

The Prodigal Species

(Luke 15:11–32)

By Bruce Sanguin

The youngest son demands his inheritance and leaves home. The son impetuously demands what is already his, but can't wait to receive it. I find it interesting to treat this story as the parable of the prodigal species. In the past 300 years, we have grabbed the 13.7 billion years of sacred inheritance, embodied Earth and like the prodigal son, we are in the process of squandering it. From one perspective, this represents a kind of hubris.

But from another perspective, this leaving home was a necessary, if high stakes, phase of our evolutionary development as a species. It is the hero's journey: leaving home and facing all manner of ordeal, so that when it comes time to return home, it is with a new identity. The heroic journey is transformative. The hero paves the evolutionary path forward for those, like the elder brother, who stayed home out of a sense of duty or obligation. From a psychological point of view, adolescents need to rebel in order to sufficiently individuate and become their own persons. From a socio-cultural view we can see the evolutionary necessity of humanity taking the hero's journey and leaving a naïve pre-modern identification with nature and her processes in order to realize our unique potentials. This describes the human journey into the modernist worldview.

The problem is that this modernist project of distinguishing ourselves from nature descended into disconnection from the planet and into a full psychotic state of disassociation.¹ In this state, we are in the process of foolishly destroying our very source of life.

Evolutionary theology posits that the problem with humanity is not that we are innately sinful, but rather we are in a stage of adolescence as a species, acting very badly. We've been around for about 200,000 years as humans. This might seem like a long time in a human time scale, but in cosmic time this is a snap of the finger. Our brains and biochemistry are still locked for most of our waking hours in the crocodile brain, which is in a constant state of red alert — focused solely on our own survival. We are not bad. But we're treating Earth, her creatures and bio-systems as though they belonged to us. It's actually the other way around — we belong to Earth. But in a dissociated modernist state of consciousness, we literally forgot that we are one part of a larger ecosystem, and our fate is inextricably linked to it. We turned nature into a "natural resource". We lost a sense of awe and wonder at the living system of Earth. Philosopher and theologian, Abraham Heschel, wrote: "Forfeit awe and the world becomes a marketplace."

From the perspective of our wisdom tradition, our problem is not that we are sinners, but that we are foolish. We always need to remember, as philosopher Ken

¹ Thanks to Ken Wilber

Wilber puts it, that in an evolutionary paradigm humanity has not so much fallen an original Paradise, as we have been moving “up” from Eden — we are the universe moving in an upward trajectory of increasing empathy. Our ecological intelligence, however, is lagging.

We are the prodigal species. What began as a hero’s journey to realize new potentials by individuating ourselves from naïve identification with nature descended into a dissociative state. We are in the midst of squandering a 13.7 billion years in less than 300 years. We find ourselves, like the prodigal son, living in a pigpen of our own making. As a Jew he was rendered unclean by his contact with Gentiles and particularly with pigs. As human beings at the top of the food chain, our own bodies are filled with toxins. Having spoiled Earth, we are now impure. So great is our state of alienation that we thought we could just throw stuff “away”, but as Julia Hill Butterfly so poignantly asks: “Where is *away*?”

In a unified, universe, there truly is no away. Whatever we imagine we are throwing away — into our rivers, oceans, earth, air, will end up in our own bodies and our children’s bodies.

The good news is that we are Wisdom’s children, as Jesus called himself. We can learn. We evolve. Within us is all the resilience of this magnificent cosmos, which is enveloped and infused by a creative intelligence that is able to adapt to changing life conditions. This process of adapting to challenges is what drives evolution at all levels, biological, social, cultural, and spiritual.

It is his own survival instinct that causes the prodigal son to “come to his senses”. He’s hungry. Nobody is giving him anything to eat. His father’s slaves are living a better life. He is full-blown crisis, which in an evolutionary worldview is not the end of the world. Potentially, it’s the beginning of a new future. I find in this evolutionary theology an implicit hopefulness. There are no guarantees, of course, and the trajectory is not smooth or linear. According to one theory, evolutionary leaps occur through a process know as punctuated equilibrium, whereby evolution plateaus for long periods of time and then leaps forward — not incrementally, but dramatically. In the presence of crises, these leaps may occur.

This ecological crisis we are facing has the potential to elicit new intelligences, new behaviours, and new technologies which could issue in the emergence of a new kind of human presence — the ecological human, if you like. It may not, of course. By 2020 the so-called “adversity trends” may coalesce into an “unyielding, world-scale systems crisis. Every major system in our lives — ecological, economic, political, cultural, psychological and spiritual — is in a state of crisis as each is challenged to adapt to a dramatically changing world”².

² (Duane Elgin, *The Living Universe*, p.139).

At this point in the evolution of the universe, it is truly our choice. We are a particular expression of the universe, and mode of planetary presence that represents what Brian Swimme calls a “macrophase” power. Earth has never had to contend with a force like the human species, with such power to destroy.

On the other hand we may come to our senses and learn the ways of wisdom. In our tradition, Sophia is the feminine personification of sacred wisdom. An ancient Gnostic cosmology understands Wisdom to have incarnated as Earth. Dr. Sallie McFague invites us to imagine Earth as God’s body.

To listen to Wisdom, in the 21st century, is to connect more deeply with the intelligence of Earth. Our planet has almost five billions years of wisdom stored up. She possesses an immense intelligence that can help us to survive this crisis. “Ask the animals and they will teach you; the birds of the air and they will tell you; ask the plants of Earth, they will teach you; and the fish of the sea will declare to you” (Job 12:7-8).

In Janine Benyus’ brilliant book, *Biomimicry*, she documents how we’re just beginning to listen. Biomimicry is the emerging practice of learning to mimic Earth’s processes in the development of new technology, social systems, and building. Her book is filled with examples of the intelligence of Earth’s processes. Scientists, farmers, and architects are just now beginning to realize that by imitating natural processes, we can thrive in all areas of life.

The honeybee has learned to support its bio-system in the process of building its society. Bees take nothing from Earth that they don’t return. My friend and colleague, Dr. Marilyn Hamilton, has written a groundbreaking book, *Integral City: Evolutionary Intelligences for the Human Hive*³, suggesting that we would do well to mimic the honeybee in our design of the city as an eco-system.

The honeybee has developed an intelligent learning feedback loop. It’s not focused on the single bee, but on the survival of the hive. And in the process of helping the hive, it sustains not just the individual or even its own hive, but it adds value to, (as opposed to extracting life from), the flowers, fields, and orchards that the bees pollinate. Marilyn is helping city planners design cities like the honeybee. When we understand the nature of this one-Earth community, we realize that nature has figured out how to sync up the multiple intelligences of the diverse species and ecosystems so that the whole organism can thrive. Coming to our senses means first noticing, and then mimicking, the planet’s deep adaptive intelligence.

A member of our congregation has a cherry tree that hadn’t produced fruit for years. The tree surgeon came out, and recommended cutting it down. But Angela had heard about a species of local bees that might be able to save it. So she bought a hive,

³ Integral City reference

set it up in her front yard near the tree. This past year they picked over fifty pounds of cherries. She applied a natural wisdom to the crisis of her cherry tree.

If you haven't read anything by William McDonough I highly recommend his book, *Cradle to Cradle*. He's an architectural engineer, who has gone radically green in his practice. He works with major corporations, like the Ford Motor Company, with a simple natural principle. He noticed that in nature there is no waste. In nature, waste = food. He worked with a textile company in Switzerland. He helped them to resource only natural, organic dyes, and then to develop a processing system so that the water that comes out at the end of the manufacturing process is more pure than the water that went into the process at the beginning.

He calls this *Cradle to Cradle* engineering. Everything a company produces is returned to the company at the end of the product's lifecycle. This gives the company incentive to produce products that are radically re-useable and recyclable. Everything we produce comes back to us — and that cycle is true for good or ill. If we are unconscious of this natural intelligence, and what we produce is toxic and draws down the natural capital of the planet, then it will eventually kill us. But if we collaborate with the natural, sacred intelligence of the planet, then what comes back to us after production will enhance us and all of life.

The prodigal son returns home, having come to his senses, with a changed identity. He has undergone a change of heart. No longer the entitled son, he prepares his homecoming speech from the perspective of a servant. ("I am no longer worthy to be called your son"). In similar fashion, the human species needs to undergo a fundamental shift in identity — from the privileged species who can take whatever we want, when we want it, and dispose of our waste wherever we want, to life-enhancing servants of our awesome planet.

But before he is able to get the words out of his mouth, his father has him in a bear hug and is smothering him with kisses. His son that was lost is now found. Let us pray that Earth and all of our kin-species are as generous with us as we make our way back home to the heart of the cosmos.