

Re-inhabiting the Earth

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AS WE STAND AT THE EDGE OF THE CENOZOIC ERA WE FACE AN ENORMOUSLY CREATIVE task: the integration of the human species into the Earth community. It all comes down to a question of story. The dominant story of our time is that of the industrial human. It is a narrative of economic progress at the expense of the life systems of the planet and is responsible for the ecological crisis in which we find ourselves. What we need is a larger story, a story that inspires our full creative potential and calls us to participate in the ongoing creation of the universe. But we cannot know our place in the universe story if we do not know our place in the watershed—our place in the ecosystem’s story. The first step in what Thomas Berry identifies as the re-invention of the human species is the discovery and participation in the integral dynamics of our ecosystems.

In Chinese philosophy it might be said of the industrial world that we have fallen out of the flow of the Dao, that underlying ordering principle of nature. In such terms we might consider the primary task of our time as the discovery of a way to move with the Dao rather than against it—a kind of eco-social T’ai Chi. As the old Daoist texts say, “The Tao is that from which one cannot deviate; that from which one can deviate is not the Tao” (Watts, 37). From this perspective it is impossible to be “out of harmony” with the Earth or the cosmos. Like a rivulet separated from the larger flow, however, we can meander off its course, pool and stagnate. It is possible to dam a river but only for a time. Eventually—by some means—the river will be free of its confines and will return to its natural course. On a geologic timescale the dam was no more than a temporary blockage of its natural pattern and impulse to flow. As in T’ai Chi there are movements which block the flow of chi through the body and movements

which enhance its circulation—such movements are those which move with the Dao rather than against it.

This is the quality which we must cultivate in regards to our relationship with the ecosystem. As the Daoists say, “The Dao that can be named is the not the eternal Dao,” and therefore any attempt to directly describe it can do nothing more than circumscribe it, to circle its approximate meaning, and point toward it but never directly at it. How then, without being able to say what it is or deviate from it, should we proceed in flowing with it? As the Dao organizes and orders nature it is directly perceivable within the dynamics of the watershed. To align ourselves with the watershed is to align ourselves with the flow of Dao.

I have chosen to describe five ecological principles toward this end. Each one describes some important dynamic with which we must participate if we are to live in accordance with the Dao of the Earth community. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin wrote that, “to integrate consciousness into a system of the world requires us to envision the existence of a new face or dimension of the stuff of the universe...*to discover the universal underlying the exceptional.*” He goes on to say that, “a natural anomaly is always the exaggeration until it becomes perceptible of a property that is spread everywhere in the imperceptible state. By virtue of the world’s fundamental unity, once a phenomenon has been clearly observed, even only at a single point, its value and roots are simultaneously present everywhere” (Teilhard de Chardin, 24). Responding to this, we might say that these principles are exceptional to ecological systems but point toward the more universal qualities of the Dao—the organizing principles of the universe—and that therefore they have direct relevance on all levels of the cosmos: physical, ecological, cultural, psychological, and spiritual. As gravity is to planetary and stellar bodies, so love is to human beings—each reveals and participates in a cosmological power which Brian Swimme refers to as allurements.

Likewise, it is not merely that humans must make themselves participatory in the principles of the ecological system but that such principles point to an underlying process which lies nascent in the human imagination and spirit. Having a habitat, in this sense, is not only knowing one's place in the ecosystem but knowing one's deeper place in the life community in regards to what unique dimension of the cosmos they embody. It speaks directly to the way in which we find belonging. Similarly, it is not only our bodies which decompose after death. Decomposition is made evident in our psychological and spiritual lives as the mycelia of our wakeful attention digests the compost of our experience to make it fertile for the growth of nourishing spiritual fruits.

All this is to say that we do not merely "fit in" with the dynamics of the ecosystem in a way which suggests that we are like respectful tourists in a foreign land, participating in the cultural norms but still strangers and aliens. Rather, the power of the ecosystem pulses immanently within us so that we *are* the ecosystem in human form, however stagnant in the pool of our own alienation. I describe these ecological principles not merely as a road map but as a self-portrait of unconscious processes of the human being which, if we are to integrate into the currents of the Dao, we must participate in both inwardly and outwardly so that body and mind are synchronized.

Finally, the five principles which I have chosen to describe aim to loosely suggest, as a whole and in wide sweep, the process by which a person's integration into the Dao of the watershed (and thus of the whole Earth and cosmos) might happen. Each is a reality that by participating in we come to know and embody more fully our place in the Earth community.

Succession.

Succession is the process by which ecosystems change. Because the Earth community is in constant flux the systems which constitute it change over time, *succeeding* one another as new plants and new relationships take the place of the old ones. There is a general pattern to this process which tends to occur as a cycle: development—stability—crisis—adaptation (Berkes, 95). Although this process can be seen in any ecosystem over time it is writ largest in the dynamics of the fire adapted forests of the West Coast of North America.

The reason California has such trouble with forest fires is because so much energy has been spent for decades trying to suppress them by the Forest Service. This compression of the creativity of the forest ecosystem has led to an eventual explosion of its sublimated potential. The less minor fires which happen, the more underbrush remains on the forest floor, which leads to wilder and more uncontrollable fires over much larger areas than would naturally be affected. Such suppression is a refusal to participate in the natural cycle of the region.

This process of succession tends to follow a four-fold stage. The first stage is the *development* of the ecosystem. This corresponds to the growth of new species toward a mature size which will allow them to fill their niche. The creativity of the community is exploding with life at this stage, aimed at greater complexity—more species means more interdependence. As the ecosystem reaches maturity it also reaches a state of *stability*. Growth dies down and the energy of the ecosystem is channeled instead toward its maintenance (Callenbach, 128). Eventually there will be a *crisis*, whether human caused or inherent to the patterns of the environment, such as a forest fire which decimates the ecosystem. Seen without an understanding of the holistic nature of the ecosystem this might appear to be a negative event. The fire clears the floor of plant life, but secretly the fire has done a service to the community.

By thinning out the plants it has allowed more sunlight to penetrate into the forest allowing the growth of new life. It has returned various nutrients to the air such as carbon and nitrogen, and ash releases phosphorus and sulfur into the soil. Fire helps the forest fight disease and aids in the opening of the seeds of certain trees such as the redwood. The mature trees, however, remain relatively undamaged which allows a more complex dynamism which involves a steady old growth forest with a succession of other plants on the lower stories of the forest (Callenbach, 59). Because of these fires, or other crises such as clear cutting, the ecosystem must *adapt*. The crisis sets the stage for the appropriate adaptations. If the soil is deficient in nitrogen you will likely find “pioneer plants,” with long roots and nitrogen-fixing bacteria. The fallen detritus of these species will also decompose and further enrich the soil and make way for a new period of growth which begins the cycle over again—this time with new plants, new species, and new relationships.

This is all well and good for ecosystems, but aside from learning to live with fires, what does this mean for our human participation in the successional powers of the Earth? Earth-centered people have long held rituals at various stages of their life—rites of passage, which mark, confirm, or initiate the person into a new role or way of being within the community. We as a culture have lost this sense of initiation and rites of passage. Such rites, however, tend to follow the same pattern of succession.

As succession initiates the forest into a new depth of being it also initiates us into a greater and more complex embodiment of our soul’s creativity. It is the way we grow into the full potential of our relationship with the whole cosmos. We find a life that calls our creative powers into being and we devote ourselves to it, perhaps eventually finding stability within it. It is inevitable, though, that crises will happen which call into question who we thought we were

and what we thought we were about. It is our responsibility to ride the waves of this succession, whether we're growing or collapsing. When the self collapses it does so in order to create the conditions out of which our new life will grow.

Decomposition.

Decomposition is one of the most fundamental and important ways that matter cycles throughout a system. New life begins through the decomposition of dead matter which is broken down by microbes to release essential nutrients such as carbon and nitrogen into the soil. Decomposition is how life is “reincarnated” in the biosphere—dead beings break down to be released into the ecosystem where they will become essential to the growth of plants, their physical “being” diffused into the food web once again.

Nothing demonstrates the decompositional power of the ecosystem like peat bogs. They're like naturally occurring compost piles, the time frame of their decomposition stretched out and slowed down due to the anaerobic environment beneath the surface. The bogs were formed at the end of the last ice age about ten thousand years ago. As the glaciers retreated they carved deep moraines which, in damp environments, formed a perpetually soggy layer of earth. This environment was hospitable to sphagnum moss which grew, eventually decayed, and formed a new damp layer of “peat,” decomposed plant matter, which provided a fertile environment for more sphagnum. Eventually, through the process of succession, more plants would move into the bogs depending on the particular environmental qualities—some more barren than others. Heather, particular types of moisture loving mushrooms, and in some bogs even trees, might all be found. With each successive period of growth new layers would form to become the bed for the next stage.

Without decomposition matter could not cycle through the ecosystem and it would become static and stagnant. Anyone involved in permaculture is familiar with the importance of decomposition through the use of compost as a means to enrich soil with vital nutrients. However, there are other more subtle ways in which we can participate in this process. The most important, perhaps, is the artistic process as a means of “soul work.” Gary Snyder writes of this:

Detritus cycle energy is liberated by fungi and lots of insects. I would then suggest: as climax forest is to biome, and fungus is to the recycling of energy, so “enlightened mind” is to daily ego mind, and Art to the recycling of neglected inner potential. When we deepen ourselves, looking within, understanding ourselves, we come closer to being like a mature ecosystem. Turning away from grazing on the “immediate biomass” of perception, sensation, and thrill; and reviewing memory...blocks of stored inner energies, the flux of dreams, the detritus of day-to-day consciousness, liberates the energy of our own mind-compost. Art is an assimilator of unfelt experience, perception, sensation, and memory for the whole society. It comes not as a flower, but—to complete the metaphor—as a mushroom: the fruiting body of the buried threads of mycelia that run widely through the soil, intricately married to the root hairs of all the trees. “Fruiting”—at that point—is the completion of the work of the poet, and the point where the artist reenters the cycle: gives what she or he has re-created through reflection, returning a “thought of enlightenment” to community (Snyder, 31-32).

Thinking of poetry, and in fact all of art, in this way helps us to see that it is actually part of the ecosystem—immanent to it, like the human, not merely something which happens within

it, isolated within the human community. If the ecosystem is an open network of relationships through which energy flows and matter cycles then humans and therefore cultures are intricately linked up within that system. The poet Hölderlin asks, “What use are poets in times of need?” I would ask more specifically, what use are poets in an ecological crisis? As art and poetry are the decomposers of the cultural unconscious and “the fruiting bodies” of that process, artists are the creators or re-creators of culture. Poetry feeds directly into the energy cycles of cultures, which are interconnected with the energy cycles of ecosystems (which feed and nourish humans and cultures, in turn)—it re-invigorates them, heals them, constructs them, dreams them, and sometimes even destroys them. If you could trace the flow of creative energy you might see it flow like a river straight out of the poet, through the culture, and through the ecosystem, which all cycle together interdependently. By participating in the decompositional power of art and poetry we can embody and bring to fruition what Thomas Berry calls “the dream of the Earth.”

You, compost from which I came
to which—like lines of poetry
that feed the culture fed by
water and plants, the winged and legged—
I feed the earth and decompose,
break down, rot, fertilize, decay
into you, womb of my passion.

So much for the summer sun,
apples on trees, or the dew
hanging like crystals on leaves.
All things return to you—
 not a thing will be spared:
not the oak, maple, and pine;
neither wren, robin, or crow;
not the fox and deer;
 not this poem—not even the woman I love.
Everything is forfeit to the damp
 fungal mycelia of soil,
rich with earth-scent,
 the voice of the dead still
 speaking.

The rain falls upon the detritus of
de-composed lines: once flesh and bone and singing,
drips from the branches and leaves—
a baptismal for the holy fruits to come,
spoken in the common tongue
of mushrooms and moss; sorrel and sprouts.

Even as the ink of this poem sinks into the page
the paper fades, dampens, decays—
What vegetables will it become?
Who will eat this? Who will drink the vitality of change?
Who will fruit, flower, and seed?
What use are poets in times of need?
(J.K.)

Open Systems.

All of this interconnection and interpenetration is possible because all living systems are open systems. We take in energy (such as through plants, which take in energy from the sun) and excrete waste. The matter is recycled and enters into the process of decomposition but the actual energy flows through us as we use it. If we were closed systems we would be isolated and alone, unable to enter into such intimate communion with the rest of the Earth community and the cosmos.

Currently, in the modern industrial world, we behave as though we were a closed system. It is only late in the 20th century that we began to realize that our actions have consequences within the larger ecosystems that our human communities are embedded within. If we are to integrate into the Earth community we must realize that we are not only biologically open systems but also psychologically—or rather, *narratively*—open systems. We take in stories like energy. They enliven us, give our lives meaning, and create the context for our participation.

One powerful example of what it means to be a narratively open system can be seen from the life of Irish philosopher and “mythopoet” John Moriarty. In his autobiography, *Nostos*, John

describes the cognitive dissonance he experienced being raised a devout Irish Catholic and coming across the work of Darwin. Coming across the sedimentary depths of the Earth, reaching down thirteen and three quarters British Miles and even further down in time: back to the Paleozoic. He contrasts this to his Christian worldview in which God had created the Earth in 4004 B.C., in which one found either salvation or damnation depending on their keeping of sacraments and commandments.

That was the story I lived in. That was the story that sheltered me. And now I knew that isn't only houses that shelter us. Only a great story can shelter us.

It was my calamity that I had fallen out of my story. I had fallen out of a world into a universe that seemed infinitely indifferent, even hostile, to my purposes and yearnings (Moriarty, 21).

Eventually, John would reconcile his feeling of the universe's hostility and indifference with an experience of the divine ground of the cosmos and a sense that the Earth was groping with the human toward being an evolutionary success—something he called Buddh Gaia. In the meantime, however, the experience shattered him. He described it as his Year One Reed, the year that the Aztecs and Spaniards met, in which the Aztecs would be devastated by the loss of their culture and religion. Other times he compares it to the Titanic running up against an iceberg. By all accounts this new story which he experienced was devastating to his inner life. Devastating and wildly creative as it cleared the ground, like a forest fire, for a new worldview—a new story—to blossom in him.

Coming up against a new story like this initiates in us, if we have cultivated ourselves to be narratively open beings, a process of succession in which the old story which no longer serves us is burned away and a new story takes its place. This is the attitude we must take when listening to what Thomas Berry calls the New Story, for we also are shoring up against the iceberg of a new cosmology which threatens to sink those outmoded and destructive ways of being in favor of a new narrative. This new story is one which tells us—even more radically than Moriarty’s “thirteen and three quarters British Miles—that we are a dimension of the cosmos and of the Earth community and therefore are *already* open systems, interpenetrating and consonant with the same energy that flows through the entire cosmic process.

Habitat.

Like all living beings in the Earth community, we have a habitat. We don’t normally think in terms of “habitat” because most of our human communities are so alienated and disconnected from the ecosystem. Nevertheless, even cities exist in ecosystems on which they thrive. Beneath the city streets the streams and rivers are diverted and rerouted, and the sublimated creative energy of the plant life pulses—just waiting to shoot up in whatever crack they can. Even the most nightmarishly concrete city hosts a thriving urban ecology of persistent plants, grasses, fungi, moss, birds, and other animals adapted to scavenging off our waste—raccoons, mice, rats, and squirrels.

Whether we live in a city or as a hermit in an isolated wilderness cabin we live our lives in a habitat—a *place* to which we are intimately tied and related. Mostly, we don’t honor our places. We think of our place simply as our location or as a specific landscape. But our places create us in the same way that the fox and its habitat are co-created and evolve together. Places

are landscapes of meaning. They tell a story—whether it is the story that the rain tells as it falls and drips from trees and the way the light reflects off the river’s edge, or the stories we tell of that place which bring it alive and orient us to it. Folktales do this when they tell a narrative about how some particular formation came into being. The telling communicates some interior meaning of the place and its unique qualities and reminds us that it is significant and that it has a spirit or a depth of being.

Having a habitat, however, is something we must work at. It means becoming native to a place and, therefore, entering into the mind of the ecosystem. It means being created by the place and in turn participating in the ongoing creativity and self-creation of that place. This involves forming a relationship between what nature writer Barry Lopez calls the interior and exterior landscapes. He writes that,

The shape and character of these relationships in a person’s thinking, I believe, are deeply influenced by where on the earth one goes, what one touches, the patterns one observes in nature—the intricate history of one’s life in the land, even a life in the city, where wind, the chirp of birds, the line of a falling leaf, are known. These thoughts are arranged, further, according to the thread of one’s moral, intellectual, and spiritual development. The interior landscape responds to the character and subtlety of the exterior landscape; the shape of the individual’s mind is affected by land as it is by genes (Lopez, 65).

Our places, our habitats, shape the way in which we belong to the world. Integrating into the dynamics of the Earth isn’t just a personal process but a communal activity. It is about becoming members of the Earth community and acting in a mutually enhancing way toward it.

Part of this process of re-inhabiting place is recognizing our consonance with the watershed. We aren't just interchangeable pieces which are capable of being plugged into the ecosystem—foreign entities who have to learn the proper way of behaving. Rather, we *are* the ecosystem expressing its humanity. The Earth and cosmos long for the human experience—it is why we have emerged. It is why anything ever emerges. So long as we shut ourselves out from the participatory dynamics of the ecosystem, the watershed—our place—can never fully express its humanity through us. It wants to personalize, uniquely and individually, through us. For this to happen we have to find our habitat in the Earth community.

Niche.

Just as each living being has a habitat so too do they have a niche. Ecological writer Ernest Callenbach writes that, “A niche is an organism’s lifestyle, the group of strategies it employs to obtain the food, water, shelter, mating spots, and other necessities that it must have to survive. Its habitat is *where* a species lives; its niche is *how* it lives, its job description” (Callenbach, 94). If all organisms have both a habitat and a niche, it begs the question of the human niche—both individually and as a species.

A niche is the activity of the relationships in the ecosystem. Elaborate food webs which are constituted from the organisms which make up the ecosystem fulfill their niche and enable, through this fulfillment, the other beings to fulfill their own. Their niche both creates their own individual identity and their community.

What mutually enhancing role do we play? Perhaps we have not yet begun. It is, therefore, the ultimate task of every being to discover their niche if they are to participate fully in the Earth community. The Irish have a word, *dán*, which means poetry, art, a gift, a skill, or

destiny. It is a strange weave of meanings which suggests a concept much like niche, or more familiar to our Western philosophical concepts, a genius or daimon. In short, one's *dán* is that inner quality of being—the soul—that is their destiny to embody in the world. It is that which allows us to belong to the world in a larger way, living a larger story. It is that activity which is essential to the full embodiment of one's life in the way that burning is essential to the existence of fire. In order for fire to be, something must burn. Likewise, for each person to *be* some essential activity must be enacted in the world in such a way as to enhance it and deepen its relationships. If we consider for a moment the burning activity of fire as a kind of lovemaking to that which it burns, then our niche is the way in which we make love to the whole of creation.

Callenbach writes that, “Coyotes and human beings...are generalists. Our flexibility and adaptability enable us to exist in a great variety of circumstance; our niches are “wider.” We humans have temporarily broadened our niche still further with the aid of modern technology and fossil fuels, outcompeting more specialized organisms and consuming a larger and larger share of Earth's basic productivity, the gift of photosynthesis. We're sometimes tempted to think and act as if our niche were infinitely expandable, forgetting that we and all our planet-mates are locked in an evolutionary dance together” (Callenbach, 95).

Our niche is the problem. As a species, and at greater interior depths than Callenbach seems willing to admit into the study of ecology, it might be said that the niche of the human species is our self-reflective consciousness. In a sense our niche is our art, poetry, and music—those things which bring the self-reflectivity of the cosmos into full expression. This is our unique gift, the ability of the ecosystem—through us—to reflect back on itself. In order to do this however, we must be integrated into our habitat. Beings outside their habitats are those who have no niche in their respective community and either die or reduce the native biodiversity.

They become, in other words, an invasive species. This is the opposite of a mutually enhancing relationship and sadly it is the dominant niche of industrial humans and the cause of so much ecological destruction.

We must, individually and collectively, discover the niche which calls us into being in mutually enhancing ways. Each person will have their own niche in service both to the human community and the more-than-human community which, as the human species finds its collective niche, will reveal themselves to be one Earth community.

The human species is now the dominant mode of life on this planet if one judges by the amount of power one holds over life and death. Other species and the creative potential of the Cenozoic era are being brought to a terminal stage due to human dissociation with our environments. We have several choices: 1) continue our destructive path and bring both ourselves and the last 65 million years of evolution to an end; 2) try to preserve the Cenozoic mode of being and, as best we can, push against the momentous changes we have initiated; or 3) recognize ourselves as an integral mode of being through which the universe acts, and commit ourselves to the creative participation in the epoch-shattering event that is the human emergence into the Earth community. This means finding a more creative way of participating in the cataclysmic power of our time. Currently we are destroying all the wrong things—the beautiful and necessary multitude of beings which make up the Earth community. Rather we turn the initiatory event of the human species inward to our own outmoded ways of being. The Cenozoic era is ending whether we like it or not and it is largely up to our actions and decisions what the next era will be. We must wake up to the ecological crisis as a call to life—to find some way of entering into the dance of the community in a way which enhances life for all members involved.

Just as there is no deviating from the Dao there is no true deviation from life's evolutionary pull. Sooner or later those pools of stagnating energy will become free to join the Great Watershed of our cosmic destiny. Through participation with these ecological dynamics in the unfolding of the cosmos, our destruction can become a force of creation and the human being a true citizen of the Earth and the universe which holds it all.

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