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A Christian Vision Of The Earth

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A Christian Vision of the Earth

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FRIENDS JOURNAL

Quaker Thought and Life Today

April 1, 2007

By Ellen M. Ross

We are by nature Earth creatures, lifted from the mud of the ground and stirred to life by the breath of God. Intimate both with the life-giving Earth beneath our feet and with God's vivifying breath, we come into being in a wondrous garden-world of soil, plants, water, and air.

But then something goes wrong, and we find ourselves hiding from the God who comes walking in the garden in the cool of the evening. Just what goes awry is the subject for another meditation, but the biblical insight is profound that we find ourselves in a world alienated from our Creator. Even more startlingly, the Genesis narrative tells us that the "fall" fractured not only our connection to God but also our relationship to our other life source: the Earth. So God, speaking to Adam, says, "Thorns and thistles [the ground] shall bring forth to you. . . . In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken. . . . Therefore the Lord God sent [Adam] forth from the garden of Eden" (Gen. 3:18-19, 23). God-alienation and Earth-alienation are paired in this biblical portrait of the broken human condition.

The shattering of humankind's founding Earth-connection is reinscribed in the next generation after the Fall. After Cain kills Abel, God confronts Cain, "What have you done? The voice of your brother is crying to me from the ground" (Gen. 4:10). The Earth, as if recognizing its kinship with human well-being, takes up the blood of the innocent Abel and carries his voice to God. "And now you are cursed from the ground which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. When you till the ground, it shall no longer yield to you its strength; you shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the Earth" (Genesis 4:11-12). Human violence marks the land, and humans are now even further estranged from their life source in God and in the Earth. The Earth has strength and bounty to share with humans, but interhuman violence saturates the ground with blood, causes the land to withhold its strength, and humans once again become fugitives from their Earthen life source.

The wisdom of these stories is the spiritual truth they tell about the human condition: many of us experience a deep and abiding sense of separation from the natural world. Acknowledging the biblical lineage of this fundamental brokenness may help us to understand our own and others' resistance to compassionate love of the Earth. It may help us to see the urgency of nurturing spiritual and ecological practices to restore our individual and communal sense of belonging to Earth community.

I have been wondering why for so many of us the devastation of our planet home seems so remote, as if it is happening far away in distant lands. On some level we know it is not: of course, the degradation of our Earthen home is here, in our midst, in the communities we love, on the grounds we walk. The sites we now cherish, the places of our memories, and the open spaces of our children's futures are fast disappearing. But so often, I feel, we live in denial of our participation in this destruction, and in abdication of our responsibility for sustaining the well-being of the creation around us.

Strangely, the biblical stories of Earth-alienation console me because they remind me of how *primal* our estrangement from the natural world is. The problem begins with our first parents, as it were. These stories tell me why I find it hard to make the difficult, and even not so difficult choices to live more simply—why it is I drive rather than walk, make one more set of xeroxes, waste paper towels or hot water, or continue to miss numerous opportunities for sustained Earth advocacy. Recognizing the intractability and the generations-old lineage of my Earth-separation attested to in the biblical narratives urges me compassionately to admit that it is hard to walk the green road of Earth-love. Earth-alienation is an ancient character trait, bred into the bones and inscribed onto the hearts of our ancestors and our own selves as well.

Given our primordial loss of kinship with the biotic community, we often overlook our own implication in the destruction of habitat around us. When we encroach upon wild spaces to build athletic fields, for example, so that our children can play soccer; or when we make incremental inroads into wetlands to build institutional structures; or when we choose as a community, for seemingly "good" purposes, to grant variances to statutes designed to protect

streams and rivers, we are not acting in any way that is egregiously destructive. And yet when we are weighing goods in land-use decision making, the good of human expansion consistently takes precedence over the good of the ecological integrity of the insect, plant, and animal world around us. The problem is that our piecemeal environmental impacts are, when considered together, monumentally catastrophic; clearly, the momentum is on the side of disappearing habitat and increasing noise, air, and water pollution.

One day this past summer I stood at a place called Sakonnet Point in Little Compton, Rhode Island, watching a dredging barge and stone-searing drills tear up the edge of the harbor where I had paddled in rowboats and played in the sand as a child. My heart ached as I surveyed the carnage, the noise, the broken rocks, the trash, the piles of sediment produced in the interests of building a private club that would restrict public access to this nature area and discharge various contaminants into the pristine waterway. I wondered again why so many otherwise well-meaning people, myself included, are so often tone-deaf to the cries of the natural world. Why do we repeatedly experience the same struggles in trying to persuade ourselves and others to prioritize the well-being of the land and its more-than-human inhabitants? I agree with those who say that the current situation of "Earth distress" is at its heart not a crisis of technology, but is rather a symptom of the spiritual malaise of our culture. I observe that most people are not malicious or hateful; rather, in the idiom of the Christian story, we are all simply the bearers of the heritage of Earth-alienation.

Christian history teaches, and Quaker traditions, in particular, perceive that restoration of the God-human relationship is paired with a renewal of the human-Earth relationship: spiritual transformation heals the Earth-alienation that plagues us. In 1650, when Quaker founder George Fox began to experience God's power in the world, all things became new to him: "All creation gave another smell unto me than before, beyond what words can utter. The creation was opened to me." Fox says he considered becoming a physician since he had gained this knowledge, but instead perceived that he was called to *reform* physicians, to bring them and others to the "wisdom of God." The early 18th-century traveling Quaker minister Elizabeth Webb writes that after she publicly spoke of the goodness of God, "I was in love with the whole creation of God . . . so everything began to preach to me, the very fragrant herbs, and beautiful innocent flowers had a speaking voice in them to my soul." While at times Christianity is a contributing cause of humans' isolation from their Earth source, this is, nevertheless, not its only heritage. Christianity beckons us to reexperience our rootedness in the Earth and warns us of the dangers of neglecting our origins: we live as fugitives and wanderers from our very life source when we violate the ground from which we spring. The promise of Christianity is a restored relationship to God and to Earth.

As our relationship to the land heals, we can once again affirm our kinship with the Earth, a kinship signaled by our origin in the mud of the ground and echoed in the Earth's absorbing of Abel's blood and crying out to God. We are, each of us, then, both Cain and Abel—at once

deeply separated from the Earth, and at the same time deeply linked by kinship to the Earth. We are, like Abel, joined in our suffering to the Earth, reunited once more to our life source and at one with the ground as it cries out for justice and compassion.

Healing Our Separation From the Land

In the spirit of dialogue with those who seek to nourish Earth-connection, I offer two suggestions for practices we might employ to cultivate compassion for the community of creation.

As I stood with an aching heart at Sakonnet Point this summer and wondered how I might find comfort, I envisioned communities holding "Evenings of Remembrance" at times when their open spaces are considered for development. These rituals of remembrance would provide opportunities for people to recount what they love and enjoy about the spaces to be developed, and to celebrate these special sites in stories, images, pictures, and poetry. These "Evenings of Remembrance" could be occasions to lament the impending loss of places that we have loved; they could be a chance to recall the funny, simple, poignant stories of time spent in these places.

Why do I want our communities to gather to share these stories? A few summers ago, I participated in a weeklong workshop for environmentalists and educators sponsored by Maine Audubon. In a session on memory and childhood, people wept as they described places of lifelong significance to them; they recalled with grief the loss of open forests and fields to construction; they tenderly spoke of particular trees, plants, and small city spaces that nurtured their love for the Earth and inspired their current work as environmentalists and educators. This session demonstrated what many friends of the Earth have observed: living in the presence of our Earth-connections provides people with personal sustenance and meaning, and, even more, it often empowers people to advocate for environmental well-being as well.

I believe that one of the important ways to slow the relentless destruction of the natural world is for us to live in compassionate mindfulness of the places we love. We must remember the spaces we care about: what they look like, smell like, sound like, what colors we see, and how we feel when we are there. We must feel deeply the specialness of these places. For many of us it is only when we feel again the comfort, the oneness, the beauty, the joy, the calm, the delight, and even at times the grief of the loss of these spaces, that the energy will well up within us to protect these lands and these experiences for the generations to come. I wonder, for example, whether community leaders, in awareness of the meaning of open spaces in people's lives, might be a bit more reluctant, once the political discussions have started, to grant the variances so often needed to develop our natural areas.

My second idea emerges from a discipline that I first used in my teaching. In a class on Christian Visions of Self and Nature I introduced an exercise I initially envisioned in narrow academic terms. We were reading books that included detailed scientific observations, and I

wanted students to hone their own perceptual skills as a way to foster their appreciation for the texts we were studying. I asked each student to observe a tree for the duration of the spring semester, and I invited students to reflect on their trees in their weekly papers. They did write about their trees, much more frequently, and with much more energy than I had imagined.

I cultivate relationships with traditions, books, and people when I teach, but I realized that it was the relationships with their trees that sparked the most meaningful transformation for some of my students. In a reflection paper at the end of the course one student wrote, "One image that has continually resonated with me throughout the course is my first visit to my tree. . . . I was extremely skeptical about the whole thing and really did not see trees as anything more than wood that would eventually be covered in leaves. My tree looked especially dead on this particular day, but as I got closer my opinion started to change. I noticed that the moss on its bark was still alive and also that a couple of tiny buds had started to sprout up on some of its branches. . . . There definitely seemed to be a lot more going on with this tree than I originally assumed. The reason this image has stuck with me is that it constantly reminds me to have a more observant view of nature. Whereas before I might have just passed things by, now I usually try to take a second or third look if I can." I learned that the practice of being attentive to a tree awakened some of my students to the significance of the ecological concerns that were so compelling for their classmates.

Trees evoked memories, gave pleasure to my students, and, most surprisingly and significantly, cultivated a sense of connection with Earth community. Another student wrote, "[Simone de Beauvoir] speaks in terms of humans, economic revolutions, but it's terribly easy to borrow her language to talk about this tree. I have now seen this tree, thought about it, lain on its petals. It's no longer something I can divide myself from, so of course my self is tied to it, if only in small ways." Many people live in communion with the land, but I have become increasingly aware that many people do not, and that we can spark or reawaken connection by practices of mindfulness. Maybe there are ways to incorporate such simple disciplines as "attending to a tree" into our schools, our First-day schools, and our communities, as ways to nurture land-based connections, to cultivate compassion, and to participate in the healing of the ages-old Earth-alienation many of us experience.

Just as we forget the intimacy with God signaled by the Genesis story of our first life-giving breath shared with God; and just as we forget that we are by our very birth from the ground in kinship with the Earth; so also do we forget that the crisis of Earth-separation recounted in the Adam and Eve and Cain and Abel narratives has at times become fully realized in the personal decisions we make in our own lives. Envisioning ways to address the ecological suffering that depletes this good Earth involves first recognizing just how isolated we are from the land. Once we acknowledge our heritage of separation from the Earth community, we can more effectively heal our brokenness by cultivating practices that can bind us again to our primal life source. Our sense of unity with the biosphere can be rekindled through retelling the biblical stories of our ancient origins. Our alienation from the Earth can be

healed through the sharing of personal and communal memories and practicing Earth awareness. And our voices can unite once more with our Earth home in calling out for compassionate living in renewed relationship to God, self, and world.

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