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THE GROUND ON WHICH I STAND

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ECOLOGY IS EVERYTHING

We live on a planet that has been changed by the actions of human beings to the point that it may not continue to support our existence. This planet we talk about so much isn't just a location. It's a biosphere, a living organism of which we are part, and on which we depend. I don't refer to our ecosystem as "the environment" because that term implies that the biosphere is really a kind of stage for human activity, a backdrop, existing to support us. It also tends to segregate what we consider natural and not, to place the habitats we have engineered, and we ourselves, outside "nature."

The ecological crisis we find ourselves in is in fact a crisis of human relations, with each other and with the entire planet. It is a crisis created by a set of false assumptions about reality, the same assumptions that drive all systems of oppression. That greed and domination are the inherent driving forces of human existence and, therefore, that warfare, conquest, enslavement, exploitation, the looting of other people and of the entire ecosystem are natural and inevitable, and therefore must be okay.

The intransigence of climate change deniers, their refusal to accept the scientific consensus, based on extensive and compelling evidence, that human activity is dramatically changing our ecosystem, their willingness to spend fortunes promoting conspiracy theories to account for and invalidate that consensus, is really a defense of the goodness of greed.

In order to continue their plundering, they refuse to accept that there are limits to what can be extracted, from the physical planet or from other people. If we accept that the earth is becoming catastrophically less habitable for humans because of reckless extraction driven by avarice, then the founding myth of capitalism, that greed is a benign, creative force with tolerable costs, collapses.

It's heartbreaking that there are so many human beings who cling to the sinking ship of infinite piracy, unable to imagine a society of reciprocity, respect, and mutual care that would meet the needs of all, including them. They would rather accelerate their looting, hoping to amass as much wealth as possible before the ship founders, even though that ship is our entire world and no amount of ownership will keep them from drowning.

But for those of us who are able to envision that society, it's essential that we understand this: every struggle is an ecological struggle.

The problems in our relationships with each other and with the so-called natural world are the same. If we understand ourselves as part of a living ecosystem continually being shaped by and shaping us, then everything we do has ecological implications, and every attempt to mend or protect our ecosystem is inevitably rooted in questions of social justice. For human society to be sustainable on earth, it must become inclusive, must take into account the well-being of each one of us.

Much of the oxygen we breathe is made by plankton in our oceans, and the oceans are in grave danger. The only way we can stop, and reverse as much as we can, the extensive damage to our oceans—dangerous levels of acidification, oxygen-starved dead zones without any life at all, coral die-off, massive islands of garbage, and other threats to marine life, including major sources of human food—is to have societies of people who think differently, who understand and practice interdependence, who are not pressed by poverty into overfishing, who understand the connection between burning coal and poisoning the sea and are able to do something about it. Only an interdependent humanity with the resources and power to make good ecological choices can act effectively on behalf of the seas or any other part of the world ecosystem essential for our lives.

Therefore anything that threatens human interdependence is an ecological threat. First among these is the existence of economic classes, the massive, worldwide exploitation of most people's work to pay for luxuri-

ous lives for a small minority, and the recruitment of a larger minority to participate in this system for more modest portions of the loot.

Every other system of oppression is at the service of this goal, the concentration of wealth. Every other systemic oppression exists to create and uphold that project: the attempts to exterminate indigenous peoples in order to occupy and extract wealth from the land and water they live with; the enslavement of millions of African people whose forced, unpaid labor made it possible for European Americans to quickly amass fortunes, build roads and cities, dominate world markets for their crops, and the ongoing exploitation of their descendants; the immense and deeply rooted structures that violently control the reproductive abilities of female-bodied people, and the physical and emotional labor of all women; the commodifying of sex into an international commerce in rape, destroying lives, bodies, psyches, cultures in its wake; the discarding and often killing of people whose bodies and minds can't comply with the demands of profit-making work—people referred to as disabled; the violent enforcement of rigid categories of sexuality and gender, the better to control us; the placement of artificial borders dividing up looting rights between different groups of owners and the enormous waste of lives and other resources spent in wars to guard or expand those looting rights.

We think about making cities more “livable” in terms of urban farms, restored streams, pedestrian zones, and cleaner and more efficient public transportation, but more than half of humanity lives in cities, often as the result of collapsing rural economies and wars. If human interdependence is essential for better ecological choices to be implemented, then every aspect of urban life is ecological: poverty, segregation, racist and sexist divisions of resources, the existence of food wastelands, inequitable and impoverished health services, the endless violence of the police toward Black people and other People of Color, including Black and brown immigrants, the mismanagement of essential life supports such as clean water and air, the lack of basic safety, and all the ways we structure work, housing, transportation, neighborhoods, schools: these are all aspects of urban ecosystems. If we don't solve cities, we won't solve anything, and the only way to solve cities is to liberate the people in them.

When the basics of life are threatened by ecological harm, the consequences fall the hardest on people already systematically deprived of resources and self-determination. From the aftermaths of hurricanes to

the deforestation of the tropics, from the depletion of fish to changes in temperature and rainfall that herald the collapse of coffee production, ecological disasters are inevitably disasters of social injustice that flow along the existing cracks in our world.

Eco-activism with a narrow focus on wildlife and wilderness that does not take into account the unequal impacts of ecological destruction on different groups of people, or the different relationships they may have to land, water, trees, and other species, ends up perpetuating the injustices that are blocking our way toward lasting solutions. Wildlife advocacy groups attempting to protect tigers in India have unleashed state violence against indigenous people for whom tiger hunting is culturally important and could be sustainably managed. Middle-class urban activists trying to revive sustainable agriculture in Puerto Rico are becoming rural organic farmers, but sometimes treat local growers of coffee and bananas, with a long and intimate knowledge of soil, rainfall, and pests, as ignorant or irresponsible for growing cash crops with pesticides, failing to understand how poverty drives their decisions.

My father used to pose this question to his students: What is the relationship between women's ownership of land and the nitrogen-fixing qualities of legumes? Because women have less access to capital, we tend to own smaller farms. We also tend to plant more diverse crops, because a manageable scale and a variety of crops whose most intensive labor is spread out over the year are most compatible with child rearing and other domestic work, which is still overwhelmingly the responsibility of women. A small and diverse farm both allows and requires a more intimate knowledge of how plants, soil, insects, birds, and animals interact. It allows for and requires better management of the soil than plantation farming does, and close observation teaches us the importance of rotating crops and planting legumes and other nitrogen fixers to maintain fertility where nitrogen-hungry crops grew the season before. Feminist land reform, increasing women's decision-making power about how land is farmed, is an essential component of protecting the soil that vast monocultures deplete.

At this point in our history, many of the most powerful fights against extractive economics are being led by indigenous people whose deep cultural ties to specific ecosystems give them an understanding of our interdependence with earth, water, and other species and a clear picture of the

disastrous costs of extraction. In every case of indigenous environmentalism, the defense of specific waters and lands is also a fight for indigenous sovereignty and resistance to multiple forms of genocide.

The peaceful, culturally rooted resistance of the Standing Rock Lakota water protectors and their indigenous and nonindigenous allies to the pipeline transport of some of the dirtiest petroleum in the world through their ancestral lands and rivers has grabbed the imaginations of people all over the world. Nonindigenous people often frame it as a climate change fight and a fight for clean water, without understanding that it is, at its core, a battle for indigenous survival, for the most basic of human rights: the right to exist.

“Water is life” doesn’t just mean that we have to drink it to stay alive. It means water is alive, earth is alive, that these presences in our world are not inert “resources” to be claimed, packaged, and sold. They are bound by a billion strands into the fabric of the living world, and tearing them apart for profit cuts deep gashes into the biosphere, with consequences that spread far and wide. The failure to recognize this could destroy us all, beginning with the indigenous peoples whose commitments to these truths stand in the way of the final extractions: the last oil, the last clean water, the last forests, the last uncontaminated stretches of ocean, the last great dammable rivers.

Liberal environmentalism talks about cultivating corporate responsibility, about “greening” the pursuit of profit without changing the fundamental social relations that profit-driven economies require. The pursuit of wealth for its own sake, and not for the common good, not to enhance the quality of life on earth for all its living beings, inevitably leads those who pursue it to make decisions skewed by that goal, even if they practice some form of harm reduction. The underlying purposes of profit remain the same. Profit is built on inequality, which is incompatible with sustainability.

When power is in the hands of people whose driving desire is to accumulate as much wealth as they can, as quickly as possible, they will always choose short-term profit, no matter how destructive, over accountability to the rest of us. Underlying this drive, I believe, is a profound fear that those who don’t dominate are doomed to be dominated, that the choice is between stealing what you can or starving. Part of our work, then, is to enrich the impoverished soil of the possible, to cultivate through both

our grand visions and our daily practices the belief that we can create societies in which it makes sense to place our lives in each other's hands, neither exploiters nor exploited, but simply kin.

We have the creativity and intelligence to solve the problems we face, but a great portion of human ingenuity is tied up with managing the challenges of just surviving oppression.

Nearly half the world's population, including 1 billion children, lives in poverty, and more than 1.3 billion in extreme poverty, defined as less than \$1.25 a day. Over 750 million people don't have access to clean drinking water, which causes 2,300 deaths a day. One in nine people on Earth are chronically undernourished. In 2011, 45 percent of all child deaths, nearly 1.4 million, were caused by lack of food. One in nine children is growing up in a war zone, and children make up half of all refugees. This is the context within which we must work our transformation.

Years ago my colleague Victor Lewis said that the greatest untapped natural resource on Earth is the human imagination, but that if the cure for cancer lay in the mind of a starving child in a Brazilian favela, we were out of luck.

One of the things I love most about revolutionary Cubans is their perspective that each human's gifts are unique and irreplaceable, and that all of those gifts are essential. Many of their social policies express the idea that the purpose of revolution is to nourish and free those gifts to fully function in the world. In order to tap the great hidden aquifers of human ingenuity and let them well up to meet our thirst, we must remove every obstacle to the flowing of human potential.

That flow is blocked by poverty, inequality, violence, the lack of sovereignty and self-determination, basic security and health, and the psychological rubble of massive collective traumas, reinforced by endless false narratives fed to us day and night to explain why our suffering is our own fault.

In order to create ecologically viable societies and avoid our own extinction, we will have to build social movements that include all humans in our vision of environmentalism and our entire ecosystem in our vision of social justice.

Because every struggle is an ecological struggle, and the only path forward is to create fully inclusive and interdependent societies, it follows

that every ecological struggle must also be embedded in the call for universal social justice.

If we fall short, if we continue to build limited movements that treat the multitude of battles we face as separate and the work of full inclusion as a luxury, we will not be able to mobilize the power, resilience, clarity, and unity we need in order to win. I believe that we have it in us to rise to this moment, to end the failed experiment of greed, restore the streams of our creative power, and establish a global culture of reciprocity and generosity as the beating heart of human life on earth.