

***“The Earth without Us”***

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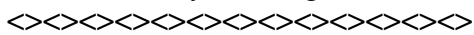
Next Thursday, April 22, 2010, is the fortieth anniversary of the first ever “Earth Day”, a day designed to inspire awareness and appreciation for the [Earth's](#) environment. It was founded by [U.S. Senator Gaylord Nelson](#) as an environmental [teach-in](#) in 1970 and is celebrated in many [countries](#) every year.

On 22 April 1970, Earth Day marked the beginning of the modern environmental movement. Approximately 20 million Americans participated. Thousands of colleges and universities organized protests against the [deterioration of the environment](#). Groups that had been fighting against [oil spills](#), polluting factories and [power plants](#), raw [sewage](#), toxic dumps, [pesticides](#), [Freeway and expressway revolts](#), the loss of [wilderness](#), and the [extinction of wildlife](#) suddenly realized they shared common values.

As Senator Nelson attests, the most impressive thing about this movement was how it had no central governing body and simply grew on its own: “Earth Day worked because of the spontaneous response at the grassroots level. We had neither the time nor resources to organize 20 million demonstrators and the thousands of schools and local communities that participated. That was the remarkable thing about Earth Day. It organized itself.”

This is an important point, I think.

Today, in 2010, it’s a little hard to believe that in those days, forty years ago, the subject of the Earth and its deteriorating conditions was a rather new and novel idea. And it’s equally hard to believe that now, forty years later, the subject is still debated as to its authenticity and urgency. We are still barely trudging along in our response to what is most certainly the greatest threat to the survival of the human race itself. Is it time, after these 40 years, to get serious about our commitment to the welfare of the Earth?



So what to say on this anniversary? And why would we preach to the choir about it? (All of you are part of the choir.)

I have a proposal. I would like to invite us all to go on a mind adventure. Let us begin by imagining—actually, *re-imagining*—the Earth in two ways:

(1) Let’s visualize the Earth as nothing less than God, *the* God of all things. Let’s give the Earth all the attributes we have given to the gods throughout our history: *omniscience*, all-knowing; *omnipotence*, all-powerful; *omnipresence*, everywhere and in all things. We would relate to the Earth in the same way we have related to the Almighty in days past—*kneeling* before the great altar and throne, bestowing our faith and our allegiance; giving our lives in servitude; making every act an act of obedience and faith. The rules the Earth plays be now become the Commandments—and there aren’t just ten, for the laws of Nature enable everything we know and do and believe, to work. The laws are also immutable and cannot be modified or evaded.

Are we ready to bow down to the inevitable? Or is it not time yet, after these forty years of lip-service?

(2) The second visualization is much more comfortable. Let’s imagine the Earth as our *lover*, and give to it all the attributes of the beloved one. Each of us can think of what a lover is like, the particulars of personality, physicality and emotionality. But the basic element of all notions of loving, is about the quality of the relationship. As in the marriage vows, we say “I will love you, no matter what, through sickness and in health, for richer and for poorer, in all circumstances and in all ways. I give myself to you.”

How can we do that, when we talking about the Earth itself.

“The Great Turning” movement teaches us how to do this. In our relationship with the Earth *as an entity*, we can perhaps make a “bargain”. As we increasingly recognize the significance of “the interdependent web of all existence” and what that actually means, we begin making a great turning away from human self-centeredness, toward a serious consideration of the relationship we humans have with the Earth.

Have you ever known of a marriage where one of the people says, “We will do this” and “You will do that”, both of us acting in accordance with the relationship and it’s valuable correlations.

What are terms of the agreement, which we ought to call a *covenant*? The great 20th century Unitarian theologian, James Luther Adams, described a covenant as a “contract rooted in love”. Is it possible that could make a covenant with the Earth, a covenant rooted in love? Notice how he uses the word “rooted” or perhaps “grounded” in love. The Earth itself is where the covenant is located. What a concept!

Are we ready to make this covenant?

Here are elements of these visualizations of Earth as God and Earth as lover.

For instance, unlike Jehovah or the other human-minded and human-modeled gods throughout history, it may be said that, in our relationship with the Earth, the Earth doesn’t even notice humanity, or at least humanity’s thoughts and dreams and plans and behaviors. That is to say, the Earth does not *respect* humanity and its desires. Like the true God, the Earth *just is*, period.

The question before us now is, will we *respect* the Earth, even when we know that it doesn’t respect us?

A disturbing realization is that if the Earth, as an entity, pays any attention to us at all, it may be in the same way that we humans pay attention to bacteria in our bodies, or worse, the way we pay attention to viruses in the body. The only response we have to them is to get rid of them. Viruses seem to have a mind of their own, driven to propagate at any expense to their hosts upon which they live. They only respect their hosts insofar as what they can get out of them.

If I think about humanity as a virus, I become very sad.

Will we *love* the Earth, even as we know that it doesn’t love us back, at least not in ways we can imagine? And what are those ways the Earth might love us?

Chief Seattle can help us out. Here’s what he proposed:

*This we know. The earth does not belong to us;  
we belong to the earth.*

*This we know. All things are connected  
like the blood which unites one family.*

*All things are connected.*

*Whatever befalls the earth  
befalls the sons and daughters of the earth.*

*We did not weave the web of life;*

*We are merely a strand in it.*

*Whatever we do to the web, we do to ourselves.*

And yet, do we humans truly treat the Earth with the kind of “love” we expect in our human relationships? Indeed, how *do* we treat the Earth? Well, you just have to pick up a newspaper any day and every day to read the reports of humanity’s latest activity. The evidence proves that what we’re doing is criminally assaulting our supposed lover. In human terms, it’s called rape, and unfortunately, that’s the truth of the matter.

Like a jilted lover, the Earth will respond. We hear daily reports of how this is happening, from the fact of global warming of the atmosphere, to the melting of the ice caps and previously considered unchangeable glacier flows, to the settling of heavy metals into the waters around us—the streams, rivers, out to the oceans. And then on to that newly discovered thousand mile stretches of waste floating in the Pacific and now, we’ve just learned, the Atlantic. Much of this waste is plastic, which no can yet predict how long it will take to disintegrate.

In some ways, one subject encapsulates this whole dilemma we face: the fate of plastic. Ever since World War II, humankind has been creating staggering amounts of synthetic polymers—one *billion* tons of the stuff. According to one expert, except for a small amount that has been incinerated, every bit of that plastic still exists somewhere in the environment. Much of it is at sea: there is six times more plastic by weight on the sea’s surface than there is plankton.

All that plastic kills fish. Even if it ends up as powder, it will still be swallowed by jellyfish and other filter-feeders, with unknown consequences. None of it will biodegrade in any time frame that will matter; no organism has had time to learn to eat it yet.

Not surprisingly, it's pretty clear that the Earth can take everything we throw at it. But there's a disquieting flip side: If we keep on going as we are now, the Earth may physically survive, but we won't. And even if we survive, the world as we know it will no longer exist.

Let us embark on another audacious intellectual adventure: Let us try to imagine what the world would be like if humans suddenly disappeared. "How would the rest of **nature** respond if it were suddenly relieved of the relentless pressures we heap on it and our fellow organisms? How soon would, or could, the climate return to where it was before we fired up all our engines? How long would it take to recover lost ground and restore Eden to the way it must have gleamed and smelled the day before Adam, or *homo habilis*, appeared? Could nature ever obliterate all our traces?"

Maybe you saw the History Channel TV show called "The Earth Without Us", where they imagined what the Earth would be like if humans were no longer here. Here is the link:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PCGhnwfNQtl>

By approaching the end of humanity from this unique angle, as a given, we can succeed in throwing the spotlight on the earth itself—and invests us in her fate. Our thought experiment is so intellectually fascinating, so oddly playful, that it escapes categorizing and clichés—in particular that earnest moralizing that can make environmental screeds so predictable.

How do we deal with the philosophical and foundational questions raised by our thought experiment? For our concern isn't just to figure out what the world would look like without us. It's also to put that question in context by assessing what we have done to the world, for better and worse. And what the world would have looked like if we never existed.

In order to make sense of humankind's brief and potentially catastrophic sojourn on the Earth, we must turn to some foundational questions. Why did humans appear? Was it inevitable that they did? And if we vanished, could we reappear again? The crucial element here is ice: It was an ice age that led certain apes to leave the forest and venture onto the savannah, where eventually they became hominids. There was nothing inevitable about this, he implies, and nothing inevitable about it ever being repeated. If humans disappear, he writes, baboons stand as good a chance as any species of making the evolutionary leap—and it'll take another ice age to drive them into the open.

In what we might call an "insidious epitaph," we could say that "Only one thing, too terrible to contemplate, might slow all this proliferating before all the animals go extinct": AIDS. Noting that the HIV virus probably spread to humans through bush meat, he asks rhetorically, "Could AIDS be the animals' final revenge?"

What can we do? I'm not sure there's a lot we can do.

We could call for humankind to cut its birthrate dramatically by limiting every female to one child. By 2100, we would have reduced the human population to 1.6 billion, where it was back at the beginning of the 19th century.

The alternative, he strongly implies, may be figuring out how to travel to other planets, either physically or by replicating ourselves remotely, cloning our bodies holographically, perhaps "transporting" or e-mailing our minds across the cosmos.

I want to tell you about our Coming of Age program here at Shoreline Church. We have a list of ten aspects of our human reality to think about as they write their credo.

Over the years I've made notes about what our youth say about their responses. What is the most important thing there is in the world? What do you think the predominant answer these young people say is the most important thing in the world? The answer, by a hefty margin, is Nature, since everything in our lives comes to us from nature.

I am hopeful because of this response. We are rearing a generation of people who know—even if we don't—our future is completely dependent on the Earth and its ways of doing things, laws included.

We are proud of these young people. We should be proud of our congregation to host this kind of program to teach our future generation. And we are proud that this Community of Faith has made a commitment to its future and to its flourishing, now and always.

Here I am. Here we are. We give ourselves to you, Great Gaia.

Here's the Benediction, from an amazing production by AARP, called "Lost Generation":

[http://www.youtube.com/watch\\_popup?v=42E2fAWM6rA](http://www.youtube.com/watch_popup?v=42E2fAWM6rA)