

Sustainability

Creating Beauty in Wounded Places

How do we respond when the wild and beautiful places we love are damaged? When forests are cut down, waters polluted, wildlife habitats destroyed, there seems no way to deal with the grief, anger, and guilt that rise up in us. Those who do express sorrow about the loss of nature are often accused of anthropomorphizing or of caring more about nature than about people. So we avert our eyes from these wounded places and swallow our feelings, because we don't know what else to do.

Radical Joy for Hard Times (radicaljoyforhardtimes.org), the non-profit organization I founded in spring 2009, has a different approach. Based in Thompson, Pennsylvania, with supporters around the world, we believe that creating a sustainable, thriving future on Earth depends on opening our hearts to the natural world in its brokenness as well as its splendor. Through simple events called Earth Exchanges, we give people the opportunity to spend time in wounded places, share personal stories about what

the place has meant to them, and rediscover it in its current state. Every event includes the creation of a simple act of beauty, such as drumming, dancing, praying, singing, or making an image of a bird (the Radical Joy for Hard Times logo) out of materials found on site.

On June 19, 2010, for the Global Earth Exchange, people on all seven continents of the Earth gathered at clear-cut forests, a threatened sacred mountain spring in Bali, a beach in Florida where the first balls of tar from the BP oil spill were just beginning to wash ashore, coal mines, a disappearing glacier at a scientific research station in Antarctica, and many other places. Our new project, Gulf Coast Rising, will be a day of solidarity, healing, and beauty to take place on October 30 from Houma, Louisiana to Pensacola, Florida, the area most severely affected by the oil. Groups of school children, church members, environmentalists, artists and musicians, and families and friends will gather to share how the oil spill has affected them and what has given

them strength. They will make images of a bird, a shrimp, a cross, a boat, a human figure, or anything else that represents the vitality of life in the Gulf, and photograph them. Several groups will create images large enough to be seen from a helicopter, and these will be photographed by the acclaimed photographer Matthew D. White.

As I wrote in my article, "Rituals for Wastelands" in September 2009 ([Spirituality Health.com](http://SpiritualityHealth.com)), making an effort to find and make beauty in wounded places heals both people and nature. We all know intuitively how to do this. An Earth Exchange can be a big event planned weeks in advance and composed of hundreds of people, or it can be one person spontaneously pausing at a damaged place just long enough to open the heart, look around, and create a little beauty. Through such acts we reconcile with beloved places and realize that it is possible to find meaning, compassion, and even joy under very difficult circumstances.

—TREBBE JOHNSON

**Radical Joy
FOR HARD TIMES**

