
In the living world, the seasons unfold without any attention from us. There are simply times of growth and production, as there are times of shedding and quiescence.

Our own energies naturally wax and wane, and we can find ourselves in any season. We might move through this cycle many times in our lives. In practice, each season might last for months or years and some might be longer than others. Different areas of our lives might be in different seasons; for example, professionally we might be in a growth phase, whereas our creative endeavours might be in a quiet phase.

We may have an affinity for one particular season more than the others. However, only inhabiting one season can lead to stagnation, and sometimes we are pushed out of our comfort zone. Not long ago, I encountered a woman in her 70s who had just started participating in direct actions because she was very concerned about climate breakdown and the future her grandchildren would inherit. This moved her to take action. New to activism, she brought with her an open mind and the fresh possibilities of the springtime.

Let's consider each season in depth and the opportunities it offers us.

In the spring, dormant seeds open and seedlings begin to grow. At this stage of life, young children are



learning about the world and taking tentative steps. You could be emerging in a new capacity and starting out with an idea. If you are an experienced activist, this is when you are initiating a new project and feeling inspired. If you are new to social and environmental justice issues, you might feel nervous and unsure of how to proceed, and you can get stuck before you even begin. Toddlers play with all sorts of different motions before they walk. So just try and keep trying.

In the summer, the days are long and the plants dedicate a lot of energy to growing and fruiting. For youth, it tends to be a stage of high energy, doing things, and extending themselves. For seasoned and new activists alike, this is when you are fully engaged, being very productive, and taking a lot of action. Your schedule is likely filled with activities, projects, meetings, gatherings, emails, plans, and more ideas. It can be an exhilarating, busy, and fun time.

In the autumn, as the days become shorter, plant growth slows and more energy is put into roots. Gardeners harvest and store food. Mature adults are established in their lives and can invest towards the future. As an experienced activist, perhaps you have been working for years and continuing seems harder than before. You may be feeling tired, frustrated, or drained; you might be burning out and still pushing despite needing a break. As someone new to activism, this might be the time when you begin to feel cynical and realise the limitations of your efforts.

In the winter, many trees become dormant and many animals rest. Farm fields lie fallow. Elders may find themselves in a more tranquil and reflective space. They might be called to mentor and share their knowledge with others, and they might be ready to let go of things that were previously at the forefront of their lives. For long-time activists, it might be time to be celebrated, to retire, and to refocus on yourself. For people newer to this work, this could be a phase of replenishing, reflecting, and re-envisioning your projects; you could be nurturing ideas for when you re-engage in the springtime.

The cycle of the seasons teaches me balance and wholeness. Although I can feel urgent in wanting everyone to do more to help Mother Earth, I also recognise the importance of being thoughtful and intentional in our efforts. Our participation makes a difference, and it is critical that we be able to sustain our efforts through the long-term. I believe this work will take the rest of our lives rather than just one long season of hard work.

Regardless of the role you currently have, I encourage you to do an honest assessment of yourself and your life. How do you benefit from the capitalist/colonial system? For example, do you have enough food to eat, a safe place to live, the ability to read and write, money in the bank, access to healthcare, and/or the ability to travel? If your physical needs are met and you live comfortably, then you have some privilege—and you can use what you have to give back.

On the other hand, how are you depleted and drained by extractive capitalism? For example, do you typically feel stressed, anxious, or depressed? Do you have health issues that are worsening or debt that is piling up? How often do you skip cooking a healthy meal, getting enough sleep, or doing regular exercise, so you can do more? If you no longer feel well, perhaps it is time to shift your focus and give back to yourself.

Think of the cycle of the seasons again. Where are you in this cycle now? What areas are most in need of your care? How might you put your precious energy to its highest use? How does this shape your next steps?

I also invite you to consider how you feel called—in addition to what your community and the world needs. What are your gifts and passions? What is needed in the human and more-than-human communities around you? And how might you create meaning and happiness by taking care of life (others' and your own)?

We are bearing witness to so much loss in our lifetimes. Wildfires raging on several continents, old growth forests disappearing, polar ice shrinking, and species going extinct faster than before. Our human civilisation is leaving the world in flames.

I grieve and sift through the ashes. And still I find an ember of hope today. Because you are here reading this and caring about this too. My hope is for the spark in each of us that loves all of life, that wants to protect it, and that wants to birth a healthier world for those who come after us.

Please live purposefully. Please sow the precious seeds of care, healing, and renewal that you hold in your heart. Please nurture them that they might take root and bring forth new possibilities.

Curious about Embers of Hope?

Part memoir and part meditative workbook, *Embers of Hope: Embracing Life in an Age of Ecological Destruction and Climate Chaos* invites us on a personal journey to better connect with ourselves and the living Earth, offering perspective shifts that help us acknowledge our sorrow, ignite our hope, and consider everyday acts to strengthen our communities.

Watch the video: <http://livinghearth.net/article/watch-embers-hope-video>

Read excerpts and order the book: <https://www.embersofhopebook.com/>

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Do more or do less?

Responsibility for a World in Crisis

Bonita Eloise Ford

AS CRISIS ARISE ALL OVER THE WORLD, I am noticing a growing sense of responsibility and care in people. Whether we like it or not, global challenges are now impacting our own communities. I am trying all I can to be responsible. I am asking us to assess what needs support in our individual and collective lives and then to act accordingly.

Climate chaos, social unrest, and the risk of pandemics—while seemingly unrelated—are all symptoms of a critical imbalance. Our capitalist/colonial/industrial civilization, which exists within and as part of the living world, is making humans and all of life on Earth extremely unwell.

It's been a deeply painful time for many. In the last couple of years on Turtle Island (also known as North America), significant events include George Floyd's murder by Minneapolis police, the confirmation of mass graves on the sites of Canadian Residential Schools, and the catastrophic explosion of the Coastal GasLink pipeline through Wet'noan territory.

In addition, extreme weather events have been widespread, including the "heat dome" in the Pacific Northwest (the temperatures in Lytton, British Columbia reaching 49.5 degrees Celsius / 121 degrees Fahrenheit and breaking the heat record for all of Canada!), "megadrought" and wildfires in California, record rainfall and extreme flooding in British Columbia, Hurricane Ida on the Atlantic coast (which intensified from a Category 1 to a Category 4 storm, increasing by almost 60 miles per hour in a day), and 70 tornado-like events in the Midwest in one day (3).

To add insult to injury, as the world still grapples with the COVID-19 crisis, and experts warn of the potential for future pandemics, business continues as usual. Indeed,

"Pandemics are a predictable and prolonged outcome of how people source and grow food, track and consume animals, and alter ecosystems." (4) Biochemists had estimated the likelihood of pandemics (5) Scientists assert that "Protecting forests and changing agricultural practices are essential, cost-effective actions to prevent pandemics." (6) Meanwhile, old-growth logging continues in British Columbia. "Protecting forests to keep this promise has now felt the largest act of civil disobedience in Canada's history... People know that decimating the last old-growth is unambiguous." (7)

We do the hard work of confronting what is at stake in order to live purposefully and to make a difference in our lives.

Self-Care

In my book *Embers of Hope: Embracing Life in an Age of Ecological Destruction and Climate Chaos*, I encourage us to start with self-care, because acknowledging these painful realities both to us and to our future can be overwhelming for many of us. We do the hard work of confronting what is at stake in order to live purposefully and to make a difference in our lives.

So let's pause now. What do we notice in this moment? I notice a heaviness in my shoulders and some tension in my throat and belly. My breathing is shallow. I feel sad, frustrated, tired, and a bit helpless.

What emotions do you observe in your body? What emotions are present for you? Be present with that for a moment.

Please take three breaths, inhaling slowly and exhaling gently. Notice your body making solid contact with whatever surface you're sitting or lying on.

Now, I invite you to pause for a few low-life, your deep gratitude for Mother Earth, your yearning for all to be well, and for this filling your heart, nourishing and empowering you.



A snow-covered landscape in the winter, by Bonita Ford.

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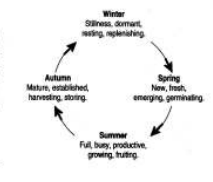
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Let's consider each season in depth and the opportunities it offers us.

In the spring, dormant seeds open and seedlings begin to grow. At this stage of life, young children are learning about the world and taking tentative steps. You could be engaging in a new capacity and starting out with an idea. If you are an experienced activist, this is where you are initiating a new project and feeling inspired. If you are new to social and environmental justice issues, you might feel nervous and unsure of how to proceed, and you can get stuck before you even begin. Toddlers play with all sorts of different motions before they walk. So just try and keep trying.

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In the autumn, as the days become shorter, plant growth slows, and more energy is put into roots. Gardens harvest and store food. Menstrual cycles are established in their lives, and can invest towards the future. As an experienced activist, perhaps you have been working for years and



The four seasons: a metaphor for life.

It might be time to be celebrated, to retire, and to reflect on yourself? The people never do this work, this could be a phase of replenishing, reflecting, and re-energising your projects; you could be nurturing seeds for when you re-engage in the springtime.

The cycle of the seasons teaches us balance and wholeness. Although I can feel eager to wait, waiting energizes us to more to help Mother Earth. I also recognize the importance of rest in this effort. Our participation makes a difference, and it is crucial that we be able to sustain our efforts through the long term. I believe this work will take the rest of our lives rather than just one long season of hard work.

Regardless of the role you currently have, I encourage you to do an honest assessment of yourself and your life. How do you benefit from the capitalist/industrial system? For example, do you have enough food to eat, a safe place to live, the ability to read and write, money in the bank, access to healthcare, and/or the ability to leave if your physical needs are met and you live comfortably, then you have some privilege—and you can use what you have to give back.

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As social, financial, political, and ecological challenges intensify, I believe many community organizers and activists get that everything seems urgent—and please slow down. Please do less for others right now. Taking care of yourself is critical, because the world really needs you and the work you do.

At the same time, many people are just starting to learn about the gravity of our collective predicament. Despite being caring individuals, they may still struggle to fully see knowing how to become part of the solution. To them I want to say, "So much is unfolding, and I understand you're worried. There is ample reason for concern. Please do more. Please do as much as you can, because the life around us is so easily crying out for help."

When I first reflected on these thoughts, I wondered if I was contradicting myself. How was it fair to ask some people to help themselves while asking others to help the world?

Several years ago, I had the joy of working with Andrea Meier, environmental activist, professor, and Director of the Persephone Project which is based at the University of Toronto. Her team noticed that many women "were suffering from an epidemic of fatigue, depression, and chronic illness. They saw a connection between the exhaustion of these women and environmental resource collapse—whether draining bodies or aquifers, a culture predicated on the

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myth of individual autonomy and the rampant depletion of resources was by definition unsustainable." (8) I began to recognize that the capitalist/colonial worldview promotes the depletion of the planet and of people, and I could have echoes of this in my own attitudes and old beliefs.

Similarly, I think our tendency to compartmentalize and perceive things as separate keeps us stuck. As people with compassion and empathy, when we learn to extend our perception of "self" to include our communities, the greater world, and all of life on Mother Earth, it necessarily leads us to see. Knowing that we are all interdependent and part of one whole leads us towards greater responsibility and care for everything. An expanded sense of self, to



Bonita's garden full of food and medicine in the summer. Bonita also includes the entire living world, also gives new meaning to the notion of "self preservation" and "self-care."

Four Seasons

I want to take care of myself along with the people, animals, plants, land, water, and air. It's as much as I love myself, please do everything (because that leads to burnout). Where is my precious energy and time best applied?

As I consider this today, here in British Columbia (which is unceded Algonquian/Anishnaabe/Ojibwa/Miwok territory), we are approaching the winter solstice. Outside my window, the deciduous trees are bare, and the middle sun is low in the sky. The squirrels have been busy for weeks storing black walnuts around our garden, like they do every autumn. The heavy snows and bone-chilling winds of winter will soon be on their way.

I used to treat winter like an awful time to be. I still walk with optimism for the first spring snows to break through the cold soil and for the first tastes of peas and beans and "weeds" to fill my belly. The summer is my favorite season when our garden overflows with food and plants, with the vibrant energy, the long days, and the best, my body feels best.

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