



# Communing with Gaia

## Juliet Batten

### **Introductory comments**

It's great to be here so close to Spring Equinox, just after Easter. Now if I see some raised eyebrows, I must reassure you that I'm not crazy. In the seasonal calendar that follows the rhythm of the southern hemisphere, we have indeed just passed Easter. We are in a season of resurrection and growth. But more of that later.

### **Invocations**

First I honour Gaia. I'm using the term to mean the divine being of the earth, as more recent writers do, rather than Lovelock's original meaning of the selfregulating function of the planet.

I honour my Celtic ancestry and the four elements of life: earth, water, fire and air. I also honour the centre, where all diversity becomes one.

Ko Juliet Batten ahau, ko Taranaki taku maunga, ko Waiongonaiti taku awa.

Taranaki is my mountain and the Waionganaiti, which flows down from the mountain, through Inglewood, is my river. This river flowed along the bottom of my grandparent's property in Inglewood, and as a child my sacred place was sitting on a stone on the river bank, where I became still, absorbed in the changing light and rippling currents of the water.

### **Origins**

Three people lived in that house: my grandmother, grandfather, and my Auntie Jessie. Each of these three people had a different god.

For Grandma, a little woman from Yorkshire, mother of four, hers was a god of fear and anxiety. Fear and anxiety are of course dimensions of God, but for grandma they became everything. Hers was a rule-bound, strict religion that looked for any signs of fun in the world and pounced on it as a cat would a mouse, tearing it apart. Her god made me feel extremely nervous, as if I was always about to be found out committing the sin of enjoying myself.

Grandad, who was the town constable before he retired, had emigrated here from Yorkshire as a young man. Grandad was a man of principle, honest and straight as a die. It was said he could talk a gun out of the grip of an armed man. Granddad's god was a kind of good policeman, who kept the world safe and orderly. This god had a certain appeal to me.

But Auntie Jessie's god was the one I wanted for myself. For Jessie, the school teacher and unmarried daughter, hers was a god of joy. Praise would burst out of her like bubbles from ginger beer or toys from a Christmas stocking: hers was a god of Nature, who dwelled in the garden, the river, the food she cooked, children she taught, flowers she grew; in the flower circles I made every time I lost a tooth, to entice the fairies out of hiding and leave me a 6d under the central blossom. It was Auntie Jessie who taught me to tend the riverside garden, and as we weeded together she would suddenly break into song with a joyful hymn, her favourite being: 'All things bright and beautiful, All creatures great and small, All things wise and wonderful, the Lord God made them all'.

Auntie Jessie would never have called her god Gaia, but to me, looking back, that's what it was: Gaia, the divine power of this planet. For me, Gaia is not tomorrow's god; Gaia is the god of yesterday, and of today, right here in this present moment, the one who has lived inside me ever since I first sat on my stone by the river.

### **Our own sacred place**

So my sacred place in nature, the place where I first learned to experience the soul of nature, what I am calling Gaia, was on a stone or among the plants by my river. These early experiences shape who we are and how we will relate to the earth. And such experiences are vital for our soul development. On my stone by the river, I wasn't just in the *presence* of Gaia, or the soul of nature: I communed with her. Sometimes we are lucky enough to discover this special relationship in childhood; sometimes it's not till adolescence or adulthood that we find our sacred connection with the natural world.

### **Reflection**

I invite you to notice how your minds have been wandering to your equivalent of my stone by the river as I've been talking. I'm now going to make space for you to remember more fully your own sacred place in nature. I am going to ask you to pause and reflect for a few minutes.

Bring your awareness inside, closing your eyes to help do this. Bring your attention to your breathing, noticing the breath flowing in and out very naturally. Listen to the rhythm of your breath.

Now remember your sacred place in nature, or maybe, allow your sacred place in nature to remember you. Maybe you have more than one, but for now allow just one place to come to you, and accept whichever one presents itself. Connect with that place: smells, sounds, feelings, temperature. Imagine that Gaia, the soul of nature is there. Listen to Gaia. What is she saying to you?

When you are ready, bring your awareness back to the room. If you have writing things on hand, you may wish to make a quick note of what occurred.

### **The act of communing**

I read recently that while prayer is about talking, meditation is about listening. I've entitled my talk 'Communing with Gaia'. When I use the word 'communing', I am thinking of a kind of synthesis of the two: the deep speaking of prayer, and the deep listening of meditation.

Communing begins with listening. When we learn to listen to nature through contemplation and meditation, we may be surprised at what we pick up and what messages we receive.

For many years now I have been listening to the seasons. In fact, I have probably been doing this all my life, because in Taranaki the changing seasons are mirrored in the changing face of the mountain very powerfully. We watched the mountain on a daily basis to see what weather it would send us. [reading from p. 9-10 of my new book, *Touching Snow: A Taranaki Memoir*]

About twenty years ago I began tuning into the seasons in a particular way, for I was writing about seasonal celebrations and became curious about the rhythms of change that take place in *this* land, as opposed to the northern hemisphere. In Auckland where I live, at my bach at Te Henga on the Waitakeres west coast, or in journeys around the country, I would observe and take notes, sometimes even make a quick drawing of what was happening in nature at different times of the year. Keeping a seasonal log soon became a regular habit, and the results of this were most interesting. The more I observed, the more there was to discover. It was as if nature began speaking to me, knowing I was listening.

### **Fostering intimacy with Gaia**

And what did I hear? How imperative it is that we foster our connection with the natural world. Gaia grieves that we attend so little to her. Not only must we attend to Gaia for her sake, but we must also do so for our own. The human soul must have an intimate connection with nature in order to develop its full potential. We must learn to commune with Gaia.

Bill Plotkin, depth psychologist and wilderness guide, would agree. Plotkin listens deeply to nature, especially during his solitary vision quests in the southwest deserts and mountains of the United States. In January this year he published a remarkable book entitled *Nature and the Human Soul* in which he develops a model for the stages of a human life based on the cycles of nature. He says [p.394]:

*The soul of the earth is the essence or the psyche of the being called Gaia. To truly know another individual at her depths is to perceive and to know her soul, the ultimate way she fits into the web of life. The Earth too, can be known in this way... To truly care for the Earth community, then, a person must sense or intuit the soul of the Earth, the underlying pattern of nature expressed through an astounding diversity of forms and species.*

We pay a terrible price for severing ourselves from nature, or taking up a dominator stance towards our environment. Yet we seem to have lost the ability to maintain our relationship with the natural world. What would our lives be like if we could successfully handle modern technology such as electricity, cars, cell phones and computers, and yet stay in touch with the rhythms of the earth and the cycles of preparing, planting, growing, decay and return to essence?

My teenage granddaughter's generation is growing up in the belief that food comes, not from the earth but from shops. Her generation is growing up not knowing that for the cows to run dry, the hens to go off the lay, or the ground to lie fallow, are all part of the natural way. Can you imagine the consequences of this?

When we can walk into a supermarket and buy kiwi fruit, for example, all year round, we lose sight of the season when the vines stand bare. When the vines of Hawkes Bay are bare, we can fill a bag with kiwifruit from Italy, and the concept of changing our diet with the seasons is lost. These children are growing up, not only disconnected from the realities of seasonal production but in its place they have the illusion of unremitting supply. This means they are in danger of growing into young people who drive themselves relentlessly, who lack the wisdom to know when to pause, withdraw, or claim the necessity of barrenness.

Due to various circumstances, this granddaughter has grown up very urbanised. In the middle of winter a new granddaughter was born, my only other grandchild. My son and his new wife are committed to fostering her connection with nature, and when she was six weeks old, brought her whenua (placenta) out to Te Henga, where my bach is, to be buried on the land. The hole was dug and the kauri tree ready to be fed by the deep rich blood from the womb, but before this happened I held little Mira and explained to her what was happening. I told her that this was to be her tree. Her eyes widened and she became extremely alert. She listened and watched as if nature were speaking to her too.

Although she lives in an urban street in Auckland, this little one will visit the land often. Her soul has been planted here.

These days, especially if we live in a city, how can we ensure that our children, the very ones who love TV and texting, also experience an intimate connection with untamed nature? Our ancestors had an extremely close relationship with the natural world, because they depended on it for survival. The ability to watch the skies, animal behaviour, to sense the turning of the wind, was critical to time the moment of harvest, for example. Detecting the indicators of the warming earth, as our ancestors did by listening for the call of certain birds, studying the stars, phases of the moon etc, was critical in timing the best moment to plant new crops. Nature could not be controlled; nature needed to be worked with, understood, respected and even feared.

We felt we had made progress as a human race every time technology allowed us to take one more step in imposing our will on nature. Our fears were assuaged. But now

nature is striking back, in the form of floods, hurricanes, droughts, melting ice caps and the extinction of one species after another.

Now, we are becoming anxious again, which is a good thing. We need to restore partnership with Gaia.

### **Attending to the rhythm of life**

What else did I discover when listening to nature? I learned about the rhythm of the yearly cycle and the relationship between outer and inner seasons. The more I paid attention to the seasons, over the last 22 years celebrating eight festivals each year with a group of women, the more I became aware of the significance of coming into alignment with the great wheel of life. It happened naturally for me, simply by being aware, and it led to more easeful and conscious living, an ability to flow with the rhythms of life, to attend to effective timing, to use my energy in harmony with daily, monthly, and annual cycles.

Nature is full of cycles and rhythms: not just the seasons, but tides, phases of the moon, growth cycles of plants, night and day, and the life of our own bodies. The pulse of life beats through our own heart and our own movements of expansion and contraction, whether physical, emotional, mental or spiritual. Healer Donald Epstein said [Epstein, p. 34:

*Suffering occurs when the rhythm of our thoughts and actions is incompatible with the greater natural rhythms of our bodies and with the greater natural rhythms of life ... Suffering is what makes us aware - even if not consciously - that our actions and thoughts are not in harmony with the greater rhythms that guide our lives.'*

In researching seasonal festivals from many traditions; especially those of ancient Europe, the Celts, and Maori, I discovered what enormous significance these festivals have, because they mark transition points from one state to the next. Transitions are challenging, as any woman who has given birth will know: that stage between surrendering to contractions as the cervix slowly opens, and actively pushing a baby down the birth canal into the world. There are simple transitions, such as stepping across a threshold into a new situation, and larger ones, such as the transition from work into retirement, or life into death. I've found that big transitions are also times of heightened energies, as if the power of grace enters us, to assist and give guidance.

The old festivals were born out of both heightened awareness and anxiety, and served the vital purpose of helping people deal with their fear of change, and concern about the future, among other things. Here in this land, as many of you will know, we have lost the alignment between the seasons and our festivals, because we still follow the northern hemisphere calendar.

### **The spring festival of Easter**

I began this talk by saying how happy I was to be here just after Easter. Of course, everyone knows that we celebrate Easter in April, but not so many of us are conscious

of it being autumn when we do this. And many of you also know that Easter originally came into being as a spring festival, close to the equinox. It celebrates resurrection, not just in the Christ story, but also in nature itself.

We can easily rationalise why we need to keep it in autumn here; but have you ever imagined what might happen if we connected with that particular metaphor at the same time as all of nature is greening and growing? In mid spring our bodies are surging with energy. Everything we smell and see is burgeoning with growth, we taste the life force in new season's green food, the sun is half way towards the zenith, shoots and leaves are rising upwards, and so our whole being - body, mind and soul - can enter into the spirit of resurrection. It's not just a concept for our minds, it's in our very cells and blood stream. When we connect with the deep origins of such a festival, we discover that Christ's rising was linked with the rising of vegetation gods throughout Europe and the middle East. This particular metaphor goes back thousands of years: it is embedded in our psyches.

Then we link with the Maori heritage of this land: Te Koanga, the digging, awakening time, heralded by the return of the cuckoos, kowhai, clematis - and our sense of connection with this place, this time, deepens.

People would listen to the call of cuckoos, migrating birds whose return to breed signalled the coming of spring. The pipiwharau (shining cuckoo) called kui! Kui! With a rising inflection (No food! No food!) before adding to its song later in the season, whiti! Whiti ora! With a falling inflection (changing, changing to plenty).

In Europe my ancestors also listened attentively to the call of the cuckoo. It too changes its call as the season advances: in this case, from 'cuckoo' in spring to 'cuc-cuckoo' in midsummer.

But now it sometimes seems to me that our obsession with the TV or radio weather forecast is all that remains of our ancestral ability to scan the skies, sense the wind, and observe the behaviour of living creatures in order to know what change is on its way.

### **Reconnecting**

Each day I see how disconnection causes suffering and how connection and presence restore life and well-being.

In therapy I am able to help my clients to connect with themselves, but this is private work, with one person at a time. From a wider perspective, we can make an effort to be aware of the rhythms of nature.

When we restore our missing connections we become one with the soul of the earth and this affects every thought and action we take with regards to nature.

So how can we foster this relationship with nature?

### **Taking action**

Here are five action points for you to take away with you and consider:

1. Build awareness by gardening, keeping a seasonal log, or enacting rituals to mark the transition points between seasons (See my book *Celebrating the Southern Seasons* for guidelines on how to do this).
2. Praise: through poems, paintings, photography, song or dance to celebrate the movement of life.
3. Sit and commune with Gaia. Create an altar and on it place symbols which are renewed through the seasons. Foster this relationship.
4. Make sure that your children and grandchildren develop an intimate relationship with wild nature.
5. Do something for the earth in every season.

### **Conclusion**

By communing with Gaia we open our senses, minds, hearts and souls to nature. We listen and speak, soul to soul, becoming so attuned to the living power of this planet, the life force, Gaia, God, divine energy or whatever we call it, that we tend to all living things as if they were part of our own body. Then we can no more pollute and poison the earth, water or air than we could pollute or poison our own selves. Then we become kaitiaki, guardians and protectors of Gaia, the soul of nature, and in doing so, kaitiaki of our own souls as well.

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**Dr. Juliet Batten** is well known as a writer, artist, psychotherapist and teacher who has led rituals and workshops throughout Aotearoa/New Zealand. She has a PhD in English, has taught Environmental Studies at Auckland University and was a director of the QEII National Trust for ten years. She has written many books on spirituality, including the award winning *A Cup of Sunlight: Discovering the Sacred in Everyday Life* (2005), and *Celebrating the Southern Seasons: Rituals for Aotearoa* (1995; revised and expanded 2005).

Her writing reflects her commitment to personal, community and ecological well being, and her passion for reconnecting people with nature. She has meditated for 25 years and is a meditation teacher and trainer.

She is currently completing a new book entitled *Seasons of the Soul*.