

Deep Ecology

By Rev. Michael Dowd (Second of two parts)

From the point of view of deep ecology, what is wrong with our culture is that it offers us an inaccurate description of the self. It depicts the personal self in competition with and in opposition to nature... But if we destroy our environment, we are destroying what is in fact our larger self. - Freya Matthews

Deep Ecology is an integrated world view and an associated way of life grounded in Earth's Sacred Story. It branches out of the awareness that the environment is not "out there," separate from us, but that we are part of vast cosmological, geological, and biological cycles which are concentric and interrelated. My own body, for example, is constantly exchanging matter, energy, and information with my "environment." The atoms and molecules of my body now, what I collectively call "me," are not the same ones that made up my body a year ago. Every five days I have a new stomach

lining. I get a new liver every two months. My skin is replaced every six weeks. Every year, 98% of my body is replaced. The molecules that are continually becoming "me" come from the air I breathe and the food I eat. Before that they were part of fish and snakes, birds and trees, other humans, and all that we eat. I give out as I get. It makes little sense, then, to overly identify with my "ego" self, for that is only a very small part of "me." My larger body is the body of Life itself. Earth is my larger self. This is the essence of deep ecology.

If the Rhine, the Yellow, the Mississippi rivers are changed to poison, so too are the rivers in the trees, in the birds, and in the humans changed to poison, almost simultaneously. There is only one river on the planet Earth and it has multiple tributaries, many of which flow through the veins of sentient creatures. - Thomas Berry

A living body is not a fixed thing but a flowing event, like a

flame or a whirlpool: the shape alone is stable. The substance is a stream of energy going in at one end and out at the other. We are temporarily identifiable wiggles in a stream that enters us in the form of light, heat, air, water, milk ... It goes out as gas and excrement - and also as semen, babies, talk, politics, war, poetry and music. - Alan Watts

Through the lenses of deep ecology we can begin to see clearly the nature and serious magnitude of our global ecological crisis. Consider the following parable:

Once upon a time, a group of brain cells debated the relative importance of the rest of the body. Some suggested that the body was dispensable.

"After all," said one, "we are the only cells in the body that know that we know things."

"Only we can react on our dreams," said another, "so we must be the only part of the body that is spiritual, right?"

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"Why just think of the awesome accomplishments we are capable of!" And they all thought ... thinking that they were separate from and superior to the rest of body.

Occasionally a brain cell would realize that it was one with the entire body; but it was usually martyred trying to tell the others about this good news. You see, the brain cells had convinced themselves that the Great Life and Love lived outside the body and could be known only through their dreams. They believed that they were destined to leave the body and dwell in a place called heaven. They also assumed that the rest of the body was not really alive at all, that it was an inexhaustible supply of "resources" for the benefit of the brain. Needless to say, the health of all the organs including the brain, worsened by the day, and the body was soon on the verge of death.

A cancer cell is a normal cell disconnected from its genetic memory, cut off from the wisdom of millions of years of evolutionary development. It doesn't cooperate in harmony with the rest of the body. It experiences itself as separate from the body, overpopulates, and consumes the organism which supports it. Cancer eventually kills itself by consuming its own environment. - Brian Patrick

The message of deep ecology is timely news for humanity, and for the planet as a whole. It offers reconnection to our genetic memory and billions of years of evolutionary wisdom. Its application can empower us

to live in cooperation and harmony with the rest of the body of Life. We can begin to experience a harmonious connection alien to us when we thought of ourselves as separate from and superior to our larger body. We can begin to experience a consciousness of heavenly rapport with all of life.

Timely as it may be, the message of deep ecology must be taught and integrated into our society on a massive scale if our grandchildren and theirs are to be saved from a toxic and literal hell on Earth. It must be put into fervent daily practice in every area of our lives. The planet is calling us to create communities that live and love ecologically. This is essential for the salvation of millions of species, especially our own.

To be a philosopher is not merely to have subtle thoughts, nor even to found a school, but to so love wisdom as to live according to its dictates, a life of simplicity, magnanimity and trust. It is to solve some of the problems of life, not only theoretically, but practically. - Henry David Thoreau

The main task of the immediate future is to assist in activating the inter-communion of all living and nonliving beings in the emerging Ecozoic era of Earth development. What is most needed in order to accomplish this task is the great art of intimacy and distance: the capacity of beings to be totally present to each other while further affirming and enhancing the differences and identities of each. - Thomas Berry

A human being is part of the

whole, called by us "universe," a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings, as something separated from the rest - a kind of delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty. - Albert Einstein

Our present situation, I think, can be summarized by the following three sentences:

1. The glory of the human has become the desolation of the Earth.

2. The desolation of the Earth is becoming the destiny of the human.

3. Therefore, all human activities, professions, programs and institutions must henceforth be judged primarily by the extent to which they inhibit, ignore or foster a mutually enhancing human/Earth relationship. - Thomas Berry

A thing is right when it tends to preserve the diversity, stability, and beauty of the life community. It is wrong when it tends to do otherwise. - Aldo Leopold

Utilizing our symbolic 100 year calendar, earth has been inhabited by *Homo sapiens* during only 23 and a half of the past 24 hours we were in the tribal-shamanic period of Earth's cultural development as hunter-gatherers. This is also known as the Paleolithic era, or Stone Age. From 11:20 p.m. to

11:40 p.m., we went through the neolithic village era. Writing developed at the end of this period and, with it, the beginnings of recorded history. The next nineteen minutes, to 11:59 p.m., is the period of the classical civilizations, or the age of the classical religious cultures. This also marks the beginning of patriarchy, characterized by the oppression of women by men. For the last sixty seconds we have been in the scientific-technological-industrial period. During this last minute we have so toxified the air, water and soil upon which all life depends that we are now faced with the possibility of a collapse of the planetary life-support systems, or ecocide.

The human is an expression of Earth. We are totally dependent upon the health of the community of Life for our own health. Our own healing and destiny, as individuals or as a species, depends entirely upon our relationship to the land, air, water and life of Earth. What we do to the planet, we do to ourselves.

It is, of course, possible that the destiny of Life may not include a human expression much longer. Whether or not our species survives, however, Earth will continue to evolve, eventually healing the damage done by us. The Milky Way galaxy will continue to spiral, with countless new solar systems being born, living and dying. And the Universe will continue to expand and grow more complex for billions of years after our solar system is but a distant cosmic memory. We are part of an awesome and divine Universe. We are also only a very

small part of it. We must keep this perspective in mind when discussing "human destiny." Humility may be the single most important attitude of the heart we will need if we are to continue into the future. Humility and survival go hand in hand. Pride goes before a fall.

We are now at what may be the most significant turning point in Earth's Sacred Story since the 185 million year Mesozoic era, the age of the dinosaurs, came crashing to a close some 65 million years ago. That was when the dinosaurs all died out. The last 65 million years have been called the Cenozoic era, the age of the mammals and the flowering plants. As a direct result of human activity over the past two hundred years, we are now bringing to an end this 65 million year age! It is important to see things from this larger perspective.

Today, species are being eliminated at a rate faster than perhaps any other time in history. Biologist Norman Myers, a specialist in the rainforests and vegetation of the world, says that we are bringing about an "extinction spasm" that is likely to produce "the greatest setback to life's abundance and diversity since the first flickerings of life almost four billion years ago." Thanks to our addictive industrial culture, we are altering the geological structure, the chemistry, and the biological systems of the planet on a scale that would normally have taken millions of years. We are accomplishing this feat in a few short decades.

As the Cenozoic era crashes

toward a close, the logical question becomes, "What's next?" Thomas Berry suggests two possibilities. The first possibility he calls the Technozoic era. In the Technozoic, humanity would continue to understand "progress" in terms of increasing mechanistic control over the forces of nature for its own superficial, short-term benefit. Through continued scientific innovation and technological cunning, we could create artificial environments to "protect" us in isolation from our despoiled and dying world. The Technozoic would be an isolated hell of existence. Humanity would become ever more alienated from the rest of Life. In the long run, of course, it could not even hope to last. Without spirit, matter decays. The Technozoic could never be sustainable.

Another possibility, perhaps the only viable option for humans, is what Berry calls the Ecozoic era. The primary aspect of the Ecozoic would be the deep somatic awareness of the natural world as our larger body, as our larger self. All species would be granted their habitat, their freedom, and their range of life expression. The Ecozoic would further be characterized by our harmonious alignment with, rather than domination over, the biological processes of the planet. This would require abandoning many of our destructive mechanistic technologies. The natural world itself would be taken as the primary referent for all that we do, and the primary model for

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all our technologies. In the Ecozoic, all of our activities, professions, programs, and institutions will be judged primarily by the extent to which they inhibit, ignore, or foster a mutually enhancing relationship between humanity and the body of Life upon which humanity depends. This is the way of human destiny!

When we see things from a larger perspective, it becomes clear that something more is needed to "save the Earth" than recycling our paper and glass, not using styrofoam, and driving our cars less. Specifically, two things are absolutely necessary if the human expression of Earth is to continue into the future.

As a species, we must make a profound shift in consciousness in the direction of deep ecology. We must grow from seeing ourselves as discrete, separate beings that walk around on Earth, to feeling and knowing ourselves as an expression of Earth. Our thinking and behavior must align with, and flow out of, the reality of our situation: the planet is our larger body, our larger self. We are dependent upon the community of life, air, water and soil in every conceivable way. Unless we make this shift in consciousness, we will continue to be a "cancer," a parasite, consuming its own host environment. We will survive only with the spiritual guidance and awareness of the body of Life as a whole with its billions of years of evolutionary wisdom.

The second thing necessary for the human expression of

Earth to survive is for human beings to live in ecologically sustainable communities. We must live our lives in deep communion with each other and with our bioregion: sharing possessions and dwelling space, growing food together in a way that enhances our lives and the soil; laughing, working, playing and celebrating together, and, in short, living in love with each other and with all of Life. We must create ecological communities where we can be most truly ourselves, where we can experience loving physical touch, where we can share our finitude and brokenness and feel loved unconditionally, and where we are both supported and challenged to be all that we can be, especially for future generations.

None of us asked to be alive at this moment in Earth's history. We did not choose to be born at this juncture in the Story. We were chosen. Each of us has been chosen by the Universe to be alive and to participate in the most significant geological and biological transformation in 65 million years. This is a fact! Can you feel the sense of personal destiny, or a sense of mission or purpose, that such an awareness awakens within you? Thomas Berry calls this awareness "the grace of the present moment."

(If you want to, take a few moments and allow yourself to feel your connectedness to the larger body of Life, and your place in the Great Sacred. To the degree that we live the values of the Ecozoic era now will be the degree to which we participate in its inauguration. Love and Truth must be our

guiding realities. As we love Life with all our heart, mind, soul and strength, we will quite naturally love our human and nonhuman neighbor, and our planet, as our self. That is the true state of affairs. Living the values of the Ecozoic requires being lovingly truthful and gently honest with ourselves and with each other. It means being real and open with the Life that is our Source, Body, and Destiny.

This story provides the context for, adds meaning to, and affects the destiny of every other story in existence. That is why everything in human affairs must now be seen in light of this "big picture" in order to have any lasting meaning for present and future generations.

For peoples, generally, their story of the universe and the human role within the universe is their primary source of intelligibility and value. Only through this story of how the universe came to be in the beginning and how it came to be as it is, does a person come to appreciate the meaning of life or to derive the psychic energy needed to deal effectively with those crisis moments that occur in the life of the individual and in the life of the society. Such a story ... communicates the most sacred of mysteries ... and not only interprets the past, it also guides and inspires our shaping of the future. - Thomas Berry ♦