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# Op-Ed

Wednesday, April 17, 2024

## This Earth Day, hold both hope and lament as you reassess the part you play



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By **Judy Benson**

Maybe the flooding rains, earthquake and partial solar eclipse of the last few months have jolted you awake to the forces of nature since the start of 2024.

These are dramatic reminders that we humans are part of something much bigger than ourselves that is ultimately outside of our control, however much we alter it. Such happenings seem to be necessary to maintaining some humility in our perspective about our species in a wider context.

As Earth Day approaches again this year on April 22, take a few moments to consider that perspective anew. The designation of Earth Day is certainly much needed as an occasion to take stock of how we act on our planet and how it acts on us in the global and local spheres we inhabit.

Earthquakes, hurricanes, the outpouring of spring life and the daily tides are some of the literal forces of nature. When that phrase is metaphorically applied to people, it usually describes a unique and dynamic individual who has an outsized influence. But all of us are, in fact, forces of nature, too, regardless of whether we acknowledge it. We are agents that impact the Earth we are part of in ways large and small. Earth Day shouldn't be a day to celebrate Mother Nature as something apart from humanity, but to recognize that our minds, bodies and actions are fundamentally intertwined with it.

In her book, "Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities," Rebecca Solnit insists that maintaining hope is the necessary foundation for realistic engagement in confronting the enormous environmental challenges we face. An essential part of having hope, she believes, is appreciating that progress has been made — the effects of the Clean Water and Clean Air acts are just two examples — at the same time we refuse to be satisfied with the status quo.

"Much has changed; much needs to change," she writes. "Being able to celebrate or at least recognize milestones and victories and keep working is what the times require of us. Instead, a lot of people seem to be looking for trouble, the trouble that reinforces their dismal world view. Everything that's not perfect is failed, disappointing, a betrayal."

Solnit calls this "naïve cynicism" that disregards what history teaches us — that progress is often incremental, and that the most effective activism is often the kind that persists even when results aren't immediate and maybe not even realized in one's lifetime.

"How do we get back to the struggle over the future?" she asks. "I think you have to hope, and hope in this sense is not a prize or a gift, but something you earn through study, through resisting the ease of despair, through digging tunnels, cutting windows, opening doors or finding people who do these things. They exist."

She concludes: "... you can talk about the challenges we face and the progress we've made, and the small victories and achievements that give us the courage to keep going."

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