

Media Information

Nature Speaks:

Art and Poetry for the Earth

By Deborah Kennedy

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Deborah Kennedy Event Description

The captivating poetry and illustrations in Deborah Kennedy's new book, *Nature Speaks: Art and Poetry for the Earth*, bring to life the profound bond between ourselves and the larger natural world. Kennedy focuses on the ecological themes of our time, infusing art and science with insight and passion. Her powerful poetry and earth-toned ink illustrations unveil nature in its beauty and depth, appealing to the eye, the mind and the heart. *Nature Speaks* invites us to listen to the earth—to appreciate nature's grace, complexity, and vigor—as we discover pathways for healing ourselves and the earth.

Multimedia Presentation:

Nature Speaks: Art and Poetry for the Earth Nature Speaks: Art and Poetry for the Earth is a lively exploration of the artwork and poetry of Deborah Kennedy. While projecting intriguing earth-toned ink illustrations, I read poetry and discuss compelling topics related to ecology and the natural world. This presentation will introduce viewers not only to our ecological challenges, but also to recordings of the most beautiful songbird of North America, the life cycles of redwood trees, and to models of holistic thinking that can help us move toward a thriving world.

Art and Writing Workshop: Creating Art and Poetry for the Earth

Creating Art and Poetry for the Earth, is an engaging workshop where participants share in my creative process. First, we experience the natural world, eyes filled with curiosity and wonder. Regardless of whether we have a local park or extensive coastal preserves to explore, we observe, sketch and write brief responses to the natural world. Upon returning to our studio space, we will develop and integrate our initial observations. Using ink techniques that produce quick and dramatic effects we produce short illustrated poems. These lively and stimulating cross-disciplinary techniques will enliven us, opening our hearts and minds.

This workshop can be presented in a variety of formats ranging from three hours to weekend-long workshops. It is appropriate for beginning creatives to mature artists and for writers seeking to reinvigorate their creative process. In the briefer workshops we experience select nature photographs in place.

About Nature Speaks: Art and Poetry for the Earth

In *Nature Speaks: Art and Poetry for the Earth*, Deborah Kennedy combines thoughtful poetry and intriguing artworks to capture the profound bond between ourselves and the

larger natural world. Her eco poetry reflects a deep respect and affection for scientific knowledge; her stories introduce us to the cycles of watersheds, theories of environmental complexity and Darwin's prescient discovery of co-evolutionary relationships. Her writing often suggests the sweep of history and the enduring relationship between humans and the land.

At times, her poems seem to peer into the distant past and then into the looming future, all while standing firmly on a single patch of land.

Each poem in *Nature Speaks* is paired with an alluring earth-toned ink drawing and a short essay, offering three lenses to view nature and our ecological challenges. Some of the illustrations feature surreal visions; others meticulously detailed renderings of the transformations of butterflies, the delicacy of violets and power of tornados. Kennedy's unique melding of art and text brings us to a deeper understanding of our complex relationship with the larger natural world.

Nature Speaks offers a timely message that informs, cautions and inspires us as we face today's critical environmental challenges. Kennedy invites us to commit to creating a healthy, sustainable and thriving world. The last section of this book points to paths forward that can heal our relationship with the larger natural world and begin the long process of restoration.

Q&A with Deborah Kennedy

Q. What led you to create this book?

A. When I was young, I was able to be very free—a wild child—running through the woods, climbing trees, swimming in lakes, and gorging on mulberries until my mouth and hands were dyed purple. My family enjoyed outdoor activities like hiking, some sailing and spending time at our friend's farm. My mother was a birder and taught me to identify and appreciate local birds.

Then, as a young adult I was a bit of an adventurer: I backpacked, galloped around on horses, lived on a farm, milked cows, hiked and snorkeled in the tropics. My abiding love and delight in the natural world originated in these formative experiences. Later, I started to do research on ecological problems. As I realized the seriousness of these challenges, I felt alarm and grief at our destructive ways and began to express my feelings through my artwork. Sculptures, installations and public art on themes like watersheds, the extinction crisis, endocrine disruption, and also the holistic thinking we need to engage in to solve our problems became the focus of my work. I soon realized I wanted to address these ideas and feelings more directly and began to work on this book. Ten short years later I am done!

Q. Sometimes our environmental problems seem overwhelming. How do you stay optimistic about working toward change?

A. In 1989, I was fortunate to travel to Europe for the first time. My husband had a Fulbright Grant to teach and do research in Germany. Fresh out of graduate school, I was creating installations or large sitespecific sculptures with social and psychological themes. When I learned we would be traveling to Berlin,

I decided to create installations on the surface of the Wall. It was a fascinating experience. As I produced four installations, I met people from both sides of the Berlin Wall. East Berliners said things like, "This wall will be here for another 2,000 years." The leader of East Germany had the support of the USSR and their military police state seemed all powerful. West Berliners said, "If they take down the wall now, we will have to build our own." Who could imagine that within six months the Wall would be permanently dismantled? This experience showed how apparently intractable problems can almost miraculously be

overcome if people persistently work toward change. This incredible transformation in Germany illustrates that even in the face of overwhelming challenges we should continue moving toward a better vision of the world, realistically but with genuine optimism.

Q. How do you think poetry and art can help us with our environmental problems?

A. Although art and poetry seem like indirect ways to approach problems of such enormous scale, I believe our core ecological problems are rooted in the way we think and feel—or avoid thinking and feeling! We must begin to understand how closely we are woven into the web of life and how urgent it is to heal our relationship with the larger natural world. I hope my art and poetry will help in a small way by encouraging people to realize the urgency of our problems. This is a pivotal time, as more people directly experience the problems caused by climate change and pollution, and people are increasingly willing to grapple with these issues. If we, as a society and world community, continue to minimize and ignore the serious scope and scale of these problems, I fear we are moving toward a future that will be considerably more difficult and dangerous. Some scientists are predicting truly disastrous consequences even now.

Although our problems are serious, we have the tools to solve many of them if we commit ourselves to this important work. We will only follow this path if our thinking and emotions help us confront our environmental challenges.

Q. Why present art and poetry together, shouldn't poetry stand by itself?

A. My creative process is very labor intensive—I started this book ten years ago. The images usually take between twenty and forty hours and the poems have been repeatedly honed, like polishing a stone sculpture. It certainly would be easier to only have poems!

Nature Speaks also includes short essays to elucidate the concepts that underlie each poem. I see the art, poetry and text as three different ways to look at these ideas and feelings, like three sides of a prism. There are precedents for this type of work, like William Blake and his illustrated mystical books. The ancient Greeks also had works that combined poetry, humor, and essays—switching between different voices.

Also, I think Nature Speaks is allied with the rising number of books featuring images and writing. For example, Gary Snyder and a woodcut artist have recently produced two lovely books together, and there are an increasing number of graphic novels with scientific themes, like Lauren Redniss' *Thunder & Lightning: Weather Past, Present, Future*.

Q. You have a number of poems focusing on birds, why? Why are birds so important today?

A. Rachel Carson, the noted biologist and environmentalist, understood the connection between threats to the natural world and threats to our own health. Ever prescient, she said: "But man is a part of nature, and his war against nature is inevitably a war against himself." Currently, our actions are devastating bird populations. A global loss of birds and bird species is resulting from a wide variety of causes.

Recent studies predict that by the end of this century, one quarter of all bird species will be extinct. This loss of birds is primarily the result of human activities. Habitats are lost as construction and extraction industries destroy natural areas and their food sources are destroyed or contaminated by agribusiness' use of pesticides and herbicides and other chemicals. Birds often collide with power lines, windmills, and windows. Also, the avian flu, a new bird disease, is speeding this already rapid loss and has caused the deaths of immeasurable numbers of wild and domestic birds. The combination of these challenges to avian health is leading to precipitous declines in many bird populations.

Our incessant war against nature is leading not only to these declines of bird populations, but also to profound hazards to ourselves. If we understood the connection between these

animal disappearances and the threats to our children and ourselves, would we continue to turn a blind eye to these losses?

Q. How do you justify traveling around, creating more greenhouse gases, promoting a paper book in the name of environmentalism?

A. I call it sinning in the name of art! Yes, I definitely think about these problems and try to address them as best I can. For example, I use a printer who is eco sensitive and doesn't use child labor. When I travel I try to take mass transit, and do carbon offsets. However, these problems point to the fact that while individuals can take some meaningful environmental actions, it is very hard to really live your environmental values in a society that is environmentally destructive. Many of the changes we need to adopt to have a sustainable world can only be done at the regional, national and international level. But I do what I can: I only had one child, I shop very little, and I always wash out my yogurt containers!

Q. A number of your works focus on women's issues—concern for your son's future, breastfeeding, breast cancer, fertility issues. Why do you feel these are important to write about?

A. When I was younger, I was not focused on my role as a woman. As I said, I loved to travel, backpack, snorkel in the tropics, and get bucked off horses. Also, I did construction work for a number of years— sheetrock taping, roofing, sort of a Jane-of-all-trades.

Later, when I did marry, and my wonderful husband and I had a son, I was thirty-eight years old and working and teaching as an artist. Having a child opened my heart and mind in profound ways. I waited so late in life to have a child because I was concerned about the condition of the world and understood the implications of climate change and endocrine disruption.

After I had my son and became a mother, I started to more fully understand the serious impacts of our profligate and uncontrolled use of chemicals. Children and women can be seriously injured by endocrine disruption and chemical exposure. Shouldn't we as a society, claiming to embrace family values, be much more concerned about protecting children's health and women's fertility?

Q. I understand you recently had a catastrophic accident, how did that affect your work as a writer, ecologist and artist?

A. Yes, two years ago I was crossing the street in the crosswalk and struck by a car speeding at over 30 miles an hour. The driver didn't see me or the two cars that had stopped for me at the crosswalk—I broke his windshield and was thrown twenty feet. Both my legs and eight other bones were broken, and I had a concussion and a brain injury. Before the accident, I could bike and hike in the hills and create largescale sculptures. I was furious to have all that taken away. The important idea I learned from this personal catastrophe was the power of regeneration. My healing after two years is thankfully, extraordinary. I realized that my body, like the larger natural world, has tremendous powers to heal and regenerate. If you completely destroy an eco system, there is nothing to come back. But let's say you destroy eighty percent of an eco system and then stop harming it. In that case, we are finding nature can leap back with tremendous vigor. We can see this with newly sanctioned marine reserves and the restoration of salt ponds in the Bay Area. My last poem in the book, "Regeneration Ruckus," is about this idea. It is a narrative poem that tells the tale of an area destroyed by a tornado and how the trees and native plants come blasting back after a destructive incident. So, ultimately my accident helped change me from an environmentalist with a very dire view, to someone who has more hope that we can revive the health of people and the larger natural world.

Q. You recently traveled to Australia, and learned about their national reconciliation program with indigenous people, what did you discover and how did that influence your work?

A. Today, the Australian government and people have developed a program called Reconciliation Australia that strives, according to its website, “to create relationships between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island peoples and other Australians.” The programs of most large institutions there advance the culture of traditional people through festivals, work/study programs, and an annual National Reconciliation Week.

I believe we could benefit from a similar program. We need the ecological knowledge of the First Peoples, the traditional peoples who lived here for centuries before modern society. Many of their societies lived sustainably and have models for thinking and acting that could help save our society. Several of my poems refer to these issues, *More Than Light*, *Native*, and *Beaten Path*, for example. Recently I traveled to the Northern coast of California and was honored to meet some indigenous people and had moving conversations with them. One woman read *More Than Light*. In this poem, I am standing on the bay plain and imagining the indigenous culture that once flourished there. After reading the poem, she said to me, “As an indigenous person, sometimes I feel an empty place inside me, like something is missing. This poem helps me see what should be there.” When I wrote the poem, I was, of course, inside my own experience, looking from my own point of view. I was moved by her understanding of the poem in ways I could never have imagined when writing it.

Also, I believe we need to expand the idea of reconciliation and apply it to our relationship with the natural world. We need to acknowledge the harms we have committed and start working to create a state of harmony with nature.

Q. What do you hope people will gain from reading the book?

A. This book is foremost about offering enjoyment to the viewers and readers of *Nature Speaks*. Finding the illustrations and poetry interesting and compelling is the first hope, but not the last. I also envision readers engaging with the environmental issues, beginning to contemplate the urgency of our situation and working toward a common goal of creating sustainable societies. As many scientists have been warning, we are moving toward tipping points, for example, with regard to climate change and species extinctions. I hope *Nature Speaks* is part of a much larger movement of awakening and action on behalf of ourselves, our children and the larger natural world

Check out Deborah’s latest interview with SVTAGS:

<http://reflect.creatv.cablecast.tv/vod/27655-SVTAGS-160926-160921-1-27-35-High-v1.mp4>

About Deborah Kennedy

An artist and writer, **Deborah Kennedy’s** work has been presented in the United States and Europe. Her exhibitions include numerous solo and group shows featuring objects, conceptually-based installations, and public art focusing on ecological and social themes. She is noted for creating four large-scale installations on the Berlin Wall six months before it was torn down. This work was an inspiration to thousands who witnessed art in the service of social change and has been featured in books and newspapers in Germany and the United States. Her work has been widely reviewed and she has received numerous grants and awards from Art Councils and museums in California. Recently, Kennedy received awards from the Bay Area Poets Coalition for her poetry. Her upcoming book,

Nature Speaks: Art and Poetry for the Earth, will be released in the fall of 2016. Kennedy lives in San Jose, CA, teaches college classes in art and art history and presents at ecology conferences. She often hikes in an urban riparian corridor where she spots osprey, hawks and herons. In the evening she watches for moon bows, earthshine and other modern miracles.

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White Cloud Press:

Since its founding in 1993, White Cloud Press has been publishing acclaimed works on World Religions, Mysticism and Spirituality, Ecology, Yoga, Politics, and Memoirs. White Cloud titles and authors have been praised by the New York Times, Publishers Weekly, Christian Science Monitor, Time Magazine, Washington Post, Parade, People, Tikkun, Chronicle of Higher Education and been featured on CNN, Nightline, PBS, CBS Evening News, Good Morning America, National Public Radio, and, perhaps our very favorite moment in the media spotlight, the The Daily Show with Jon Stewart, among others. Leaders of thought such as Jimmy Carter, Karen Armstrong, Deepak Chopra, Huston Smith, Queen Noor, Brian Swimme, Cornell West, Alice Walker, Joanna Macy, Jane Hirschfield, Robin Williams, and Greg Mortenson have praised our titles.