

# Now Is the Time to Actively Craft the World

## An Interview with Blair Nelsen, Executive Director of Waterspirit

Waterspirit is a center of ecology and spirituality that informs, inspires, and enables all people to deepen their consciousness of the sacredness and interdependence of all creation with a focus on water as critical in sustaining life. It was founded in 1996 by the Sisters of St. Joseph of Peace (see History and Roots on page 26).

**LP:** How does Waterspirit seek to create a revolution of the heart around water and climate issues?

Resolving the water and climate issues that face our world requires change on both the individual and collective level. I believe that real change in our behavior comes from a deeper place, from the level of our dearest spiritual values. Facts and data won't do it. Waterspirit encourages personal transformation through reaching people at this deeper level, which is what I hear in Dorothy Day's "revolution of the heart." When we see ourselves as part of a communion of subjects (to use Thomas Berry's phrase), we no longer see ourselves as isolated individuals, and we are neither superior nor inferior to anyone. Only then do we become able to think about the common good. Then, we become ready to confront ecological sin.

I am seeing a lot of worrying posts online that describe humanity as a virus and epidemics, wildfires, hurricanes and so forth punishment for our fundamental, unfixable flaws. I don't buy it. At my core, I believe that humanity desires to live in right relationship with all members of Earth's great communion of subjects. We have to dig down through many layers of harmful habits learned throughout our own lifetimes spent living in unbalanced systems that value short-term profit for the few over

long-term well-being for the whole, as well as through intergenerational trauma. Yet, fundamentally, our deepest selves know how to behave because we are *supposed to be here*.

**LP:** What are practical ways/steps for people to have those kinds of transformative experiences that will foster the systemic change you would like to see?

Restoring balance with the Earth is a process that requires healing. We might turn to Jesus' example to help us with this. He performed his healing ministry through direct touch, through listening deeply, and through restoring community. We might use these principles to guide our own Earth-focused healing. Direct contact with nature can be near-miraculous medicine. Touch and deep attention to nature can happen from anywhere. We can pay attention to natural cycles and how they impact our bodies, and then lean into those seasonal changes. (Mary Oliver is a master of this kind of attention, and I recommend her poetry as a gateway into this practice.) Deep listening to our inner emotional state allows us to perceive the feelings that this process of reconnection produces, which are not always positive or easy. (Reconnecting with the Earth can entail a lot of heartbreak!) This kind of work is helpful to do with others, since humans are fundamentally



communal beings. For example, Waterspirit has started an eco-anxiety support group to provide a safe container for processing such emotions in community. Connecting with each other is part of our reconnection with nature, which leads to healing. When we transform our consciousness, we find the strength and resilience needed to transform the systems in which we are enmeshed.

**LP:** What kind of changes would you like to see in the next 5-10 years? If those changes came to pass, how would the mission of Waterspirit change?



Program Manager Abbey Koshak and Executive Director Blair Nelsen

By 2030, my son will be 18. Now is the time to actively craft the kind of world he will step into as he reaches adulthood. The next 10 years are also critical with regard to implementing the UN's sustainable development goals, including slowing climate change down to 1.5°C as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change recommends. These goals will only be achieved through sweeping actions that require technological advances, global cooperation, and the commitment to put intergenerational well-being over short-term profit. Immediate widespread dissemination of renewable energy and a moratorium on fossil fuel use is needed, starting with the worst polluters. In the next 5-10 years, it would be within our power to hold these corporations, particularly fossil fuel companies, accountable for the harms they have caused our

planet and to use that money to invest in these technologies and in the communities that have suffered environmental justice violations. Injustice of any kind must be eradicated in order for the world to be whole.

I also want to see investment in our communities. Local resilience is what will sustain us in the case of systems collapse. In an ideal world, I see economies that are locally-focused, with an abundance of gardens promoting food security as well as access to healthcare and a living wage guaranteed for all. Decisions will be made after weighing their intergenerational impacts so practices that are harmful in the long-term (like creating plastic pollution, using pesticides, and so forth) as well as the short-term are avoided.

I find it difficult to imagine how Waterspirit would shift course were an ideal world to be realized by the

time my son reaches adulthood. I remain skeptical that the kinds of lasting changes we need will come about in the next 5-10 years. Water protection is a life-long endeavor, so Waterspirit is likely to have work to do for a long time.

**LP:** Do you see progress in terms of meeting Waterspirit's mission and goals? If yes, in what ways? If no, what's preventing the changes you would like to see?

I hardly need to speak to the challenges facing Waterspirit and other water-protectors worldwide. They are massive, and they are many. Still, even as we confront unprecedented and difficult times, I hold onto a cautious, dark hope. As I write, COVID-19 is just beginning to ravage the United States. Within the span of a week, my country went from business-as-usual to a complete interruption of the normal. This illustrates society's *potential*

for rapid collective action in favor of the common good. Lack of political will—driven, frankly, by greed—is the greatest impediment to the changes we need in order for life to flourish in the long-term. Yet, I take to heart *Laudato Si's* assertion that injustice is not invincible. Even as climate change progresses, we are witnessing greater global awareness of it and a growing movement toward mitigation. People are waking up; the personal healing is happening, and it is leading to large-scale change. This transformation must continue to occur in order for these changes to be lasting.

**LP:** Tell us a little about how your work at the United Nations is affecting what you do at Waterspirit. What does Waterspirit bring to the table at the UN?

I had the opportunity to participate in the preliminary meetings of the 2020 UN Ocean Conference, held at UN headquarters in New York City. I felt deeply uncomfortable to be an American citizen while listening to our delegate undermine the proceedings. Yet, it was heartening to hear the near consensus of the international community saying that we have to solve ecological problems with an ecological mindset. Everything is interconnected—or, as Pope Francis might say, ecology is integral. We cannot talk about solving ocean acidification without addressing climate change. We cannot address ocean pollution without addressing the land-based activities that lead to that pollution. Solutions must be integrated and multifaceted. Most of the world is speaking the same language, and that gives me some hope.

At the United Nations, Waterspirit brings a spiritual and moral perspective that is not always voiced. (At the Ocean Conference meetings, two delegates did mention the oceans' spiritual

importance in addition to the other ways humans value them.) We are able to join with other partners to amplify needed action, as we did by signing onto the *Rise Up: A Blue Call to Action* document at the conference. We also help connect the hyperlocal to the global, always asking pointed questions about how top-down solutions might truly impact people at the grassroots level. Waterspirit's daily work benefits from this international perspective as we bear in mind that we are part of a larger global movement. Waterspirit is ultimately a drop in the bucket, but everyone else is adding their drops, too.

**LP:** Lastly, what is your vision of a global revolution of the heart in terms of water/climate?

A revolution of the heart takes us beyond the harmful systems that currently dominate the planet. Left unexamined, they will perpetuate injustice until the moment humanity causes its own extinction. As we transform ourselves and our systems, we will inevitably balance the health of the climate and Earth's land and waters. This balance is Earth's true self—it is our true self—and the closer we come to that balance, the more we open ourselves to grace. A revolution of the heart leads to peace through justice, to health through reconnection, to full spiritual realization through ecological balance.

Please join us online for meditations, seasonal celebrations and more at [www.waterspirit.org](http://www.waterspirit.org).

