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John Moir

Cries from a Distant Sky

Mindfulness in an Age of Extinction

I'm sitting in the meditation hall on the fourth day of a silent retreat when a riveting memory seizes my attention. It's a recollection from an interview I conducted at the American Museum of Natural History in New York City—and there's a particular image that haunts me. I try to focus on my breath, but the memory won't let go. With a small shudder, I give in to my remembrance.

I have come to the museum to interview scientists about extinction. As I enter, I see a tableau of a towering, long-necked barosaurus reared up on its hind legs, defending itself against an attacking allosaurus. But my interest this day is not the asteroid strike that caused the dinosaurs to go extinct sixty-five million years ago. I have come here to talk about the current, human-caused mass extinction.

I spend the morning interviewing ornithologist Peter Capainolo, who recounts the story of the passenger pigeon. One hundred and fifty years ago, there were an estimated four *billion* of these nimble fliers inhabiting eastern North America. Observers from that time reported that when vast flocks of passenger pigeons flew overhead, their calls and the roar of their wings drowned out human conversation. But the tasty birds were easy to hunt, and they were slaughtered at a staggering rate. By 1900, the unthinkable had happened: the bird vanished from the wild, and in 1914 the last passenger pigeon died in the Cincinnati Zoo.

“Would you like to see a passenger pigeon specimen?” Capainolo asks. He leads me to a cavernous storage room that smells of mothballs and is filled with long rows of cabinets containing hundreds of bird specimens. Most of the specimens are preserved as study skins, a technique where all but the bird’s skin and feathers are removed and the empty body is stuffed with cotton.

Capainolo opens a drawer and wordlessly hands me a male passenger pigeon study skin. Its regal slate-gray feathers contrast with tiny accents of iridescent pinks, greens, and purples that ring its throat and neck. The bird floats on my palm, delicate as a memory. My chest tightens with the realization that *this* is all that remains of these graceful birds that once flowed through our skies like feathered rivers.

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At the retreat, when I recalled the memory of holding that passenger pigeon, my grief was not just for that one bird—or even for that entire magnificent species.

It was for all that we have lost, and for all that we will likely lose in the near future.

There have been five mass extinctions like the one that ended the dinosaur era. Today, the worldwide impact of species loss caused by human activity rivals those events and is known as the Sixth Extinction. This time, we are the asteroid.

Humans are altering Earth's oceans, landscape, and atmosphere in ways that are as unimaginable as the passenger pigeon's demise. Factors driving the Sixth Extinction include climate change, habitat destruction, invasive species, overconsumption, overpopulation, and overharvesting. Harvard biologist E. O. Wilson estimates that the current loss of species is a thousand times higher than the normal rate of extinction typical on Earth prior to humans becoming a planet-wide geophysical force.

Environmentalist and Buddhist teacher Joanna Macy characterized this extinction in a powerful metaphor: "We reenact Noah's ancient drama, but in reverse, like a film running backwards, the animals exiting [the ark]."

* * * *

Future generations will ask what we did to resist the individuals and institutions that are jeopardizing the continuity and diversity of life on Earth. Any kind of positive action makes a difference. What are your skills? What do you love to do? Who can you join with to help turn the tide? Here, at the intersection of the personal and the collective, is our way forward. When we engage with others, the effects ripple outward.

But *how* we take action is as important as *what* we do. We have our best chance of succeeding when we advocate for change firmly but with compassion and nonviolence. And yet, how do we do this when the challenges looming before us are so dire?

We can find guidance in mindful awareness and spiritual perspectives such as the teachings of Buddhism. During his lifetime, the Buddha emphasized that humans are happiest individually and in societies when they enact behaviors that cause no harm such as not killing other living beings and not taking what hasn't been given to us. Extinction is killing on a grand scale. Taking much of the Earth's resources and altering the Earth itself in ways that imperil future generations of humans--as well as thousands of other species--is taking without consideration of harm or risk.

While some solutions for making the systemic changes needed to save the ecosystems upon which civilization depends can be found in technical science journals and academic research, our most important actions begin with ourselves. Meditation teacher Pema Chodron said: "Learning not to cause harm to ourselves or others is a basic Buddhist teaching on the healing power of nonaggression. Not harming . . . is the basis of enlightened society. This is how there could be a sane world. It starts with sane citizens, and that is us."

For many of us, not turning away is our first hurdle. It is all too easy to let the overwhelming nature of so vast a crisis deplete our energy and numb us to the suffering. A place to begin is in letting go of denial so that we can meet and contemplate our outrage and

anguish. This is especially true in today's political climate, with politicians who deny climate change and dispute evolution, and when fake news and fact-free tweets pass as the truth. Meeting our own feelings through meditation and mindful awareness allows us to see clearly what our particular responses and actions can be.

For many of us, it is precisely the Buddha's first noble truth—there is suffering—that brought us to sit down and look into our hearts and minds through meditation. And after we practice for a while, we start to notice changes: less anger, prejudice, judgment, and ill will. There is a developing sense of interconnectedness that offers more empathy and patience for ourselves and others.

Developing more equanimity and kindness through meditative practice enables us to present ourselves so that those with whom we disagree will not feel the need to be so on guard. When we are peaceful, others are better able to hear our words. As Thich Nhat Hanh, Nobel Peace Prize nominee and Buddhist priest activist said, "Peace in oneself, peace in the world."

Still, we must move from meditation into action, which is healing for ourselves and the world. Meditation teacher James Baraz, a leader in the Buddhist response to climate change, has said: "The most important thing is to do *something*; otherwise we are left feeling helpless." Baraz likes to quote anthropologist Angeles Arrien: "Action absorbs anxiety."

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Singer Leonard Cohen spent many years living in a Buddhist monastery. In his song *Anthem* he wrote:

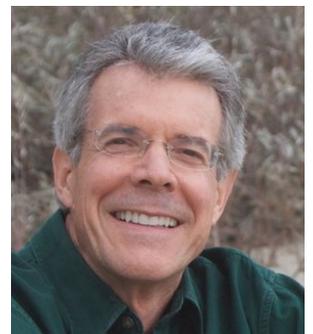
Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in.

There are many cracks in our world. Rain forests, Arctic ice, and coral reefs are disappearing. Across the planet, thousands of species are spiraling toward extinction. And far in the distance—just beyond the edge of our hearing—echo the faint cries of the last passenger pigeons.

Our actions in the face of the suffering of the Sixth Extinction are ultimately a spiritual quest. We will be saner, not to mention more effective, if we take care to preserve our own humanity, and if we keep our hearts intact and our actions informed by the wisdom of mindful awareness and the compassion of kindness and equanimity. There are many bells we can ring.

John Moir

John Moir is an environmental journalist who has written for the New York Times, Washington Post, Smithsonian and numerous other publications. He is author of two books, including *Return of the Condor: The Race to Save Our Largest Bird From Extinction*. John has also contributed to three anthologies and



received more than two dozen writing awards. He has had a longtime interest in mindfulness and is on the Board of Insight Santa Cruz.



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