

ecospirit

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INSTITUTE FOR ECOSOPHICAL STUDIES

THE INSTITUTE FOR ECOSOPHICAL STUDIES

We live in an age when the fate of the earth is being determined by the wisdom and conduct of one species--the human. Whether that fate will be for the good of the whole planet largely depends on whether that one species can grasp the meaning of its place within the earth system and assume its proper responsibilities toward the process that birthed it and sustains it. Such an achievement requires a deep transformation of our attitudes toward and relationship with the earth. The goal is an harmonious state called ecosophy.

Ecosophy has its roots in two Greek words, oikos (household), and sophia (wisdom). Ecosophy means both human wisdom regarding the earth household and the wisdom of the earth itself as a biospiritual organism.

We consider that the earth has intrinsic value apart from its instrumental value for humans. Human action should be guided by a respect for and recognition of these other values. We are part of a web of interrelated and interdependent beings. Hence, we cannot realize our own identity or fulfill our own destiny, even in the realm of religion and spirituality, apart from these other beings and the whole earth. Thus, to paraphrase Whitman, all human activities, including economics, politics and religion must be judged according to how they reflect and corroborate the wisdom and dynamics of the earth.

Our institute hopes to explore all areas of human life in order to enable humans to overcome their alienation from and frequent antagonism toward this holy planet, so that its wisdom and power might heal and soothe our often frantic, distempered hearts. To aid in this task, we have instituted Ecospirit, our quarterly newsletter.

Ecospirit is both a voice for the earth and of the earth. More particularly, it is a voice emanating from the ancient land of the Lenni Lenape, rooted in the fertile Lehigh and Lebanon Valleys, echoing off the Appalachian Mountains and wetted by the waters of Monocacy Creek between the Delaware and Susquehanna Rivers. Appropriately, our first issue explores the themes of bioregionalism and the sense of place.

BIOREGIONS:
THE CONTEXT FOR REINHABITING THE EARTH

by Thomas Berry

The universe expresses itself in the blazing radiance of the stars and in the vast reaches of the galactic systems, but its most intimate expression of itself is in this tiny planet; a planet, however, that could not exist in its present form except in a universe such as that in which it has emerged and from which it has received its life energies. The planet presents itself to us, however, not as a uniform global reality but as a complex of highly differentiated regions caught up in the comprehensive unity of the planet itself. There are arctic and tropical, coastal and inland regions, mountains and plains, river valleys and deserts. Each of these has its distinctive geological formation, climatic conditions, and living forms. Together these constitute the wide variety of life communities that may be referred to as bioregions. Each is coherent within itself and intimately related to the others. Together they express the wonder and splendor of this garden planet of the universe.

The human species itself has emerged within this complex of life communities; it has survived and developed through participation in the functioning of these communities at their most basic level. Out of this interaction has come our distinctive human cultures. But while at an early period humans were aware of their dependence on the integral functioning of these surrounding communities this awareness faded as humans, through their scientific and technological skills, learned to manipulate the community functioning to their own advantage. This has brought about a disruption of the entire complex of life systems. The fluorescence that distinguished these communities in the past is now severely diminished. A degradation of the entire natural world has taken place.

Even though humans as well as the other higher species are in a stressful situation, few of us are aware of the order of magnitude of what is happening. Fewer still have any adequate understanding of its causes or the capacity to initiate any effective program for the revitalization of these communities upon which everything depends. Disruption of the life process has led also to disruption of the more limited human community itself. If social turmoil and inter-nation rivalries have

evoked significant concern, the disruption earth's life systems remains only a vague awareness in the human mind. This is strange indeed when we consider that the disruption of our bioregional communities is leading to a poisoning of the air we breathe, the water we drink, the soil and the seas that provide our food. We seek to remedy our social ills by industrial processes that only lead to further ecological devastation. Indeed our sensitivity to human conflict over the sharing of earth's resources has distracted us from the imperiled condition of these resources themselves, a period associated with the loss of topsoil, the destruction of forests, the desertification of fruitful areas, the elimination of wetlands and spawning areas, the exhaustion of aquifers, the salinization of irrigated areas, the damaging of coral reefs.

The urgency of a remedy for this situation is such that all social groups and all nations are called upon to reassess the entire human-earth situation. As was first indicated by Edward Schumacher we must rethink our industrial approach to "development." This rethinking involves appropriate technologies, but also appropriate life styles, and beyond these appropriate human-earth relations.

The most difficult transition to make is from a homo-centric to a bio-centric norm of progress. The entire life community must progress. Any progress of the human at the expense of the larger community of the living must ultimately lead to a diminishment of human life itself. A degraded habitat will produce degraded humans; an enhanced habitat will assist toward an elevated mode of the human. This is evident not only in the economic order but throughout the entire range of human affairs. The splendor of earth in the variety of its land and its seas, its life forms and its atmospheric phenomena; these constitute in color and sound and movement the great symphonic context that has inspired our sense of the divine, given us our emotional and imaginative powers and has evoked from us those entrancing insights that have governed our most sublime moments.

This symphonic context not only activates our interior faculties; it also provides our physical nourishment. The air and water and soil and seeds that provide our basic sustenance, the sunshine that pours its energies over the landscape; these are

integral with the functioning of the fruitful earth. Physically and spiritually we are woven into this living process. As long as the integrity of the process is preserved we have air to breathe and water to drink and nourishing food to eat. The difficulty has come from our subversion of this integral life community for our own advantage. We have torn apart the life system itself. We have developed technologies that do not function in harmony with earth technologies. We force the soil with chemicals to produce beyond its natural rhythms. Having lost our ability to invoke natural forces we seek by violence to impose mechanistic patterns on life processes. In consequence of such actions we now live in a world of declining fertility, a wasted world, a world in which its purity and life-giving qualities have been dissipated.

The solution is simply for us as humans to join the earth community as participating members, that we foster the progress and prosperity of the bioregional communities to which we belong. Here we note that a bioregion is an identifiable geographical area of interacting life systems that is relatively self-sustaining in the ever-renewing processes of nature. The full diversity of life functions is carried out, not as individuals or as species, or even as organic beings, but as a community that includes the physical as well as the organic components of the region. Such a bioregional community is self-propagating, self-nourishing, self-educating, self-governing, self-healing and self-fulfilling. Each of the component life systems must integrate their own functioning within this community functioning to survive in any effective manner. Within this perspective the human can be identified as that being in whom the community reflects on and celebrates itself in conscious self-awareness. Yet this distinctive role of the human requires our appreciation of the full range of the community life processes.

The first function, self-propagation, requires that we recognize the rights of each species to its habitat, to its migratory routes, to its place in the community. The bioregion is the domestic setting of the community just as the home is the domestic setting of the family. The community continues itself through successive generations precisely as a community. Both in terms of species and in terms of numbers a certain balance must be maintained.

The second bioregional function, self-nourishing, requires that the members of the community nourish each other in the established patterns of the natural world for the well-being of the entire community and each of its members. Within this pattern the expansion of each species is limited by opposed life forms or conditions so that no one life form or group of life forms should overwhelm the others. In this functioning of the community we include, for humans, the entire world of food gathering, of agriculture, of commerce and of economics. The various bioregional communities of the natural world can be considered as commercial ventures as well as biological processes. There is the constant interchange of values, the laying up of capital, the quest for more economical ways of doing things. The earth is our best model for any commercial venture. It carries out its operations with an economy and a productivity far beyond that of human institutions. It also runs its system with a minimum of entropy. There is in nature none of that sterile or toxic waste or non-decomposing litter such as is made by humans.

The third function of a bioregion is its self-education through physical, chemical, biological and cultural patterning. Each of these requires the others for its existence and fulfillment. The entire evolutionary process can be considered as a most remarkable feat of self-education on the part of planet earth and of its distinctive bioregional units. An important aspect of this self-educational process is the experiential mode of its procedures. The earth and each of its bioregions has performed unnumbered billions of experiments in designing the existing life system. Thus the self-educational processes observed in the natural world form a model for the human. There is presently no other way for humans to educate themselves for either survival or fulfillment than through the instruction available through the natural world.

The fourth function of a bioregion is self-governance. An integral functional order exists within every regional life community. This order is not an extrinsic imposition but an interior bonding of the community that enables each of its members to participate in the governance and to achieve that fullness of life expression that is proper to each. This governance is presided over in much of the world by the seasonal sequence of life expression. It provides the

order in which the florescence and exuberant renewal of life takes place. Humans have traditionally inserted themselves into this community process through their ritual celebrations. These are not simply human activities but expressions of the entire participating community. In human deliberations each of the various members of the community should be represented.

The fifth function of the bioregional community is self-healing. The community carries within itself not only the nourishing energies that are needed by each member of the community; it also contains within itself the special powers of regeneration. This takes place when forests are damaged by the great storms or when periods of drought wither the fields or when locusts swarm over a region and leave it desolate. In all these instances the life community adjusts itself, reaches deeper into its recuperative powers and brings about a healing. This is done whether the damage is to a single individual or to an entire area of the community. Humans too find that their healing takes place through submission to the discipline of the community and partaking of its nourishing and healing powers.

The sixth function of these life communities is found in its self-fulfilling activities. The community is fulfilled in each of its components, in the flowering fields, in the great oak trees, in the flight of the sparrow, in the surfacing whale, or in any of the other expressions of the natural world. Then there are the seasonal modes of community fulfillment, the mysterious springtime renewal. In conscious celebration of the numinous mystery of the universe expressed in the unique qualities of each regional community the human fulfills its own special role; for in the human the community celebrates itself in a reflective self-awareness. This is attained through its human component in liturgies, in music and dance, in song and poetry, in literature and drama, in painting, sculpture and architecture.

After reviewing these various functions of bioregional communities it is necessary to add that the primary role of the human can be identified only within this context and that the future of the human lies in acceptance and fulfillment of this role in all six of these community functions. The change indicated is the change from an exploitive homocentrism to a participative biocentrism. This is something beyond environmentalism which remains homocentric while trying to limit the

deleterious effects of human presence on the environment.

We have limited our discussion so far to the inner functioning of the regional communities because these provide the most immediate basis of survival. If these communities do not fulfill their most essential functions then the larger complex of bioregions cannot fulfill its role. Each of these bioregions is, as we have noted, relatively self-sustaining. None are fully self-sustaining since the air and water flow across the entire planet and all its regions. So with the animals. Some of these range widely from one end of a continent to another. Birds cross multiple bioregional and even continental boundaries. Eventually all bioregions are inter-dependent. This interdependence is presently accentuated by the toxic waste poured into the environment by our industrial society. Such toxic materials are borne across entire continents and even across the entire planet by water and air. Such an extensive continent remedy would, of course, not be needed if the various bioregions each functioned properly within its own context.

The larger functioning of bioregions leads to a consideration that the earth be viewed primarily as an inter-related system of bioregions and only secondarily as a community of nations. The more massive bureaucratic nations of the world have lost their inner vitality because they can no longer respond to the particular functioning of the various bioregions within their borders. A second difficulty within the massive nations is the exploitation of some bioregions for the advantage of others. A third difficulty is the threatened devastation of the entire planet by the conflict of massive bureaucratic nations with their weaponry capable of continental and even planetary devastation. To break these nations down into their appropriate bioregional communities could be a possible way to peace.

This bioregional mode of thinking and acting is presently one of the most vigorous movements taking place anywhere on the North American continent. Its comprehensive concern is leading toward a reordering of all our existing establishments: the political-legal, the commercial-industrial, communications, educational and religious establishments. At present all of these are involved in the devastating impact of

industrial society on the natural world. The human arrogance they manifest toward the other natural members of these life communities remains only slightly affected by the forebodings concerning the future expressed by professional biologists and by others who have recognized that the imminent peril to the planet is not exactly the nuclear bomb but the plundering processes that are doing so much to extinguish those very life systems on which we depend.

Yet the numbers of those speaking and acting and leading others in programs of reinhabiting the earth in a more benign relationship with the other members of these natural communities is growing constantly. This movement, often referred to as the Green Movement, is fostering an ecological or bioregional context for every aspect of life, for education, economics, government, healing and religion. So far the movement remains a pervasive and growing mode of consciousness that is groping toward a more precise articulation of its own ideals, of its institutional form and its most effective programs of action.

Of primary importance in North America is identifying the various bioregions. To do this requires a sensitivity akin to that of the shamanic personality of tribal peoples. While bioregions have certain geographic boundaries, they also have certain mythic, mystical and historical modes of self-identification. Even this identification depends also on ourselves as we participate in this process which has been suppressed ever since the European peoples invaded the continent.

Much more could be added here to indicate just what has been achieved so far; yet this must suffice for the present. It is only a beginning statement of the rising transformation of the planet as the bioregions of the earth begin once more to assert themselves.

Thomas Berry is the Director of the Center for Religious Studies, Bronx, New York. His multi-volume Riverdale Papers demonstrate the breadth of his vision and his great sensitivity to the depth dimension of ecological thinking.

A Sense of Place, A Sense of Home

by

Donald P. St. John

Human life is shaped and moved not by abstract systems of thought or ethics but by value-laden symbols. One of the most powerful of these and one that carries most of the nuances of place, is home. Just as the Earth as place is revealed through and incarnated in local place, so the Earth as home (oikos, hence, eco-logy) is first encountered and embraced in one's primal home. And it is through a deepened understanding of home that we come to an understanding of how to care for the Earth-home or -household.

Home is more than the interaction of family members. It is a world wherein the furniture, stairs, walls and fixtures become "affective entities" that play a formative, integrative and conserving role in shaping the character and history of the family. The defacing of the home by an intruder is experienced as an insult because of the expanded sense of self-identity. Similarly, the dumping of toxic wastes, the pollution of water sources and the scarring of local landscapes is experienced as personally revolting to those who identify with this expanded home or place.

Home is a multivalent world that is both given and transformed. One generation acts as a model and transmitter to the next generation of the values, affections and behaviors associated with home. The younger generation, through its own lived experience shapes its own unique bonds with and leaves its own mark on home. A world of textures, colors, sounds and odors forms into a patterned collage. Years later deep emotions can be stirred and memories relived by the smell of the porch warming in the sun or the feel of the arms of a favorite chair. If this sense of home fails to be passed on, the younger generation may think of its value only in terms of the market. Home will be split into two quantitative entities: house and consumer. As house it will be reduced to competing with other dequalified houses for the consumer dollar. Place as an organic intrinsically valuable being will have been reduced to space, i.e. a quantitative, standardized entity. Home as a cultural achievement will have been reduced to house as a physical structure.

Similarly, there are many dimensions to place. When individuals or a community lose or never acquire a sense for the deeper bonds that link them with place, then economic considerations alone dictate action. The community becomes a "human resource" and the environment becomes a "natural resource." Outside investors and speculators "develop" each separately and for separate goals. The now separated spheres are further splintered. Community is replaced with zones of distinct interests. Religious and civic leaders lament the passing of "traditional" values of the home while serving on commissions and supporting institutions that undercut and destroy home and place. The destruction of many local populations of insects, animals and birds resultant on the destruction of the ecosystems reflects what has also occurred less visibly to the spirit of the place.

Caring for the earth household is not vastly dissimilar from caring for any household. There is the same process of mutual influence and change and the same sense of respect and reverence needed to preserve its integrity. One must learn to work within the constraints imposed by the household, while an imbalance caused by overpopulation and rising demands can cause serious deterioration. Endless competition by residents for a particular part of the household or for its limited energy can wreak havoc.

The Earth is forcing people toward a recognition that they all belong to one household. The Earth is insisting that all work be seen in its spiritual dimension as housework. Institutions, corporations and nations have pursued their own narrowly-defined goals with little recognition of their interconnectedness except in the most trivial way. The growing recognition of interdependence, however, opens the possibility for deeper insights. If in fact the household is beginning to break apart, this is not only a sign that we have trespassed some ecological limits set on human activity but that we have basically misunderstood or failed to grasp the meaning of that activity and of our lives together as household-earth. Our old paradigms have failed.

Our household is constituted by the structures and processes of the Earth and our family consists of all living beings. All play their part in the cycles of housework. It is within this household that humans have evolved

and it is as members of this family that they are essentially marked. Humans must discover and articulate consciously what other members have learned instinctively, i.e. their place and identity as household members.

Humans do not want to do housework but to play destructive games. This childishness must give way to a more mature realization that human fulfillment and self-realization can only come through meaningful, creative work. Humans are one species occupying many places throughout the entire household. They therefore have the potential to raise to consciousness the history, structure and meaning of the whole household. Humans can be the mind and heart of the household, assuring that it remains a home for future generations and for all species.

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"You ask us to think what place we like next best to this place, where we always lived. You see the graveyard out there? There are our fathers and our grandfathers. You see the Eagle-nest mountain and that Rabbit-hole mountain? When God made them, He gave us this place. We have always been here. We do not care for any other place...We have always lived here. We would rather die here. Our fathers did. We cannot leave them. Our children were born here - How can we go away? If you give us the best place in the world, it is not so good for us as this....This is our home....We cannot live anywhere else. We were born here and our fathers are buried here....We want this place and not any other...."

--Cecilio Blacktooth

TERMINAL CASE

Beehive huts they call them,
where they weathered the seasons
wintrous at the wane of wax-froth deliria,
 these hibernateria
 of moss and stone.

A fit place for anchorites, huts
that root the sky in fields ajut
with saphorn and bloodwort splint
at sacred well-edge
and land's and feeling's end.

Wound in my springing
Green boughs of hope
Bare limbs are clinging
Across every slope

Monitors I call them,
as, cowl down, I view my moss-green screen,
tapping my keys against kingdoms gone,
poem-processing,
image-downloading,
casting lines the color of trout's shadow
and fingering the chip that hides memory paler than pale
 and beyond, even unto the sands
 that mount at moon of monk's tide.
The summons is the same: Ø portaddress byte
 is my DOS office today,
 a runic vocative for a porter to a doorless hut
But such a sky-gluttet port.

Warm in my summers
Glut of my grain
Fragrant with thunder's
Ascent on the rain

It is the regular structure that is sought:
the threads of prayer and program,
regular like the turning of a flat earth, a skull-smooth disk,
or like Brendan's boat, hulled for soul's harvest

Firm in my falling
Withering grace
Blackbirds are telling
Of gold on the haze

Terminal hut, bee-strummed, it is a console still
But consolation drowns in winter's chill
The system will abort: that is all we know
Alone with secrets of the stones.

Lost in my winters
Sullen and stark
Course through my center
O spring in the dark

--Ed Moran

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