



Bearing Witness to the Earth

The Ecoretreat at the Rhenish Brown coal area

21. August 2022 in the Spirit of the Zen Peacemakers

A report from Svenja Shinsen Wildflower, Zen Peacemaker

I always seem to find it a bit of a challenge to put a Bearing Witness retreat into words. Every time I remember the Ecoretreat the atmosphere comes up – filled with the experience, the direct encounters with and around the open pit mine. I feel a tremendous respect for meeting the place as it is as well as for the whole issue connected with it. Complex and confusing crises are threatening. They are lurking to dart at all our life with all their force and stir it, to rattle the very basis of our existence. They are already doing this in the global South.

Was I afraid to go to the edge? I was. To be honest the fear had not settled due to the retreat – how could it in the view of the violent extent? But everything in my life has changed since the Ecoretreat. Since then I have been feeling the immense power and the subtle vulnerability of the earth, as simultaneously in a new way. Above all I experience this synchronicity even closer, directly and radically right under my skin.

To stay present with it seems to me to be the real challenge of bearing witness. I even dare to say that it is exactly about to stand this immediacy of power and vulnerability, to be with it, to stay with it, to let it live through us. And that's the reason why we need each other, why it's time to create warm places of life-serving gatherings: life wants to be heard, doesn't it?



"May be urgency invites us to slow down. To listen. To see who is here with us to give us advice. And then to respond to insights of the possible that shine through the fabric of the moment."

Bayo Akomolafe

Probably a local resident or people who have been dealing for years with the complex topic of climate justice could write a more substantiated report about the incredible situation. What I risk here is simply to

share my bearing witness as I experienced the days around the brown coal field. Preceding were almost two years of preparation, some visits to the place, getting to know people and circumstances, a "deep diving". The ecoretreat grew out of me as it were. It was not something "thought up, which could be done some time". Already in my childhood and youth the fact of the immense destruction of our livelihood drove me. And I know I am not alone. The again and again appearing enigma how we humans are really in relation with the beauty and the destruction of our nature became the guiding question for me.

I wrote this report over 5 month piece by piece. Meanwhile it is 14 January 2023. Today was and still is the big demonstration in Lützerath. 35.000 people were there. The village is being cleared for days under partly devastating circumstances. But better I start with the ecoretreat in August 2022. A retreat that lasts longer for me than five days.

On 17 August 2022 the time had come. A small group of 17 people was courageous enough to engage together into something I am still grateful for. We were a wildly mixed bunch of people from the Zen Sangha Gent, from the Netherlands and from Germany. New and familiar faces. Among us were two activists from the organization "Kirchen im Dorf lassen", a catholic minister from Krefeld and two young people from the activist resistance, who lovingly cared for us by creating nourishing vegan food for us, partly from saved groceries. That was really good. Two gifted musicians were part of our group – I still see them with their violin and guitar always at hand, have their special voices in my ear and how they interwove the landscape, of which more later.

Our accommodation was the "Feierabendhaus" a simple guesthouse mainly used as lodging by workers employed in the pit or a power plant. It was situated handy only one kilometer from the Hambach hole. There we spent the nights, cooked, ate in the mornings and evenings and had our meditations and council circles every morning. We all got involved with the diversity of the group. At least it seemed so. We experienced a familiar and peaceful togetherness. But familiarity and peace was not all we got involved with: There was also the destruction of our nature immediately before our feet.



There is the Hambach forest a 700 years old old-growth forest – especially worth protecting because of its primeval beauty and biodiversity. Due to Europe's biggest surface mine it is already destroyed to a large extent. When we arrived the heat was baking. Drought was steaming from the dusty soil as it were. The blackberries were producing fruit in abundance this summer – what a stubborn will to live! Though the fruits withered before ripening and hang shriveled on dried up twigs. The forest gets the existential groundwater

extracted by the surface mine. The energy company RWE is pumping the groundwater away to prevent it flooding the pit. Whereas 2018 the remnant of the primary forest was saved by courageous activists it is dying of thirst now – that was perceptible.



Two of the activists who are living in the forest, Stick and Omega were their forest names, gave us an extensive tour through the forest up to the edge of the pit. They had substantial information and background knowledge for us. For some of us it was the first encounter with the complex topic of climate justice, ecological and political contexts. I often feel outrage, when I read about the hard facts about the state of our planet. This familiar outrage turned into something best described as holy anger. It feels good to give home to this holy anger inside of me and to nourish inner clarity with it. To look into the faces of Stick and Omega and to listen to them kindled an almost shaking clearness and at the same time something I would call wild originality... may be even a wondrous seed of lively hope.

It's not at all comprehensible what all this has to do with hope. Some experiences are deeply disturbing. Like the visit to the little memorial for their friend Steffen Meyn. Steffen fell to his death during an attempt to evacuate the forest by the police in 2018. We stood there, sounding together with our musicians accompanied by violin and guitar, offering flowers and incense. To pause at such a place, to give the situation time and space, interweave it with sounds and listen to what there is to listen to changes everything. It is an Acknowledgement.

*"That a gentle thing might happen to us,
when heaven touches us,
when its breathing nearness
seduces us completely into being here."*

Jean Gebser

Hope? Beneath one of the numerous photos of Steffen was told his birth date. I realized that he had the same birthday as I only another year. We had celebrated birthday on the same day for 27 years.



SteffensDeathnotice



we in the



Hambacher Wald

Later Stick and Omega invited us into their treehouse settlement, from ground perspective of course. We sat around the fire pit, that had probably warmed many an activists hands and served as campfire hearth. A good place to eat our brought along food. Living hope!

Humans need cultures and structures of living together, common good. School pathways for kids, community centers, bakeries baking fresh bread – humans need good places to live. For everyone. In short: humans need villages. These villages are destroyed by the open cast mines. People are (forcibly) relocated. In total 300 settlements were devastated and about 100.000 people were relocated for open cast lignite mining alone in Germany.

We visited the almost totally extinct village Alt-Mahnheim. There were only the street lights of the old streets left. Houses already torn down or, if still standing, with barricaded windows. As the former church. Here we stayed in silence. At the church, or better, it's hull, we celebrated for the

first time the "Gate of Sweet Nectar". This Buddhist ceremony, which I am devoutly fond of and which Zen Peacemakers use to do at hungry places like Auschwitz. May it nourish all hungry ghosts, suffering from greed, hatred and ignorance, within ourselves and all.

"May all places be held sacred.

May all beings be cherished.

*May all the injustices of enslavement, oppression and devaluation be redressed,
remedied and healed.*

May those who are imprisoned by hatred, be liberated to the love that is their birthright.

May those bound by fear, be released into the safety of understanding.

May those weighed down by grief, be released to the joy of being.

May those lost in delusion, find relief on the path of wisdom.

May all the wounds of forests, rivers, deserts, oceans,

All wounds of mother earth lovingly be healed again.

May all beings everywhere rejoice in the song of birds and the blue sky.

May all beings dwell in well-being, awaken and be free."

A prayer from the One Earth Sangha



One evening we went to a soldiers cemetery close to our accommodation. It was a resettled cemetery of soldiers killed in World War II from all the villages dredged away for the Hambach pit. It was a silent place beneath old oak trees. The trees had a calming peaceful air. Maybe because I knew that they would be left alone.

We also visited Keyenburg at the Garzweiler pit, a village still populated but mostly abandoned already. Here I started to realize the uncertainty the people are living in here concerning their whole existence: one time it's decided to dredge Keyenburg. Another time they say it will survive. What a fragmentation in the history of the village and its inhabitants, animals and plants. But there are more incredible stories about other villages and existential back and forth. To recount them all would fill a book. Maybe it should be written one time.



“To destroy the environment means to take creatures the basis for the taste of god.”

A. M. Karimi

What remains anyway when you walk through these villages is the profound brokenness, the forced displacement. Even the churches don't provide refuge any longer – desecrated, profaned. I ask myself up to this day: How is it possible to violate sacred soil?

Isn't this the core of a multiple crisis – a radical spiritual crisis? Have we taken leave from our senses? Have we totally lost our connection to the really life serving?



Exactly here our violinist unpacked his instrument and gave sound and voice to all the dissonance. It reverberated while we were sitting in silence in front of the Keyenburg church. If there were a word it would be re-ensoulment.

Then there is the so called “Sophienhöhe” (Sophie's height), a 300 meters high huge hill protruding from the flat landscape. I am reluctant to call this artificial hill Sophie's hill, not only because its very existence has nothing to do with wisdom at all. But also because my daughter's name is Sophie, something to do with future and beautifully aliveness!



Once here used to be villages, forests, fertile fields. Then brown coal was extracted and a huge pit emerged. Finally the pit was filled with the overburden of the next excavated hole. Especially the Belgians and Dutch dealt a lot with the word “Abraum” (overburden, mining waste – The German verb “abräumen” means to clean up, to clear away, to strip off.). We met the alienation expressed by this very word during our whole hike. Everywhere shredded earth and stones, of no use any longer. There was something absurd about it to walk this ground. It was hot at that,

above 30 degrees, blazing sun, rarely shadow.



I had not even mentioned that I was present with a broken foot, mostly in a wheelchair. So there I was, learning devotion, especially showing up as a visionary & organiser so vulnerable and in need of help, really challenged me and was put to the test especially on the climb to "Sophienhöhe". With broken foot on broken, shredded, injured (earth)body. 4 people (!) pulled and pushed me up the monotonous, graded path along small freshly planted trees. Remaining in the wheelchair on this path, I got a tiny taste of what enormous power and energy it takes to manage these gigantic earth movements, as they happened on and under this hill. A huge reshuffling of huge masses of earth - a reshuffling

of the earth's history that has grown in peace over thousands of years. Slowly matured by the growth and decay of organisms and life.

As a friend said: "A brainwash for Mother Earth's brain". Once here, it only hurts.



At the same time, we have gathered on the artificial hill at various stations during the ascent. Huddling together in the little shade available.

The trees are simply still too small to provide ample shade, as perhaps the old village lime tree of Alt-Lich-Steinstraß would have done, one of the first villages to be demolished because of open-cast mining "under the Sophienhöhe". Yes, I know, it sounds confusing, with the consequences of the earth's re-layering, the under and over - it is!

Here we listened to each other, argued, sweated, did small ceremonies and made music again with guitar, violin, voice and landscape.

We said the Thanksgiving Greetings to the Natural World prayer of the indigenous Haudenosaunee tribe and interwove it with some violin playing.

Our Catholic priest gave a short devotion, with reference to the prophet Jeremiah and the great drought....we listened, prayed and we sang "Heaven Rises Above All".



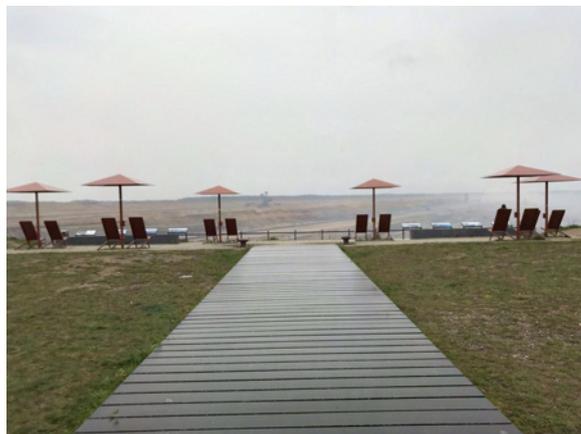


“To stand in front of the hole has something attractive, almost beautiful.”, a friend told me, “The earth shows her inside. She is naked, 400 meters deep, thousands of years deep. This is rather intimate, isn’t it?” The hole is huge, too big, reaching to the horizon. It is inconceivable to stand in front of it. It needs a lot of inner space to get to grips with the ungraspable. But not to try to apprehend the real and global extent, the



connection of life and death involved in it, would be dire and life-threatening denial in my opinion. I realized how the denial feels at a place called “Terra Nova”, New Earth, created by the energy company RWE. What an ignorance and mockery made of the injury of the earth: to create an observation deck with permanently installed beach chairs and sunshades, plus event location where you can even celebrate your wedding. “Enjoy the view” a sign invites at the entrance. Are they serious, new earth? This is disaffection! How can I stay in relation to it? That’s why we need each other, I sense now.

Because it is so big, too big. A wound area on so many layers. It needs the contribution and care of all of us. This wound area is not only at the Rhenish mining area. But here it is absolutely acute and open. The wound is gaping.



In the villages around the Garzweiler hole I experience exactly this devotion and care for one another and the earth. Especially in Lützerath, the next village on the coal companys list to be dredged away. While we visited Lützerath the last farmer of the village spent his last weeks in the heritage-protected house his family has inhabited for 4 generations. Meanwhile, on 13th January 2023 the farm was knocked down. It is different when you were there, got to know the place. How must it be now for those who used to live there? A friend wrote to me: “Peoples memories hang around homeless between here and there.”



To make connections where they are broken, to enter a relationship where alienation prevails: between humans and landscape. A little bit further, step by step along the edge of this enormous, unfathomable hole of the brown coal opencast mine. Here alienation is reigning, absolute unrelatedness. Instead the lignite excavators, removing and shifting the soil, are mechanistic monsters enough.



The camp was established by activists over 2 years in the middle of remaining houses. It had a livable infrastructure with everything heart, mind and body need. To explain the outer and inner structures, remarkably growing at this place, would fill another book – again one that should be written! A woman by the forest name Schildkröte (Turtle) guided us openheartedly through the village, enriching us with background information, experiences and later with her enchanting singing voice. I have deep respect for what was created in Lützerath. The people living here are using their bodies right now to prevent the village being excavated. Already for two years they have been

making sure that Lützerath lives and thrives inspite of the daily uncertainty. Here an exerpt from an email a friend wrote me from Lützerath on 22 October 2022:



“At the moment I am in Lützerath. It is beautiful, too warm and too dry weather. A peaceful saturday. I kneel in the memorial on the mattress in front of my laptop. From afar I hear some guitar music, light hammering, from time to time a passing car and flying by flight object. A child’s voice, other voices and laughter. Beneath me it is tinkered in the Bicycle Castle and the wind is rusteling through the poplar leaves glimmering in the sun.

(...) In the morning we had prepared vegetable beds. They have brought seeds and sowed spinach, radishes, bulbs and mache. Knowing that with some luck we will see these living creatures germinate but not grow. Up to the highest “realms” they say it is now sealed that Lützerath, the plants, the earth, the insects, the worms, that all of us here must give way to the coal.(...)

RWE keeps excavating in depth in front of Lützerath. They started to dismantle wind turbines now. I ask myself how it can be more obvious, more visible what is happening here right now. All the beings preparing for the winter as it was field tested for them for millenials or even millions of years. All this will be a manmade nothing. A non-livable space. And it is also a place of music, full of conflict and life and something new, surprising and touching. Almost every day people come by who haven’t been here at all or for a long time. It is nice to be in the shit brigade with them, to swear for night watches, clean vegetables, be asked where help is needed. It is also a space of many expectations and disappointments, a place of finding yourself again, standing up again, of reconciliation and rest.”



How to respond to so much beauty? I am left with the words of Václav Havel..



“Hope ... is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out.”

Here we were now at the edge between deadly destruction and self-effectiv created aliveness. In Lützerath. Everything at the same time. Split and Wholeness and the rhythm in between. Here in Lützerath I could here it. Especially in the Yew Chapel.

From the Yew Chapel, the remnant of an old wayside cross chapel, I watched a bird. It left from a tree and flew towards the hole. I don’t know what happened to it. Was it a wall of heat rising from the hole and let it bounce off or a sudden change of heart because it realized that it was approaching a territory hostile to life without a landing spot in sight. For a while it faltered, then bobbed up and

flew straight back to its known tree. What made the bird turn around? Was it by habit from a time when fields and trees used to be on the other side of the road – not too long ago presumably. Or was it out of a shock or simply a thermal updraft because the heat is more extreme at the hole. Or a combination of all of it. I gave myself a treat by imagining a contest among the birds: “Who dares to go the farthest?”. What tricks your own mind is playing, particularly at the edge.

May the bird and its tree giving shelter and all the others in Lützerath facing the clearing right now be well.



“You have dreamed me, God.
How I practice walking upright and learn to kneel
down
more beautiful than I am now
happier than I dare
freer than allowed over here.
Do not stop dreaming me, God
I don’t want to cease to remember
that I am your tree
planted at the watercourses of life” Dorothee Sölle

(During the retreat a friend whispered this poem into my ear, heartwarming)

Later we listened to an inspiring service held by our KiDI friend, celebrated our Gate of Sweet Nectar ceremony in front of sceptically marveling people. Before we could start we were surprised by an Attac demonstration of 300 people in red. With a lot of noise and vigorous resistance they walked along the red line, the line marking the 1,5 degree climate goal. A total A total contradiction? Yes and no – just life.

Life channeled through our guitar player. He flooded our heart and minds with Jewish songs we celebrated. Yes really, we celebrated life at the very edge. He also sang a song by Rabbi Shir Yaakov. We got to know it at the Zen Peacemakers Bearing Witness Retreats in Auschwitz. Good to sing it also at this place. Here an excerpt from the text:



“Healer of the broken-hearted
binder of their wounds
Counter of uncountable stars
You know where they are
Healer of the broken-hearted
Binder of our wounds
Counter of uncountable stars
You know who we are
Ha·le·lu YAH Ha·le·lu YAH”
Shir Yaakov

We stopped off at one of the rural storage houses formerly used for harvests or machines. It was dark, silent and empty. Only a couple of straw bales and a big selfmade swing in the background. Together with our violinist we played with our voices. The halls acoustics resounded superbly. A space for voices. Later when we wanted to leave, a part of the group stayed and seesawed in intense joy. It looked like they were on the high sea. Frank Roshi shouted into the hall: “Come peacemakers! Come!” - this sentence reverberates. Even after the storage house was knocked down yesterday, “Come peacemakers! Come!”.



At the very edge, in the Yew Chapel, we celebrated later that evening my Jukai, a traditional Zen Buddhist ceremony to receive the bodhisattva vows. I got my second dharma name, Wildflower.

A Zen friend gave me later a broken, painted thin piece of wood she had found at the Yew Chapel. Maybe it was once a tinkered sign from the camp. There is so much lovingly and colorfully painted in the camp.

The wood was a fragment of it. She presented it to me with the words: there is the color. It reflects the color of your eyes, the patterns of wildly climbing

flowers, the Wildflower. The white dots are the stars that shone above us and bore witness to everything.

This journey as well as this report can only be fragments of the whole. But everything is included in this fragment.

Yes, the stars at the night sky, the depths of the naked earth and every single human, bird, tree and beetle who were with us witnessed this.



“Sometimes you must look. Otherwise you don’t see.

Sometimes you must listen. Otherwise you don’t hear.

The glaring pictures, the piercing sounds don’t suit me.

I come quietly. Love always comes quietly.

Unlock all senses! Unlock your heart!

For I am here. And I’ll stay”

Jürgen Werth

Sign in Lützerath „I stay“



This is a piece of my raku, a traditional Zen Peacemaker "robe", which I stitched for the Jukai ceremony and will wear from now on during my meditations and pilgrimages. The small embroidery represents a green broken pine branch: A green broken pine branch

“This is our life
The length of our days
Day and night
We meditate upon it”
From the Gate of Sweet Nectar liturgy

In deep respect and gratitude to
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&

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Information about us:
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Pictures:
black and white photos by Harry Aldering: www.harryaldering.nl
colored photos: Wildflower
drone picture of Lützerath: www.lützerathlebt.info