

TOWARDS AN AUTHENTIC ECO-SPIRITUALITY

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An authentic eco-spirituality assists us in understanding our responsibilities as citizens of this fragile planet and encourages us to take proper remedial action. The urgent task before us makes this a spirituality leading to action, to preserving what is threatened, and to healing what is wounded. Such threats as global warming, extinction of species, air and water pollution, and unsustainable resource extraction practices require the concerted effort of all of us, working together in an effective manner. Spiritualities which distract from such urgent pursuits by placing too much emphasis on the individual's self-fulfillment, by expecting others to do the work, or by diminishing the cooperative efforts required are not authentic. The pursuit of authenticity takes goes beyond mere acquisition of information and techniques. We must address our individual and collective lack of will power, a persistent problem in an affluence-ridden culture.

The nagging problem of burn-out impels us to reflect more deeply, to pray for guidance, and to know our limitations. We look for a discernment process which will sort through and distinguish the eco-problems facing us, their possible solutions, and our ability to help heal what is damaged. This discernment invites the possible contribution of a time-honored Ignatian spirituality to the environmental movement, which can also gain much from the Benedictine rhythm of work and prayer and the Franciscan emphasis on the wholeness of all creation. Through proper discernment we can discover the good spirit prompting us and, simultaneously, to expose and distance ourselves from evil and wayward temptations.

The call is ever deeper and involves joining forces with people of good will who strive to repair environmental degradation and prevent future destruction of the planet. All the while these see the terrible conditions facing the poor folks who live near polluting industries or clearcut forests. We know something must be done, but our wills are weak. Honestly, why should we interfere? Why get our own hands dirty? And a deeper question: is this lack of will power due to our individual and collective addiction to consumer goods and our prevailing affluence? Are we in the so-called *developed world* insensitive to the poor both at home and abroad? Are we seeking to justify an immunity from further soul searching when it comes to consumer luxuries? Are we aware of the poor who lack wholesome food, clean water, necessary energy, and affordable housing?

An authentic eco-spirituality must be placed squarely in the framework of both sustainability of the planet and social justice for all the human family. Both Earth and people must be present within our spiritual purview. In fact, we simply can't be spiritually alive and forgetful of the deep cleavages dividing the family of creation. Such people are candidates for a spirituality with an attached discerning process that focuses on the Earth. To

be authentic we need to recognize the *here* (current situation of our Earth), the *we* (all healing agents), and the *now* (current planetary problems which must be addressed today). Furthermore, an authentic eco-spirituality is based on the laws of ecology and must be spiritually uplifting by exhibiting glory in the goodness of Creation, showing compassion with those who suffer, and sharing in the diverse healing arts as extended to the Earth.

RECOGNIZING THE GOODNESS OF ALL CREATION

Here, and not there. We observe more closely those parts of our creation which are not in the distant heavens but are close to us -- right under our feet. Starting right here gives us a sense of orientation, of direction, and of kinship with other nearby creatures. This kinship is what mystics like Francis of Assisi championed centuries ago in talking to and feeding birds and fish. All creatures are good and we extend our respect for them through human/non-human interaction. We are on a journey together with all creatures of the Earth. Our collective welfare is closely linked with them, a rainbow gathering of many species.

All creatures are interdependent. This is an elementary principle of ecology worth further reflection. We human beings are not splendid isolationists, but caretakers on a modern day Noah's ark or spaceship Earth. A spirituality of overlords, masters, big game shooters and colonialists encourages a conquest of parts of the world for selfish purposes -- a deliberate choice to be selective in participation to the exclusion of those to whom we owe so much for our own existence, even though it is not always self-evident. Upon prayerful reflection we see that the goodness of the Creator is reflected in all creation and is bathed in an atmosphere of mutual respect for others, whether human or non-human. We are called to be gentle, to see our own limitations, to foster care for all creatures, so that in protecting the local environment we might extend our sharing to wider vistas.

BEING SENSITIVE TO ALL WHO SUFFER

We, not They. When we see and are willing to look squarely at the misdeeds done to our Earth by human greed and ignorance, we are deeply moved. However, we still must control our emotions so that we can perform meaningful action. We cannot excuse ourselves from entering into the action, nor deny that the injustice is occurring, nor follow the temptation to escape and leave the battle to others. Yes, our spirituality calls us to face the cause of the suffering -- and to be willing to co-suffer (compassion) with victims whoever they are.

Natural processes obey the Law of Conservation of Resources. A scientific understanding of applied thermodynamics allows us to realize not only our interconnectedness with other creatures, but that these laws extend even to individual and collective suffering. Nothing is lost; all suffering has ultimate gain, if we but look at the big picture. A spirituality which directly confronts the causes of suffering, whether disease, pollution,

resource depletion, etc., will be more ready to have compassion (suffer with another) among all creatures. Compassionate people do not wish for or condone the suffering, but accept it as part of a deepening mystery of human and ecological redemption. Compassion with other co-sufferers is counter to a spirituality of total self centeredness, or a fleeing from suffering as unbecoming or beneath one's station in life.

WILLINGNESS TO BE OPEN IN CELEBRATION

Now, not then. So often people want to put matters off to another time, or live in the past that attempts to walk backward in history. No, we should not wait until tomorrow when we must start to heal the Earth today. An authentic spirituality accepts the *kairos*, the now of our life. Others potentially could do a better job, but it is risky to wait for them to surface -- if they will. The call is for us to seize the moment and to do so as best we can with our limited resources, confident that our imperfect but good intentions will inspire others to join us.

Variation and richness of diversity add to the health and harmony of the total eco-system. It is difficult to prove that one threatened species is important for the survival of the planet, but we can argue from numbers: the richness of ultimate well-being of the Earth depends on the interaction of a greater diversity of beings. The beauty, wholesomeness and ultimate health of the system is at stake. It is good that such creatures exist, and we find value in the rich diversity of plants and animals around us. To diminish this richness of diversity diminishes us as part of the family of all creation.

An impoverished spirituality is reflected by a noted classicist who, upon hearing that half the world's languages will disappear before the year 2100, said "who cares, the others aren't worth much anyway." The inability to recognize value in the variety of plants, animals -- or human languages and cultures -- is to fail to see diversity as an enhancing quality and our ultimate celebration -- truly, a fruit of the Spirit. There's a thin line between such impoverishment or cultural elitism and acceptance of arguments for allowing the destruction of species for our own self or economic interests. Threatened tribal land is suitable for a hydroelectric dam impoundment; a species' habitat is better used for housing or industrial development. Such narrow approaches limit the openness for celebrating diversity in its many forms. It betrays a lack of wonder and respect, and bodes badly for the planet.

General Reflection

An all-good God creates, redeems, and invites us into the noble task of re-creating this damaged Earth. We enter into this mystery with praise, compassion, and a sense of being open to celebration of the diversity of creation. With these basic qualities we seek an ecumenical and interreligious dialogue with others, even while recognizing that some eco-spiritualities may

not be authentic or enlivening. And part of an eco-spirituality is to interact with all spiritualities which strive to heal, and to enhance their vitality.