

# 2017-10-02 Loving The Earth

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## SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdaal

This week is this week is Buddhist Earth care week. So once a year, there's a kind of local Buddhist custom of taking the first week of October to consider our care for our planet, our environment, the natural world. And so this morning I was, I woke up with thoughts about talking about that a little bit, and that I read the news. And so I read about the mass killing in Las Vegas. And I thought about my 14 year old son who doesn't usually read the news in the morning, and he goes to high school. So I said, I think I should tell him about this. So that he can be a little bit prepared for what might happen at high school, what he hears what other kids are talking about, or something. So I told him, that single person in Las Vegas shot at a concert, and that back then 50 people were killed. And many people were wounded 400 back in the morning, they said, so I told them that told them about it. And then I said, but you keep in mind, there was one person who did that. And there were thousands of people that came to help. There were many, many more people who were helping. And some of the news was about heroic acts at the concert, people have helped others who are going to aid or through their bodies to protect other people. And then their relationship, the numerical relationship between the number of people in the world who do harm, and the number of people who are ready to offer support and help, I think puts it in favor of the people who helped. I think that it's easy to forget that there's a tremendous, tremendous force in the world and human beings of caring and helping. Often, in this kind of situations that happened last night, a lot of the people who came to help and were involved weren't planning on it. It wasn't kind of on their mind, they weren't kind of gearing themselves up and thinking about how they could help. But that's what they did at this at the situation at the time was just kind of what you do with those kinds of situations. And at least for some people, for many people. So I wanted my son to have that in his mind. So he didn't just remember, just think about the one thing, this horrible thing that happened. Because sometimes we have these things happen. And they they weigh us down, are they just horrifies such a waste we become paralyzed, or we think that's somehow the state of the, of the world. This is how it is. And a lot of these things that people do, sometimes they're small, and they don't they heroism, you know, this morning, there was some articles on that kind of nature, and which is nice, but the 10,000 hundred thousand small acts that people did that, you know, aren't mentioned. And so. And, you know, there's lots of lots and lots of people, I mean, I was trying to figure out how many people came to help and do something. And I just tried to calculate, you know, there were now they say 500 people who were wounded, went to hospitals. And that needed know that large teams of people had to come in the hospital and help those you know, they had to call people in from all over to help. And then you know, the medics who had to come and the police officers, it must have been quite difficult for the police to figure out what to do and how to respond and put their lives at risk and not know what they were dealing with. And I bet there was a big, you know, lots and lots of things showed up. And that's going to go on for a long time that people helping. I think that the force of caring for each other is huge in this world. Unfortunately, just one person can make such a big difference to cause so much harm and damage But I think that there's a tremendous amount of good in the world. And there's

a tremendous, tremendous amount of good in people who we sometimes think are our enemies, people who we think are somehow in the what some on the other side of some divide.

And they say that sometimes wars are justified by somehow demonizing the other. And there's certainly a strong force in human minds, to want to generalize, to demonize, to angelize people, but there's also a strong force to help to be supportive, and it's a pretty instinctual thing that people do. And so I don't want to, you know, pretend or make it pretty what happened or nice, but I also don't want to forget how people are changed by it. And some people are changed, you know, dramatically for the better from these things. Some people are changed dramatically for the worse, by it, I'm bitter and then go off and perpetuate further harm and damage. We've I think I've said this often hear this. Now, it's become somewhat well known locally have a quote that was, came out of San Quentin Prison. And Jordan was teaching this kind of mindfulness program, meditation program, healing program for some pretty tough, violent background prisoners. And there were gang members in this program, and some of them were opposite gangs and pretty tough people. And they were talking of some point of saying something about what they've learned in his program after a while. And one of the gang members member said, what I've learned is that hurt people, hurt, hurt people that wants to hurt others. And then these other gang member from another gang, you know, rival grip gang, piped in, he said, Yes, and healed people heal. So, which side of the How do you what do you emphasize? What do you do? If you're if you're hurt? Can you heal? If you're healed? Can you help others heal? If you're healed? Can you recognize the forces in our world that need to be appreciated and supported, so that can grow and develop? So that was my train of thought that breakfast, you know, trying to take care of my son, you know, in case you didn't know what he was going to encounter in school.

And one of the things that I've been thinking a lot about lately, is that this movement to help some people don't like the word help, because some people think that the word help implies kind of a superior position, kind of like, you know, your poor people who are below us, we're going to help them somehow he's kind of a distance that's not so some people don't want to be helped. But rather, another word people prefer is to serve. And for Can people the idea of serving is more equal, or it's not so hierarchical, or the day you serve or support. I like the word support. And so what is this, this movement of movement of our hearts to support to help to appreciate, to nurture, to heal, to help? Where does that come from in us? And I don't think it comes from if it comes out of duty, or obligation or requirement, or someone says you should do it. I don't know if that really works, or that really speaks to the best in what's inside of us. But I think that if we can help people to love, help people to not be closed, not hate, not be caught up in their greed, that we want to support and nourish something that is a is a positive momentum, positive force that can come out of our own hearts. And how do we do that? And then in that positive force coming out, that then helping or supporting and nurturing is not a requirement, but rather it's feels more like a natural movement. It's almost Some people say they didn't think they were helping Are you helped a lot really, I just did what, you know, what I did, you know, just seemed like a thing to do, I wasn't self consciously thinking of helping is just this is what this is what was required. And the kind of analogy that I'm fond of for this is when the, you know, the right hand helps the left hand wash itself. And the left hand helps the right hand, right. You know, people have two hands, that's kind of, you know, does the right hand thing, the left hand and the left hand thank the right hand, you know, just, you know, that was it, there's a right hand demand to be thanked, I want to be recognized for what I did what I did for you, it's, you know, it's just kind of what the hand does, we don't just kind of unseen, some ways, unselfconscious in that way. And it's possible to have that kind of momentum movement coming from inside of us, that supports the world. And so one of the responses I have to tragedies in the world, sometimes I don't know what to do in terms of the tragedy. But I sometimes take that concern, energy and turn it around to myself, to understand myself better to be mindful here, to let my mindfulness kind of dissolve or work for work through some of the barriers that I

might have, that would get in the way of allowing the natural momentum of love, of compassion of care, come out of me. So that at some other time, so in their circumstance, or even, you know, in relationship to this, I can somehow respond. And probably the most, you know, one of them kind of maybe strong, big or somebody example of this, in my own life, of how this might work, is, you know, my response to 911, many years ago. And I felt that in the wake of 911, I felt this way, it was a big deal. For me personally, it was a big deal for everyone in America, pretty much. What wasn't, you're not unique in that. But, you know, I felt that if that's I was worried that after some months, after some years, people would just go back to how they were they and I felt in the, in the wake of something as big as 911 It felt appropriate to be changed by it. And if I'm not changed by this, then, you know, am I capable of learning, you know, changed by this? You know, what, you know, what good is that. And so, what I decided to do, was to start a Buddhist training, a Buddhist chaplaincy training program.

And we had now for here for 15 years, 14 or 15 years, we've had a year long training program that some of you here in this room have taken in training, people are introducing people to the world of Buddhist chaplaincy and encouraging or supporting people to go and become offer spiritual care in a lot of different settings. And we've trained people who've gone often on spiritual care and hospitals and prisons and jails and hospice, for homeless people. We've had one person who went and did police to people. When did police chaplaincy? Working with the police? We had one. What else we've done, people have done.

Educational chaplaincy lead someone who became a college chaplain coming out of our program. And I know we've had a few hundred people not go through our program in 15 years. And I call it a pyramid for joy, pyramid scheme for joy. And I think it's legal. And because you know, we train people here in this room, and they go out into the world and do their training, and we do their work and support people. And they come back and tell us, and it's pretty cool. I've been pretty happy with this. And so this idea of being changed, you know, so I was changed. And this is one example of what I did. And, you know, it's, and one of the things that chaplains think about when they work with people are four different what they would consider human needs. So they listen to me, and the people I talk to, which of these needs are, are required right now. And what do I support them with? And the first first need it's, it's often mentioned, is a sense of belonging, a place in the world, a place in society in place with a community said it's very important for people not to feel alienated or feel their cut off or not connected to anything. And so the idea of belonging is very important. So how do you support people in that fundamental need to belong to be connected. The second is a sense of worth, there's plenty of people in our society, who have very little sense of self worth, they don't feel like they count, they've been dismissed. Maybe they have immediate family that support them, they think they're worthy. But the racism in our country, the oppression in our country, that classism in our country, leave some people feeling like they don't belong, like they don't count, like they're lesser than other people. I was told recently about someone who is a cook for spiritual retreats of many different types. And so she goes around these dentists retreat teachers who teach these, you know, wonderful, inspiring retreats about something or other. And then it seems like it's a lot of good in the world. But she said, said, you know, but, you know, they, you know, they're up there on stage, they do all this good stuff. But I'm the cook. And they treat me really lousy. You know, I'm kind of like a second class citizen, you know, and take, you know, I feel like a ticket to that Vantage dub or just not, they're not really quite, you know, and supported and understood, and it's kind of like a blind spot. And so she gets the impression that she doesn't count for a certain kind of way. Luckily, she's a strong person I know. And, you know, she's, you know, she's, she kind of can see through that, and has her own place, but, but in our society, often, this idea of worth is powerful, what society as a whole can do to people and in all kinds of things. The third need is that of being able to have a life of purpose, they have a purpose in what you do with your life and direction you're going and so chaplains talk to people about their purpose and direction they have and where they get a sense of

purpose. chaplains, because they offer spiritual care, often talking to people about how their own religion gives them a sense of purpose, or meaning, or something that they can tap into, often in times of crisis. And then, the last of these four things is reconciliation. Many people have their relationships to their family and other places in the world, deeply broken. And it's not uncommon for chaplains, like in hospitals to be supporting someone who is maybe dying, and, but who is estranged from a family member, or all the family members. And so then part of the chaplains, sometimes work is to help bring some kind of reconciliation between the strange family members so that there can be some contact before someone dies, or just something. So these are powerful, you know, human needs, that people have. And so we all have these kinds of needs, I think we all have a need for belonging and purpose and sense of efficacy and worth. And if we have broken relationships, to heal them in some way.

So all this is kind of, in the back of my mind, as I was thinking about Earth care today, the earth care week, the care of the earth. And it's very easy to be alarmed by the state of the planet and the earth and global warming, it's very easy to be angry and upset. It's very easy to all kinds of things. And but it's also difficult to love, it's difficult to be able to come from a place where it's the natural love natural care, this natural movement of the open heart, to want to do something and want to help. So rather than being an obligation is like, of course, this is what I'm going to do. Now, some people might not be interested in doing that. But I think this is the work of what I'm interested in, is to try to help people support people to get in touch with their hearts get in touch with there's some deep inner motivation that can come. So that the impulse to support and help the world, the planet. People of the world is comes from a place of love comes from a place of, of appreciation. It comes from place of seeing the beauty In the care and mutuality. And so it becomes like a left and right hand, cleaning each other, rather than some, you know, burden in some sense of oppression or have to do something and so hard, it's hopeless and all that. And so in terms of Earth care week, I think the thing that I somehow would like to support happen or see happen, is just a deep, deep appreciation and love for our natural world. To see it as not separate from us to see it as something that we can, of course, we would care from it to care for it, if we understood the tremendous value and the beauty and the mutual way in which our life is dependent on the natural world. And then, and what gets in the way of our hearts responding in this natural, almost instinctual way out of compassion and love. So it's all even almost unselfconscious. Of course, it's what we do. And I think each person would have to answer that for themselves about what gets in the way. But the way we can answer that question for ourselves is through mindfulness, if we can stop and pay careful attention to what's going on here for us, and really kind of turn the attention inward in a deep way. Pretty quickly, people start discovering what keeps them distracted, they discover what keeps them closed, discovered, what keeps them caught in the grip of forces, which are the opposite of love and generosity. And it's a mindfulness is a powerful microscope, to really see what's going on here. And to begin purifying, or cleansing or emptying the things that keep the our beautiful hearts from being able to connect and see the beauty in the world itself. And that's mindfulness, that kind of a way to discover a capacity to respond. But you know, then we need to respond. And I think that to not respond in some way, is not that we have to respond. But to not respond. In some circumstance. I think there's a kind of violence to ourselves. And I think many people have feel like something should happen in horrible situations, and they feel horrible about it. But then they don't do anything, they don't become adept, they don't become different in any way, they haven't been changed. And so something closes up or some there's a wound that gets never closed, or it just becomes kind of a festering thing or to become just one more kind of, you know, middle brick in the edifice of a difficult life. But to see if it is the appropriate way for each person in their own way to respond. So in 911, I didn't help in New York, I didn't go do anything there. I didn't help with terrorism whatsoever. And you know, I didn't that's beyond my paygrade or something. And, but the what I did do was start this chaplaincy program. So it's very indirect. But it was a response. What do we do with Las Vegas? So we know what we touched with enough, they want to be changed in some way? What about the hurricane? In Puerto

Rico and hurricanes in the Caribbean? in Texas? Are we you know, it's a big deal for many, many people? In what way does that change us?

And it's not as a burden, but just Oh, yeah, of course, this is this is what I want to do. So I wanted to read one Buddhist teacher, who kind of approaches that the issues of the earth, the planet nature, I think, in a very profound way. And with the kind of spirit and attitude, which I don't hear very often, when we, you know, discuss the earth and environment and the environmental crisis of our times. And this is a tick, not Han, Vietnamese teacher, who's fairly old now lives in France, usually. And he's been one of the great champions of peace in our world. And he has this little book, and just the title of the book is worth knowing. It's called love letter to the earth. Isn't that nice? This is a different approach to global warming and environmental problems. He writes a love letter to the earth. And so I want to read a little bit from it. In this very moment, the Earth is above you, below you, all around you. And even inside you, the Earth is everywhere. You may be used to thinking of the earth as only the ground beneath your feet. But the water, the sea, the sky, and everything around us, comes from the earth. Everything outside of us. And everything inside of us comes from the earth, we often forget that the planet we are living on is given us all the elements that make up our bodies, the water in our flesh, our bones, and all the microscopic cells inside our bodies all come from the earth, and are part of and are part of the earth. The earth is not just the environment we live in, we are the earth, and we are always carrying her within us. realizing this, we can see that the earth is truly alive. We are a living, breathing manifestation of this beautiful and generous planet. Knowing this, we can begin to transform our relationship to the earth, we can begin to walk differently and to care for her differently. We will fall completely in love with the earth. When we are in love with someone or something. There is no separation between ourselves and the person or the thing we love. We do whatever we can for them. And this brings us great joy and nourishment. That is the relationship each of us can have with the earth. That is the relationship Each of us must have with the earth if the earth is to survive, and if we are to survive as well. So he writes kind of long, gladly lots of things. And then the end of the book, he actually writes this letters to the earth. And it's a source of Dear Mother Earth. I bow my head before you as I look deeply and recognize that you are present in me. And then I'm a part of you. I was born from you. And you are always present, offering me everything I need for my nourishment and growth. My mother, my father, and all my ancestors are also your children. We breathe your fresh air, we drink your clean water. We eat your nourishing food, your herbs heal us when we're sick. You are the mother of all beings. I call you by the human name, mother. And yet I know your mothering nature is more fast and ancient than humankind. We are just one young species of your many children. All the millions of other species who live or have lived on earth are also your children.

You aren't a person, but I know you are not less than a person either. You're living breathing being in the form of a planet. each species has its own language, yet is our mother. You can understand us all. That is why you can hear me today, as I open my heart to you and offer you my prayer. Dear Mother, wherever there is soil, water, rock or air, you are there nourishing me and giving me life. You are present in every cell of my body. my physical body is your physical body, and just the sun and the stars are present in you. They are also present in me. You are not outside of me, and I am not outside of you. You are more than just my environment. You are nothing less than myself. I promise to keep the awareness alive, that you are always in me. And I'm always in you. I promised to be aware of your health and well being. I promise to be aware that your health and well being is my own health and well being. I know I need to keep this awareness alive in me, for us both to be peaceful, happy, healthy and strong. Sometimes, I forget lost in the confusion and worries of daily life. I forget that my body is your body. And sometimes even forget that I have a body at all. unaware of the presence of my body and the beautiful planets around me and within me and I'm unable to cherish and celebrate the precious gift of life that you've given me. Dear mother, my deep wish is to wake up to the miracle of life. I promise to



train myself to be present for myself, my life and for you. And every moment. I know that my true presence is the best gift I can offer to you. The one I love, love letter to the earth. That's a whole different approach. You could go read statistics and numbers about what's happening to the planet. And that doesn't, does that give you does that touch your heart. So, we live in a world that we're part of, we live in, in human society that we're all part of that take that hands call is that we're not separate, that in some ways, if the whole earth is who we are, and then we're all part of each other as well. And the sense of deep belonging to the human race, deep belonging to the human family, deep belonging to the earth, the planet, the other species, this cosmos, a sense of deep, deep sense of being, you know, valuable and important, precious, because we're not different from the earth is famous story kind of fable from the time of the Buddha's awakening, that the last step, before he became awakened, liberated, which is depicted here in our statue, you see that he has his right hand, draped over his right knee, and the fingers are reaching down. And what he's doing is reaching down to touch the earth. And he had the sense that it may, or he had this challenge he was, he was challenged, that he wasn't really worthy of becoming liberated and free, opening his heart. And so then he reached down, he called on then the ancient Buddhist didn't call it the Mother Earth, they called it the goddess earth. And they, and he called upon the goddess Earth, to bear witness to his appropriateness is worth to become free. And so the earth, they made a little earthquake, that was the language of the earth back then. And that was enough to, for everyone to get the message, that it was okay. And this idea that, that somehow, our connection to the natural world, that is often forgotten, actually teaches us something very important about our own inner worth, and well being, not a few people will find they go out into the natural world go stand at the beach, the ocean and look at it, and it gives them a very different sense of who they are, and how they are and come back into society.

And just a few days ago, you know, we have a high school right, down the block, right. And it starts in ninth grade. And ninth grade is, you know, coming to high school, just a few weeks ago, we started in about a month ago, I guess, six weeks ago, and being a freshman, I guess it's difficult can be very difficult, right? And a freshman girl committed suicide on that. train tracks, just, you know, a few blocks away from here. And so there's, you know, the I don't know what happened to her what's going on. But my guess is that some of what was going on, given this history of things like that, for teenagers, a lot of it had to do with social challenges at home, or in school, or with friends or something. And then some people will have these challenges and find healing and nurturing by spending time in the natural world. And then a sense of purpose for our lives. I think that when we can open up to this capacity to love or to recognize what we love, then I think we know what to do, or find what to do in a very different way than if we don't know what we love. And if we love this world of ours, if we have an open heart, that's really able to connect to people in the field people and be with people connect to the earth, the planet, the environment in a way that's meaningful, we will have our sense of purpose, we will have a direction. And if there is need for reconciliation, the reconciliation to the earth, to our fellow humans in some way. And there's often a need for that, because humans certainly can be cruel to each other. And I don't know if the earth is ever cruel. But some people you know, that, you know, the natural world can create is very dangerous place as well, and you don't want to romanticize it. And so how do we reconcile a relationship to that? So I'll end with a story that I heard this summer I went back to the Zen monastery where I spent years training in the Big Sur mountains south of here and place called Tassajara. And it's deep in the wilderness you get to it by taking a dirt road. 14 miles deep, deep into the Padres National wilderness and right the deep inside is one of the few private land holdings in this huge National Forest. And in periodically, their forest fires there. And those forest fires were pretty big. And they sweep through and they had won in 2008. And so they had some many days to prepare maybe few weeks. And so they had a lot of preparations. And they put lots of got more pumps from the river and put sprinklers on their system on the roofs. And I think put even put tin foil around some of the buildings and clear the ground Did you can do it. And they had fire crews that came down and stayed with them

and helping them prepare them for the fire was was going to come, they thought might come. And so finally the fire was coming. And I think maybe because of the wind conditions or whatever the fire was coming larger and faster, and then they may be anticipated. And the order was given that everyone had to evacuate. And the Forest Service or that you have to arise to go. And so even though I did all this work preparing for the expected fire, everyone started to leave. And everyone left. But there were five of the monastics who lived at the monastery who got halfway up the road to civilization. And they kind of stopped and I guess they thought about what they're doing. They had abandoned the monastery. And if no one was there, the fire would just go through without being stopped. So they decided to go back against the orders of the Forest Service, the fire department and whatever. And so those five went back and they had been trained how to handle the pumps in the water and stuff and they got ready and the fire did come. And they managed to protect the monastery. There's a few little things that burned. There was a treehouse on the edge of the monastery that someone was lived in when that treehouse got burned to a few other small little shed and things. But there was a save the monastery, it's still there. So that's that's the ancient story.

But the modern one this summer, I met a retired fire chief who, after that fire, had to become friends with Tassajara and had gotten involved with the vault volunteer firefighting efforts and the whole area down there. And he was at a meeting where one of these monastics who, who had been there and went back and took care of the monastery was asked, you know, you know, you stayed there to, to meet the fire. How do you do that? How do you manage that? or What did you do? How do you know? And so this is what I want to tell you her answer. She said we befriended the fire. That's something instead of fighting the fire, which people say right, we'd be friends in the fire. It's a very different relationship to the natural world, the dangerous natural world. They made themselves safe by befriending as opposed to fighting at this point of seeing the enemy, that somehow you work with it, or you kind of understand it, or you befriend it. And I thought it was a beautiful thing. It's recognized, he recognized the danger they were in the problem. It wasn't like saying that this beautiful, natural world we can love is all you know, Bambi and you know and sweetness. But there are dangers are tremendous hurricanes, and all kinds of things that are part of it. But how do we live in this world? How can we love it? How can we be friend it so that we can coexist? We can reconcile, we can have, you know, we can see all the divide the pain and all the stuff that goes on. So this is Earth care leak. And the earth care is not just our planet, our Earth than our natural world, but includes all of us and the humans live on it. And what would you Your love letter to the earth be? Could you write one? And if you did write a love letter to the earth what would you say? And if you do write that love letter, I suspect that the earth will respond in kind for you. Just wait and see. Try it. So May we all care for the earth as, as an extension of caring for ourselves. And may all of us support and nourish and cherish the goodness that's here in this world so that we can make a difference and prevent maybe the next massacre and tragedy that might come along or not come along because we made a difference. So thank you all very much.