

The Way Home for the Prodigal Species

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"Human society is inextricably part of a global biotic community, and in that community human dominance has had and is having self-destructive consequences." ~ **William R. Catton, Jr.**

"The most difficult transition to make is from an anthropocentric to a bio-centric norm of progress. If there is to be any true progress, then the entire life community must progress. Any progress of the human at the expense of the larger life community must ultimately lead to a diminishment of human life itself." ~ **Thomas Berry**

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Here is a short story. The theme: how human-centeredness alienated us from primary reality (God) and how ecology — the interdisciplinary study of the way, the truth, and the life of the living biosphere — can lead us home.

We begin by taking stock of our species' situation. After centuries of profligate living, we have exceeded what ecologists call the *carrying capacity* of the biosphere. We have extracted more resources and exuded more wastes than Nature can sustainably provide and process. *Overshoot* is the ecological term for our species' predicament, and nothing in heaven or on Earth can spare us from the troubles ahead. We know this because Reality has revealed it through evidence. By dishonoring material grace limits, we have made a *Great Reckoning* inevitable. In the words of Robert Louis Stevenson, "Sooner or later we all sit down to a banquet of consequences."

The *Great Reckoning* will be experienced as bad news by most of us alive this century. It is, however, soul nourishing to remember that a roll-back of the human imprint on Earth's ecologies will be *good news* for other species — and eventually for ours, too. That turn will be the *Great Homecoming*. After squandering a multi-billion-year inheritance, the prodigal species will come home to Reality, humbly returning to the community of life of which we are part and upon which we depend.

The vital — indeed, essential — key to this turn is that we will have learned to measure progress and success in bio-centric and eco-centric (Reality/God-centered) terms. Our descent into species narcissism will be a harsh memory, a clear warning, while stories of collective repentance and atonement become the bright new myths.

Reality Is GOD

"The most profound insight in the history of humankind is that we should seek to live in accord with reality. Indeed, living in harmony with reality may be accepted as a formal definition of wisdom. If we live at odds with reality (foolishly), we will be doomed. But if we live in proper relationship with reality (wisely), we shall be saved. Humans everywhere, and at all times, have had at least a tacit understanding of this fundamental principle. What we are less in agreement about is how we should think about reality and what we should do to bring ourselves into harmony with it." ~ **Loyal Rue**

"Reality is that which, when you stop believing it, doesn't go away." ~ **Philip K. Dick**

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Words create worlds and worldviews shape human behavior, individually and collectively. Sometimes a single word or redefinition of an existing one can help usher in a new concept or paradigm that shifts how we see and experience reality. The new way of seeing solves problems the previous paradigm couldn't because it transcends and includes the older way of seeing. I suggest that *God* (small caps) or perhaps *Godde* (pronounced *God*, yet spelled the Old English, gender-neutral way, as some Roman Catholic nuns and others already do) may offer just such a reframe and fresh way of perceiving reality.

Divinity, of course, is the Universe+, Time and Nature+, the Biosphere+. Plus what? Plus, at the very least, an authoritative voice! Plus whatever transcendent beliefs about ultimate reality a person may already hold. After all, any God who merely transcends time and nature is *less* than a God who includes (i.e., is revealed or incarnate *within*) time and nature. Worse, a transcendent-only notion of the divine has over the past 500 years resulted in an Earth bereft of respect, bereft of honor, bereft of devotion — and therefore inevitably stripped and assaulted.

Imaging God, or primary reality, as *unnatural* rather than *undeniable* has led us to overshoot Earth's carrying capacity, or grace limits, and thereby betray future generations. A limited and ultimately impotent notion of the divine is directly responsible, I suggest, for the demonic, anti-future economic system that now dominates human affairs.

Demonic economic system? Yes, but I'll say more about that shortly. I first need to emphasize that the issue of what we call, and how we regard, *primary reality* (i.e., everything that is necessary for our existence and wellbeing) is far from trivial. The name we choose influences, and possibly even determines, whether or not our way of life will be sustainable. The I-It, "Man, Conqueror of Nature," relationship we have forged in recent centuries clearly is not. In contrast, I-Thou relating to primary reality fosters a mutually enhancing human-Earth relationship. As Thomas Berry was fond of saying, "The environment is not our surroundings, it's our source."

Our name (or names) for primary reality — our *living* creator, sustainer, and end — dictates the health or sickness of our relationship to that which brought us into existence, nourishes and supports us, and receives us when we die. Naming may also determine whether we live in a pro-future or anti-future way, and whether we can even distinguish good and evil.

"God," of course, means different things to different people in different traditions. By offering nuanced spellings — God or Godde — the meaning I intend is this: *Reality with a personality*, not a person outside reality.

What is gained by spelling God with small capital letters or by going back to a spelling left behind some 600 years ago? Just this: an opportunity for each of us to nurture a *personal relationship* to the Nature part of Nature+, not just the + or transcendent aspect. Consider the words of James Hillman, one of the more influential psychologists of the past half-century:

"Loving is a way of knowing and for love to know, it must personify. Personifying is thus the heart's mode of knowing. It is not a lesser, primitive way of apprehending, but a finer one. To enter myth we must personify. To personify carries us into myth."

Nothing, I would argue, is more consequential than how we think of primary reality. Why? Because it matters, ultimately, whether our relationship to the biosphere is characterized by humility or hubris! As renowned systems thinker Gregory Bateson warned decades ago:

“If you put God outside and set him vis-a-vis his creation, and if you have the idea that you are created in his image, you will logically and naturally see yourself as outside and against the things around you. And as you claim all mind to yourself, you will see the world around you as mindless and therefore not entitled to moral or ethical consideration. The environment will seem to be yours to exploit. Your survival unit will be you and your people against the environment of other social units, other races, and the brutes and vegetables. If this is your estimate of your relation to nature and you have an advanced technology, your likelihood of survival will be that of a snowball in hell. You will die either of the toxic by-products of your own hate or simply of overpopulation and overgrazing.”

Anthropocentrism Is Idolatry

“The world we live in is an honorable world. To refuse this deepest instinct of our being, to deny honor where honor is due, to withdraw reverence from divine manifestation, is to place ourselves on a head-on collision course with the ultimate forces of the universe. This question of honor must be dealt with before any other question. We miss both the intrinsic nature and the magnitude of the issue if we place our response to the crises of our planet on any other basis. It is not ultimately a political or economic or scientific or psychological issue. It is ultimately a question of honor. Only the sense of the violated honor of Earth and the need to restore this honor can evoke the understanding and energy needed to carry out the renewal of the planet in any effective manner.” ~ **Thomas Berry**

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The core of my message is simple and can be expressed in both secular and religious ways. In secular language it sounds like this: *Primary reality is primary; human-centeredness is self-terminating.* Said religiously: *Ecology is the heart of theology; anthropocentrism is idolatry.*

Idolatry is nothing so trivial as bowing down to statues or worshipping the wrong god. Idolatry is maintaining an unreal notion of God, one not inclusive of — indeed, synonymous with — that which is necessarily and inescapably *real*. In contrast, an eco-theological or ecosophia perspective encourages lifeways that respect the integrity of the soil, forests, water, and life that in turn give us life. We naturally live as a blessing to posterity.

Human-centeredness is idolatry because it excludes all but a smidgen of reality from matters of ultimate concern. It fosters hubris rather than humility. Anthropocentrism is idolatry because it makes the entire universe little more than a stage upon which the human drama plays out. Therein lies the danger.

Surely, one reason the ancients warned so vociferously against idolatry is because human-centeredness is an insanity our kind cannot survive; it is inherently anti-future. As Edward Goldsmith details in *The Way: An Ecological Worldview*, every sustainable culture that we know of held three things in common: (1) they related to primary reality in a humble, indeed mythic, I-Thou way; (2) they treated the Biosphere+ as the source of all benefits and thus the source of all real and lasting wealth; and (3) they embraced as a sacred responsibility preservation of the health and wellbeing of the body of life and “critical order of the cosmos.” In other words, *God first!* permeated every aspect of culture.

The way home for the prodigal species is to return to this deep and profound intimacy with the living world+.

Why Good People Engage in Great Evil

“For the present to have meaning, it must see the past as legacy and the future as bequest. What makes societies great is not conquest or consumption but their dedication to something grander than themselves.” ~ **William Ophuls**

“We are talking only to ourselves. We are not talking to the rivers. We are not listening to the wind and the climate. Most of the disasters that are happening now are a consequence of that spiritual autism.”

~ **Thomas Berry**

When we trivialize primary reality as an otherworldly clockmaker (Creator) outside a clockwork cosmos (Creation), we contribute — albeit unintentionally — to our species’ demise. When God is either dead or otherworldly, doing evil is almost guaranteed.

It is not just immoral, it is evil to irreparably harm the future for short-term personal or institutional gain. Yet we have a global economic system, supported by governments on every continent and accepted by adherents of every faith, ensuring that it is not only legal to betray posterity; it’s profitable — *highly* profitable. This is precisely what history teaches: when religion fails, greed reigns and economics becomes demonic.

Good and *evil* is discerned, at the very least, by this: how the actions of an individual or group impact the larger community and how those impacts ripple into the future. At the extremes, that which consistently leads to personal wholeness, social coherence, and ecological integrity is *good*, and that which harms or endangers personal wholeness, social coherence, and ecological integrity is *evil*. Granted, shades of gray take up a large swath in between — but if we lose the scale, we lose our bearings. *Unsustainable, after all, is just a bland and deceptive word for evil.*

Our global, industrial-growth economy rewards the few at the expense of the many, measures progress by how fast resources can be turned into waste, and seduces billions to betray the future just by pursuing ‘the good life’. Is this not collective madness? Is this not, in truth, demonic?

Let us now repent of our human-centeredness and return to God. The Great Work of our time is to do whatever it takes to bring forth an economic system that embodies the wisdom of ecology. First and foremost we must shed our addiction to fossil fuels. Rebuilding topsoil, restoring forests, recovering wetlands — returning to balance becomes our sacred duty. The Great Work is a time for letting go of extravagances, for re-localizing, and for rekindling the simple joys of living within the grace limits of this planet.

We are the prodigal species, and this is our way home.

Q&A published one week after the above essay, on October 26, 2017

Q: What is the essence of your message? The most important thing you have to say?

We are living in a time of unprecedented evil, yet we don't see it; we can't see it. Not only has industrial civilization lost the ability to distinguish good and evil, we typically confuse the two and casually treat things that are downright anti-future as good.

Q: Wow, that's a bold claim. Can you give some examples of things that are accepted and standard today that you actually regard as evil?

As I said in my essay, it is not just immoral, it is evil to pursue one's own short-term personal or institutional gain in ways that diminish or destroy the long-term future. Here are some examples...

It is evil to use renewable resources faster than they can be replenished.

It is evil to use nonrenewable resources in ways that harm and rob future generations.

It is evil to introduce substances into the environment that are not food for some other life form.

It is evil to alter the climate and devastate habitats in ways that drive millions of other species to extinction.

All these things, and more, are patently anti-future and thus evil. Yet religion — the one institution charged with the responsibility of naming as “good” that which promotes personal wholeness, social coherence, and ecological integrity, and as “evil” that which diminishes or destroys the same — is asleep at the wheel.

Why? Anthropocentric idolatry.

To speak religiously, if measuring progress and success in human-centered ways casts us out of the Garden, measuring progress and success in GODDE-centered (bio-centric or eco-centric) ways is our way home.

My mentor Thomas Berry regularly reminded us that “The universe is primary; humans are derivative.” In mythic language, “Reality rules—i.e., God is Lord” That’s a fact, not a belief.

When we honor primary reality *as* primary — as more important than us — our species can thrive. But when human wellbeing is put ahead of the health of the air, water, soil, forests, and life, we ensure the condemnation not only of our grandchildren but of generations centuries to come. It turns out that the Judgment Day is real; it’s just not otherworldly.

Q: Can you offer any hope?

Surely! Those of us who sacrifice our privilege, power, and conveniences today for the sake of future generations will be revered not reviled. To my mind, that’s what being a *Christ*-ian means. It’s got nothing to do with “believing in” ancient miracles and supernatural entities so that I get to avoid everlasting torment and go to some special place when I die. It’s got everything to do with whether I continue living in an anti-future (anti-Christian) way, or whether I choose to follow Jesus and live with a commitment to save the future and thereby redeem humanity.

“Deep Sustainability” Resources

See here: <http://thegreatstory.org/sustainability-audios.html> for links to text and audio files...

William R. Catton, Jr.: *Overshoot: The Ecological Basis of Revolutionary Change*

Tom Wessels: *The Myth of Progress: Toward a Sustainable Future*

William Ophuls: *Immoderate Greatness: Why Civilizations Fail; Plato’s Revenge; Sane Polity*

John Michael Greer: *The Long Descent; Dark Age America; Not the Future We Ordered; The Retro Future; Collapse Now and Avoid the Rush; After Progress*

Richard Heinberg: *The End of Growth; Afterburn: Society Beyond Fossil Fuels; A New Covenant with Nature*

Nate Hagens: Youtube — Blindspots and Superheroes; A Guide to Being Human in the 21st Century

Thomas Berry: *The Dream of the Earth; The Great Work; The Universe Story* (w/ Swimme); *The Christian Future and the Fate of Earth*

Joanna Macy: *Active Hope; Coming Back to Life; World as Lover, World as Self*

Bron Taylor: *Dark Green Religion: Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future*

James Howard Kunstler: *The Long Emergency; Too Much Magic*

Robin Wall Kimmerer: *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teaching of Plants*

David Fleming: *Surviving the Future; Lean Logic: A Dictionary for Surviving the Future*

The Dark Mountain Project: *Walking on Lava: Selected Works for Uncivilized Times*

Richard Adrian Reese: *Sustainable or Bust; Understanding Sustainability*

Michael & Joyce Huesemann: *Techno Fix: Why Technology Won’t Save Us or the Environment*

Charles A.S. Hall: *Energy Return on Investment; Energy and the Wealth of Nations* (w/ Klitgaard)

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The Rev. Michael Dowd is a bestselling evolutionary storyteller, eco-theologian, and pro-future evangelist whose work has been featured in *The New York Times*, *LA Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Washington Post*, *Newsweek*, *Discover*, and on television nationally, including CNN, ABC News, and even FOX News. His book, *Thank God for Evolution: How the Marriage of Science and Religion Will Transform Your Life and Our World*, was endorsed by 6 Nobel Prize-winning scientists, noted skeptics and atheists, and by dozens of religious leaders across the theological spectrum. Michael and his science writer, evolutionary educator, and fellow climate activist wife, Connie Barlow, have spoken to 2,200+ groups throughout North America since April 2002.

A former pastor and sustainable communities organizer, Rev. Dowd has delivered two TEDx talks and a program at the United Nations. His commitment to the legacy-work of his colleagues has resulted in two online conversation series: “The Advent of Evolutionary Christianity,” and “The Future Is Calling Us to Greatness,” and recording nearly 1,500 hours of, what he calls, “deep sustainability scripture.” Dowd’s passion for proclaiming a pro-science message of inspiration — what he calls “the gospel of right relationship to Reality” — has earned him the moniker Rev. Reality, as he speaks prophetically in secular and religious settings about our sacred responsibility to future generations. Videos of his most popular sermons and longer programs can be found here. His and Connie’s 2017-18 itinerary can be found here.