

“Fixing” Earth by Fixing Ourselves

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Dear reader, I have a request to make. Please, right now, point with your finger to the natural world—yep, that’s right point to where the natural world is. If you are like most people, you are pointing to some place away from you... some place “out there.” But try this! Turn your finger back toward your very self and consider that you—your pulsating, breathing, animated body—are not separate from, but, are an inseparable part of the natural world, inextricably interwoven with it. That’s right!. You *are* the natural world.

Indeed, our bodies are complex ecosystems inhabited by hundreds of different species, among them animals, bacteria, and fungi. By some estimates the total number of foreign guests harbored in our bodies, especially in the form of bacteria, is greater than the number of cells in our body. The vast majority of these organisms that live on and in us are not harmful and some bring us benefits. The point is this: We, each of us, are ecosystems; our bodies are “habitat,” part of the larger body of life.

Now, allow me to ask you a question: How do you refer to the third planet out from the sun? In response to this question, most people put the definite article “the” in front of an uncapitalized “earth,” calling our planet, “*the* earth.” Consider, now, how it would be if we dropped “the” and simply said “Earth” when referring to our home. After all, when referring to Mars or Venus we don’t say “the Mars” or “the Venus.” This may seem to be a trivial distinction but saying “the earth” implies that “Earth” is somehow an entity separate from us—I am here and Earth is out there. The effect, however subtle, is to distance us from our “source.”

Because we use language to construct our reality, when we talk in terms of “the earth” it is easy to forget that we have literally come forth from Earth. As Michael Dowd has pointed out, “To refer to the literal ground of our being, the source and substance of our life, as ‘the earth’ is to objectify it. Such objectification enables us to continue seeing ‘the earth’ merely as a resource for human consumption.

Seen in this fuller context the expression “Mother Earth” is not cute or fanciful but rather as accurate an expression as I can imagine for what Earth is for us—the womb/incubator of our very lives and the lives of our ancestors and of our children. In this vein, the naturalist Richard Nelson observed: *There is nothing of me that is not Earth, no split instant of separateness, no particle that disunites me from the surroundings. I am no less than Earth itself. The rivers run through my veins, the winds blow in and out with my breath, the soil makes my flesh, the sun’s heat smolders inside me... the life of Earth is my own life. My eyes are Earth gazing at itself* (paraphrased).

Nelson’s imagery—Earth’s winds in our breath; Earth’s waters in our veins—is enchanting. Enchanting, that is, until, with a gasp, like a recipient of a Zen slap, we realize that Earth’s winds and soil and water—and by extension our very breath, body and blood—have become toxified because of our hubris, ignorance and alienation.

My point is simply this: We can fight the good fight for environmental protection and this is all well and good, but political campaigns to “save the environment,” even when successful, will be no more than holding actions and, as such, are not capable of bringing forth the lasting and comprehensive improvements that so many people long for. Something much deeper and more systemic is being called forth in these times. In my view, the big job ahead isn’t to “fix” the environment. Rather, the really monumental task, it is to *fix our thinking*. If we can do this, the rest will be easy.

“Fixing our thinking” in this context means coming to understand that Earth *is* our larger self; that when you walk along a sidewalk or forest path, you are, quite literally, Earth walking. This is not metaphor. You are, I am, each of us is, an expression of Earth. This realization, when we really get it—I mean *get it* in our bellies and bones—brings about a dramatic shift in our personal identity. No longer do we look out at “the earth,” assuming that “the world was made for us.” Instead, we come to understand that “we were made for the world”—that we, along with all other forms of life, are part of Earth’s living body—and that anything we do to Earth we do to ourselves.