

Foreword

By Sarah Anne Edwards, PhD, LCSW

If you're reading this book you already know we're living in perilous times. By now most people are waking up to that fact. Even President Obama has warned us that difficult times lie ahead. Just days before taking office when asked if sacrifice will be required of everyone, Obama told the nation, "Everyone is going to have to give. Everybody's going to have to have some skin in the game."

But even recognizing that times are tough, chances are reading this book will feel overwhelming and unsettling at times. I know it has been for me and I've been studying, writing, and teaching about the implications of such threats as peak oil, climate change, and economic collapse over half a decade. But I'd like to suggest that we welcome whatever feelings of overwhelm or disquiet this book may stir in us, because like the medicine our mothers gave us as children, they will make us better.

I say this because Carolyn is not one to beat around the bush. Her focus is not on statistics, charts, and data demonstrating the factual realities of our economic situation. There are ample books with such information. Most of them touch lightly on the focus of this book, firmly acknowledging its importance, but skittering on to the facts.

In *Peak Everything*, for example, Richard Heinberg emphasizes that “Much of the human impact (of peak oil and climate change) will be measurable in economic terms; however, individual and collective psychological effects will perhaps be of equal and often greater significance.” Having observed the effects economic collapse of the USSR in the 1990’s, Dmitry Orlov agrees. In *Reinventing Collapse*, he writes, “Economic collapse is about the worst time for someone to suffer a nervous breakdown, yet this is what often happens.”

Fact is, the future is going to be hard to swallow, not only presenting practical day-to-day challenges but deeply impacting our emotional and spiritual lives. In *Sacred Demise* Carolyn doesn’t just touch on this fact. She dares to make it the sole focus of our attention, reaching far beneath the statistic, charts, and generalizations about their implications and delving deeply into the heart and soul of the inner traumas and turmoil we will most likely encounter. She zeroes right in on the very places we want to run away from, ignore, and rationalize, including the profound loss we will feel. This naked honesty about such matters is only the context of the book, not its purpose. This is not a doom and gloom book. It’s about looking squarely at the reality of our circumstances, as incomprehensible and uncomfortable as they may be, and exploring the potential for personal growth, transformation, and resurrection.

By openly sharing her personal experiences and the wisdom, poetry, questions, and activities included in the book, she draws upon herself to understand and grow from our circumstances by infusing them with compassion. Carolyn makes us feel safe venturing into the tender, vulnerable places.

She says let's look straight on at what we're facing and allow it to be a grand teaching to deepen our understanding of life and our place in it. While the reality of what we are dealing with may be overwhelming when seen with such stark honesty, isn't that what we yearn for? Isn't the failure to talk together in this way what unsettles us most? Like the young child whose parents won't talk about a life-threatening illness that's befallen their household or the child who on the way to the dentist is told "It won't hurt at bit," we don't want to be blindsided by realities that could be opportunities instead to prepare ourselves and make ourselves strong and capable.

After all, what is being overwhelmed but a just fast flowing river of experience we need to catch our breath for; a rug pulled out from beneath our feet to get up from, an unexpected encounter we can surprise ourselves with by responding to aptly? Chances are as you read on page-by-page you will begin to feel oddly relieved. You'll be getting your bearings in a reality that at first seems foreign and frightening but gradually reveals itself as a truth you have long known already.

Certainly that has been true for me. From the time I was a small child I sensed there was something very wrong with how things work in our human-made world. I spent many hours out of doors where everything seemed to make sense, but as I matured I concluded there must be some flaw within myself that was preventing me from understanding what everyone else seemed to grasp so easily, that our culture works to our best interest even if it appears otherwise. With that mind I undertook the arduous task of molding myself into what was expected of me hoping at some point everything would fall into place as promised.

It was not until I entered the ecopsychology PhD program that I came to see how terribly disconnected, distorted, and dysfunctional our human world has become; how tragically separated we've become from the natural world we are innately part of. As I began to learn from nature how naturally other life forms function, I was heartened by my four years in which I had the pleasure of experiencing how naturally and organically life could unfold. Oh, surely not without challenge or discomfort, but like riding down that fast-flowing river. At times it's surging furiously; at other times it's bubbling along gently. But it's always ever-changing and engaging, always keeping me on my toes, yet something perfectly natural I could navigate as long as I paid attention.

"Ah, ha!" I concluded, at last I will know how to live in our world! When I complete the program I will return to the "normal world" and just continue

living in accord with nature's ways. But that was not to be. Returning to the "normal world" was one of the most difficult experiences of my life. My short-lived, free-flowing journey through life ran smack dab into a massive cultural dam of expectations and limitations as difficult for us to escape from as it is for any river to circumvent the manmade dams we've constructed to divert and contain.

This is when I realized fully how virtually impossible it is to function naturally and healthfully within the demands of our growth-oriented, consumer-driven, materialistic, and hierarchical culture. But that's the world that's crumbling now. While we may enjoy many of its conveniences and comforts, or at least have the promise of enjoying them, we also know the price we pay to pursue and maintain them is high. The stress, the long hours, the fast pace, the pressure, the fatigue, and the demands on our time by tasks far different from those we'd prefer. Our way of life is not only wearing down the natural world, it's also wearing down our psychic and our physical well-being. No matter how many possessions we garner or how much money we make, there is never enough to quell our yearning for a greater sense of peace, potency, normalcy, and well-being.

Granted, the difficulties we're facing will not bring us this kind of well-being anytime soon. Probably anything but, at first, because few of us are prepared mentally or spiritually for the onslaught of feelings, the tide of emotions, the rush of the unexpected that is engulfing us. After all, the world

that anchors our daily lives now is collapsing right along with the dam upon which our current way of life is built. We don't know if we'll make it to the bottom of the spillway as the dam cracks and breaks away. Assuredly some of us won't. Even if we do, there is no guaranteed, made-to-order world awaiting us on the river once it has burst forth from the dam. For sure there will be no welcoming "comfort inns" along the shore. We're uncertain what the unleashed river of our life will look like or if we will have the knowledge, skills, and acumen to survive in it.

But life, death, mystery, uncertainty, paradox, and danger are all part of the natural world we inhabit. As Henry David Thoreau discovered and expressed so aptly after abandoning his attempt to climb Maine's Mt. Katahdin, there is in nature "a force not bound to be kind to man, an awesome, primal force of evolving matter-in-motion," a force, I might add, that has proven to be beyond our control to manipulate and mould to our desire. This simple insight is not easily accepted in our culture where we learn that anything we believe, we can achieve, and it is something Carolyn invites us to address before it's too late.

Sacred Demise is an opportunity to do the emotional and spiritual preparation we need to be present, awake, and responsive in awesome circumstances we can't control or prevent. Each chapter invites us to delve deeper into ourselves, deeper into who we are and how we fit into the natural world outside our roles in a crumbling system. From that blatantly honest,

deep place of our hearts and souls we can begin to *find* our way to a more natural way of life and glimpse how the grand unleashing of the waters constrained behind our current way of life could bring us the peace, potency, normalcy, and well-being we yearn for.

The operative word in this possibility is *find*. Throughout *Sacred Demise*, Carolyn refers to many insights from Viktor Frankl, the Austrian neurologist, psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor who wrote in *Man's Search for Meaning* of his experiences in the Nazi death camps. Some years ago I had the honor and pleasure of interviewing Frankl. His rather stern rebuke of a question I raised left me with an enigma I spent many years wondering about. Not until midway through my ecopsychology program and many learning experiences in nature did I finally understand what Frankl was getting at and why he corrected me so sharply. I had made an innocent error common to our culture, an error we all need to correct to be prepared mentally and emotionally for the years ahead.

As I began to ask how we create meaning in our lives, Frankl interrupted me abruptly, "Not *create* meaning, *find* meaning." And so it is in the adventure Carolyn invites us to undertake in *Sacred Demise*. The pages that follow are an invitation to *find* meaning in a time of collapse so that when our preconceived and manufactured dreams for how we'd like things will often no longer be relevant, it needn't be also the end of joy and value. This is a worthy task because only from a place of such personal meaning can we build

new lives along life's free-flowing river, if not for ourselves then at least for those who come after us.

Sarah Anne Edwards, LCSW, PhD Ecopsychologist, provides continuing education courses for helping professionals through the Pine Mountain Institute and directs Let's Live Local, a non-profit organization working to build local resilience. She's the co-author of *Middle-Class Lifeboat*, and a trainer for the US Transition Initiatives Network.