

From Evening Thoughts
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Earth as Sacred Community

The magnitude of the ecological crisis of our times is such that we are presently terminating the Cenozoic era of Earth's development and entering into the Ecozoic phase of the Earth process. The Cenozoic has been the period of the expansion of life in the full brilliance of its expression, but this expansion of the life systems of Earth is being terminated. This will affect all our human institutions and professions that were appropriate to the Cenozoic era. They must now undergo a transformation if they are to be integral with the new period in the historical evolution of the planet. The transformation required is a transformation from an anthropocentric norm of reality and value to a biocentric or geocentric norm. This will affect every aspect of our human thought and action. It will affect language, religion, morality, economics, education, science, technology, and medicine.

biocentric
← norm

In our discussion of sacred community, we need to understand that in all our activities the Earth is primary, the human is derivative. The Earth is our primary community. Indeed, all particular modes of Earthly being exist by virtue of their role within this community.

Failing to recognize this basic relationship, industrial society seeks to subordinate the entire Earth to its own concerns, with little regard for the consequences for the integrity of the planet. This subjugation of the primary functions of the Earth to the limited concerns of the human can be observed in all our professions and institutions.

This is certainly true for economics. Both in our great corporations—in, for example, the automobile industry; the petrochemical

industries; and the construction industry that builds roads, housing development projects, shopping malls, and parking lots—and among public utilities, we find little concern for the well-being of the natural world. Nor in the teaching of economics is there any significant reference to the remarkable economics of the Earth, whereby the vast numbers of living species provide habitat and nourishment for each other in an ever-renewing cycle of seasonal transformations. Our imposition upon the natural world is reaching a certain extreme moment in the case of contemporary drift-net fishing in the great oceans of the world. These fine-meshed nets, thirty to fifty miles long and forty feet deep, draw up from the sea every living being within their range. Over five hundred such nets are used daily by boats from Japan, Korea, Taiwan, and other nations. Even in the Mediterranean, drift nets are being used, with obvious consequences that include the extinction of marine life and, ultimately, diminishment of human life. Those who criticize this kind of industrial fishing now call these nets “walls of death.”

That such destruction is possible, and that there has been great difficulty in ending these practices, can be traced, to a large extent, to our sense of governance. We have established our human governance with little regard for the need to integrate it with the functional order of the planet itself. Just as the human derives from the Earth, so the validity of our governance in its every aspect derives from the ecosystems of the Earth.

Not only have we failed to establish our legal system in accord with the ecosystems whereby the Earth rules itself, we have established legal structures that leave the Earth defenseless against the savage assaults by its human inhabitants and their corporate embodiment.

We are extremely sensitive as regards human rights. Yet the question of Earth rights seldom enters into our conscious minds. We invade the habitat of other species on the supposition that humans have rights to habitat unlimited by the rights of other species. Our

machines are built to tear the Earth apart in our construction projects. Our off-road vehicles tear up the natural world for ephemeral human excitement. Our failure to establish some acceptable inter-species legal structures is contributing to the extinction of species around the planet. This will continue until we expand our democracy into a biocracy, under which humans will be sensitive to the needs of the larger Earth community.

This inability to take the integral functioning of the Earth into consideration when we conduct human affairs can be observed even in the medical profession, with its very limited concern for the integral functioning of the larger life community within which we exist. The lack of concern in the medical profession for the chemical balance and the integral functioning of the biosystems of the Earth is driving us ever more deeply into technological forms of medical practice to counterbalance the deleterious influences on human health derived from the toxic elements in the environment. There is little awareness, apparently, that the health of the planet is primary while human health is derivative. We cannot have well people on a sick planet. Our efforts to sustain human life by increasingly artificial methods may mitigate the immediate consequences of the present situation, but it is doubtful that they will long sustain either the physical or the psychic vigor of the human community.

Humans as a planetary presence are currently terminating the Cenozoic era of Earth history and entering the Ecozoic era. This geological shift is marked by the fact that the sixth extinction spasm is occurring, and it is of our own making. This is the largest transition in Earth history since the end of the dinosaurs 65 million years ago. The survival of other species and the vitality of human affairs will depend on our capacity to adapt to this transition. Above all, this entry into the Ecozoic era is the entry into the period of the Earth community with a new sense of its sacred dimension. Just as traditional societies entered into the sacred liturgy of the natural world expressed in the sequence of cosmological transformations throughout the seasons of

the year, so now we are in the process of rediscovering the sacred dimension of the great Earth community in its stupendous unfolding over these past billions of years.

Presently, those of us who are heirs to the biblical tradition are trying to be religious in accordance with written scriptures and covenant relations with the divine based on a juridic model. This can be effective only as long as it functions within the awesome awakening to the divine evoked by our experience of the natural world. We become religious by fulfilling our role within the larger community of the universe itself. The natural world is both the primary source of religious understanding and the primary religious community. In the natural world, we discover the mysterious power whence all things come into being. In humans this religious community reflects on and celebrates itself and its numinous origins in a special mode of conscious self-awareness.

Rather than accord with these vast cosmic forces in the natural rhythms of their expression, especially in the biosystems of the planet, we have, in recent centuries, been subverting these forces. We have long been imposing our mechanistic patterns on these biosystems, forcing the natural rhythms of the Earth to accord with our accelerated demands. When organic processes are too slow or too limited in bringing forth their produce, we force the growth through chemical processes that increase the volume of production, even though the nourishing quality of the product is inferior and the fertility of the land diminished. In a multitude of different ways, we seek to subdue the Earth to our own ephemeral purposes, considering this the proper human relationship to the natural world.

Because of this distortion in our thinking, we are carrying out what may be one of the most devastating assaults ever on the Earth in more than 4 billion years of life on this planet. That such devastation is taking place is evident from the writings of Norman Myers, an environmental scientist at Oxford University with exceptional competence in understanding the larger life systems of the planet.

In a conference called by the National Academy of Sciences and the Smithsonian Institution in 1986, he stated that we are likely "bringing about the greatest reduction of the diversity and abundance of life on Earth since the first flickerings of life on Earth some 4 billion years ago." E. O. Wilson of Harvard University estimated that we are presently extinguishing some ten thousand species annually, and that this rate is increasing. In this same conference, Paul Ehrlich told us that through our industrial civilization we are likely producing the conditions of a nuclear winter.

Something much greater is happening than is generally realized. This is something more than the "end of the Enlightenment" as is sometimes suggested. It is something more than a parallel with the fall of Rome. It is something more than the demise of Western civilization. It is a transition greater than any historical transition that has ever taken place in human affairs. For this is a deleterious change not simply in human social order or cultural expression. It is a change in the very chemistry of the planet that makes life possible. It is a change in the biosystems of the planet. It is a change in the geological structure of the planet.

Not simply the human future is involved. The future of every living being on the planet is at issue. The fate of the planet itself in its most profound physical and psychic structure is being determined. We are witnessing nothing less than the dissolution of the planet Earth and all its living systems in consequence of this strange distortion of our human role in the Earth process that has emerged from within our modern Western world, which was itself born out of a biblical-classical matrix.

Here we might observe that our Western religious institutions are strangely indifferent to what is happening. This indifference arises, apparently, as a result of excessive concern for redemptive processes out of this world—which is considered to be seductive—rather than integration within this world considered to be sacred. There seems to be little realization that the disintegration of the natural world is the

magnitude
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destruction of the primordial self-manifestation of the divine. The very existence of religion is threatened in proportion as the splendor of the natural world is diminished. We have a magnificent sense of the divine because we live in such a resplendent world. If we lived on the moon, our sense of the divine would be as dull as the lunar landscape.

Even when we try to bring religious influence to bear on these issues, we find that our religious traditions have little relevance to what is happening. Our Western religions exist in a different world, a world of covenant relations with the divine, a world little concerned with the natural environment or with the Earth community. Our sacred community is seen primarily as one concerned with human-divine relations, with little attraction toward a shared community existence within the larger world of the living. Our iconoclasm is such that we can hardly think of ourselves within a multispecies community or consider that this community of the natural world is the primary locus for the meeting of the divine and the human.

One study done at Yale University found that the more extensively people participate in religious activities, the less likely they are to be concerned with the natural world. The pathos of the human, described so extensively in the prophetic writings, seems to exhaust our religious energies. Religious attention is directed toward moral conduct, social injustice, pietistic practices, and interior meditation experiences.

Valid as these activities might be, they are themselves frustrated at present because the primary reorientation of our society toward a more integral relation with the Earth is not taking place. Religion, rather than supplying the needed cultural therapy, is in need of a profound rethinking of itself and its role in Earthly affairs. This requires that we humans reflect on our present situation to understand how it has come about, why we are so incompetent in our efforts to mitigate the damage being done, and how we might foster a profound Earth renewal.

We are at the end of the Cenozoic era in the biological history of the Earth and moving into the beginning of the Ecozoic. If this integral Earth community is to emerge, however, the entire array of our professions and institutions must accept the larger Earth community as our primary source of reality and value and the human as derivative from, and as fulfilling a unique role within, this community. Within this context our various professions and institutions should even now be establishing their new patterns of authenticity and effectiveness. It is a moment of supreme challenge, since the various spheres that constitute the macrophase structure of the Earth (the land sphere, the air sphere, the water sphere, the life sphere) are all presently imperiled in their most basic functioning.

Some 65 million years ago the Cenozoic era began, the period when life as we know it took shape. During the Cenozoic the life systems of Earth brought forth their most entrancing beauty. This was the period of flowers in their unnumbered variety and in all their gorgeous colors and fantastic shapes. A wildly creative period of divine fantasy and extravagant play. This was the period of music, of winds through the trees, the call of the mockingbird, the song of the whales in the sea; this period saw the flight of the osprey, the colorful patterns on the wings of the butterfly, the fireflies in the evening.

The early human types appeared during the Ice Ages of the last 1.8 million years, during a period sometimes referred to as the Pleistocene—a supremely lyrical moment when humans first emerged, quietly, somewhere on the edge of the savanna in Africa, whence they later spread into the Eurasian continent. From these early hominid types came our own ancestors some sixty thousand years ago, with developed speech, with symbolic language, with skills in toolmaking, with extended family communities and the capacity for song and dance and elaborate ritual within the sacred community of the entire natural world.

Then, some ten thousand years ago, this community emerged into the Neolithic period, during which it developed advanced skills

for social structures, for weaving and pottery, for domestication of wheat and rice and chickens and pigs and cattle and horses and reindeer herds. Above all this was the period of village beginnings. Out of this village context came the early sacred cities of the world, in Sumer and Egypt.

A pervasive religious rapport with the spirit powers of the natural world developed. The gods and goddesses were born in the human mind as expressions of those ultimate creative sources of existence. Ritual enabled humans to enter into the grand liturgy of the universe itself. Seasonal renewal ceremonies brought humans into the rhythms of the solar cycle. Religious structures were set on coordinates identified with the positions of the various heavenly bodies.

This was a period of wonder and creativity that was to shape the human future until our times. A remarkable continuity existed at this period throughout the entire realm of existence. The human experienced itself in integral relationship with the surrounding forces of the universe. Human activities were modeled on the functioning of the larger community of life. Everything possessed its own life principle, its own subjective mode of self-expression. Humans and animals and plants and all natural phenomena were integral within the larger community. There was no "it" in our sense of the word. Every being and every phenomenon was experienced as a "thou."

This continuity between the human and the cosmic was experienced also in the Chinese world, where the residence of the emperor was so arranged as to conform to the cardinal directions of the universe. Human activities throughout the year were coordinated with the cycle of the seasons. The clothes worn by members of the court, the music, the colors, the rituals were all carefully coordinated with the seasonal sequence. If summer music was played in the winter, then the entire cosmic order was considered to be disrupted. The supreme achievement of the human personality in this context was to experience one's own being as one body with heaven and Earth and the myriad things.

This continuity of the human with the natural world in a single sacred community can be appreciated in the experience of Black Elk, a Lakota Indian. When he was nine years old, he experienced an elaborate vision culminating in a vast cosmic dance evoked by the song of the black stallion seen in the heavens: "There was nothing that did not hear, and it was more beautiful than anything can be. It was so beautiful that nothing anywhere could keep from dancing. The virgins danced, and all the circled horses. The leaves on the trees, the grasses on the hills and in the valleys, the waters in the creeks and in the rivers and the lakes, the four-legged and the two-legged and the wings of the air—all danced together to the music of the stallion's song."

To alter this primordial sense of continuity throughout the universe seems to have been the basic purpose of biblical revelation. Within the biblical context, the continuity of divine presence with the natural world was altered by establishing the divine as a transcendent personality creating a world entirely distinct from itself. In addition, the continuity of the divine with the human was altered by the establishment of a covenant relationship based on a juridic model. The continuity between the human community and the natural world was altered by identifying the human as a spiritual being in contrast to all other beings. Only the human really belonged to the sacred community of the redeemed. The previous sense of a multi-species community was diminished.

These discontinuities became exaggerated over the centuries, especially through emphasis on the personal redemptive experience communicated to the human, not a redemption out of our autististic status into a more abundant life of intimacy with the Earthly community, but redemption of an elect people into a trans-Earthly divine kingdom. Our true home, our true community, was not in this world.

The humanist traditions that come down to us through the classical writings of the Greco-Roman world, apart from those of the

Stoics, supported this alienation. This is evident in their emphasis on human grandeur considered to be distinct from the wilderness world and opposed to any sense of multispecies community. This "arrogance of humanism," as David Ehrenfeld termed it, alienated Western society from both its religious heritage and its intimacy with the natural world.

Whatever the human gains in these Western religious and cultural developments, the Earth in its most essential functioning has been profoundly disturbed by these developments. But even while we indicate the role of our Western biblical-classical traditions in bringing about deterioration within the larger Earth community, we must note that this is an intensification of even earlier stresses upon the Earth: the stresses caused by the constant increase of its human occupants, especially since the Neolithic period; the clearing of woodlands; the development of agriculture; the invention of the plow; and the domestication of animals. Even evidence from Paleolithic times indicates a significant deleterious human impact on some of the larger animal species.

From these observations we can say that establishing a mutually enhancing human presence upon the Earth has been a difficulty from the late Paleolithic until the present. Also, we can say that the biblical-Christian-classical tradition has intensified this alienation from the natural world and has set up conditions that have permitted extensive plundering of the Earth for human use. As regards our own specifically Western responsibilities, we must note that, although we have developed a moral teaching concerned with suicide, homicide, and genocide, we have developed no effective teachings concerned with biocide, the killing of the life systems of the Earth, or geocide, the killing of the Earth itself.

Realizing that there is something terribly wrong in our relations with the natural world, our religious traditions have recently begun putting special emphasis on the concept of stewardship as the primary relationship between the human community and the natural

world. This concept of stewardship is derived from biblical statements concerning human dominion over the Earth and all its living creatures. To many religious people, this seems quite adequate as a basic orientation toward the natural world. To others, stewardship itself is the origin of our present evils. There is no way in which we can care for the natural world or improve on the genius of nature. It would be difficult to discover any human improvements that have ultimately been beneficial to the natural life systems of the Earth, although we can on occasion bring about a measure of healing to the damage that we have caused.

Yet it should not be said that stewardship exhausts Christian concern for the world about us. There is a profound Christian awareness that the natural world is itself a manifestation of the divine. This has led to the concept of revelation being contained in two scriptures: one the scriptures of the natural world, the other the scriptures of the Bible. While this sense of the natural world as revelatory has been severely diminished since the sixteenth century, with the discovery of printing and the consequent emphasis on the written word, it is still available in the tradition itself. If more fully developed, this could lead to a more effective concern for the survival of the planet.

However, these Christian or classical humanist orientations cannot alone support the new effort of understanding or provide the energy needed in this transition in our sense of sacred community from the Cenozoic to the emerging Ecozoic era in Earth history. The main reason for this is that our religious traditions were developed in a world characterized by a spatial mode of consciousness. In this mode of consciousness, the universe is experienced as secure and determined in its essential form, although we experience on Earth a seasonal renewal. Our religious liturgies are extensively based on this sense of an ever-renewing sequence of change. Even though there did exist a continuing irreversible historical development in the Divine Kingdom, this was essentially a spiritual transformation of the human world in an abiding natural world.

Modern humans are committed to a time-developmental mode of consciousness, in contrast to a spatial mode of consciousness. Since Darwin, humans have experienced the universe not simply as cosmos but as cosmogenesis, as changing and unfolding. Everything in the universe is experienced in the unceasing flow of cosmological or historical time. Whereas time is ever renewable in spatial consciousness, time is irreversible in a developmental mode of consciousness.

In a developmental mode of consciousness—in contrast to the spatial mode of consciousness—we know less by intuition than by empirical observation, in quantitative as well as qualitative terms, and by acquaintance with the sequence of transformations whereby the universe has attained its present structure and modes of functioning. It is not sufficient for us to receive mythic stories of the universe, such as those that have come down to us through traditional societies, although these are a necessity both for ourselves and for other peoples and generations.

Our basic story, however, is quite different. It is upon this story known through empirical observation that we must move into the future. The difficulty with the story of the universe, as this is known to us through recent centuries of intense observation and analysis, is that it has generally been told in an inadequate way, as simply physical in form and random in process. Insofar as it goes, this scientific presentation of the universe has achieved a certain dazzling success. Yet the materialistic interpretation generally given to the scientific data has become progressively less adequate.

The entire scientific process was severely affected by Werner Heisenberg's discovery in the 1920s that the reality known is profoundly affected by the knowing subject, that our knowledge of the universe never ultimately attains the so-called objective world in any absolute sense. Knowing is a communion of subjects rather than a simple subject-object relationship.

Several other considerations have also affected our overly facile scientific presentation of the universe. In such presentations there is

no reference to the fact that all coding, whether in the structure of the elements or in the genetic endowment of living beings, is by its nature an immaterial, a psychic determination. While certainly not separate from the physical aspect of things, this inner psychic dimension is distinct from any of the component parts as well as from the totality of the parts. It is the unifying principle imperceptible to sense faculties but immediately known by intelligence, just as a tree is seen as a unity in all its physical relationships and is not reducible to any or all of these. There is a mystical dimension not only in the reality known but in the scientific equations whereby we give expression to the knowing act. Our study of genetics may provide us with a pattern of the components governing the genetic process, but we will never have physical experience of the inner principle that enables this amazing complex of genetic materials to function with the unity and spontaneity we observe in the unfolding processes of life.

A further observation: if we proceed in scientific inquiry by a downward reduction of wholes to their parts, we need to complement this procedure by an upward integration, in which we understand parts by their function in the larger configurations. We cannot understand any part of the universe until we understand how it functions in the whole. For example, any study of the element carbon limited to its inanimate form provides only minimal understanding of carbon, since carbon has astounding capacities for integrating the basic elements needed for organic existence. Even beyond the organic and the qualities associated with living beings, there is the capacity of carbon to enter into the processes of thinking. Thought itself and the highest of human spiritual achievements are attained through activation of the inner capacities of carbon in its alliance with the other elements of the universe. Thus carbon has varied modes of expression, from inorganic to organic to conscious self-awareness in the human.

In the interconnection, then, of part to whole (as seen in the example of carbon), there is surely a certain discontinuity that emerges, but also a continuity that must not be neglected between the different

modes of expression—inorganic, organic, reflexive. The materialism of science or the spiritualizing tendencies of religion that refuse this continuity of the human and all our capacities with the natural world ends up with a radical disassociation of the human from the universe about us. Moreover, to identify this disassociation with spirituality is to mistake the entire meaning and significance of spirituality in its human expression.

Vast periods of time have been required to bring about this sequence of transformations from the primordial radiation to the shaping of the elements, from the elements to the molecules, then to the megamolecules—the viruses, cells, and organisms—and on to the more complex living forms, and eventually to the human mode of consciousness.

Narration of this sequence has required the immense effort of scientific investigation of these past few centuries. It has necessitated the setting aside, for a while, of the spiritual, visionary, intuitive, imaginative world in order to probe as deeply as possible into the visible, material, quantitative world, the measurable world, the world that could be expressed in the language of calculus, the great instrument of the scientific endeavor. The success of this scientific achievement and its subservience to the often-ephemeral purposes of the commercial, industrial, and financial establishments produced a profound revulsion in many religious persons. Out of this revulsion has come a widespread reassertion of traditional religious teachings with a fundamentalist fixation.

This antagonism between mechanistic science and fundamentalist religion is one of the basic reasons for our inability to establish a sense of sacred community with the natural world. Scientific materialism could not evoke the awe or wonder or fear of the natural phenomena needed to restrain the more grasping tendencies of the human. Nor could fundamentalist Christianity committed to redemption out of this world evoke the dedication needed for intimacy with the forces of nature, considered to be both seductive and

without spiritual meaning. Strangely enough, even some of the other religions, such as those in Asia, with magnificent traditions of intimacy with the natural world, could not restrain their own adherents from plundering the Earth in the race to consume more resources for modernization and development.

My proposal is that we cannot fully remedy this situation except by a realization that the universe from the beginning has been a psychic-spiritual, as well as a physical-material, reality. Within this context the human activates one of the deepest dimensions of the universe and is, thus, integral with the universe from its beginning. The universe story needs to be accepted simultaneously as the human story and the story of every being in the universe.

There is a need for the religious traditions, on their part, to appreciate that the primary sacred community is the universe itself, and that every other community becomes sacred by participation in this primary community. The story of the universe is the new sacred story. The Genesis story, however valid in its basic teaching, is no longer adequate for our spiritual needs. We cannot renew the world through the Genesis story; at the same time, we cannot renew the world without including the Genesis story and all those creation stories that have nourished the various segments of the human community through the centuries. These belong to the great story, the sacred story, as we presently know this sacred community.

The New Story of the universe is a biospiritual story as well as a galactic story and an Earth story. Above all, the universe as we now know it is integral with itself throughout its vast extent in space and throughout the long series of its transformations in time. Everywhere, at all times, and in each of its particular manifestations, the universe is present to itself. Each atomic element is immediately influencing and being influenced by every other atom of the universe. Nothing can ever be separated from anything else. The Earth is a single if highly differentiated community. This is the quintessential way of understanding the universe.

So, too, every part of the universe activates a particular dimension or aspect of the universe in a unique and unrepeatable manner. Thus everything is needed. Without the perfection of each part, something is lacking from the whole. Each particular being in the universe is needed by the entire universe. With this understanding of our profound kinship with all life, we can establish the basis for a flourishing Earth community.