

Our Lonely Home in Nature

By Alan Lightman, *The New York Times*, May 2, 2014

THE tornadoes that have been devastating parts of the South and Midwest, just weeks after a deadly mudslide in Washington, demonstrate once again the unimaginable power of nature.

After each disaster, we grieve over the human lives lost, the innocent people drowned or crushed without warning as they slept in their beds, worked in their fields or sat at their office desks. We feel angry at the scientists and policy makers who didn't foresee the impending calamity or, if forewarned, failed to protect us. Beyond the grieving and anger is a more subtle emotion. We feel betrayed. We feel betrayed by nature.

Aren't we a part of nature, born in nature, sustained by the food brought forth by nature, warmed by the natural sun? Don't we have a deep spiritual connection with the wind and the water and the land that Emerson and Wordsworth so lovingly described, that Turner and Constable painted in scenes of serenity and grandeur? How could Mother Nature do this to us, her children?

Yet despite our strongly felt kinship and oneness with nature, all the evidence suggests that nature doesn't care one whit about us. Tornadoes, hurricanes, floods, earthquakes and volcanic eruptions happen without the slightest consideration for human inhabitants.

I first encountered the insensible power of nature during a two-week sailing trip with my wife in the Greek isles. It was just the two of us on a small boat. For the first few days of the voyage, traveling south along the coast from Piraeus to Cape Sounion, we were within sight of land. Then we turned west, toward Hydra. Soon, the land and other boats vanished. All we could see was ocean.

At first, I felt elation. Then I felt fear. Because during the summer season, the Aegean Sea is plagued by a fierce, dry wind called the meltemi, which can appear without warning in clear air and be upon you in minutes with great waves and gales. At any moment, a wall of water and wind could have lunged from the horizon, washed over the boat, and drowned my wife and me. I realized that there was no compassionate overseer or oceanic consciousness to prevent that from happening. To the vast expanse of water, my wife and I were just additional pieces of flotsam and jetsam.

Our comfort with nature is an illusion. Here on earth, even with our earthquakes and storms, we have no conception of the range and the power of nature. In many other parts of the cosmos, conditions are far more extreme than on earth and quite inhospitable to life. On the planet Mercury, for example, the temperature reaches 800 degrees. On Neptune, it is minus 370. On Uranus, the winds exceed 350 miles per hour. With the recent work of the Kepler spacecraft, searching for planets favorable for life, we can estimate that only about one millionth of one billionth of 1 percent of the material of the visible universe exists in living form. From a cosmic perspective, we and all life are the exception to the rule.

For all of recorded history, humankind has had a conflicted view of nature. In ancient times, we made awesome and frightening gods of the natural elements. The Babylonian-Assyrian god of storms, Adad, brought rain to the crops but also caused havoc and death on land and sea. Vulcan, the Roman god of fire, both created and destroyed and was sometimes invoked to annihilate one's enemies. So close to nature are we in some mythologies that human beings are regularly transformed into other animals and even inanimate matter. In Aztec mythology, the twin volcanoes Popocatepetl and Iztaccíhuatl were once human lovers, later turned into mountains by the gods.

In the other direction, nature is constantly given human qualities. Wordsworth wrote that "nature never did betray the heart that loved her." Mother Nature has comforted us in every culture on earth. In the 20th and 21st centuries, some environmentalists claimed that the entire earth is a single ecosystem, a "superorganism" in the language of Gaia.

I would argue that we have been fooling ourselves. Nature, in fact, is mindless. Nature is neither friend nor foe, neither malevolent nor benevolent.

Nature is purposeless. Nature simply is. We may find nature beautiful or terrible, but those feelings are human constructions. Such utter and complete mindlessness is hard for us to accept. We feel such a strong connection to nature. But the relationship between nature and us is one-sided. There is no reciprocity. There is no mind on the other side of the wall. That absence of mind, coupled with so much power, is what so frightened me on the sailboat in Greece.

The recent report by the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change documents the damage now being done by human-created greenhouse gases and global warming. In reacting to the report, we should not be concerned about protecting our planet. Nature can survive far more than what we can do to it and is totally oblivious to whether homo sapiens lives or dies in the next hundred years. Our concern should be about protecting ourselves—because we have only ourselves to protect us.