

## Planting My Heart in Lancashire. *By Andrea Hosfeld*

Some people travel to India to wake up... I went to Lancashire. And as with many life changing experiences, I journeyed to this place not fully aware of what I wanted. It began with a simple email - Was anyone interested in camping for a few days near Blackpool to support a group of anti-fracking protesters in need of solidarity?

The reason I decided to go is complex. To an outsider it might look like a committed environmentalist walking the walk. My own internal experience, however, was much different.

As an American living in the seeming safety of 'Britain' I was deeply affected by the election of Donald Trump. It felt a lot like being slapped. I spent a few months feeling dizzy, bewildered, and afraid, caked in shame, at points, when I told myself that *my* ignorance and *my* apathy were clearly to blame. In the past six months, this stupor has been replaced with a growing desire to care and take action in meaningful ways.

And all of this might sound straightforward. We care... and then we act. We read an article in the Guardian about ocean plastics choking birds, and then we sign a petition. But much of my reading left me feeling hollow. I signed those petitions and put up with the growing undercurrent of guilt. The ice caps were melting and our sea creatures were being poisoned, the landscape pillaged and raped... and it felt like I was watching something unfold on the moon, too remote and intangible to digest. I wanted the darkness to penetrate me. I wanted *to feel*. Perhaps there is something perverse about this desire. I recall telling my husband that I felt jealous after spending time with activist friends who were crying. Where were *my* tears? I knew that my mind was engaged, that the reality of what was happening was scary and desperate. But somehow the heart stayed closed.

Surprisingly this did not stop me from acting. If anything I found myself wanting to get involved more, feeling myself drawn to members of the Insight community, in particular, who were dedicated to peaceful action. I sat in protest by myself and with others. I made signs. I wrote articles. I posted things on Facebook. I felt, in brief moments, while writing poetry that I was dancing around the edges of a passionate heart. My armoured feelings, however, made me doubt my authenticity. If I didn't feel grief when I read about a new species fading into extinction then why was I holding up a sign about climate change? What exactly was I doing at these protests? What did I want?

In the days before our small group of 'DANCE-ers' headed up to Lancashire, I decided to book my train tickets. I knew it was only a two hour journey from Euston station to Preston and was looking forward to it. It came as quite a shock, then, to discover that the train tickets were priced at around £100. I waffled for a bit and then started to look at bus tickets which were 75% cheaper but would involve a 6-hour ride. I share this in order to highlight what can often get in the way of action... money, comfort, a sense of 'wasted time.'

I thought about not going very briefly. Interestingly, it was not my wish to support the anti-fracking campaign that influenced my decision but the possibility of connecting with the other Dharma folk who would be camping at the site. I realise now that I was engaged in

the act of imbuing all these beautiful beings with cosmic dimensions. I felt into their love of the earth, their dedication, their heart-fullness, their willingness to brave long journeys to stand in solidarity with others. That I thought of myself as somehow outside that movement is telling. My desire, which I only recognised in hindsight, was to rub up against them, to ignite my own heart, to learn by their generous example how one connects to that which is overwhelming.

And though I see the naiveté of assuming my friends were not privy to doubt or overwhelm or disconnection, I also acknowledge the beauty of this perception (propped up by my imagination) – of a sacred community who care about peace and human dignity, and kindness. It was feeding this and other ‘perceptions’ that would lead, by the end of the weekend, to the heart peeking its head above the parapet.

Each of us has a unique palette that we can draw on as we paint this experience called life. And there are so many conditions that contribute to what arises for us. I needed this trip to Lancashire to counter the cultural malaise of apathy and perceived safety. I look out of my window in Twickenham and there is a large green field and a winding river and trees. There are people walking around who don’t seem to be affected at all by changes in the climate. At the campsite, however, I met people in the local community who were scared, heard them speak about their love for the fields and trees that they’d cherished as children. I lingered with their eyes, noticed them welling up, and felt my own beautiful compassion arise in response. I connected with their sadness and it provided a doorway for my own.

On the Friday we all woke early and walked down to the gates to the site where Cuadrilla have been preparing the land for fracking. We brought porridge and bowls and spoons. The activists who have been sleeping by the highway for 6 months walked up and down the road in pyjamas with toothbrushes hanging out of their mouths. The police were lined up in front of the gate in their yellow day-glow jackets and the workers in their orange jumpsuits stood behind. I watched as two large lorries made their way onto the site before any protesters could prevent them and I followed them with my mind, wanting their cancer-like entrance to be benign, feeling my own insignificance in the face of heavy machinery. The tension at the site was palpable, and I felt the fear in my body grow as people began running across the road to stand in front of and amongst the police. I had come believing that my only role was to swell the numbers but soon found myself standing with a few friends holding a banner by the gate.

And then word passed that more lorries were on the way and we realised that the police van parked in front of the gate would need to move in order to let them in. Myself and two others moved with our banner into the space in front of the police van. Suddenly there was shouting. The police were telling us to move out of the way and my instinct was to run but I was in the middle of the banner with my back to the van and my friends were not running. I felt the vehicle start to move into the backs of my legs and we all started to walk slowly forward. An officer was screaming at us to ‘stop touching the van! Stop touching the van!’ At one point he pushed one of my friends, told him he’d been warned three times. I received a weaker push in the back. We wondered aloud how it is actually possible to ‘stop touching’ a van that is pushing itself into your body.

In the moments after this exchange I stood rigidly with the banner, felt the stab of tears, waves of anger, sadness, fear. New to activism, I did not realise the ramifications of 'direct action' -- that one committed to the risk of arrest or 'roughing up' because all other avenues of protest had been exhausted. I was standing with a community that had gone through the democratic process and had rejected fracking and was now being forced by central government to expose their children and their land to a whole host of environmental dangers.

Though deeply unpleasant, I feel that witnessing and experiencing violence at the site put me in touch with the vulnerability of standing up for what one believes, and the visceral force that holds flawed ideologies in place. Mindful of my own fear, and seeing it also on the faces of others, tasting the desperation and sadness in my friends and the visitors and inhabitants of the camp, contributed to a growing feeling of belonging... that I belonged to this earth, and cared about what happened to it, and that I belonged to its inhabitants, on both sides of the imagined gate.

Later in the day we were joined by more protesters and one side of the dual carriageway was closed. Benches were carried into the space and a table was laid out with plates and cutlery, and soon a beautiful curry arrived. We ate together and sang together and danced together... waved to the cars who honked their horns in support.

On Sunday morning a group of us led a two hour session with meditation and reflection. Having been blessed by the spirit of the camp, we all felt a sense of gratitude and a growing wish to offer our own form of generosity. Half of the session focused on moving into the sacred landscape of the body, and the other half provided a space for connecting with the beauty, courage and vulnerability of fellow protesters and activists. There were several people in the group who had only recently arrived at the camp and were feeling isolated and disconnected. By the end of the session, however, it was clear that our hearts were quivering with each other. Our feet were making contact with hallowed ground. A local woman, her eyes wet and very blue, thanked everyone for coming, for making her and the other residents feel less alone.

The bus ride home felt slightly somber. My system was processing everything I'd seen and heard and my imagination was lingering and resonating with particular moments. It felt like having my system re-wired, like my body was making room for the heart to touch and feel that which had felt remote. The day after I got home I found myself googling my home state of Pennsylvania. A man at the site had seemed shocked when I told him this was where I was from. 'Fracking is huge there,' he said in disgust. To my horror, I found that he was not exaggerating. I read, with growing sickness, about a fracking industry that has been going strong since 2005, and viewed the vast area of destruction. Many of the sites are near where I went to University. I read about a community that has been forced to accept donations of bottled water because the liquid coming out of their taps is no longer palatable to drink and is even dangerous to touch. And quite suddenly the tears I'd been so eager to possess were upon me. I felt overwhelmed by their force. As I caught my breath I remembered a local farmer who had spoken at the gates about what it meant to her to

grow on this land, how she loved this place. My own love for Pennsylvania felt connected to her love of Lancashire.

I journeyed to the north of England not realising that what I desired was 'belonging.' My soul wanted to feel and to know that she, like Adam and Eve, had been fashioned from the clay of this earth. Perhaps I could not begin the difficult emotional journey of bearing witness to the earth's devastation, until I felt in some important way that I belonged to it. The banner we held up for hours by the roadside said 'what we do to the earth, we do to ourselves...'

And if 'belonging' is indeed an essential element in keeping our activism fresh and alive, authentic and meaningful... then feeding this perception is something I need to care about as a practitioner. Because I know that the belonging I tasted in Lancashire is not a permanent, solid entity on which I can depend forever more. Thoroughly empty and without its own inherent existence, it is a tale I participate in telling, fashioned in the realm of the imagination where it is sanctified and made beautiful.

A friend of mine told me recently that her environmental action comes out of a reverence for photosynthesis. The beauty of this miraculous process moves her in deep ways and is something that motivates her to act. For me, there is a story that gets told in my body and my mind. It is made up of an assortment of what I have seen and felt, breathed and imagined... and it fashions a lens through which I can look at this ailing world and find a heart-full place to stand and act.

As I write this, I can still see those lorries slipping through the gates, and the bright blue eyes of the local woman who took part in our meditation workshop. I can imagine my way into the camp kitchen where I stood for hours chopping potatoes, and ginger and garlic so that the people at the gate would come back to the smell of frying pakoras and be nourished by a home-cooked meal. I can take myself back to that sacred Saturday evening when a group of us stood in the dark by the gate singing Earth blessings, burning incense, beating rattles and drums, and dancing with joy, while the incredulous police watched us from their vans. I linger on the moment when we opened our circle so we could include the security officers behind the metal gates. These stitched together images, these stories of meaningfulness, are no less important when we reflect on their ultimate emptiness. That they have the power to break us out of numbness, to give us new eyes and wider hearts, makes their magic well worth cultivating.

Sitting on my cushion at home, I see myself amongst a large group of souls who are planting their hearts into the soil of that blessed field in Lancashire, answering the Earth's prayer for protection while offering up one of my own.

For me, this is what engaged Buddhism is about... learning how to look in ways that unshackle our hearts and infuse our care for the world with authenticity, meaning, and love. It is only through coming into contact with the world, and letting the messiness of our human dilemma imprint itself onto our being, that we discover a reservoir of courage and love deep enough to sustain our efforts.