

Earth Love

Finding Our Way Back Home

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Comment retrouver son chemin vers le refuge de GAIA? En adoptant les enseignements de l'antique déesse nous revenons à notre point de départ. Plusieurs sources alimentent l'écoféminisme, "l'amour de la Terre" qui nous entraîne vers l'équilibre, au tout et à la reconnexion avec la Terre, notre Mère.

The Earth is Our Mother

How do we find our way back home to the ancient Goddess cultures which embrace the sacredness of all life? How do we move beyond the centuries long disconnection of humans from nature fostered by patriarchal cultures and religions? How do we remember our kinship with the Earth community?

These are questions posed to students in "Goddess Mythology, Women's Spirituality and Ecofeminism" the course I teach at Athabasca University. Earth Love, a concept introduced to me by June Watts, my teacher of sacred circle dance, expresses this paradigm shift. Earth Love celebrates the power and beauty of the Earth, indeed of all life. It carries us forward to wholeness, balance, and reconnection in today's fractured world. Earth Love reminds us: "*The Earth is our Mother, we must take care of her*" (chant by Libana).

This tribute to Earth Love expresses my own journey with Goddess. I am dancing with the Goddess, embodying Her timeless stories, sharing the teachings of ancient cultures which honour the sacredness of women and the Earth. This new / ancient paradigm of ecological awareness is being carried forward by a growing river of understanding. It is fed by many streams: Goddess spirituality, ecofeminism, deep ecology, earth-based spirituality, Indigenous wisdom,

and engaged Buddhism. They speak to us and we listen.... The Earth is sacred. She is alive. She is our Mother.

We have a beautiful / Mother
Her green lap / Immense
Her brown embrace / eternal
Her blue body / everything / we know.
(Walker, cited in Bolen 39-40)

Hearing these words of African American writer Alice Walker inspires me to take better care of this planet I love as my Mother, this planet I love as myself.

What is this paradigm shift, the shift in consciousness that brings us closer to Earth Love? It is "awareness of Earth as a living system... we belong like the cells in a living body" (Joanna Macy and The Great Turning). We are embedded in the sacred Earthbody (Spretnak). "The world is a being, a part of our own body" (Seed 6). We are nature, nature is us, and we are all sacred manifestations of the Goddess (Wells and Leah 123).

Paradigm Shift: The Sacred Earth

Cultural ecofeminism, "the hands and feet of the Goddess in today's world," draws much of its inspiration from goddess mythology (Wells and Leah 113). Unlike the transcendent god of patriarchal religions who is separate from creation, the goddess is immanent in creation, she *is* creation. She is the source of life, death and regeneration. Ecofeminism, which links the domination of Earth and the exploitation of women, presents a vision of life free from all forms of oppression, including "naturism," the

oppression of nature by humans (Wells and Leah 114). Ecofeminism, the union of feminism with deep ecology, looks to transform the destructive relations of humans and nature to a life-affirming culture which respects the web of life (Reuther 13). Deep ecologist Joanna Macy calls on us to move from “the industrial growth society to a life affirming society” (*Joanna Macy and the Great Turning*).

Feminist ecological responses reconnect spirituality with the material world, challenging patriarchy’s false separation of spirit and matter. The subsistence ecofeminist perspective acknowledges the material “connection and continuity between the human and the natural” and recognizes the sacredness of the living Earth (Mies and Shiva 20; Shiva 4). Nature, “the complex web of processes and relationships that provide the conditions for life,” is not separate from or external to our being (Shiva 8). Spirit is the life-force in everything: “we ourselves with our bodies cannot separate the material from the spiritual” (Mies and Shiva 17).

As an activist for the world’s rainforests, deep ecologist John Seed calls on us to embody these understandings. He recalls a moment of “intense, profound realization” while defending the trees: “I knew then that I was no longer acting on behalf of myself or my human ideas, but on behalf of the Earth... on behalf of my larger self, that I was literally part of the rainforest defending herself” (Seed 5).

Feminist-pacifist writer Barbara Deming beckons us to remember this “Spirit of Love” which connects us with the earth.

We are earth of this earth, and we are bone of its bone.
This is a prayer I sing, for we have forgotten this and so
The earth is perishing.
(Deming, reprinted in Seed i)

Practices for Sacred Ecology: Council of All Beings

How do we open to these understandings? How do we come to “hear within ourselves the sound of the Earth crying”? This phrase borrowed from Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh underlies “The Council of All Beings,” a practice developed by Joanna Macy and John Seed in 1985, which “opens us to experiencing our fundamental interconnectedness with all life” (Seed 5). I was fortunate to train with Joanna Macy in 2009, as a facilitator for the Council and “The Work That Reconnects” (see www.theworkthatreconnects.org). My recent experience facilitating “Peace with the Earth,” a sacred ecology workshop in Calgary, has convinced me that, at a visceral level, we are indeed learning how to listen....

I played a heartbeat on my hand drum as we walked ceremonially out into the garden. We gathered in a semi-circle under the branches of a large tree. I spoke as the Guide:

This Council is called to order, on behalf of the future generations.

One by one, the beings introduced themselves through us...

I am a mama grizzly bear protecting her cubs. I am the krill in the ocean. I am the dirt under your feet. I am a tree dying from pollution...

After each being spoke, the circle answered:

We hear you.

As I guided this exercise, I no longer spoke in my human voice: I was the grizzly bear protecting her cubs. I spoke in her voice... and I was angry with the humans!

Other beings spoke:

Hear us, humans. This is our world too. Our days are numbered because of what you are doing. Listen to us.

We took turns listening as humans:

We hear you.

When all the beings had a chance to address the humans and call them to account, I spoke again as the Guide / Grizzly:

The humans are now frightened. Our life is in their hands. If they can awaken to their place in the web of life they will change their ways. What wisdom do you have to offer to the humans?

The beings offered us their insights, their powers, to stop the destruction of the world. We listened and we accepted these gifts with thanks, on behalf of all humans. I picked up my drum again to announce the closing of the Council, as I shifted back into human form.

The Council of All Beings was a transformative experience, a journey into the imaginal realm. It was a communal ritual experience, where we allowed the Earth and other life forms to speak through us. We expanded our human identities into our larger ecological selves. We spoke on behalf of the earth; this is an important step in experiencing the shift in consciousness that Joanna Macy describes in her film (*Joanna Macy and The Great Turning*). Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh reminds us: “Only when we recognize our connectedness to the earth, can real change begin.”

The “Law of Dependent Co-Arising” expresses the fundamental Buddhist concept of “interbeing”: our nonseparateness from a world where “all events and beings are interdependent and interrelated” (Kaza 57; www.joannamacy.net/engaged-buddhism). We are seeing

a convergence of three streams of thought and practice: deep ecology, Buddhism and ecofeminism. Most of all, we are remembering our Earth Love.

When we can truly see and understand the earth, love is born in our hearts. We feel connected. That is the meaning of love: to be at one. Only when we've fallen back in love with the earth will our actions spring from reverence and the insight of our interconnectedness. (Thich Nhat Hanh)

the Earth Mother, who is the first and ultimate giver of life. Our instructions are "*Minobimaatisiwin*—we are to care for her" (Williams and Johnson 252). Nishnaabeg women speak out about their sacred relationship with water, their responsibilities as caretakers of the land and keepers of the water:

We call the Earth "our real Mother," the land as our "Mother's lap" and water the blood of this Mother the Earth ... the Nishnaabeg people view the land,

Indigenous women in Canada have taken the lead in protecting the sacred earth and waters of our land... "Our systems are designed to promote more life (through) resisting, renewing and regeneration." The concept of *mino bimaadiziwin*—continuous rebirth—is a guiding cultural principle of Anishinaabeg society: it's the principle of regeneration.

This is the revolution, the shift in consciousness that needs to happen: "We need to wake up and fall in love with the earth" (Thich Nhat Hanh).

Creative and Spiritual Practices to Embody Earth Love

The creative arts play a crucial role in this expression of Earth Love. "Ecofeminist arts... [are] essential catalysts of change" that (re)connect us with nature and spirit (Orenstein 279). In my own journey with the Goddess, it is through sacred circle dancing that I feel most connected to the earth and all life. Dancing creates a shift in consciousness, it provides a way to embody the peace, wholeness and unity I envision for the world (Leah 74). Our circle dances in Calgary often incorporate rituals to honour the sacred earth and the turning of the year. Ritual practices help to awaken and deepen our spiritual connections with the earth and her continuing cycles of birth, growth, decay, death and regeneration (Starhawk 1989; Spretnak). Rituals help us to remember, to recognize and celebrate the sacredness of everyday life, to show gratitude and respect for our larger family, our nonhuman relations (Sanchez 222). We are all children of the Goddess. "In ritual we can feel our interconnections with all levels of being" (Starhawk 184). Rituals help to restore these sacred relations, allowing the Goddess to come alive in our bodies, minds and spirits.

Themes of interconnectedness with the living earth echo the ancient earth wisdom of First Nations. "The land, and all it has to teach, to give, and all it demands, is what it means to be Indigenous" (Alfred 10). Many Aboriginal cultures express values similar to the ancient goddess cultures. "All females are the human manifestations of

water, plants, animals and sky world as one unified and interdependent living system that works to sustain us all. (Bedard 96)

Through movements such as Idle No More (which began in December 2012), Indigenous women in Canada have taken the lead in protecting the sacred earth and waters of our land. In an interview with Naomi Klein, Anishinaabeg writer and academic Leanne Simpson articulates a clear alternative vision to destruction of the environment: "Our systems are designed to promote more life ... (through) resisting, renewing and regeneration." The concept of *mino bimaadiziwin*—continuous rebirth—is a guiding cultural principle of Anishinaabeg society: it's about the fertility of ideas, bringing forward and acting on your dreams and visions, it's the principle of regeneration (Klein and Simpson 5). Leanne Simpson describes the Round Dances which became a feature of Idle No More events. The dances reflected the joy of building "authentic relationships with the land and the people around you.... Let's make this fun. It was the women who brought that joy" (Klein and Simpson 9).

I was fortunate to be involved in Round Dances organized by Idle No More activists in Calgary in 2013 and 2014. These were expressions of community celebration and renewal, rooted in Indigenous traditions and spirituality, drawing in the youth and elders, native and non-native participants. Simpson goes on to describe how the dances embodied joyful transformation: "Watching the transformative nature of those acts (the Round Dances), made me realize that it's the embodiment, we have to embody the transformation." What were the emotions generated by the

dances? Simpson affirms that it was love, on an emotional, physical and spiritual level. "Like the love I have for my children or the love that I have for the land.... It was a grounded love" (Klein and Simpson 11).

Earth Love: Dancing the World into Being

In the words of Naomi Klein and Leanne Simpson, we are "dancing the world into being." This is the world of Earth Love: the paradigm shift to a life affirming culture; reconnected with our ecological selves, we are one with the sacred earth. Through ritual and dance we are remembering who we are. This is embodied transformation. "We dance to know ourselves and our place in the great scheme of things" (June Watts). "No longer separate from the web of life, *we are Gaia*" (Leah, "Foreword" iii). We have found our way back home.

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