

# HOW TO WRITE A LOVE LETTER TO THE EARTH

PETER REASON

The cold weather has passed. It is thawing, although the earth is still frozen hard. The remaining snow lies thinly on the ground. It has melted more quickly around twigs and other debris, slashing dark lines through the white. Along the base of the garden wall, where the earth has remained soft, badgers searching for worms and roots have turned over the soil, scattering brown oak leaves over the snowy surface.

I am clearing our overgrown walled garden on the outskirts of Bath, as I have most days through the winter, wrapped up warm: woolly hat, heavy boots, thick gloves. Yesterday I pollarded a hazel tree, so today I am cutting it into firewood. There is a path of grey slush where I have walked between the pile of branches and my saw bench, and another where the wheel of the barrow has rolled from the bench to the hedge where I am stacking the cut firewood. I am enjoying the physical work – the stretching of muscles and the rise of sweat – all the while watching the thoughts and reflections that pass through my mind.

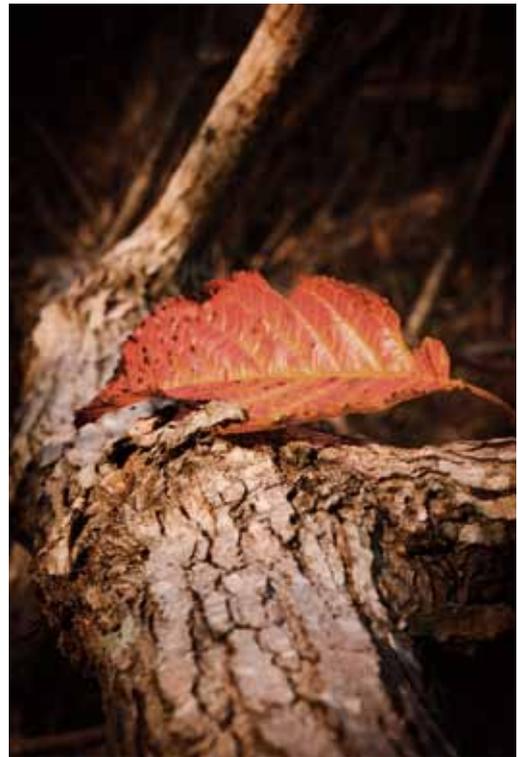
For Valentine's Day, the people at Eradicating Ecocide have invited supporters to write a love letter to the Earth, part of the campaign to put ecocide on the same legal footing as genocide. As I clip twigs into bundles for the bonfire and saw the thicker branches into handy lengths for the fireplace, I wonder what I might write. The melting snow sets me thinking about how life arises and passes away. Do we love what is impermanent? In these temperate islands, what could be more impermanent than snow and last year's oak leaves?

The Buddha taught that suffering is caused by attachment: forms are empty, there are no things in themselves. Life is characterized by impermanence, as entities of the world arise and pass away. It is easy to see the impermanence of snow, from that moment when a footprint disturbs the pristine surface to the dripping thaw that leaves bedraggled patches in shaded places. We can grasp the cycle of seasons, how the oak sprouts young leaves that mature, fall and slowly rot away. Maybe when we stand dwarfed by an ancient oak we can glimpse the hundreds of years that make up the cycle of the tree's life. It is less easy, maybe scarcely possible, to grasp the immense planetary cycles in which we are embedded, cycles that maintain the composition of the atmosphere, the patterns of temperature and rainfall, the emergence and decline of civilizations and even of species like our own.

I heard a teaching story on a Buddhist retreat a few years ago: A bereaved lady said, 'Master, truly – presence is impermanent, but absence is permanent.'

'Quite so,' said the Master.

We may learn through Buddhist and other practices to release our attachment to forms, to accept impermanence, even our death, as part of life. But the ecological crisis is not simply death: the disappearance of species, the destruction of ecosystems, the disruption of the great cycles of the planet, are impermanence of a different order. They are disruptions of the process of life itself, permanent loss of evolutionary complexity, permanent endings of patterns of being. They are also moments of transition in geologic time, in which one grand order passes leaving space for a new dispensation to emerge. But this is beyond the



grasp of everyday human consciousness.

I work my way to the bottom of the heap of hazel branches and rake up the twigs and bits of bark left on the ground. Tomorrow I will start pruning the apple trees, so there will be more twigs and branches to cut up. It will soon be time for another bonfire.

The invitation to write a love letter to the Earth pulls me toward lament. I might write celebrating the elegance of snowdrop flowers dangling delicately on their fragile stems. I might recall my joy at the bright double rainbow that yesterday arced across the sky, two lines of intense colour penetrating down into the valley. But can I also offer love to these great disturbing transitions? My love letter must be accompanied by grief for what is being lost.

In the end, all I was able to write for Valentine's Day was, 'Dear Earth, I couldn't live without you.'

PETER REASON retired in 2009 from an academic career at the University of Bath. He is co-editor of *Stories of the Great Turning* (Vala Publishing Cooperative, 2013), narratives of contributions to a more sustainable world. He is finalizing the manuscript of *The Call of the Running Tide*, the story of a single-handed sailing voyage to the west coast of Ireland exploring his relationship with the world of sea and coast.

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