

Earth Foolishness, Earth Wisdom¹

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A [person] might own a whole country and be a stranger in it. I saw that if I belonged here, which I felt I did, it was not because anything here belonged to me. If I belonged *in* this place it was because I belonged *to* this place.

Wendell Berry, in *Recollected Essays, 1965-1980*²

Sermon

In 1974, I took a geography class in college, called “Culture, Environment, and Change.” My teacher’s name was Thomas Edison. (I wonder if he ever forgave his parents for naming him after the famous inventor.) Mr. Edison taught us to question common assumptions that we took for granted. He taught us new ways of looking at reality. It was my first introduction to ecology.

Ecology is more common now. It refers to the study of interrelationships among living organisms and their environment. Ecology views the earth as a living system, rather than a collection of individual objects to be studied separately. We learned Barry Commoner’s Four Laws of Ecology:

1. Everything is connected to everything else.
2. Everything must go somewhere.
3. Nature knows best.
4. There is no such thing as a free lunch.

I remember an example Mr. Edison used to challenge our assumptions. It was about sacred cows. Because of religious beliefs, Hindus in India would not eat cows, despite the fact that so many people were starving. Americans saw this as foolish. But a closer look revealed that the cows in India had many uses. Their milk was a renewable source of food. They were used for traction in plowing and hauling. Their dung was used for cooking fuel and fertilizer. When they died of natural causes, their meat and hides were used. In fact, the Hindu system was more efficient in terms of energy production and consumption than the U.S. system of using cattle for beef. What seemed to us to be foolish was in fact wisdom.

Rachel Carson’s 100th birthday was celebrated on May 27, 2007. The publication of her book, *Silent Spring*, in 1962, launched the modern environmental movement. Rachel was studying the effects of pesticides on humans and animals. Although her work ultimately led to a ban on DDT, chemical companies continue to put hundreds of new synthetic chemicals on the market each year. By 1992, U.S. production of carbon-based synthetic chemicals was over 435 billion pounds or 1600 pounds per capita.³ Around the world there are over 100,000 chemicals on the market.

Just looking around my house, for example, I notice all the ways that plastics are now indispensable to daily life. From my toothbrush to the keys of my computer; from the construction of our air filters to the bottles that hold my natural vitamins. Research shows that plastics are constantly leeching chemicals into our food and air and water. Bill Moyer’s powerful

documentary, *Trade Secrets*, released in 2001, exposed the profit incentive of chemical corporations to keep secret the dangers of their chemicals to the workers and the public.

Only a small fraction of these chemicals have been adequately tested for their effects on living beings. Many are implicated in cancers and disruptions of animal and human fertility. No matter where we live, every human being on earth is carrying chemical residue in our body fat.⁴ Some of the highest concentrations are among the Inuit people far away from industrial society in the Arctic Circle.⁵ It is children who are most at risk, because they are at the most sensitive stage of human development.

Everything is connected to everything else. Everything must go somewhere. If we put chemicals into the environment, they will go into our bodies. We seem to be getting smarter and smarter in our technical ability. But we still don't live according to the four laws of ecology. Is this wisdom or foolishness?

Alongside pollution by chemicals, there is a litany of other environmental hazards: nuclear weapons and nuclear waste, holes in the ozone layer, depletion of soil from modern agriculture, fresh water shortages, loss of forests and other habitat destruction; and one that has moved to the forefront of concern—global warming.

Just this week, even President Bush is suddenly acting as if he is a leader in the fight against global warming—this despite the fact that the U.S. has been a major obstacle because of his refusal to sign on to the Kyoto Protocols. I better not get started on George Bush's effect on the environment. But there is one thing that I can't forget. Early in his administration, one government official was quoted as saying, "We must balance the needs of the environment with the needs of human beings." As if these needs were two very separate and opposing concerns. This is how we have been conditioned to think of ourselves: human beings over here on one side; the earth, the environment, nature, over there on the other side.

In the debate about global warming, one economist argued that we need not worry much about its effects on the economy. He claimed that the only sector of the economy that is strongly influenced by the climate is agriculture, which contributes only three percent of the U.S. Gross National Product. He seems to suggest that if the crops fail, people could eat the ninety-seven percent of the GNP that remains.⁶

Unfortunately, this is no joke. Our economy is based on an unsupportable belief in the separateness of humankind from the natural world. Historian Lynn White links this dualistic thinking with our Judeo-Christian heritage.⁷ The creation story in Genesis reads that "God blessed the humans and said to them: be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and master it; and rule over every living thing on the earth." Humanity was seen as separate from—and more important than—the earth, and many argued that it was God's will that humans exploit nature for their own purposes.

Even when these explicitly religious beliefs were abandoned by some, the underlying assumption about the relationship of humans to nature remained. Our modern economies, whether capitalist or socialist, were built upon the exploitation of natural resources as raw

materials for industry. They were built upon the understanding of humans as the conquerors of the natural world.

And so our environmental problem is also a spiritual problem. Even that word *spirit* gets caught in the crossfire. In the dualistic world view, *spirit* is that which is separate from the material world. But in a holistic world view, *spirit* is understood as that energy which animates and interweaves the material world—the life force itself.

There are people of many religions who are now trying to shape ecological spiritualities. An ecological spirituality starts with a new or renewed vision of humanity's relationship to the earth. The heart of this work is to rediscover our kinship with the earth and all its creatures, to remember that we are all connected. Unitarian Universalism affirms this truth in our seventh principle. We call it "the interdependent web of all existence, of which we are a part."

How do we go about reclaiming our awareness of our connection to the earth? One source of learning for me came in a novel by Chickasaw writer, Linda Hogan, called *Solar Storms*. There is a stereotype about Indian people, that they are all very connected to the earth. But what this novel explores is first of all brokenness, and the path to healing between people and the earth.

Her main character, Angel, is a young woman who had been separated from the Native community of her birth, and raised in foster care after being abused by her mentally ill mother. Angel comes back to her relatives, and then the family makes a journey to their ancestral lands in the north of Canada. Something awakens for her there.

She says,

"A part of me remembered this world... it seemed to embody us. We were shaped out of this land by the hands of gods. Or maybe it was that we embodied the land. And in some way I could not yet comprehend, it also embodied my mother, both of them stripped and torn. ...My heart and the beat of the land, the land I should have come from, were becoming the same thing."⁸

Angel's family had returned to their homeland because it was being threatened with hydro-electric development. She speaks of how the bonds between the land and the people had been broken by the developments of many years. This was no pristine wilderness, or unspoiled scenery to which she was responding. The land was under assault, and they felt a responsibility to fight for its protection.

For several years, I was active in the real-life struggle of the Cree, Inuit and Innu people against hydroelectric development in Northern Quebec. The traditional way of life for these peoples was one of hunting and fishing and gathering. In my ignorance, I had imagined small bands of people roaming over vast wilderness areas at random, looking for game. What I learned was different.

Each small family band had very specific territory--certain rivers and waterways, certain areas whose terrain was utterly familiar to them, whose beavers were counted by them, where

trap lines had been set out for generations. When the LaGrande project was built in 1970, those beloved lands were flooded, and lost to them, with their ancestors' graves, their memories, and medicines, and stories. I learned that even the migrating birds try to return to the very sedges from which they departed the previous season. They, like the Cree, had lost their homes.

In Linda Hogan's story, one of Angel's relatives through marriage was a Chickasaw from Oklahoma. She had also come to help in the struggle. Angel talks about how the land in the far north was different for her. She was not indigenous to that land. The land loved her, "but it did not tell her the things it told the rest of us. It kept secrets from her."⁹

Through these stories I began to understand how making relationship with the earth was not just about loving the planet in general, but about knowing and loving a particular place, a particular river or hill or peninsula. And this was painful, because I knew that I did not have a family connection to the land where I was living. During the last hundred fifty years, my ancestors were migrating. For four generations, each of my foremothers moved from the land of her mother before her, and so did I. Perhaps this migration of so many people is part of what has made us feel separate from the rest of nature.

I live in North Yarmouth now. If I walk in the local cemeteries, none of my ancestors are buried here. No familiar ghosts recognize me or call my name. I am not indigenous to this place. When we pursue a spirituality of relationship to the earth, we begin to realize the depth of our brokenness from all beings.

But this is not to say that we cannot begin to restore that connection—only that the first steps may include a painful awakening. As Wendell Berry reminds us, it is a spiritual ambition to belong to a place, and requires enormous labor. But the land does open its heart to us, when we make a commitment to restore what we have lost. Who among us has not stood in amazement at a starlit sky, or delighted in the spring flowers? Our awe and wonder at the beauty of the earth are a source of energy for restoring and reweaving the broken threads.

Because I know that I am never separate from the earth, I have the courage to keep trying to live in a closer harmony. In the story, the elder Tulik tells Angel, "Here a person is only strong when they feel the land. Until then a person is not a human being."¹⁰

To feel the land, we must go outside. One of the ways I first felt at home in Maine was just to sit outside on a blanket at my house, and watch the birds that lived in the trees. It felt even better when Margy and I planted three forsythia bushes and put our hands in the dirt. There is a woods in our neighborhood that was set aside as conservation land. I have been taking walks there this spring, and this past week discovered dozens of pink lady slippers in bloom. My walks are weaving small threads of familiarity. I am beginning to make a history. Next spring, I will be looking for these lady slippers and the other wildflowers whose names I do not know. There is joy in each recognition.

But some of the work is more frustrating. As we make a connection to our small piece of land, we also wrestle with the ways our culture is not there yet. Some of you have heard about our septic system issues—Margy and I were told we needed a new leach field, and early on a plan

was designed that would not require cutting our beautiful maple trees in the front yard. But the only option was to cut three other smaller trees in the back. Septic systems aren't really that horrible, except for the fact of cutting trees, and that the tanks have to be pumped and the waste taken somewhere else every few years. Remember the second principle of ecology—everything must go somewhere.

We began to wonder whether there might be more sustainable alternatives. Ideally, all our waste would return to the soil on which we make our homes. So I began to research composting toilets. It seemed like it might be a good option for us, until I had a conversation with someone who actually had one in their house. He described it as similar to having a pet. It was worthwhile in certain ways, but it required considerable maintenance; there were accidents, which were always messy and smelly; it used a lot of electricity; and it was a difficult system to keep in balance on the small scale of a residence. Not to mention it is made of plastic.

Margy and I painfully decided that such a high-maintenance system would not be sustainable for our household. But that same day I had a premonition, or maybe it was just a well-visualized hope—that someday, there would be septic systems designed where composting was part of it, and graywater was routed into moisture for gardens and trees, and an average person could just call the local septic company, to come and install it, just like they do with the currently available systems.

The thing I realized was this—our whole culture is part of the brokenness, and individually we can only do so much to solve the problem. We can't all be experts on septic systems. But what if there were a team of scientists—with ample government funding—working on this very issue of creating a cycle of waste management that enriched our soil, rather than polluted our rivers and lakes and oceans? If I could imagine it, without any real expertise, it seems like it shouldn't be that hard for smart people to create.

But it won't happen until as a culture we undo our dualistic thinking, and embrace our unity with the earth. Sometimes environmentalists say we are trying to “save the earth.” But really, the earth will survive in some form no matter what we do. What we are really trying to do is save humanity and our fellow earth inhabitants—we are trying to save our children and our future.

Linda Hogan tells us, that for her people, the purpose of ceremony is to remember that all things are connected. Maybe that is what we need too. She writes: “It is the mending of a broken connection between us and the rest. ...We make whole our broken-off pieces of self and world. ...The ceremony is a point of return. It takes us toward the place of balance, our place in the community of all things. But it is not a finished thing. The real ceremony begins where the formal one ends, when we take up a new way, our minds and hearts filled with the vision of earth that holds us within it, in compassionate relationship to and with our world.”¹¹

It is only our experience of the link between all beings that can give us the vision, courage and power to face the environmental struggles ahead of us.

Closing Words From Linda Hogan, *Dwellings*

“By the end of the ceremony, it is as if skin contains land and birds. The places within us have become filled... The land merges with us. The stones come to dwell inside the person. ...We who easily grow apart from the world are returned to the great store of life all around us, and there is the deepest sense of being at home here in this intimate kinship.”

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² From *Spiritual Literacy: Reading the Sacred in Everyday Life*, by Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat, (New York: Scribner, 1996), pp. 105-106.

³ Theo Colburn, Dianne Dumanoski, & John Peterson Myers, *Our Stolen Future*, (New York: Plume, 1997), pp. 137-8.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 240.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 107, 196.

⁶ *You Can't Eat GNP: Economics as if Ecology Mattered*, by Eric Davidson, a senior scientist at the Woods Hole Research Center, (Cambridge, MA: Perseus Publishing, 2000), p. 7.

⁷ In *Voices of Hope in the Struggle to Save the Planet*, Marjorie Hope & James Young, (New York: Apex Press, 2000), p. 86-87.

⁸ *Solar Storms*, (New York: Scribner, 1995), p. 228, 236.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 240.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 235.

¹¹ *Dwellings*, (New York: Norton, 1995), pp. 40-41.