

// GOD IN THE MACHINE //

ONE NIGHT LAST SUMMER, I lay awake staring at the ceiling, gripped by despair. The climate crisis can do that to me — to any of us. The web of life is unraveling before our eyes and some say that human civilization could be at risk of collapse. What then shall we do? How shall we respond to the climate crisis and the ecological emergency in which we find ourselves? On what reserves of strength and courage shall we draw as we face the greatest challenge our species has ever faced?

Raising these questions has become the focus of my ministry. After 25 years as a parish priest — while working as a climate activist on the side — I finally left parish ministry in 2013 to devote myself full-time to mobilizing Christians and other people of faith to place care for the Earth at the center of their moral and spiritual concern. As missionary for Creation Care with the Episcopal Diocese of Western Massachusetts and the Massachusetts Conference of the United Church of Christ, I travel from place to place, preaching about God's love for our planetary home and the urgent call to safeguard the living world that we are so rapidly destroying. I lead retreats on spiritual resilience and resistance; I lobby for smart climate legislation; with kindred souls, I hit the streets for marches and rallies, and sometimes to carry out acts of nonviolent civil disobedience as we struggle to keep fossil fuels in the ground, where they belong.

I've come to learn that healing is a two-way street: Just as surely as human beings can work to heal the Earth, so, too, can the Earth heal us. Call it forest bathing. Call it recovering from nature deficit disorder. Whatever you call it, wandering outdoors with a conscious intention to be fully present — to listen to birdsong, ponder the sky, feel the wind on one's face, encounter a tree — can do wonders for the soul. When we're immersed in the natural world, many of us encounter the Holy. We realize again that we belong to

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by Rev. Dr. Margaret Bullitt-Jonas

a living, sacred reality much greater than ourselves. That's why I make a practice of regularly stepping away from the computer screen. Forget the allure of virtual reality: In the end, the excitement of pings and "likes" can never replace authentic encounters with myself, other people, or the living world around me — much less with the Creator who loved us into being and whose presence sustains us still.

As I lay awake that night last summer wrestling with insomnia, I tried to sense God's presence. The Bible includes plenty of stories about God coming at night, appearing in a dream or speaking in the heart. But I felt incapable of prayer. I was alone and anxious, closed in on myself, fearful of the future on a scorching planet. I didn't want to disturb my husband, asleep beside me. Perhaps I would be restored to myself if I went outside.

I put on my bathrobe, opened the sliding glass door in the living room, and stepped onto the patio. The night sky was overcast. I could see no stars. I breathed for a while in the dark, studying the quiet houses, the empty street, the dull sheen of streetlights. I waited for my fear to subside. I waited



for some inner door to open. I tried to pray, but nothing happened. I heard no voice that called my name; I felt no larger, sacred presence. I couldn't shake the dread, the fearful certainty that this peaceful scene was imperiled. Actually, we were *all* imperiled. What could I do? What could anyone do?

I stepped back into the house, grabbed my cell phone, and carried it outside to sneak a peek at email. I was ashamed to resort to a technological fix. I knew what everyone knows by now: Using social media can be addictive. Peering at a screen can become compulsive. Reading email can be a distraction from facing ourselves. What quicker way to dodge the suffering and promise of the present moment than to escape into virtual reality?

But here I was, looking for something — courage, hope, maybe God Herself — in a palm-sized contraption of plastic, metal, and glass. I typed in the password, waited for the messages to load, and took a look. I found a new message from Emilie Smith, an Anglican priest in British Columbia. I'd met her the year before when I'd led a retreat for Anglican clergy on spirituality in a time of climate crisis.

Her email cut through my fog of helplessness like a beam of light. She began by warmly greeting her “dear beloved sisters and brothers, friends, family, and community.” She told us that she was scheduled to attend court the next morning. She had been arrested with scores of other faith leaders and friends in a protest to stop construction of a pipeline in Vancouver. She explained:

We were standing to protect eagles' nests in trees, and salmon rivers, and the already-sick ocean, and the remaining forests, and in solidarity with the Indigenous communities who have been living with grace on this land for millennia.

It is time to turn away from the oil and greed economy. It is urgently time to turn towards one another and to stand unafraid of the state and business, which claim that all that we do to protect life is useless, harmful, and illegal.

Please stand with me and with the courageous land defenders here and all over the earth. Do what you can, wherever you are. Pray, sing, garden, support, bake, love, resist! Give everything you can away.

She was facing jail-time, yet tonight — the night before her sentencing — she could write:

I am filled to overflowing with gratitude. It has been a summer of untold abundance and blessing in my personal life.... Who could ask for anything more? I could: An end to violent colonial projects of domination that destroy the earth.

Reading her words, I felt my spiritual and moral strength return, flowing like an incoming tide to every cell in my body. I did not need to be isolated, passive, and helpless. I could stand with my friend and with everyone who loves life, everyone who is fighting for a more just and habitable world. That's where we find joy, in giving ourselves to a mission larger than ourselves, in joining with other humans and our brother-sister beings in a shared struggle to protect life as it has evolved on Earth.

Will we be successful? Will we avert climate catastrophe, the mass death of human populations, and the collapse of ecosystems? I don't know. I do know that technology — think fracking, mining, plastic production — is responsible for much of the massive assault on planetary life-systems that is now underway. Cell phones, tablets, and the countless other screens and gadgets that we use every day pose their own hazards, as well. And the virtual connections they provide, whether to people or nature, are no substitute for the real thing.

But technology can also be put to good use — tangibly, through wind farms, solar arrays, and renewable energy with storage, and intangibly, through keeping us connected with each other. And in certain moments, under certain circumstances, it can offer just what we need. A reminder that we're in this fight together. A message of encouragement and hope when we need it most. Sometimes a cell phone can even convey the Word of God. ■

The Rev. Dr. Margaret Bullitt-Jonas is co-editor of *Rooted and Rising: Voices of Courage in a Time of Climate Crisis* (2019) and she maintains a website, RevivingCreation.org.

