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The Rapture in the Earth - An Interview with Brenda Peterson

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*When we can understand animals, we will know that the change is halfway. When we can talk to the forest, we will know that the change has come.*

- Skagit Indian myth

Sitting at my desk, I am surrounded by some of Brenda Peterson's books. A prolific and award-winning writer, she is the author of several novels, nonfiction books, and collections of essays including: *River of Light* (Knopf, 1978), *Becoming the Enemy* (Graywolf Press, 1988), *Duck and Cover* (HarperCollins, 1991, selected as a New York Times Notable Book of the Year), *Nature and Other Mothers* (HarperCollins, 1992), *Living by Water* (Fawcett/Columbine, 1994), and *Singing to the Sound: Visions of Nature, Animals, and Spirit* (New Sage Press, 2000). She has edited *Intimate Nature: The Bond Between Women and Animals* (Ballantine, 1998) with Linda Hogan and Deena Metzger, and *The Sweet Breathing of Plants: Women Writing on the Green World*, with Linda Hogan (Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 2001).

*Animal Heart* (Sierra Club Books, 2004), which integrates the realities of xenotransplantation and military sonar into a mystery and love story was inspired, Brenda explains, "by my love for our oceans and marine life and my concerns about the threats posed by some of these new scientific technologies". She recently completed a sequel to *Animal Heart* and her newest book, *I Want to Be Left Behind: Finding Rapture Here on Earth*, DACapo Press, will be out in February 2010. Her environmental feature

articles appear regularly in the *Seattle Times* and *Orion*. Her work is reprinted in over 40 anthologies and textbooks.

Brenda also worked as an environmental writer and editor, has taught writing in universities, and mentors private students and offers workshops in Seattle, Washington. For over twenty years she studied and swam with wild dolphins all over the world, writing extensively about cetacean conservation and working with marine mammal scientists in the field of dolphin-human interaction. With her West Seattle neighbors, Brenda is a volunteer Seal Sitter who keeps watch over seal pups from spring through September while their mothers fish. ([www.sealsitters.org](http://www.sealsitters.org)) In four hour shifts, day and night, these dedicated volunteers observe the pups from the required distance of one hundred yards. Injured or abandoned pups are reported to the NOAA (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration), pups who return to the sea with their mothers are a cause for, to quote Brenda, "Rapture".

*When I chose "Ancestors" as the theme for this issue, I was inspired by my memories of old growth forests in northern California, the Pacific Northwest, and British Columbia. The awe I felt for their majesty and strength is still with me, and the pain at the sight of the massive clearcuts was devastating. It was the first time I can remember actually feeling the pain of the Earth in my body. It really drove home that our connection to the Earth is more than just an intellectual exercise, more than an emotional feeling, it's visceral, physical. As real as my connection to my sons.*

BP: It is astonishing to feel the pain of the Earth. When you see an ancient tree cut down, when you hear the sound of the chain saws and then the scream as the tree falls and, eerily these days, when you hear the helicopter blades whirring around in the sky with chains that come down and attach to the logs and lift them into the air – it's so painful. Seeing a huge, beautiful ancestor tree flying around at the end of a helicopter is like a weirdly perverse search-and-rescue operation except there's no rescue, only ruin. During my fifty-some years I've witnessed the great old growth forests of the west fall. It has been a tragedy to behold.

*The redwoods were the first trees that literally spoke to me. They told me that the young trees will not grow as big or live as long due to pollution, and that the spirits of the elder trees are necessary for us to be fully human. Though they didn't actually tell me this in words, I also got the sense that the trees communicate with one another over great distances through their root systems. I was reminded of this just recently when I read an interview in the February issue of *The Sun* with Paul Stamets, author of *Mycelium Running: How Mushrooms Can Help Save the World*. Stamets says that mycelial mats (which are made up of fungi) are neurological*

*networks, sentient, aware, and highly evolved. He calls them the Earth's "natural internet". There's a mycelial mat in eastern Oregon that spans 2,200 acres and is more than 2,000 years old.*

BP: How wonderful! I think they've also done studies and found that the roots of trees help nurture one another not just the exact tree to which they are rooted. This a lesson we could learn from the ancestor redwoods. About reaching out from our solitary selves and nurturing our communities.

*In one of your stories you wrote about the Nez Pierce tradition of putting tribal elders to rest inside ancient trees. It's amazing to me to think that there are human elders inside those ancient trees.*

BP: It is, isn't it? In the Hoh Rainforest, which is an ancient forest in Washington State, very mysterious, with mosses hanging from the trees, there's a trail through what I think is called the Grove of the Ancestors. Walking through those ancient trees there's a wonderful sense of being in a sacred grove like the Pagans must have known in their days when they worshipped the Earth. The Quileute tribe in around those sacred areas have an island called Akalat Island or James Island as it's now called. When the elders died, the women of the tribe would take them in a canoe to Akalat Island and put them in canoes on top of trees. It's a sacred island and no one can go there except the women of the tribe and the men who help them do the ritual. *(For information on visiting and/or staying on Akalat Island: [www.ocean-park.org/facilities.html](http://www.ocean-park.org/facilities.html).)*

*My kids have never seen old growth and there's very little left in New England, just a few pockets if you know where to look. We lose so much when we cut the elder trees, when we blast cliffs and pollute rivers, and so on. I don't think people have an understanding of what it does to the human spirit.*

BP: We are a very young country compared to most civilizations but our time is coming to an end as China becomes the next superpower. You could say that America has a life span of perhaps 300 years – it will take us a while to wind down. Our human ancestors here in America were blessed with this new world of vibrant environmental wealth and beauty and we've squandered it in an evolutionary nano-blink of 250 years. That's an act of sacrilege and an act of rape that I think is unique to our civilization. Many civilizations collapsed because they depleted their environment. But because of our technology we have been able to destroy more than any other civilization. It's a sad legacy.

*I want to talk about the First People, about a time when humans could transform into other*

*species and back again. You mention them in some of your stories and in Intimate Nature, Linda Hogan has a piece called "The First People." She includes a quote from Mamie Offield that I love: "Once the world was occupied by a species called Ikkxareyavs, 'First People,' who had magical powers. At a certain moment, it was realized that Human Beings were about to come spontaneously into existence. At this point, the First People announced their own transformation—into mountains or rocks, into disembodied spirits, and above all into the species of plants and animals that now exist in the world . . . At the same time, it is ordained how the new species, the Human Beings, will live." This explains so much, and it shows that all species, indeed everything on Earth, is related and sentient.*

BP: Linda is one of my dearest friends and we've done quite a few books together. She's Chickasaw and lives in Colorado. There's a message on my answering machine from Linda that has endured for several years despite attempts to delete it. If I ever were to need a reminder of what my work is I'd just have to play this message. It says, "Hello Brenda. I'm calling you because you're one of the few animals I know who still is dressed like a human." This is a wonderful way of talking about First People. Many of us feel uncomfortable being humans because of our ability to destroy habitat including home. We don't see ourselves as separate and we also see ourselves as animals, another species not above everyone else. We don't make the mistake of believing that we would endure as the only species. There are many other species who will probably outlast us.

*I hope so. What's happening now with climate change and the mass extinctions that have been predicted is so painful.*

BP: I hardly ever watch TV but not long ago my friends called and told me to force myself to sit down and watch this show on the History Channel called "Life After People". I would advise you to watch it too. The show asks what would happen if all the people disappeared? What's amazing is that 150 years after people disappear nature would be restored to much of its original beauty and vibrance. It made me so happy! Nothing against our species. I love humans, I am a human. But just the thought that there would be life after people and that it would be abundant, that 150 years after we're gone the oceans would again teem with whales and salmon and all sorts of fish. And our buildings would be covered over with moss, house cats would be living in the cliff dwellings of sky scrapers, dogs would revert to wolves, zoo animals would get out and repopulate. The computer graphics were very heartening. As I watched I thought, "This is what we need to start thinking about. We need to imagine a world without us. If we can imagine a world recovering and repairing itself without us, maybe we can be part of that repair.

*Well, we've imagined all kinds of destruction and so we are bringing destruction to pass. If we*

*can imagine healing and restoration and beauty and growth then we can bring that to pass.*

BP: Excellent point. I just finished the sequel to *Animal Heart*, which is a novel set in this world and in an alternate dimension in which there are species and changelings whose mission, whose love, is to restore the Earth and the oceans. It's like an interspecies love story. I'm really looking forward to bringing this book out into the world because, as one of my editors says, it's a joyful and hopeful story. And as you said, if we can imagine the end we can imagine the beginning. We can imagine a new way.

*What about the ancient stories, the Native and indigenous stories, the creation myths and teaching stories? People today treat them like fairy tales. They think they're interesting but definitely not real. And they do sound pretty fantastic, but I feel the truth in them. What is the relationship between those ancient stories and the new stories we need to tell ourselves?*

BP: I've been saying for years that our stories in Western civilization are killing us. For example the stories that have to do with The Rapture where people jettison the Earth in favor of a very thinly described afterlife in heaven. They don't see the glory or what I call the Rapture in the Earth. As E. O. Wilson says in this great interview I just read yesterday, it's very hard to trump 2000 years of Yahweh with secular environmental humanism. We don't have the passion play, we don't have the music and rituals, we don't have a personal God to watch over us. What we have is a much more mature vision of the spirit. But he is an optimist and so am I. One of the things I'm doing in my new memoir is addressing the idea of deep ecology and spirituality and trying to have a conversation in a more humorous way with the Christians and fundamentalists of all ilk who don't have much of a relationship with nature. I believe we need stories of the Rapture of the Earth that bestow the same satisfaction and connection the fundamentalists feel for God.

And, yes, the Native myths are absolutely real. They are what Linda Hogan calls Native science. The Neah Bay Macah or Quilute tribes tell stories of the deluge, for example, and after doing soil samples they finally uncovered a village in Ozette on the Neah Bay that was in fact buried by a mudslide which shows that the deluge myths absolutely happened. So these Native stories are not fairy tales, they're not mythic imagination. They are stories based on raw data. My stories are very much in that tradition. I grew up in a tradition of southern tribal storytellers. My father is part Seminole and part French-Canadian Indian and he's a fabulous storyteller. We know that when you change the story, you change the future.

Part of the problem with science is that it doesn't have enough storytellers. It has raw data or someone stands up and says, for instance, that our southern resident orcas in Washington are the most toxic marine mammals in the world. Period. And then the school child asks, well what can I do now? They're in what I call Discovery Channel despair. You know how at the end of the Discovery Channel shows a voice comes on and says, "Will they survive? It's in our hands." That makes it so hard. So then I come into the schools and tell an orca story of Luna or of Springer, who was returned to her native pod when she got lost, and they're engaged. They have a relationship, a kinship with the orcas.

*Your story, "Believing the Bond" is one of my favorites because it's about the very real, personal relationship you have with Puget Sound. I know your friend in the story was trying to make you feel better by saying, "Well Puget Sound is just a body of water. It doesn't care about you." But I don't believe that. I believe Puget Sound does care about you just as I believe the White Mountains care about me. I feel that what we need to do is rediscover that bond and make it alive again.*

BP: There's a story in *Nature and Other Mothers* called "Animal Allies". It's a story of my experience teaching inner city Seattle kids, many of whom were in gangs. One young girl in the class had a best friend who was shot in a gang war. I went in to teach what I call Story as Ecology which basically says that while we have left the Green World, the Green World has never left us. It was amazing how these children who had never been to the wilderness, never been to the old ancestor trees, became animals with such effortlessness. They became completely connected to their habitat through storytelling and in the psychodrama of the story they actually solved the murder of the young girl. (See excerpt, at end of interview).

*I believe the biggest challenge we face right now is climate change. And we know that a certain amount of heating is locked in, no matter what we do from this moment on. Where I live for example, there would be no snow in the winter, the maples and white pines will die, and so on. It's so incredibly sad. And you think, "There's nothing I can do to stop it". Yet all we hear is that it's up to us. Then I consider my relationship with Earth, with trees, with my garden. And I know it's not just up to us. It's time to wake up to the fact that we are not the only intelligent species on the Earth. Whether you want to call it wishful or magical thinking or simply being deluded, I don't believe that the future science paints is necessarily inevitable.*

BP: No, it is not. That's part of the Western storytelling myth that's so arrogant and is killing us. While I completely agree and believe in the science of global warming, I also believe that, as you say, there are other sentient beings on this Earth who are also

keenly aware and even much more connected to global warming and are adapting. For example, the gray whales are changing their migration paths, moving much further away from shore. Some are choosing not to go all the way up to the Bering Strait because there's not enough food. They're finding other food sources or they're hanging out as resident herds of gray whales around certain northern islands. These animals are adapting to a changing global climate. We are not yet adapting. The one thing about our species, the reason that we lived on and the Neanderthals did not, is that we could adapt. So the question is not is global warming coming? That has been answered by the science. The question is, how will we adapt to a warming global climate? And even if there is a massive die-out from a disease like AIDS, or plagues, or a nuclear disaster, or some aspect of global warming, there will still be a remnant of us and we will adapt.

*The thing is, we're smart enough, we have the technology. We could be doing so much right now. I do expect we'll see a fair amount of change with the next administration, whoever gets elected.*

BP: It will be economically driven. Fossil fuels are drying up. We have to find other forms of energy. A headline in the *Seattle Times* in front of me says, "Commuting in the H2O Lane." It's about these men who made bicycles with paddles and they commute between the islands. A picture shows a man on a surfboard-type thing with his bicycle with paddles. He paddles two miles across Puget Sound between islands to go to work. He's adapting.

*We need to stop thinking that there's a one-size-fits-all because every place is different. What's going to work in New England is going to be different, but there are other things we can do. The key is to decide what's important. What do we really care about? We have to move beyond consumerism. I'm so sick of hearing how we have to continue to buy, buy, buy to support the economy.*

BP: That's the old mind. It's drugs on steroids. And there are signs that it's changing. The children are starting to tune into the problems, and they care. Education is the key. And things are changing. When I wrote about global warming for *National Geographic* in 2000, it was still controversial. Bush was in his heyday of censoring the truth about climate science. But I knew what was going on. I was talking to indigenous people who live in the far north and still I had to fight to keep the section on global warming in the piece. Now *National Geographic* is one of the leaders in climate research.

*It's amazing how much things have changed in even the past couple of years. Still, it's taken a long time to get here. I've got files going back to the mid-1980s on global warming.*

BP: For those of us who are visionaries, it is frustrating. I remember talking about

climate change at a family reunion with my family, many of whom are fundamentalists, and they thought it was a liberal plot. But they've come around because they read it in *Time Magazine*. It's a slow curve. The Bush administration has been deadly for the environment especially because they've gotten rid of many of the career scientists who knew what they were doing and replaced them with party-line hacks who make decisions about science based on economics and the Republican agenda of growth first at any cost. For me, the worst is the military sonar which is turning our oceans into a war zone.

*I just did a piece on sonar and its impact on marine life for my column in the local paper. It's just beyond me, but then lots of things these days are beyond me.*

BP: I've been writing about it for ten years and it has taken all that time for the major east coast media like the *New York Times* and National Public Radio to finally tune in. Thankfully they are, but a lot of destruction has been done. My hope is our fear will not outweigh our foresight. Because any time this administration says "war on terror" or "homeland security", everything else drops by the wayside. The good news is people are starting to wake up and tune into the deceit and the contempt of this administration for what we need to know about our natural world through science and education. They're beginning to see through the lies. I'm hoping the next administration will restore agencies like the Forest Service and others that are supposed to be devoted to natural resource preservation with people who care, who are not just about getting the cut out or filling our oceans with the pollution of sonar.

*You've spent a lot of time in the water and with the dolphins, which we haven't really talked about. Many of your stories, especially in *Living by Water: True Stories of Nature and Spirit*, take place in and near the water, and it's obvious that dolphins and whales are your family as much as your human family. What is the most important lesson you've learned from your experiences with dolphins?*

BP: The ability, in the face of all things that could cause despair, to adapt and to play. I write about this in "Apprenticeship to Animal Play" in *Intimate Nature*. The dolphins more than any species I've ever worked with, even wolves, have a sense of real rapture. And they have a sense of playfulness and altruism that seem to go hand in hand with their own species and their tight, complex societies. Dolphins are masters of communication and they also have a very ebullient, very buoyant nature. In spite of everything we've done to them, in spite of everything that's happening in their oceans, they still have the ability to play. And they have a sense of humor. A sense of humor, a sense of perspective, a sense of playfulness.

Play is a very high form of intelligence. When you play you advance the species. Because you're not just repeating the status quo, you're not just replicating behaviors that have been done over and over again. It's risky behavior because you're doing something that may not be safe, but it's also very creative and can lead to new ideas. When you're a creator, which you and I are, which is a form of play, you're participating in evolution and you're a co-creator of this beautiful, beautiful blue planet. So what I've learned most from the cetaceans is that I can be a co-creator and I can play my way away from the stories that are killing us and to help create the stories that will rekindle in us a sense of reverence and a sense of perspective in this beautiful world that we share.

**Excerpt: From "Animal Allies" in *Nature and Other Mothers* by Brenda Peterson**

Children's imagination is a primal force, just as strong as lobbying efforts and boycotts and endangered species acts. When children claim another species as not only their imaginary friend, but also as the animal within them – their ally – doesn't that change the world? . . .

They may be young, but their memories and alliances with the animals are very old. By telling their own animal stories they are practicing ecology at its most profound and healing level. Story as ecology – it's so simple, something we've forgotten. In our environmental wars the emphasis has been on saving species, not becoming them. We've fallen into an environmental fundamentalism that calls down hellfire and brimstone on the evil polluters and self-righteously struts about protecting other species as if we are gods who can save their souls.

But the animals' souls are not in our hands. Only our own souls are within our ken. It is our own spiritual relationship to animals that must evolve. Any change begins with imagining ourselves in a new way. And who has preserved their imaginations as a natural resource most deeply? Not adults, who so often have strip-mined their dreams and imagination for material dross. . . Imagination is relegated to nighttime dreams, which are then dismissed in favor of "the real world." But children, like some adults, know that the real world stretches farther than what we can see – that's why they shift easily between visions of our tribal past and our future worlds. The limits of the adult world are there for these teenagers, but they still have a foot in the vast inner magic of childhood. It is this magical connection I called upon when I asked the kids to do the Dance of the Animals. . . .

I put on my cobra mask and hissed a greeting to Chimp, Rat, Jaguar, and Unicorn. Keen eyes tracked me from behind colorful masks. I held up my rain stick which was also our

talking stick and called the creatures one by one into the circle. "Sister Snake!" I called. "Begin the dance!"

Slowly, in rhythm to the deep, bell-like beat of my Northwest Native drum, each animal entered the circle and soon the dance sounded like this: Boom, step, twirl, and slither and stalk and snarl and chirp and caw, caw. Glide, glow, growl, and whistle and howl and shriek and trill and hiss, hiss. Each dance was distinct – from the undulating serpent on his belly, to the dainty high hoofing of Unicorn, from the syncopated stomps of Chimp on all-fours to Rat's covert jitterbug behind the stalking half-dark Jaguar. We dance, and the humid, lush jungle filled this room.

In that story line stretching between us and the Amazon, we connected with those animals and their spirits. And in return, we were complete– with animals as soul mirrors. We remembered who we were, by allowing the animals inside us to survive.

The dance is not over as long as we have our animal partners. When the kids left our last class, they still wore their masks fiercely. I was told that even on the bus they stayed deep in their animal character. I like to imagine those strong, young animals out there now in this wider jungle. I believe that Rat will survive the inner-city gangs; that Chimp will find his characteristic comedy even as his parents deal with divorce; I hope that Unicorn will always remember her mystical truth-telling horn. And as for Sarah [whose friend was killed in a gang war] who joined the Jaguar clan . . . Sarah knows the darkness she stalks and the nightmares that stalk her. She has animal eyes to see, to find even a murderer. Taking her catlike, graceful leave, she handed me a poem she'd written, "Now I can see in the dark," she wrote; and she signed herself, "Jaguar – future poet."

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