

Presented by David Waltner-Toews, August 19, 2010
On receipt of the inaugural award for Outstanding Contribution to the field of EcoHealth.

"Ecohealth is not an endeavour for lone mavericks. To my colleagues at the Canadian Community of Practice for Ecosystem Approaches to Health – (Copeh-Canada), the Network for Ecosystem Sustainability and Health, Veterinarians without Borders/ Vétérinaires sans Frontières, the Asian Partnership for Emerging Infections Research, IDRC, and the International Association for Ecology & Health – Thank you. You have inspired me, annoyed me, challenged me, helped me, encouraged me, and wouldn't let me get away with B.S. For the next few minutes, I want to reflect on how we might expand and enrich our communities."

The Task of Being Human

We are the earth,
ruminating.
Who are we?
Why are we here?

Water, forever unsatisfied
going wherever she wishes,
waves to the smug stones,
basking on the beach.
What's going on?
Splashes and gurgles.
What's going on?
That chatty water again
thinks the stone. One day she
will
wear me down.

We are having a beer.
It is a pleasant afternoon.
Splashes and gurgles, we hear.
Susurrations.
We feel a soft breeze.
Three mergansers swim past at
dusk
two parents and a baby.
They duck their heads under
water.
I am not sure it was such a good
thing
to bring a duckling into this
world
says the drake.
Have you heard the news?
From our cousins in Asia?

The cousins are unhappy.
They talked to the chickens.
Hey chickens, they said,
the people
are taking away
our homes.
What do they want with
wetlands?
What do they want with our
mosquitoes?
Don't they have enough?

You tell them. You are close
to them, aren't you?
You are friends.
Tell them. We are anxious.
We are shit-scared.

The chickens speak to us.
What language do we
understand,
they wonder.
Do people understand what it
means
to have a conversation?
They try Salmonella
and Campylobacter.

Cluck and squawk, we hear.
H5N1 they say, we have a
message.
Peeps and tiny moans and sighs.
we hear. We kill the
messengers.
Stupid birds.

Trichinella, say the pigs. H1N1.
Snort, we hear. Snort and scoff.
Don't bother, say the chickens.
They don't know the grammar
of connection. They are
scatterlings
and word scavengers.
Discombobulators.

The merganzers come up for
air.
That's just a story, says the
mother duck.
It's what I heard, says the drake.

We are playing golf.
The geese shit on the ninth
green.
We curse. There was no need
for that!

The deer and the mice and the
ticks look up when we curse.
They watch us.
They have been playing Lyme.
Borrelia burgdorferi, they say.
What an interesting word.
I wonder what it means.

Why don't the deer go back
to where they came from?
we say, distracted. We are
almost
at our perfect game.

The birds perch very still
in the trees.
They are twittering.
West Nile, have you heard?
The crows are dying.

Fungus and mites.
The frogs are dying.
The bats are dying.
The bees collapse: they are
exhausted
from trying, again and again,
to tell us, to warn us.

The flying foxes
in their slinky fur stoles
lean over the piano:
SARS, they croon. Hendra
Marburg, Nipah, Ebola.
Surely we understand one of
them,
we who are so educated.
You have taken away our
homes,
they say. We want
to live with you.
It is all about relationships,
you and us. Everything.
They think they can seduce us.

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Interesting language, we say.
We check the genetic structure.
We can say every word.
See this genetic on-off switch?
We have the code.
We can explain everything.
We have no need to converse.

We plug our ears with
vaccination
and new drugs, with traps and
sprays,
poisons, new barns, irradiators,
and a song. Deny, deny, deny,
we sing. We like this place.
Why don't the bats go home?
They are messing up
the neighborhood. They don't
understand
our rules.

They hang outside our houses.
They pass over us at dusk,
dropping leaflets and care
packages.
We are here to bring you
freedom!
say the leaflets. They are
written in a script
we cannot read.

Oh shut up, say the rats
the cockroaches, the coyotes,
the raccoons. Let the people be.
We are all just fine.

Who is this we? we say.
We kill the cockroaches, the
coyotes the rats. Oh where shall
we go now?
whisper the fleas. Where,
where?
Plague, plague,
they whisper as they die.

Water, my friend, we say,
we love to play with you,
to irrigate, to drink, to spray,
there is so much of you
to love, we are flushed
with you,
we just want to have all
of you! We have water balloons,

car washes, water fights,
fights over water.
I feel weak, says water,
the old crone.
She spits into the air.
She seeps deep into a crack
in the ground.
They will not find me here,
she thinks.

The air's head fills with voices,
a cacophony of birds, bats,
frogs.
He is mad that water spit in his
face.
There was no call for that.
The air has a bad headache.
He drags water from her hole,
the old salt.
The air dances a dervish.
The air and the water
lash out, a tongue-lashing
of tornadoes and cyclones,
floods and hurricanes.

The earth moves.
The ancient trees wake up,
and the ferns, old, greasy
things,
the tarry blood of the planet.
They were sound asleep.
Who is making all that noise?
Who is drilling a hole into my
head?
The old men, in their pressed
black suits,
bark. The old women fret
in their tattered fern dresses
all in black, black and oily hair.
Fussing with loss, angry with
mourning,
they burst out.

The wetlands hold their breath.
The turtles and the tuna and the
sandpipers
hold their breath. The little
shrimps curl up.
the clams clam shut. Please,
please,
who woke up those cranky old
ones?
We thought they were dead.

Where did they get all that
energy?
Who knows what they are
saying?
It is so hot here. So hot and
noisy.

We are the earth
ruminating.
Who are we?
Why are we here?

We are a chorus,
a choir in a million voices,
a beautiful and awesome and
sad choir,
hallelujah, hallelujah.
We sing of ourselves, listen,
listen,
in a million voices.

It is the task of being human
to know our nature,
to hear ourselves think,
to listen, to observe, to feel,
to converse with everything,
to read the lips and voices and
gestures
of bats and chickens, ducks and
water,
fleas and termites, children, old
people,
trees, flowers, air and earth,
to talk back, to chatter together,
to reflect, to celebrate
this amazing universe we are,
to sing a healing chorus,
a grand finale.

If not us, then who?
Who but us can learn all the
tongues?
Who but us can interpret?
No one can, alone.
Know this: together, we can.
This is the burden and the glory
of being human.