

# *Spiritual Ecology: a Practice of the Heart*

*Lauren de Boer*

I am sitting along the shoreline of San Francisco Bay. As I pass the afternoon in contemplation, the mudflat before me slowly widens with the ebbing tide, drawing willets, stilts, curlews, and godwits in growing numbers. Brown pelicans and least terns cruise the shoreline, periodically free-falling into the water to feed on small fish. The air is alive with the smell of the sea and the sounds of gulls, and a fresh wind cools me. An occasional flock of sandpipers throws itself into the sky like a cast net, then circles, swooning back and forth over the silvery water of the channel several times before settling, each bird in perfect synchrony with the others, onto the shore again.

Watching this movement of birds gradually draws me into a state of reverie, and I remember one of my early inspirations. As an undergraduate at the University of Iowa, I had been fascinated by the relationship of landscape to the human imagination and was voraciously scouring everything I could find written on the topic. One day, I attended a talk by writer Barry Lopez, just after he had completed his book *Arctic Dreams*. Drawing on a passage from the book, he spoke of being at Tule Lake in the Klamath Basin on the California-Oregon border. He spoke of the flight of flocks of snow geese numbering in the tens of thousands, and how the sweep of one flock across the sky would interlock with that of a second flock with perfect grace, not one bird colliding with another.

My imagination soared with the simple elegance of this image. There was an intelligence there, and a spirit, I felt. (When I visited Tule Lake, years later, and witnessed the flight of snow geese, I felt it anew.) I thought back to my own experience of countless hours in the fields and forests of my home bio-region in the Midwest. I especially recalled a bright October day on the banks of the Des Moines River when migrating birds passed all day overhead, moving in

and out of my sight and hearing like thoughts and images in those fragile moments between sleep and waking. Their movement and presence changed me.

I left the talk that day with a sense that I had found my calling. As a writer, I couldn't imagine a more compelling work than that of attempting to communicate the sacred interplay of landscape and human imagination. That calling would eventually converge with the mission of *EarthLight*, a magazine of spirituality and ecology started by West Coast Quakers.

*EarthLight* was founded from a conviction within the Friends community that the environmental challenges facing the Earth community are spiritual at their root. It was felt that this reality needed to be explored, discussed—and, more importantly—deeply felt, for lasting cultural transformation to take place. From that conviction, *EarthLight* grew to be a bridge-builder in many ways, with the practice of spiritual ecology as the common ground. I've come to know spiritual ecology as a practice that anyone, from any cultural background, religious tradition, or spiritual inclination can adopt. I also believe that it is a practice that can help us to face the tensions of our time in creative ways.



Everything is Connected ~~ Meganne Forbes

More than just a theory, spiritual ecology describes a way of being in the world. It is very ancient in the sense that peoples have lived it in many times and places. It is contemporary in that it integrates the discoveries of science and a new sense of our evolutionary story. It draws both from knowledge of the ecology of the planet and from deeper sensitivities to the spiritual dimension of the Earth. As such, it forms the basis for an ethical code of conduct. It brings us out of the trance of our human-centered wonder-world, expanding our circle of concern to include other species. We begin to see a relationship between our spiritual condition and the planetary ecological crisis. And from this discernment, we seek to cultivate a conscious, sustainable lifestyle of simplicity and ecological integrity.

These are some of the basic ideas of spiritual ecology. However, it is its actual *practice* that makes a difference in people's lives. One can speak of the spiritual ecology, for instance, of growing food. A diet which nourishes us, our gratitude, the health of growers, workers, and the land, the relationships of plants, pollinators, weather, soil, water, and energy flows through the system are all part of the spiritual ecology of growing of food. It is both ecological and sacred work. One can also speak of the spiritual ecology of child-rearing, communication, lovemaking, and city design through which our spirituality becomes integrated into everyday life.

For many indigenous peoples whose cultures are relatively intact today, spiritual ecology is such a practice, although these cultures would not generally use the term to describe what for them is a way of life. While you can't really apply all practices equally to the cultures of all indigenous peoples past and present, it is possible to distinguish a consistent orientation toward spiritual ecology as a way of life within these cultures worldwide. These include a sense of kinship that extends beyond the human, a systematic observation and knowledge of plants and animals passed from generation to generation through story and myth, the notion of a living planet and of Earth as Mother, sacredness of place, humans seen as just one part of a created order, and shamanic rites which draw on the primal powers of the natural world. These are present in all of us to some extent as indigenous mind.



Earth As Mother ~~ Meganne Forbes

While it is important not to overly idealize these cultures, we can recognize that their experience is an indispensable part of our human heritage, and a wisdom source we need very much to draw on at this time in history. There is indigenous mind in all of us. We all come out of some lineage, some ancient culture that was, at one time, in alignment with the powers and graces of the natural world. We don't need to go back to hunting and gathering and living on the land to access that wisdom. Just spending a little time in the natural world can awaken us from our psychological, cognitive, and spiritual sleep, opening us to the sacred wisdom that surrounds us.

We need this wisdom source to help us face the tensions of our time creatively. One of the deepest tensions we live with today is the one that arises from simultaneous feelings of profound grief and joyful inspiration.

We all have a sense of the loss and destruction brought to the planet by human activity. E.O. Wilson and other scientists have estimated that we are losing 20,000 species a year to extinction. "Ecological overshoot" has become a reality.<sup>i</sup> Humanity now consumes over 20% more resources than the Earth can produce, causing rapid declines in wild animal populations. Human activities threaten the Earth's ability to sustain future generations.<sup>ii</sup> Sixty per cent of the planet's ecosystem support systems have been severely degraded. The wetlands, forests, savannas, estuaries, coastal fisheries, and other habitats that

recycle air, water, and nutrients for all living creatures are being irretrievably damaged. Nutrient pollution from agricultural runoff has led to coastal dead zones measuring thousands of square miles. An estimated 12% of bird species, 25% of mammals and more than 30% of all amphibians are threatened with extinction within the next century. Humans now use between 40% and 50% of all available freshwater running off the land. Flow from rivers has been reduced dramatically. For parts of the year, the Yellow River in China, the Nile in Africa and the Colorado in North America dry up before they reach the ocean. An estimated 90% of the total weight of the ocean's large predators—tuna, swordfish and sharks—has disappeared in recent years. Since 1980, 20% of the world's coral reefs have been destroyed and another 20% badly degraded.

Our hearts are broken again and again when we hear these facts. "How shall the heart be reconciled to its feast of losses?" writes poet Stanley Kunitz. Spiritual ecology is way of cultivating heart, of finding the courage (from the French *coeur*, or heart) to act. Instead of simply broken, we are broken open and become big-hearted and courageous, qualities needed to face loss creatively.

At the same time, there are sources of joyful inspiration which come from the growing community responding to the crisis and from having, for the first time, a common story of our origins. Scientifically based, this story tells us that the Universe isn't simply a place or a vast mechanism, but a sacred story, an event in which we play a meaningful part. It's a story that continues to unfold with greater beauty and complexity over time. Points of transformation in this story have brought about moments of grace in the face of crisis; we may be living in just such a moment. We are key characters in the narrative of the Universe, a purposeful event permeated with intelligence. Perhaps even more importantly, we have seen the planet as a whole. We've seen the NASA photos and they have permanently shifted human consciousness.

We can also take heart in evidence of a kind of "Earth *sangha*," to draw on a Buddhist term for spiritual community, that I saw mature over the ten years I was privileged to edit *EarthLight*. I've seen this

"*sangha*" forming through the acts of hundreds of individuals. I've seen it in the emergence of initiatives like the *International Forum on Globalization*, an alliance of activists, economists, scientists, and writers from over 20 countries that formed to question the assumption that globalization is inevitable and to explore local, community-based economies as an alternative.

The *Bioneers* conference, organized by Kenny Ausubel and Nina Simons, is another such initiative that took root during this time. *EarthLight* was a partner with Bioneers from their very early years and served to bring a spiritual influence to the conference's "visionary and practical solutions for restoring the Earth." The conference has grown to over 3,000 participants each year and now organizes satellite conferences in dozens of other locations simultaneously.

The *Forum on Religion and Ecology* grew out of a series of conferences organized by religious scholars (and *EarthLight* advisors) Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim on the topic. The conference series, focusing on eleven major world religion traditions, led to the publication of books on religion and ecology based on each tradition.

When I first began this work in 1995, there were only a handful of centers like Genesis Farm in New Jersey, founded by Dominican sister Miriam MacGillis, that integrated ecology and cosmology into a spiritual vision of the land. *EarthLight*, in its final four issues, published a directory of over 60 such centers. More have been identified since then (see the link on my website at <http://www.k-lauren.net>).

These and other initiatives comprise the growing movement dedicated to cultivating "mutually-enhancing relations" with Earth's community of species, as envisioned by cultural historian Thomas Berry years ago. Like the elegant sweep of birds in the Klamath basin, we are all part of a larger body of unique voices and sensitivities dedicated to the well-being of the unborn. We are brought together in the communion of the whole through our shared love for the planet.

Ultimately, spiritual ecology comes down to what we each can do, from moment to moment, to support this vision. Perhaps the most simple and yet most powerful act of spiritual ecology is the bow. The bow is an act of humility and reverence and it can be carried out anywhere, at any time. It draws the recipient into our compass of gratitude and says: "I hold you, as part of the sacred community, in my widening circle of compassion and concern." For the significance of the bow, I return again to writer Barry Lopez: "The bow is a technique of awareness. We often address the physical dimensions of landscape, but they are inseparable from the spiritual dimensions. It is in dismissing the spiritual dimensions that we are able to behave like barbarians. If the land is incorporated into the same moral universe that you occupy, then your bow is an acknowledgement of your participation in that universe and a recognition that all you bow to is included in your moral universe. If you behave as though there were no spiritual dimension to the place, then you can treat the place like an object."<sup>iii</sup>



Dalai Lama Bowing

In the spirit, I bow to the Earth and her family of species, and with that gesture, I both celebrate and grieve with my larger family, the one that sustains me and is the richest source of my imagination.

Spiritual ecology is a creative response in a time of crisis and opportunity. I end with one of my poems about the source of that creativity, the wildness found in both our inner and outer landscapes. The interplay of those landscapes with the human imagination can form the fertile ground for a new way of being human.

### **The Good Story**

The wild will come to you  
Like a good story  
Peopled with creatures  
If you are still long enough  
Like a gift of grace, a giving  
That renews the marrow  
And provides a home  
  
For those occupied with alien stories  
For those distracted by the search.

We have too long been occupied and distracted with the alienating story of greed and consumption. May we find the stillness that, through a practice of spiritual ecology, will allow a new story to live among us.

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<sup>i</sup> The Living Planet Report, issued by the World Wildlife Fund in September, 2004 using scientific analysis from the Global Footprint Network.  
<sup>ii</sup> The Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, a report issued by the United Nations in May, 2005, involving over 1,300 researchers from 95 nations. The report is the most comprehensive survey ever into the state of the planet.  
<sup>iii</sup> Sierra Magazine, Nov./Dec 1998, "On Sacred Ground: Writer Barry Lopez Respects Alaskan Environment," by Nicholas O'Connell.