

All is one

Eileen Crist

About the author

Eileen has been teaching at Virginia Tech in the Department of Science and Technology in Society since 1997. She lives in Blacksburg, VA, USA.

Citation

Crist E (2017) All is one. *The Ecological Citizen* 1(Suppl A): 36–7.

Keywords

Becoming ecocentric

Like every human being is, I was born in love with the Earth. From before I can remember I loved animals and wanted to become them. As a toddler I crawled on the floor with a box turtle, trying to walk like him. A few years later, at a museum in Chicago, I let a black snake curl around me, fascinated by the smoothness and dryness of her skin. Between the ages of 8 and 10 I kept a diary of observations about birds and other woodsy creatures. I wanted to be like Jane Goodall when I grew up (I was not optimistic about that, because I thought many people would want to be like her and there would be much competition). At the time we lived in Livingston, New Jersey. There were scattered woods, a stream and a pond near my house where I spent many happy hours. One day I caught a frog and brought him home. Secretly, I put him in the basement inside a tub of water. I woke up early the next morning and all excited ran downstairs to see him. When I saw that he was dead my mouth parched with regret and shame. That was life's first lesson never to confuse love with possessiveness.

When I was ten years old we moved to Greece and my naturalist expeditions continued. There were some hills near our seaside cottage, some 20 miles outside of Athens, where grown-ups did not venture. There, I discovered the reptile fauna of Greece: tortoises, lizards and poisonous snakes. I had read about these creatures and knew when it was easiest to find them: when the sun shines again after the loveliness of a summer rain. I also knew that the snakes were poisonous because of their crisply triangular heads and the unmistakable you-don't-want-to-mess-with-me glint in their eyes. (Decades later I would understand that I was seeing the last baseline of these animals taking refuge in the hills.) For two, maybe

three, blessed summers my extended family would swim daily and fish regularly. I saw all kinds of creatures when I snorkelled, even a tiny, light orange seahorse. My being was filled with awe and gratitude, although I did not notice those feelings because they just felt normal. One day I spied a 2-foot octopus swimming in the open water, and then she spotted me too and changed what might have been twenty colours. Perhaps it was a normal octopus response upon seeing an eleven-year-old girl with flippers and a mask. The alive with beautiful beings sea seemed like it would always be there. Then, somewhere around 1973, it died. Just like that. Everything went grey and murky and there were only cucumber-shaped slugs at the bottom of the sea, and a random fish here and there. There must have been a wave of industrial pollution or a sewage-dumping tipping point or both around the seas of Athens; in retrospect, not surprising. What was surprising, and stayed with me like a strange riddle, was that no one talked about it. All the joyful swimming, snorkelling, and (in hindsight regrettable) fishing gone – and no one said a word.

A few summers later I fell in love with a dog. The feeling was mutual. We used to run together through wheat fields laughing, or just hung out looking every so often into one another's eyes. When we had to go back to Athens in September, I was not allowed to bring him. We left him behind. Whether he found another home or died of starvation, I do not know. What I do know is that his heart was broken and so was mine. And here's the thing about a broken heart: it never quite mends. But "you got to take your broken heart and make it into art" (Meryl Streep: <https://youtu.be/EV8tsnRFUZw>). A dog named Belisarius taught me that betrayal is a great crime and that the one covenant with all beings is goodness. He showed me

that goodness is not an ethical choice – it is an ontological condition stitched into the make-up of the universe. Sooner or later we discover that it's the only choice. In that sense, neither the ecological crisis nor its solution is overcomplicated. Human beings (sooner or later) will recognize that killing the living world cannot produce wealth, any more than killing the king for the kingdom could actually make Macbeth king.

I wish for every human the blessing of falling in love with a dog. I wish it especially for those who despise them as dirty or eat them. To see yourself reflected in the eyes of a dog is to feel the grace that lives in you. To gaze into the trusting eyes of a dog is to know our ancient covenant with wolves. Keeping Earth and all Earth's beings near our hearts with unfaltering loyalty is the portal to our very being. ■



A special place for the author.