

I N BEAUTY WE WALK

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A recent issue of *Earth Ethics* contained two proposals for action on global environmental problems. The first was a draft "*Earth Charter*" prepared for presentation to the United Nations, the second a "*Joint Appeal in Religion and Science*" prepared by leaders of major American religious denominations. Both proposals suggested valuable social, economic, scientific, legal and security actions to respond to the escalating environmental problems of our planet. It was curious, however, that ***neither proposal suggested religious or spiritual action to respond to these serious problems!***

There has to be a spiritual dimension to any problem - environmental or otherwise. If we loved or even cared seriously about others, other forms of life, and the forces of nature that make our lives possible, how could destructive actions even be conceived?

Even apparently unrelated social problems have an important spiritual dimension. Poverty, crime, drugs, child abuse and mental illness are all diseases of the spirit. They all arise out of lack of respect, self-esteem, being needed and useful, or valuing others. They cannot be resolved without dealing with those root causes.

In our own lives there is a common tie of our patterns of excess material consumption to lack of personal or spiritual fulfillment. How much less would we spend on beauty aids if we had the smiles of confidence and happiness on our faces? How much less aimless consumerism would occur if we focused on more direct and sure ways to attain happiness and self-esteem? How much more for others, how much less impact on the earth?

Our religious leaders, like virtually everyone else in our culture, seem to have abdicated belief in a *sacred* world and in the importance of insisting that our actions arise within a spiritual framework. It is sad that this is occurring today, right when the forces which gave us a secular world are demonstrating the need and value of a sacred one!

It is hard to comprehend the fundamentally different nature and operation of a sacred world, where every breath is supported and directed to the health and well-being of the entire universe. The difference is greater, even, than between an American "individual" decision-making process and a Japanese "consensus" process where the needs and input of every person create, and then support, a decision once made.

People of other cultures have in the past almost invariably inhabited such a sacred world - a world in which their every thought and action is immersed in an unbroken web of bonds. We have seen the destruction which follows where those bonds have been broken.

Many feel that "science" has disproved and freed us from such traditional beliefs. Yet rather than disproving the need and value of a sacred world, our modern questioning and searching has more and more clearly invoked the need and rightness and value of making ourselves part of such a world.

Contact with other cultures and religions has undermined the *singularity* of the claims of individual religions. It rings hollow today to hear that there is only one correct

name for God or only one right or proper or valid path to spiritual growth. Closer contact with other traditions has given us instead the *more valuable* knowledge of the universality, commonality, richness and variety of religious and spiritual experience throughout the world. It has given us the knowledge that again and again when needed, human culture has brought forth an individual who can embody and convey to others the needed roots of spiritual growth.

Archaeological study has unquestionably "disproved" the origin stories of many cultural and spiritual traditions. It has, however, also proven the astounding accuracy of oral histories and traditions extending back thousands of years. We have to acknowledge today that origin stories are always the *guesses* of a culture, from the limited knowledge they have, of what might have come before. Our modern "scientific" creation stories are no different. They get disproved, modified, and evolved every few years as the expanding boundaries of our understanding encapsulate the old.

Where we have erred is where spiritual traditions are not living enough in our actual experience so that we can separate belief in them from belief in historical stories that usually are joined to them. People have consequently defended the absoluteness of an ancient origin story because they felt if they didn't defend their belief in that, they couldn't also defend their belief in their central spiritual tradition when examined by the same primitive "modern" analytic tools. The people who "disproved" the origin stories also consequently concluded that there was no more basis for the spiritual beliefs than for the origin stories.

But what *do* we see today? Our modern world has revealed an even more awesome universe than known by our ancestors. It has shown that we share the commonality of language and communication with elephants, bees, ants, whales, trees and rocks. It has shown that we share the wonders of birth, life, and death with stars, galaxies, and the stones under our feet. It has shown that our own bodies and our planet are created from the ashes of long dead stars. We are seeing revealed an origin story for our time which is even more wonderful, humbling, and empowering than any of the past. Our sciences are closing the circle on the past it once challenged. It is coming to affirm the validity and need of sacredness, of spiritual growth and of action bounded and guided by the health of the seamless web of interconnection and interaction which permeates our universe.

It is time to reaffirm the sacredness of our world, and with it, the role of spiritual perspective in resolving problems - environmental or otherwise.

Over the last four years I have taken part in a series of conferences in the U.S. and in Japan dealing with sacred places and the spirit of place. At these conferences, representatives of more than twenty Native American tribes and nations, along with Christian, Buddhist, Shinto and Ainu leaders, have worked with physicists, architects, lawyers, geomancy practitioners, and environmental activists to study the interaction between people and place.

We have found that significant geophysical and psychological phenomena underlie those interactions. Our places, like all our actions, mirror and reflect back to us our beliefs - both good and bad. We found that where places are held sacred and honored, they give power and meaning, and a sense of belonging to us and a rooted health to our existence. Where we do not or cannot hold places sacred, our health, our community, and our land suffer.

As a result of our research, we find it impossible to deny the existence of sacred places, their origins, and their effects upon people. Having to acknowledge the sacredness of some places, we find we have to acknowledge the sacredness of *all* places and *all* life, and to acknowledge the inevitability of honoring them in our lives and actions. We have to acknowledge that this in turn draws us from a secular into a sacred society with all that this implies.

We find a sacred world to be the necessary root to a sustainable and viable society. In rereading the U.S. Constitution, we find that it does not decree the secular nation which has evolved in this century, but rather guarantees us the freedom to build our lives upon a spiritual basis without governmental interference.

How do our lives and our society change when we acknowledge a sacred basis to it? What actions become incumbent upon us from a spiritual perspective in response to our perceived "environmental" problems?

We find first that "crisis" is the wrong way to view almost any situation. "Crisis" is a bureaucratic term. It says we should ignore all else and devote our full attention and resources to responding to one thing. Prime tenants of an environmental perspective, however, are the *interconnectedness* of all things, acknowledgement that any situation has *multiple* causes, and that any response to a situation has multiple and far-flung effects.

All of our actions and beliefs and dreams are interwoven. When we find that a basic change is needed in how we do things, our first assumption needs to be that *all* of our beliefs, actions and institutions need to be reexamined and probably adjusted. They all derive from and reinforce the same basic patterns, and a shift in those patterns will likely require a shift in *all* parts of our lives - not a "crisis" focus on only one strand of the web.

We find, when we look at our lives and society from a spiritual perspective, that both our social institutions and our individual actions are frequently counterproductive.

Look, for example, at what the British economist E.F. Schumacher found in assisting the government of Burma after World War II. Schumacher recognized the differences and effectiveness incumbent in an economics which supported the spiritual beliefs of Buddhism as opposed to the conventional secular economics which has grown up in our century, and outlined it's nature.

"Buddhism", Schumacher said, "takes the point of view that work has positive and essential function. It gives us a chance to utilize and develop our abilities, to overcome our ego-centeredness by working with others in a common task, and to produce the essential goods and services needed for a becoming existence. Work is not a thing to be eliminated, nor labor something to be "saved". He quotes J.C. Kumarappa, "If the nature of work is properly appreciated and applied, it will stand in the same relation to the higher faculties as food is to the physical body."

"We thus", Schumacher continues, "need to clearly distinguish between two kinds of mechanisms. One which gives us greater opportunity to enhance and use our skill and power is a tool. One which turns the human work over to a mechanical slave, leaving us in a position of having to serve the slave, is a machine, and to be avoided."

Buddhist economics, he suggests, considers production and consumption not as an end in itself, to be maximized, but to be a *means* to human satisfaction, and thus something

to be *minimized*. Conventional economics would consider a large expenditure on transportation and health services as a sign of prosperity. Buddhist economics would question instead what bad land use patterns brought about such a need for transportation, and would wonder whether the health service expenditures represented unhealthy living conditions and patterns.

Reexamining our own patterns, we would, for example, look at vacations and travel and tourism in a very different way. Our work, to begin with, should leave us satisfied and content with what we have produced, not physically and emotionally exhausted and needing "recreation". We should "make where we ARE a paradise". Putting energy into making where we live and work a physically, emotionally and spiritually satisfying place would avoid the need to search to the ends of the earth for novelty and satisfaction.

We would see conventional tourism as another kind of "taking" - one which harms both the places and people visited and the visitors as well. We would look at "vacations" as a time for renewal, for bringing ourselves into mutually enriching contact with places, people, and experiences which can offer deepening of our humanity, spiritual growth, and enhancement of our physical and emotional well-being.

Giving, we would discover, has a totally different economics than buying and selling. When we *give* our time or possessions to someone, we do it because we feel better having done so. When we are given some thing or some help we need, we feel grateful because it was something we couldn't take care of by ourselves. Everyone gains, and feels good towards each other. Buying and selling, however, we are always suspicious and uncertain whether the other person is taking advantage of us or whether what we are buying is worth what we are paying for it. We frequently end up with negative feelings, or the equally unhealthy feeling that we "got a steal". Giving ends up with gain for everyone, and we don't even have to pay taxes on it!

Such new perspectives help us see that spiritual actions are not only possible but *vital* in dealing with environmental problems. These actions are also necessary to regain competitive economic status in our new global economy. At minimum, they suggest, we can:

- * *Affirm the sacredness of our world in all our actions.*
- * *Relate to people, places, and things with honor and love.*
- * *Reevaluate what the real goals of our lives are. Determine what appropriate roles work, material goods, self-esteem, and success play in attaining those goals. Eliminate the patterns in our lives which do not well serve those goals, and revise those which do not do so with minimal impact on others and our surroundings.*
- * *Acknowledge our responsibilities to the rest of creation, and the right of the rest of creation to an un-demeaned existence.*
- * *Transform tourism into ways to enhance well-being of people and places.*
- * *Replace current advertising, banking, corporate profit, and tax laws with patterns that support a sacred view of our world. Use the currently wasted resources in these institutions to improve the health and wellbeing of all people and places.*

** Act as advocates for the parts of creation affected by our actions that are unable to speak to their own needs and role.*

** Act as advocates for the Third World - for humane working, living, environmental conditions. Implement actions to help achieve these goals.*

** Provide leadership in improving fuel and energy efficiency, CO₂ reduction, development of renewable resources and recycling of non-renewable ones to reduce conflicts over resources, environmental impacts, and stretch the capacity of those resources to benefit the lives of our whole population.*

** Initiate transition from legalistic to moral and spiritual controls for our actions.*

** Employ consensus decision making which acknowledges the needs and input of all.*

** Curtail our patterns of over-consumption of material goods and resources and depletion of non-renewable resources.*

** Demand and provide opportunity for rewarding, contributing work.*

** Give priority to equity of economic and political power rather than material growth.*

** Enhance global security, initiate military conversion, and use those resources to restore, heal, and enrich damaged places, people and things*

** Ensure that whatever religious practices, institutions and facilities we are involved with reflect, advocate, and provide leadership in achieving these goals.*

The earth we walk is sacred. The life grown of its blood is sacred. We too are sacred - to our selves and to each other. When we come to hold all this sacred, we approach it all with love. We give, and share, and celebrate our oneness with it all. We take only for our *needs*, and acknowledge and satisfy the needs of others. We live sustained and buoyed by that love and that oneness. Meaning fills our lives, our actions, and all that we find revealed in beauty around us as we walk this earth.

The Chinese character for crisis is comprised of both the characters for danger and for opportunity.