

Religion of the Earth

Rev. David E. Bumbaugh

[The Unitarian Church in Summit NJ USA](#)

April 19, 1992

At a conference on the origins of life on earth, held at Princeton in 1969, James Lovelock first presented what has come to be known as the Gaia Hypotheses. This theory, while supported by an array of scientific studies, is relatively simple in concept, taking its name from the ancient Greek Earth Goddess. Lovelock and his colleague, Lynn Margullus, have argued that life does not exist on this planet because of a benign accident. Quite the contrary, the planet, they suggest is a living being which through a variety of natural feed-back mechanisms functions to maintain the conditions necessary for its survival--including temperature, atmospheric content, water systems, mineral resources, etc. By extension, all living things on the planet, however much they may appear to have independent existence, are part of a web of interactive processes by which the life of Gaia, the super organism maintains itself and survives. Nothing is irrelevant in the process, and disruption in one area of the planetary system may force compensatory changes throughout the system. Indeed, the planet may be understood as a single living cell and we and all the dynamic processes which support the planet as part of a web of relationships not unlike the relationships which exist among the parts of our own bodies or within the cells of our bodies.

While the main-line scientific community has remained skeptical about Lovelock's thesis, a number of circumstances have occurred which have served to lend weight and credence and a sense of urgency to the Gaia Hypothesis. In the years since 1969, the human race has become profoundly aware of its ability to damage the living organism that is the earth. We have learned that our activities have damaged the ozone layer--that protective shield which reflects and absorbs harmful radiation from the sun and keeps it from penetrating to the surface of the earth. We have learned that the average temperature of the planet has been rising over the course of decades as a consequence of human activity. And suddenly we are drawing analogies between the living human body and the living planet as a whole: we refer to the rain forests as the lungs of the planet, and worry about what it will mean that their capacity has been so greatly reduced. Whether or not the scientists have accepted the Gaia Hypothesis, increasing numbers of people have embraced it and find in it a new way of relating to the earth.

I submit to you that this concept of the earth as a living organism, in which all existing things play a crucial and necessary role serves to challenge profoundly the religion and the ethics of the world into which most of us were born. Nowhere is this challenge more clearly and profoundly represented than in our modest and confused response to the ecological disaster which is threatening the planet. But ironically, the efforts of

environmental groups to respond to that challenge are often only modestly successful and painfully inadequate precisely because they are also rooted in those same assumptions and in that same world-view which has led us into crisis.

Thus, most of us still assume that the reason to be concerned over the environment is because of the likely impact of ecological disaster on the human community. From the very beginning, the environmental movement has been rooted in a desire to keep some portion of the planet wild, to conserve wilderness so that future generations will be able to see what it once was like and experience its regenerative powers; to save endangered species because we do not begin to understand those creatures and what role they play in the scheme of things and so we cannot know what unexpected benefits they may have to offer the human community; to attend to the disappearance of species because, like the canary in the coal mine, they may be serving as an early warning to us of dangers we cannot yet apprehend; to care about changes in climate and environment because of the implication of those changes for ourselves or for future generations.

All of these responses have one thing in common: they start from the assumption that the world has significance precisely in terms of how it relates to us and to the human venture. We need to preserve the earth because of our spiritual, economic, practical need, not because the earth has any inherent worth or inalienable claim on us. What is more, our sympathies are engaged most fully by those creatures closest to us in the evolutionary line. We worry about whales and dolphins, with their large mammalian brains. We give little thought to the white shark or the moray eel. Our passions are engaged over seal pups with their enormous eyes, but the cockroach draws little sympathy from us. We sometimes commit ourselves to concern for sentience--for example, become vegetarians for this reason, as if we could know that self-consciousness is limited to animals and as if a calf is of greater worth in the planetary scheme of things than a carrot or a rutabaga. And, of course, there is virtually no one who will shed a tear at the annihilation of the small pox bacillus or of the AIDS virus.

This is a clear reflection of a culture which sees the earth and its creatures in terms of instrumental values. This is a clear reflection of a culture which believes there is an established hierarchy in the universe, and since the disappearance of God, and the failure of a superior, extra-terrestrial intelligence to contact us, we must assume that the human race, is at the very top of the ladder. This is a clear reflection of a culture which believes there is an evolutionary purpose in the universe, that all the groaning and travailing since the beginning of things has aimed at producing us, and therefore value is determined by how close to us on the evolutionary scale a creature is, or how much that creature contributes to our physical or emotional or spiritual well-being, or how profoundly that creature threatens our existence. Human beings are curiously abstracted from the natural world, in order that they may function as the measure of all things.

The Gaia hypothesis would seem to be suggesting a different kind of religious perspective--one which begins by erasing the dualism of the human and the

natural worlds. The Gaia hypothesis argues that there is only one world and that it is, fundamentally an egalitarian world. Each part of the living planet is important to every other part. All parts of the planet interact to body forth a community of life, and therefore, a religious vision which is adequate cannot begin by assuming that people are more important than any other animal, that animals are more important than plants, that plants are more important than microbes, et cetera ad infinitum. The concept of relative importance is ethically and spiritually inadequate in the world in which we now find ourselves. It is increasingly clear that only a religious vision which seeks to embrace the biosphere is sufficient to the world in which we live. And that vision must generate an ethic which seeks ultimately to sustain the web of relationships which constitute the living planet, Gaia. It will be an ethic which understands, as Warwick Fox suggests in his book, *TOWARD A TRANSPERSONAL ECOLOGY*, that not only do individuals exist in relationship, but that their individuality, their uniqueness as individuals, their special worth and irreplaceable nature are consequences of those relationships in which they are embedded and out of which they emerge. It will be an ethic which sees existence organically, not mechanically, and which defines as good that which serves and sustains the organic relationship.

I find that this is a religious perspective so distant from the world with which I am familiar and comfortable, that it is almost impossible for me to get my mind around it, to understand what it implies for me and how I might live my life in terms of that perspective. To begin with, I must embrace a much larger sense of self, the most expansive sense of self it is possible for me to envision, understanding that I am an expression of the universe itself. And in light of that enlarged self-understanding, I am forced to question whether a thing can be good for me, ultimately, if it is harmful to the larger reality. In short, if I take seriously the ethical stance implied by reverence for the earth, for the interdependent web of being, I am required to expand my self identity, my circle of concern and ethical responsibility to its widest possible circumference, embracing within the moral universe all of existence, including that which is least like me and which appears to threaten me.

To some degree, at least, ecological struggles within our culture are always inconclusive, with even the smallest gains requiring constant monitoring and defense, and with nothing ever finally settled, precisely because the ethics of the ecology movement are the ethics of the patriarchal system, based upon the assumption of the primacy of the human community. Therefore, as the needs of that community shift and change, the value and worth of the natural world also shifts and changes, and a decision which saved the spotted owl yesterday can be reversed tomorrow, precisely because that creature has no intrinsic worth, no legal, moral or ethical value apart from its value to the human community. Thus, when our need is great enough, there is no barrier to prevent us from cutting the last tree from the face of the earth.

The notion that the planet is alive, that every living thing is part of the community of relationships which sustain the life of the planet, demands of us a new concept

of the intrinsic worth and integrity of the biosphere. That new concept must embrace a number of radical changes. Thus, for example, the patriarchal dream of changing the world, of leaving our mark upon it must be subordinated to a dream of living in peace with the world, and leaving behind us a world which is at least as vital and as rich as we found it. The ancient dream of escaping death, of living forever, must be abandoned, not only because it is impractical but because it keeps us from embracing death as an essential part of the process by which the planet lives. We must embrace a religious vision which allows us to celebrate the birth of a child and the death of an elder with the same sense that each is as it should be, that each contributes to the ongoing life of the planet. We must abandon the notion of evolutionary progress--not of evolution, but of evolutionary progress, the notion that more complex is better, that most recently evolved is better, that sentience is better, that reason is better. Rather, we must embrace an ethic which sees each existing thing, at each moment of time, as the full and proper expression of itself, containing both past and future, but not a pathway to something else, not a lesser form of something else, not a defective version of something else, but a part of the life of the planet and its web of relationships. Indeed, it is not the species, but the ecosystem which is the focus of evolution. Finally, we must understand that the sacred does not exist apart from the earth, but is of the earth, earthy. Whatever the holy may be, it is expressed in the web of relationships by which this Great Mother, Gaia, sustains and bodies forth existence.

I want to be clear, that I do not fully know what the dimensions of the religion of the earth, the ethics of the web might be. I know that it is not possible for us to live on this earth without impacting the earth and the other creatures who are also expressions of the planet. The very notion of an interactive reality assumes that everything impacts everything else. And it would be naive to believe that all interactions will be benign and pleasant. A pine tree kills the grass beneath it. A beaver changes the ecology of the valley and the stream when he builds his dam. Wind and rain erode hills, and silt diverts streams. The AIDS virus destroys its host. A romantic faith which dreams of a natural world with no changes, no catastrophes, no pain or sorrow is an illusion. On the other hand, the promethean vision of being able to control nature and thus prevent change, catastrophe and pain is equally an illusion. What we are required to do is to develop a sense of proportion. What we are required to do is to reverence this planet and its myriad forms, to be sensitive to the impact we have upon the planet and our fellow creatures, to inflict no needless pain, destruction or change, to cease declaring wars of annihilation upon other living beings.

As I have already confessed, I am not at all certain how it will be to live by the ethics of the interdependent web. I suggested earlier that it is critical that we develop a sense of the larger self if we are to find the way to live religiously within the interdependent web of all existence. If we fail to find that vision, that sense of being part of something that is infinitely larger and infinitely smaller than we, something alive and rich and important in its own right, we may never cure the profound sickness which has made us a cancer upon the body of Gaia, the

living earth. Whether we succeed may well depend upon whether we are able to turn from the religious traditions in which our culture was born and embrace a new religious vision.

I am increasingly convinced that the values represented by Western religion, embedded in the Judeo-Christian tradition, are simply not compatible with the value system represented by the image of the interdependent web. The Judeo-Christian tradition is rooted in a conviction that this earth, this living web in which we exist is meaningless in and of itself, and acquires meaning only by the act of God and the activity of human beings. The Judeo-Christian tradition is rooted in a conviction that the world is essentially hierarchical in its organization, and its ethics are based upon duty to higher authority rather than responsibility to the relationships in which we are enmeshed. The Judeo-Christian tradition is rooted in an ambition for perfection, for the infinite which makes life a constant contest, an endless scramble to escape our foibles and to attain the status of grace, even though that requires that we deny our fundamental nature. The Judeo-Christian tradition is committed to abstractions and absolutes which demand that we be prepared to sacrifice the immediate for the absolute. The Judeo-Christian tradition leaves each of us standing alone and naked in the universe, confronting an implacable, jealous and judgmental God who claims to love and accept us as we are, but who, in fact, makes that love contingent upon our obedience, our subservience, our ability to live up to his expectations.

All of these values are opposed to the values implicit in the web, and that is why a new religious vision--a religion of the earth--is central to our ability to respond to the challenges of our time. What, then, might the religion of the earth be like? It is obvious that the received traditions must be radically rethought. As Charlene Spretnak says, in her contribution to *REWEAVING THE WORLD, THE EMERGENCE OF ECOFEMINISM*, "...the moral systems of Western ethics and religion are...largely devoid of ecological wisdom. The crying need right now--if we have any hope of charting a postmodern, posthumanist, and postpatriarchal transition to the Age of Ecology--is for a new philosophical underpinning of civilization. We need an ecophilosophy that speaks the truth with great immediacy in language that everyone can understand."

What, then, is the truth we need to know
if we would spin a life in the web?

It is this:

No value system is adequate
which places human beings at the center of the universe.
We exist, we achieve our individuality
because of the web of relationships
in which we are held.

Meaning is to be found in the relationships
and the challenge is to sustain the relationships
and the sacred emerges out of the relationships.

Within the living web
there is inescapable democracy;
there can be no chosen creature,
no elite being for whom the universe was created.

Within the living web
we exist for each other,
in each other,
through each other.

No part of the web is unimportant
or of less importance
or less evolved
or more primitive.

All share the same honorable designation:
participant in the web of life,
sustaining it and sustained by it.

No value system is adequate
which fails to understand that in a relational universe
and each living form incarnates
the limits for another.

We seek to sustain and extend our lives,
to find peace and joy and meaning and purpose
without breaching the limits,
for once the limits have been breached
we do not save ourselves,
we put the entire web at risk.

Enlightenment within the web
consists of acknowledging
the gossamer strands which bind all to all
in inescapable interdependence,
surrendering the illusion of control,
entering into the spontaneity of a dance
choreographed by the interactive participants,
giving up the drive to achieve coercive power,
discovering the greater power of cooperation.

Enlightenment within the web
consists in refusing to do
that which would injure the whole,
in turning back those powers
which cannot be exercised without threatening the whole,
in refusing to act without thought
for the well-being of the whole
to the seventh generation.

Enlightenment within the web

presents a vision of death
as acceptable and appropriate,
not as a door into another existence
but as the final gift we give
to sustain the integrity of the web.

The religion of the earth
is rooted in the knowledge
this living earth is our mother, our great parent.
There is nothing we need be or do
to obtain our birthright.
To spin a life in the interconnected web,
we need only take our place
in the ongoing dance
in a universe in which all things
from motes to galaxies
dance.