

**T**HOMAS BERRY envisions the Ecozoic Era as a time when humanity is present to the Earth Community in a mutually-enhancing manner. Crucially, he presents this vision as the *emerging* Ecozoic Era. Roots and tendrils of a transformed human presence are evident right here and now.

Few if any of us live with this mindset consistently in the foreground. Nevertheless, we have viscerally experienced, if only fleetingly, its draw. We sense its capacity to open our hearts, to guide and empower action, to bring forth our own greatness as we step into the Great Work. We feel called to contribute in our own unique way.

The call is so new and fresh among us that there is no clear path, no time-tested set of practices that distinguish Ecozoic activism from earlier forms of environmental and social engagement. Surely, Ecozoic activism will embrace the best that has come before. It will build upon the successes of the past, while offering up emergent novelty as we shift from an exclusive focus on the human (or the divine and human connection) to the more-than-human realm.

Ecozoic activism will manifest in forms as diverse as any other expression of the life force. Yet beneath the diversity of *doing* will reside a shared core of *being*. The stronger the core, the more natural, compelling, and fruitful the response. To distinguish and nurture such core ways of being, such attitudes of the heart, is thus crucial to the emerging Ecozoic Era.



Kathleen Edwards

The following four attitudes of the heart are, in our estimation, the cultural coding necessary to effectively herald, embody, and usher in the Ecozoic Era. They could also be described as *The Four Pillars of Ecozoic Activism*.

#### 1. ALLUREMENT

*The dream drives the action.*

—Thomas Berry

**T**HE FOUNDATION of Ecozoic activism is, of course, The Great Story—the epic of evolution. The Great Story is everybody's story; it is the overarching story of every thing and all times. Crucially, it is a creation story still in process. The Great Story thus embraces our visions of the future as well as the scientifically

familiar record of the past. Ecozoic joins Paleozoic, Mesozoic, and Cenozoic in the pantheon of eras of complex life that have a tangible and honored presence in shaping the lives we lead today.

One of the things we learn from The Great Story is that reality is made of nested wholes—atoms within molecules, within cells, within organisms, within ecosystems, within bioregions. Wholes within wholes (holons)—each integral to itself yet also part of larger wholes, with no part able to fully comprehend the goings on of the larger wholes within which it is embedded. Within this nested holarchy of being, we observe that the larger wholes influence the activities of smaller wholes they encompass by way of signals that are experienced bodily. Discomfort or pain signals something to be

# Ecozoic Activism

Embodying the Future, Here, Now

By Michael Dowd and Connie Barlow

avoided. We seek that which fascinates or gives pleasure. All this occurs within a context that Teilhard de Chardin characterized as "groping": feeling one's way into the future without knowing what lies ahead.

To move in the direction of fascination is allurements. In the human, we all have experienced allurements at the level of spirit as well as body. Ethical allurements color our dreams of the future. Actions that push our joy buttons, that light up our lives, signify paths of Ecozoic activism. To act within a state of allurements is thus at the heart of Ecozoic transformation. As Joseph Campbell was fond of saying, "Follow your bliss." In the midst of our actions we will be modeling the very end we are advocating.

There will always be actions to take as good citizens; there will always be problems to fix in the moment. But for the long-term, for soul sustenance and for confidence that our choices are, in fact, choices made not by our small selves but by that portion of the Great Self residing in each of us, we can trust our allurements as ultimate guides. We can trust that our share of the Great Work lies where our own great joy intersects with Earth's great need.

And then, the dream will indeed drive the action.

## 2. TRUST

*The Universe can be trusted.*

—Michael Dowd

**E**COZOIC ACTIVISM is driven by allurements, not by anger or fear. Yet in the face of grave disappointments, during those inevitable times when we come to doubt our self-worth or the viability of our species, what gives us the strength to carry on? For eons, the religious answer to this question has been simple: faith.

A metareligious, spiritual movement grounded in and inspired by The Great Story will, by definition, be an inclusive, evolutionary spirituality. As a community of Jews, Christians, Pagans, Hindus, Buddhists, secular humanists, atheists, pantheists, panentheists, and so on, we honor the full breadth of our traditions, which continue to feed us in many ways. Those of us called to

Ecozoic activism can unite in our trust in a self-organizing, time-developmental Universe—whatever our particular conceptions of Ultimate Mystery may be. Such trust will become increasingly supportive as the pain of this transition, this collective rite of passage into maturity as true *Homo sapiens sapiens* (doubly wise humans) greets us again and again.

Trust in the Universe by no means translates into passivity. Rather, we are empowered to act in the face of the most

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formidable obstacles, in grave uncertainty, because we do trust.

Trusting the Universe means trusting that "everything is right on schedule." But it also means trusting that the anguish we feel over what is happening to others and to the natural world, and the yearnings we have for a just, humane, and sustainable society, are part of the Universe too, and right on schedule as well. We trust our allurements as the allurements of the Universe. We trust our sense of urgency as the urgency of the Universe. And we trust our own missteps as the untidy gropings of the Universe.

We trust, too, that the human venture does not represent a grave mistake, the one time in which Earth and the Universe somehow got it wrong. That would be the epitome of arrogance. In a time-developmental Universe, to judge earlier stages as bad or wrong from the vantage of one's own stage is unhelpful. Rather, those stages are accepted as simply *what was so* for their particular times. When we accept the past, rather than judge it, a combination of creative tinkering and stunning transformation becomes available. As Ken Wilber writes in a recent book, *A Theory of Everything*, "I have one major rule: *everybody* is right. More specifically, *everybody*—including me—has some important pieces

of truth, and all of those pieces need to be honored, cherished, and included in a more gracious, spacious, and compassionate embrace, a genuine Theory of Everything."

Of course, to say that the Universe *can* be trusted is not to say that the Universe *must* be trusted. These are statements of meaning, not of empirical fact. Yet they are drawn from an understanding of The Great Story as offered to us by science. The Great Story is the ground of our trust, as it is of our allurements. In its embrace, we choose to stand in trust; we are empowered to act in trust.

"From a pragmatic point of view," wrote William James of our relationship with the Universe, "the difference between living against a background of foreignness and one of intimacy means the difference between a general habit of wariness and one of trust." Another way of saying this, and a statement that can serve as a powerful affirmation in times of doubt (and which we recommend in daily practice) is simply this: The Universe can be trusted.

## 3. COMPASSION

*Comprehensive compassion is unfurling in the human species.*

—Brian Swimme

**E**COZOIC ACTIVISM drawn by allurements and grounded in trust is an activism in which compassion unfurls naturally. Ultimately, such compassion becomes comprehensive—encompassing humans, the more-than-human realm, and, quite remarkably, beings with whom one has never come into contact and generations a thousand years hence. It will entail not only the empathic experience of others' suffering, but also the empathic experience of others' joy.

Comprehensive compassion is nurtured by how we speak. Who among us has not had our perception profoundly shifted by an encounter with Thomas Berry's expanded use of the word *children*? This, from the dedication page of his book, *The Great Work*: "To the children; to all the children; to the

children who swim beneath the waves of the sea, to those who live in the soils of the Earth, to the children of the flowers in the meadows and the trees in the forest..."

Far more difficult than nurturing interspecies compassion will be nurturing compassion toward those humans here and now who seemingly stand in the way of mutually enhancing human-Earth relations. Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh, in his poem "Please Call Me By My True Names," challenges us deeply: "I am the 12-year-old girl, refugee on a small boat, who throws herself into the ocean after being raped by a sea pirate, and I am the pirate, my heart not yet capable of seeing and loving." He closes, "Please call me by my true names, so I can wake up, and so the door of my heart can be left open, the door of compassion."

Such expansive compassion is not only an ideal but also, at times, a necessity. Julia Butterfly Hill speaks movingly of how she would not have been unable to persist in her perch in the redwood tree had she not broken through her rage against the loggers. How else could she survive day upon day of the roar of helicopters, the sneer of chainsaws, and the sad thunder of toppling trees?

Finally, there is the challenge of compassion for oneself. Compassion toward the pirates of the planet may be a powerful platform for Ecozoic activism, but we can count on ourselves to often feel and express the obverse: rage. We will fall short of our ideals, again and again. We will thus need to nurture compassion for ourselves ongoingly. As activists, we will judge and condemn others to the degree that we judge and condemn ourselves. As activists, we will trust the Universe to the degree that we trust that our own shortcomings serve a purpose and are gifts for our own and others' growth.

As with the Ecozoic Era, shimmering into existence in fits and starts, comprehensive compassion is unfurling in the human species, flickering in one heart, then in another and another.

## An Ecozoic Wedding

One of the nicest surprises of the EarthSpirit Rising conference was the announcement by Connie Barlow and Michael Dowd that they would be married there, on the final day, in what is probably the very first consciously Ecozoic wedding ceremony ever held.

The playful ceremony was participatory, turning solemn at just the right moments. At one point, guests leapt into the air in tandem and their landing signified the start of the Ecozoic. If the joy emanating from Michael and Connie's faces were audible, it would have been heard in Poughkeepsie! Connie and Michael are seen here, after having been "painted" by guests with the clay from their home bioregions.



## 4. GRATITUDE

*If the only prayer you say in your whole life is, 'thank you,' that would suffice.*

—Meister Eckhart

**E**COZOIC ACTIVISM starts and ends with gratitude as gratitude is both an outcome and a source of the three previous attitudes of the heart. Cultivating gratitude opens us to allurements, strengthens our trust, and expands our compassion. Gratitude heightens our effectiveness as activists, for it holds anger, judgment, fear, and overwhelm at bay. As M.J. Ryan says, "gratitude is the mother of joy."

Gratitude manifests in the midst of our everyday living when we pause to take account of how much we ourselves have been given. We are present to the wonder of the simplest gifts: a glass of water, a spoonful of food, a breath of air. At such times, our hearts are full.

Thomas Berry has movingly written that, while we humans contribute to the cosmos by discerning and telling The Great Story, it is ultimately our role, our calling, to become "celebrants" of this story. Affirmations of gratitude we speak as individuals in our own reflective moments are one form of celebration. So too are our comings together in community to celebrate a solstice, a life passage, or the memory of a moment of transformation in the immense journey of life. Celebrating life is an essential part of Ecozoic activism. In fact, dancing may

be one of the more important things you can do to help usher in the Ecozoic Era.

So where does this bring us? In summary, we might say that whatever else Ecozoic activism may come to entail, it will surely embody these four attitudes of the heart: allurements, trust, compassion, and gratitude.

These are the four pillars upon which the Ecozoic will be built.

*Connie Barlow is one of the organizational leaders of the epic of evolution movement and a long-time wilderness advocate. Her books include The Ghosts of Evolution; Green Space, Green Time: The Way of Science; and Evolution Extended: Biological Debates on the Meaning of Life. Connie's great joy is exploring and sharing the ways in which an understanding of evolutionary and ecological sciences can enhance our communion with the natural world.*

*Michael Dowd, MDiv, DMN, is a community organizer, evolutionary evangelist, and well-known popularizer of The Great Story. A former United Church of Christ minister and author of EarthSpirit: A Handbook for Nurturing an Ecological Christianity, he now manages Global Action Plan's Sustainable Lifestyle Campaign in Rockland County, New York. Michael's great joy is inspiring faith and trust in the Universe and empowering people to follow the path where their great joy and the world's great need intersect.*