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## Spirituality of Earth



*One of the most important contributions of Berry's thought is the sense of the subjectivity of Earth—in each creature and ecosystem as well as in the planet as a whole. This subjectivity provided a context for Berry to speak about the numinous dimension of Earth that evokes awe and wonder. In this he was deeply influenced by the Jesuit scientist, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881–1955).*

*Teilhard observed that the universe from the beginning had a physical and psychic component—matter and spirit were evolving together over time. From this perspective human consciousness is not an addendum, but rather in continuity with the unfolding universe. While humans manifest a special mode of self-reflective consciousness, we are increasingly aware that other species have their own modes of awareness. The interiority of matter itself, namely, the subjectivity of all things, is that which allows for communion and reciprocity. In addition, this interiority gives rise to patterning and differentiation throughout the universe and Earth. The patterning leads to increasing complexity and consciousness, eventually giving rise to multi-cellular life, fish, birds, animals, and humans. Something in patterning causes it to reach out beyond itself, which has been called emergence. The emergent properties in matter—their self-organizing dynamics—have led to complex life systems.*

*Berry speaks of this emergence poetically as the “numinous maternal principle out of which life emerges.” For this reason, humans are in deep communion with universe and Earth processes. Just as life has emerged from these processes, so human spirituality emerges in relation to the Earth community.*

*To illustrate how humans placed themselves amidst the spirituality of Earth, Berry draws on the ritual relationships of Native Americans and other indigenous peoples. Humans placed themselves in a world of cosmic powers and an Earth infused with spirituality. They invoked these powers and spirituality to manage the demands of life—rites of passage, inexplicable loss, unmitigated suffering. In a similar manner, the Chinese saw humans as the mind and heart of Heaven and Earth—a self-reflective and affective presence amidst a dynamic living Earth.*

*This intimacy is what Berry wishes to reawaken—in thanksgiving and reciprocity. These are sensibilities that Berry would discuss with groups on the sun porch at the Riverdale Center. Often he would gesture toward the great red oak just outside the windows of this porch. Noting that this tree was some four hundred years old, he would wonder about its story in the historical setting of Henry Hudson sailing his small ships up the river. He would imagine, as well, the relationship of this bioregion to the geological time of the 200 million-year-old Palisades across the river, and even beyond to universe processes. Berry sensed the kinship and reciprocity with such enduring expressions of life. He felt gratitude for the universe story interwoven with those who gathered under the limbs of the great red oak. Such sensibilities are a counterpoint, he felt, to the devastating losses of life in the Sixth Extinction of species happening today. These are losses, Berry observed, that silence sacred stories.*

#### EARTH SPIRITUALITY

The spirituality of Earth refers to a quality of Earth itself, not a human spirituality with special reference to the planet Earth. Earth is the maternal principle out of which we are born and from which we derive all that we are and all that we have. We

come into being in and through Earth. Simply put, we are Earthlings. Earth is our origin, our nourishment, our educator, our healer, our fulfillment. At its core, even our spirituality is Earth-derived. The human and Earth are totally implicated, each in the other. If there is no spirituality in Earth, then there is no spirituality in us.

Not to recognize the spirit dimension of Earth reveals a radical lack of spiritual perception. . . .

What is needed is a new spiritual, even mystical, communion with Earth, a true aesthetic of Earth, sensitivity to Earth's needs, a valid economy of Earth. We need a way of designating the Earth-human world in its continuity and identity rather than exclusively by its discontinuity and difference. We especially need to recognize the numinous qualities of Earth.

We might begin with some awareness of what it is to be human, the role of consciousness on Earth, and the place of the human species in the universe. While the traditional Western definition of the human as a rational animal situates us among the biological species, it inadequately expresses the role we play in the total Earth process. The Chinese, for example, define the human as the *hsin* of Heaven and Earth. The word *hsin* is written as a pictograph of the human heart. It can be translated by a single word or by a phrase that conveys both feeling and understanding. It could be translated by saying that the human is the "understanding heart of Heaven and Earth." Even more briefly, in this context, we can say that the human is "the heart of the universe." Yet another way to translate *hsin* is to say that we are "the consciousness of the universe" or "the psyche of the universe." Here we have a remarkable feeling for the fullest dimensions of the human, the total integration of reality in the human, and the total integration of the human within the reality of things.

We need a spirituality that emerges out of a reality deeper than ourselves, a spirituality that is as deep as the Earth process itself, a spirituality that is born out of the solar system and even out of the heavens beyond the solar system. For it is in the stars

that the primordial elements take shape in both their physical and psychic aspects. Out of these elements the solar system and Earth took shape, and out of Earth, ourselves. . . .

Today we are in a new position where we can appreciate the historical and the cosmic as a single process. This is the vision of Earth-human development that will provide the sustaining dynamic of the contemporary world. We must nourish awareness of this vision. Our language and imagery need to acknowledge both the physical and psychic dimensions of this organizing force. It needs to be named and spoken of in its integral form. Just as we see the unified functioning of particular organisms, so too Earth itself is governed by a unified principle in and through which the total complex of earthly phenomena takes its shape. When we speak of Earth, we are speaking of a numinous maternal principle out of which all life emerges.

—“The Spirituality of the Earth,” in  
*The Sacred Universe*, 71, 73–75

## THE UNIVERSE MANIFESTS THE SACRED

The universe is the supreme manifestation of the sacred. This notion is fundamental to establishing a cosmos, an intelligible manner of understanding the universe, or even any part of the universe. That is why the story of the origin of things was experienced as a supremely nourishing principle, as a primordial maternal principle, or as the Great Mother, in the earliest phases of human consciousness. Some of the indigenous peoples of this country experience it as the Corn Mother or as Spider Woman. Those who revere the Corn Mother place an ear of corn with the infant in the cradle to provide for the soothing and security the infant needs to feel deep in its being. From the moment the infant emerges from the warmth and security of the womb into the chill and changing world of life, the ear of corn is a sacred presence, a blessing.

We must remember that it is not only the human world that is held securely in this sacred enfoldment, but the entire planet. We need this security, this presence throughout our lives. The sacred is that which evokes the depths of wonder. We may know some things, but really we know only the shadow of things. We go to the sea at night and stand along the shore. We listen to the urgent roll of the waves reaching ever higher until they reach their limits and can go no farther, then return to an inward peace until the moon calls again for their presence on these shores.

So it is with a fulfilling vision that we may attain—for a brief moment. Then it is gone, only to return again in the deepening awareness of a presence that holds all things together.

—“The World of Wonder,” in  
*The Sacred Universe*, 176–77

### LIVING IN A UNIVERSE

What do you see? What do you see when you look up at the sky at night at the blazing stars against the midnight heavens? What do you see when the dawn breaks over the eastern horizon? What are your thoughts in the fading days of summer as the birds depart on their southward journey, or in autumn when the leaves turn brown and are blown away? What are your thoughts when you look out over the ocean in the evening? What do you see?

Many earlier peoples saw in these natural phenomena a world beyond ephemeral appearance, an abiding world, a world imaged forth in the wonders of the sun and clouds by day and the stars and planets by night, a world that enfolded the human in some profound manner. This other world was guardian, teacher, healer—the source from which humans were born, nourished, protected, guided, and the destiny to which we returned.

Above all, this world provided the psychic power we humans needed in our moments of crisis. Together with the visible world and the cosmic world, the human world formed a meaningful threefold community of existence. This was most clearly

expressed in Confucian thought, where the human was seen as part of a triad with Heaven and Earth. This cosmic world consisted of powers that were dealt with as persons in relationship with the human world. Rituals were established whereby humans could communicate with one another and with the earthly and cosmological powers. Together these formed a single integral community—a universe.

Humans positioned themselves at the center of this universe. Because humans have understood that the universe is centered everywhere, this personal centering could occur anywhere. For example, the native peoples of North America offered the sacred pipe to the powers of the four directions to establish themselves in a sacred space where they entered into a conscious presence with these powers. They would consult the powers for guidance in the hunt, strength in wartime, healing in time of illness, support in decision making. We see this awareness of a relationship between the human and the powers of the universe expressed in other cultures, as well. In India, China, Greece, Egypt, and Rome, pillars were established to delineate a sacred center, which provided a point of reference for human affairs and bound Heaven and Earth together.

There were other rituals whereby human communities validated themselves by seasonal acknowledgement of the various powers of the universe. This is still evident with the Iroquois autumn Thanksgiving ceremony, where the sun, Earth, the winds, the waters, the trees, and the animals each in turn received expressions of personal gratitude for those gifts that made life possible. Clearly, these peoples see something different from what we see.

We have lost our connection to this other deeper reality of things. Consequently, we now find ourselves on a devastated continent where nothing is holy, nothing is sacred. We no longer have a world of inherent value, no world of wonder, no untouched, unspoiled, unused world. We think we have understood everything. But we have not. We have *used* everything. By “developing” the planet, we have been reducing Earth to a new type of barrenness. Scientists are telling us that we are in the

midst of the sixth extinction period in Earth's history. No such extinction of living forms has occurred since the extinction of the dinosaurs some sixty-five million years ago.

—"The World of Wonder," in  
*The Sacred Universe*, 170–71

### TO WANTONLY DESTROY A LIVING SPECIES

The ecological age fosters the deep awareness of the sacred presence within each reality of the universe. There is an awe and a reverence due to the stars in the heavens, the sun, and all heavenly bodies; to the seas and the continents; to all living forms of trees and flowers; to the myriad expressions of life in the sea; to the animals of the forests and the birds of the air. To wantonly destroy a living species is to silence forever a divine voice. Our primary need for the various life forms of the planet is a psychic, rather than a physical, need. The ecological age seeks to establish and maintain this subjective identity, this authenticity at the heart of every being. If this is so of the prehuman phase of life, it is surely true of the human also.

—"The Ecological Age," in *The Dream of the Earth*, 46

### HUMAN INTIMACY WITH EARTH

Our relationship with Earth involves something more than pragmatic use, academic understanding, or aesthetic appreciation. A truly human intimacy with Earth and with the entire natural world is needed. Our children should be properly introduced to the world in which they live, to the trees and grasses and flowers, to the birds and the insects and the various animals that roam over the land, to the entire range of natural phenomena. . . .

In our own thinking we are coming back to this once more out of our new mode of understanding the universe. We now experience ourselves as the latest arrivals, after some 14 billion years of universe history and after some 4.6 billion years of Earth history. Here we are, born yesterday. We need to present

ourselves to the planet as the planet presents itself to us, in an evocatory rather than a dominating relationship. There is need for a great courtesy toward Earth.

This courtesy we might learn from the Haudenosaunee, or Iroquois Indians. Their thanksgiving ritual is one of the most superb ceremonies that humans have ever known. Too long to present in its entirety, it does have a refrain that is relevant here: “We return thanks”—first to our mother, Earth, which sustains us, then on to the rivers and streams, to the herbs, to the corn and beans and squashes, to bushes and trees, to the wind, to the moon and stars, to the sun, and finally to the Great Spirit who directs all things.

To experience the universe with such sensitivity and such gratitude! These are primary experiences of an awakening human consciousness. Such stupendous moments reveal a striking sense of the alluring planet Earth. An intimacy wonderfully expressed in the famous Western Inscription of Chang Tsai, an eleventh-century administrative official in China. This inscription, placed on the west wall of his office, so that he would constantly have it before him, reads quite simply: “Heaven is my father and Earth is my mother and even such a small creature as I finds an intimate place in its midst. That which extends throughout the universe, I regard as my body and that which directs the universe, I regard as my nature. All people are my brothers and sisters and all things are my companions.”

Also, Wang Yang-ming, an early sixteenth-century Chinese Neo-Confucian writer, tells us that a truly developed person is someone who realizes that we form one body with Heaven, Earth, and all living things. He mentions “everything from ruler, minister, husband, wife, and friends to mountains, rivers, heavenly and earthly spirits, birds, animals, and plants; all should be truly loved in order to realize my humanity which forms a unity, and then my clear character will be completely manifested and I will really form one body with Heaven, Earth, and the myriad things.”

India, too, has an intimacy with the natural world, as expressed in the epic poem *The Ramayana*, with its touching scenes of Rama and Sita in exile, wandering in the forest with its flowering plants, fruit-bearing bushes, elephants, monkeys, deer, and brightly plumed birds. Also in India there are the familiar animal tales of the *Hitopadesa*, the teaching of wisdom through playful narratives of forest life.

Everywhere there is intimacy, the mutual presence of the life community in all its numinous qualities. We, too, have something of this in our own transcendental and romanticist traditions that arose in Germany in the late eighteenth century and came to the English-speaking world through Coleridge in England and Emerson in America. Within this context, we developed our own American feeling for the natural world, expressed in the writings of Walt Whitman, Henry Thoreau, and John Muir. These are the archetypal personalities whose work is continued in writers Aldo Leopold, Loren Eiseley, Mary Austin, Joseph Wood Krutch, Gary Snyder, Edward Abbey, Annie Dillard, Barry Lopez, Terry Tempest Williams, and so many others, and through a multitude of artists and musicians.

With the more recent nature writers a new understanding of the universe begins to take shape. Our scientific understanding of the universe, when recounted as story, takes on the role formerly fulfilled by the mythic stories of creation. Our naturalists are no longer simply romanticists or transcendentalists in their interpretive vision; they have absorbed scientific data into their writings. A new intimacy with the universe has begun within the context of our scientific tradition.

— “Human Presence,” in *The Dream of the Earth*, 13–15