

# A NATURAL EPIPHANY

BY CHERYL LEUTJEN

On this day in early January, my thoughts turn to resolutions, intentions and wild schemes for loving Earth even more in 2019. Yes, I am still mulling over my goals for the new year. I resolutely hold off on setting my goals for each year until Epiphany, which, by common convention, gives me until January 6. Partly it's because I'm just not ready on New Year's Day. The rush of the holiday leaves me feeling so sapped that I need a few solid days of introspection before making any commitment that will shape the entire rest of the year—or as long as my attention span lasts, at least. But I prefer to tell myself that I'm waiting for the Wise Ones to arrive, bringing gifts of wisdom and wealth to inform my aspirations.

I'm an ardent fan (zealot, rabid fanatic, depending on who you ask) of list-making, and the traditions of marking the fresh new year give me ample excuse to start a number of them.

- Top Ten Ideas for Book Promoting in 2019!
- Healthy New Recipes My Family Will Love!
- List of Junk Drawers I will Tackle in 2019! (Yes, there are enough to inspire a whole list. Please don't judge.) And, of course:
- Ways To Get Greener This Year!

It's all very exciting, if you're a list maker like me, involving a flurry of amassing fresh journals, bunches of colored pens and pencils, several stencils, my entire collection of rubber stamps and six acid-free, colored stamp pads. Like a kid on a Halloween candy sugar rush, I have to do 100 jumping jacks just to settle down enough to sit at my desk.

And yet, I hear murmurs from the Magi to take several deep breaths before I relegate my love for Earth to a single page (and 12 brilliant colors!) in this year's edition of the "turn-over-a-new-leaf" journal. Will a frenetic list-making session give me the answers I seek?

This inquiry reminds me of a question at the Earth Conference last November, when I was honored to be one of the presenters. Late in the day, after all the orations and most of the discussions were complete, an attendee asked, "When I walk out of this door today, what should I DO?"

I still remember how much I wished I could recite a "Top Ten to Save the World" list. How I wanted to give a concrete answer like "replace all your lightbulbs with LEDs, and all will be well. World Saved. The End." Because that's what I'd like to hear, too. What's more, I'd like to believe that such a simple solution exists. But the threats to Life on Earth as We Know It seem so dire and spiraling out of control that I find myself doubting there's anything I can do that will make a difference. Will walking to the store, instead of driving, really do anything about the forest fires ravaging my state? Am I even willing to turn off the air conditioning to reduce my dependence on fossil fuels?

But when I plant my despairing self under a blossoming pomegranate tree and discover a buzzing swarm of bees overhead, I'm rapt. I'm blissfully free of the seemingly nonstop tide of Bad News for Life on Earth. I'm simply witnessing these busy creatures,

whose industry makes possible a good chunk of the human food supply, hard at work. None are bemoaning the fate of their kind, with so many dying in droves. Each of them showed up to do what bees do, employing all the skills and abilities that Nature has given them. The bees remind me that I have the skills and abilities to do my own work—and to surrender the travesties that are not mine to address.



From this state of nature-inspired reverie, I gladly get myself to the farmer's market to purchase locally-grown, in-season produce—without any of the resentment I feel when I force myself there because it's on my To-Do list. When I hold a golden-flecked, crimson apple in my hand, I see the weathered hands that tend the 100-year-old orchard. I smell the musk of earth fed by a hundred years of moldering leaves. I honor all whose labor delivered this heirloom package of deliciousness to me. And I'm grateful for this simplest of fruits. My heart swells with hope, a rare and precious experience in these days of too much awful news.

So that was my response to the plaintive question at the Earth Conference—and I offer to anyone else who's wondering what on Earth any of us can do that will make a difference. Walk out your own front door or stop on the side of the road to admire the plucky robin foraging for food on a snowy morning. Allow your thoughts to quiet and embrace stillness. Be present. Notice. Breathe. Give your senses full rein to take in the experience. What do you see, feel, hear, taste, touch? Release, if you will, any expectations of instantaneous, mind-blowing divinations.

Because I don't mean to imply that the winter robin will share any insights on the paper-or-plastic dilemma. What I am suggesting is that witnessing this courageous featherweight just might inspire your own tenacity to tackle a challenge that's been in the back of your mind. Or perhaps you'll carry the image of the courageous robin with you, and lean into his strength when you falter in your own endeavors to fill your heart with hope. Or perhaps, like that time I stopped to commune with Nature on the side of the freeway (not advised or legal, as it turns out), you'll make a new friend in uniform when a car with flashing lights pulls up behind you. That's the thing I've discovered about contemplative time in Nature; you just never know who or what's going to turn up.

In any case, I hope you experience a moment of Wonder. Because that's the best antidote to despair and doubt that I've ever experienced. Wonder and its cousin Awe give me the spaciousness and the delirious audacity to believe that, yes, indeed, picking up this piece of litter means I'm making a difference. And that belief is what I need to commit to greater challenges, with a smile on my face and love in my heart.

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