

Balancing on Water

LAUREN HINSON

The Greek philosopher Empedocles said, “Existing things have no nature – only a mixing and separating of what has been mixed. Nature is a name given by human beings.”

Growing up, I was told time and time again “don’t whine”, “be tough”, “always be honest”, “never be afraid of the unknown”, and “balance is the key to everything”. I remember hearing that last phrase so much that I would recite my dad’s balance lecture before he could even form the word ‘balance’. When I was young, the moral of his balance theory seemed simple: a balanced life meant balancing hard work and play. As I got older, the simple idea of balance began to grow with me. Balance started to rationalize pain, loss, death, and everything that happened undeservingly and seemingly unpreventably. I thought that without pain I’d have no way to define happiness, hope, and love. In my mind, this was the work of balance. Balance was the uncontrollable force that gave life and death meaning, and it was a magical force that had some control over my life for my own good. Balance felt like God. Now, I can no longer rationalize the discomfort I feel as an act of balance. Living paycheck to paycheck is not balance; gun violence is not balance; sea-level rise is not balance; pollution is not balance; unpayable medical bills are not balance; violence against women is not balance; environmental and systemic racism is not balance; reliance on fossil fuels is not balance; neocolonialism is not balance; extinction is not balance. Balance must not be defined as the sacrifices we have the PRIVILEGE of making to continue a destructive way of life. I will not accept the pain and loss inflicted by an extractive economy obsessed with the idea of “development” as a contribution to world-wide balance that allows me to watch reality television at 3am. I don’t want balance to be a trade-off. The misinterpretation of balance justifies the fundamentals of capitalism and its

impacts on the world. Balance cannot continue to be defined as a game of tug and war with the few strongest people on one side and the weaker majority on the other. Someone has to fall, and when that happens, not even this “balance” will remain.

My dad still lectures me about balance in our cozy home that is about 500 feet away from the shore of the crystal coast. He says balance is seeing all sides, and he mainly uses it now when we talk about politics. He rationalizes climate change and fossil fuel use with balance. I know balance is not this- in fact, it is so much more encompassing, extending beyond just human interactions. Humans are not the exception of balance, balance cannot just reside in human society. Balance reaches further than the rationalization of coastal habitat destruction for an economic boost. Balance reaches to the beach we call home, the water, the animals, the plants, and every small creature in between.

I grew up with the ocean. The ocean began to feel more like a close relative as I grew older; I loved it, I feared it, and I respected the hell out of it. The love I have for the water is why I cry for coral. When I cry for coral, I’m saying sorry, and not just to the coral but to the sponges, loggerheads, blue tang, manta rays, humpback whales, sea lions, sea anemones, albatrosses, and to every single creature on earth. We are all intrinsically connected to the impacts that coral bleaching, overfishing, infrastructure, pollution, fossil fuel extraction, and ocean acidification have on the ocean. Oceans do some much for Earth and all living organisms:

- The ocean produces over half of the world’s oxygen and stores 50 times more carbon dioxide than our atmosphere (National Ocean Services, (n.d.)).
- The ocean regulates the climate and weather patterns by transferring heat from the equator to the poles, literally balancing our climate (National Ocean Services, (n.d.)).

- The ocean is a very important part of the water cycle. The ocean contributes to wind, thunderstorms, hurricanes, and rain. They help to produce the monsoon rains that millions of people rely on.
- The ocean hosts 80% of the Earth's biodiversity and provides fish as the primary protein source for 3 billion people in the world (*7 reasons why we need to act now to #SaveOurOcean*. (n.d.)) (Sustainable Seafood, (n.d.)).
- Coral reefs, mangroves, sea grass, and sand dunes are essential barriers to hurricanes and other weather events (*7 reasons why we need to act now to #SaveOurOcean*. (n.d.)).
- Many medications rely on the ocean and its biodiversity; Ingredients that fight cancer, arthritis, Alzheimer's disease, and heart disease all come from the ocean (*7 reasons why we need to act now to #SaveOurOcean*. (n.d.)).
- The ocean is an essential form of transportation, recreation, and provides many people with jobs.
- The ocean also influences well-being, reduces anxiety and contributes to a positive mental health (*7 reasons why we need to act now to #SaveOurOcean*. (n.d.)).
- The ocean is BEAUTIFUL AND DESERVING OF LIFE!

The benefits of the ocean are just one part of the puzzle. We are also connected to any harm inflicted on the ocean and the effects of the inflicted harm. One issue I'm particularly passionate about concerning the ocean is coral bleaching. Coral reefs are one of the most threatened ecosystems on Earth. 75 percent of global reefs were under bleaching-level heat stress and 30 percent suffered mortality level stress from 2014-2017 in the third global bleaching event (NOAA, n.d.). If we continue with business as usual, the Great Barrier reef will rapidly decline

to only 3% coral cover by the year 2050 (Wolff, 2018). Anthropogenic related emissions from the burning of fossil fuels, the production of industrial products, raising livestock, fertilizing crops, and deforestation have all contributed to coral bleaching. As greenhouse gas emissions continue to impact the climate, mass coral bleaching events and infectious disease outbreaks will become extremely common. Additionally, when the ocean absorbs unnatural amounts of carbon dioxide, ocean acidification occurs, which decreases pH levels in the ocean causing a reduction in calcification rates in reef-building and reef-associated organisms.

At first glance, coral may look like rocks. However, up close they are a living skin of tentacled polyps. Each polyp is anchored at its base by a calcium carbonate skeleton, sitting over skeletons of generations of polyps-past. By limiting balance to only humans, we are ignoring not only the sentience of other plants and animals, but disconnecting and destroying past, present, and future generations of life. Coral and algae have a symbiotic relationship: the algae uses sunlight to make sugar for the coral in exchange for carbon for photosynthesis and some nitrogen from the coral host. Corals bleach when heat stress disrupts their relationship with symbiotic algae, rejecting its colorful algae. “Bleaching can kill a coral, starving it to death, unless conditions normalize and the algae return.” Relationships are not just important for the exchange of goods and services, but for the health of the entire system. To mend the relationship between coral and algae, we have to look critically at our own relationship with ourselves, each other, and the environment (McDermott, 2020).

I still feel at peace in the water. By sinking to the bottom and closing my eyes, I can feel myself drift anyway from the catastrophic anthropocene and into existence within every existence outside of myself. My identity becomes defined by the connections I feel with

everything around me. In the water I feel the fragile yet resilient balance between everything.

In many cultures, water is more than just a carbon sink or money faucet. Rather, water symbolizes rebirth, purification, clarity, and life. The chant of the Standing Rock Sioux, *Mni Wiconi*, “water is life”, speaks to the complexity and interconnection of water into our lives. The access to water is life in the literal sense of its necessity to the functions of the human body but also because of its interconnections with social and environmental liberation. The Dakota Access Pipeline is an example of complete disrespect for people, the environment, and the water itself. The Missouri river holds water, knowledge, and meaning for many people, plants, and animals. In *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate*, Naomi Klein says, “The planet’s largest and most dangerous unexploded carbon bombs lie beneath lands and waters to which Indigenous peoples have legitimate legal claims” (Klein, N. 2014). The liberation, respect, equity, and love that needs to be restored to Indigenous peoples is connected to the liberation, respect, and love of water. Creating meaningful relationships with people, especially Indigenous people, will work against the environmental and societal imbalance we now face. Recognizing, respecting, and listening to other forms of knowledge, such as indigenous knowledge, provides a pathway for the realization of connection between people and the environment. This is why social issues intersect with the imbalance we currently face, and we are essential in the restoration of balance.

Living in an imbalanced society makes it impossible for me to feel wholeness with the world around me. Western society has been in denial of our connections to the ecosystems that we have taken from, and this fact has caused the imbalance I feel. Every living thing thrives through a balance in the relationships between species, ecosystems, resources, and evolution. In

a delusional act of progress, some humans have inched further away from the connections that hold meaning, respect, and balance. Capitalism has normalized the disconnection between humans and the rest of the world, redefining this disconnection as what seems like a human-centered balance. In reality, capitalism doesn't prioritize human life, but money. With this understanding of capitalism, human-centered balance is not human-centered at all- it is a money-centered balance. Money-centered balance levels its scales by making crucial sacrifices from our existence.

Money-centered balance casually takes without giving back, as if the earth is a limitless slab of resources existing only for human benefit. Money-centered balance has been sneaky, slowly obtaining the acceptance of the masses, to create a false sense of comfort. Fortunately, the climate crisis has brought to light the true discomfort and imbalance caused by capitalism. Restoring balance will not be easy, but it is essential, and the first step is to restore relationships. Respect and honor the relationships you rely on, find love and fight in them. No one can do this alone and no one should have to. Relationships are powerful, replenishing, and soul-centered.

I cannot cry for the coral anymore.

Crying is just the beginning,

An acknowledgement.

A handshake.

A hug.

Respecting coral is listening.

Honoring coral is admitting you were wrong.

Falling in love with coral is discovering your connections.

Loving coral is reframing your existence to center the relationship you have with coral.

Finding meaning in our reliance on each other broadens our existence to include all the amazing and overlooked things around us. Symbiotic relationships foster mutual-aid, respect, and love. Restoring our relationships with the whole environment is essential. Our relationships with people, animals, plants, and ecosystems interconnect and cannot thrive without the respect, recognition, and love that's been absent for so long in the workings of capitalism. Water is the connector of all life and it acknowledges the fluid-like mixing and transparency of all living things that come with meaning and balance, and is defined by relationships- not money.

Citations

- 7 reasons why we need to act now to #SaveOurOcean*. (n.d.). Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. Retrieved April 29, 2021, from <http://www.fao.org/zhc/detail-events/en/c/846698/#:~:text=Oceans%20are%20an%20important%20source,to%20about%203%20billion%20people.&text=Over%2090%25%20of%20the%20additional,is%20stored%20in%20the%20Oceans>.
- Klein, N. (2014). *This Changes Everything: Capitalism Vs. The Climate*. Alfred A. Knopf Canada. <https://mronline.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Naomi20Klein20-20This20Changes20Everything.pdf>
- McDermott, A. (2020). A microscopic mystery at the heart of mass-coral bleaching. *Inner Workings*. <https://www.pnas.org/content/pnas/117/5/2232.full.pdf>
- National Ocean Service. (n.d.). *Why should we care about the ocean?* NOAA. <https://oceanservice.noaa.gov/facts/why-care-about-ocean.html#:~:text=The%20air%20we%20breathe%3A%20The,our%20climate%20and%20weather%20patterns>.
- NOAA. (n.d.). *Fast Facts: Coral Reefs*. Office of Coastal Management: NOAA. <https://coast.noaa.gov/states/fast-facts/coral-reefs.html>
- Sustainable Seafood*. (n.d.). World Wide Fund for Nature. Retrieved April 29, 2021, from <https://www.worldwildlife.org/industries/sustainable-seafood#:~:text=As%20the%20largest%20traded%20food,a%20primary%20source%20of%20protein>.
- Wolff, N., et al. (2018). Vulnerability of the Great Barrier Reef to climate change and local pressures. Wiley Online Library. https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/gcb.14043?casa_token=BgkKxu4os5kAAAA%3A1q-d6Fs7jo0f5idoAVx63OyfrKMU43ose-tJBfhL-u4xqGIhjhJ60kUnFHLjSbnLecjCIDPa4Id6mGMU