

## Blue Boat Home

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There are many metaphors and colloquial descriptions used to capture the awesome complexity of our planet, this planet Earth that exists in just the right orbit around our sun to support liquid water, an atmosphere, and carbon-based life.

Blue boat home, swirling blue-green marble, third rock from the sun, spaceship Earth.

The metaphors that speak to me most powerfully, though, see our Earth as alive—even though in a technical, scientific sense (at least a European-American scientific sense), it is not.

Mother Earth, Goddess Gaia, a living oasis amidst the vacuum of space. Some look to Earth for their theology as well, calling to spirits of the winds from each direction or to living embodiments of the materials of being: air, water, earth and fire.

These metaphors speak to me partially because they capture the breadth and depth of the interdependent web of existence of which we are a part. Unlike descriptions that see our planet as a solitary rock or mere shelter for its inhabitants, to see the Earth as our Mother, or as Goddess, or as spirit itself is to understand that we inhabit a planet that is constantly changing and becoming, an organism, even if metaphorically, that acts and reacts and responds to stimuli.

To see the Earth as alive pays homage also to the ways in which all things on the planet are related to one another. That all living beings share the same building blocks, that our substance is recycled over and over again through the cycles of birth and death, that our energy is absorbed and transformed and released and reabsorbed, that the breath that I take in contains molecules from you and you and you and the trees outside this building, that the breath I breathe out contains molecules from every place I've been.

But more than that, metaphors of the Earth as living call us to a deeper relationship with our planet and its creatures. A relationship that brings with it responsibility to use our power as humans in ways that benefit our kindred beings.

Western scientists have for many years debated whether this view of Earth is helpful to our understanding of humanity's place on our planet. Differing camps have argued, on the one hand, that the web of interrelated forces that govern how our planet and its creatures operate is too complex to untangle, and, on the other, that we must never give up trying to do so, for in giving up we lose our ability to really understand our Earthly home.

Most scientists, however, would be in agreement that even if we ascribe to our planetary system qualities of a living being, we still do not understand the planet as having a conscience. To them, the anthropomorphizing goes only so far. Call it Gaia, but don't believe she's a she, for crying out loud.

I think they're selling our planet short.

You might be surprised to hear me say something like that, given my background as a scientist.

I certainly don't think that ascribing human qualities to the Earth is an accurate way to see it, but I think that many humans tend to assume that our human way of having sentience, of having a conscience and understanding the world around us is the only way there is to do this.

I can't say for certain that we're right about that.

For example, many modern-day Western theologians seeking to build an ecological theology often create a hierarchy in which humans somehow find ourselves on top. Several important theological works over the last hundred years have sought to create ethical systems that don't favor humans—and wind up judging other beings by their similarity to human beings. Can a being without a brain as complex as ours have thoughts as complex as ours? Who are we to say.

Feminist theologies critique hierarchy as a way to organize the world around us, but still find a way for humans to be central to their understanding of ecological ethics. I guess this is only natural, as humans are the ones creating the theology in the first place. Whether we're the top of a pyramid or the center of a web is inconsequential, I think.

But we need not look far to find people with a different way of looking at the world.

For a contrasting viewpoint, we can turn to the indigenous people of our own land.

Many native cultures that I have studied not only see moral agency in non-human beings, but also give us a glimpse of a less-arbitrary biocentric ethic. Our decision-making processes become quite different if we understand not only non-human animals but also objects that Western cultures would deem "inanimate" to have some degree of understanding of their existence and its consequences for things around them.

As in process theology, the spiritual traditions of many Native American and Hawaiian/Polynesian cultures see humans as intimately connected to all other entities in the universe. These traditions depart from the traditional Western thinking in accepting their connection to entities not thought of by these philosophies as "alive."

Native Hawai'ian philosopher Michael Kioni Dudley writes that,

“The chants of the Hawaiians told them that they had descended from the cosmos itself and from its many plant and animal species. They felt a kinship with nature not experienced by people who see a break between humankind and the species of nature which have preceded them in the evolutionary advance.”

He continues, “In the Western world, where the cleavage is most pronounced, animals are disdained as having senses but no reason; the plant world is recognized as alive, but in no way even aware; and the elements of the cosmos are treated as inert objects that follow mechanical laws. Hawaiians, on the other hand, view all these beings as sentient ancestral forms that interrelate with them as family. Therefore, they experience reality differently because of these views.” (Dudley)

This worldview is not unique to the native people of Hawai'i. Native American people from many different cultures express similar thoughts about their connection to non-human entities in the universe.

J. Donald Hughes writes that, for example, the Zuni people of what is now the American southwest see “everything in nature as alive, not just animate, but fully alive in the way people are alive, conscious and sentient. The Zunis... [call] everything, whether it be a star, mountain, flower, eagle, or the earth itself *h'oi*, a 'living person.'” (Hughes)

Hughes' observations of Zuni culture extend to many other North American nations.

The famously misattributed Chief Seattle of the Suquamish people of the Pacific Northwest coast was quoted in an 1887 edition of the Seattle *Sunday Star* as having said, “even the rocks, which seem to be dumb and dead as they swelter in the sun along the silent shore, thrill with memories of stirring events connected with the lives of my people....” (Smith)

Navajo, Choctaw, and Haudenosaunee/Iroquois oral traditions, to name a few, also have teachings that closely parallel these.

I believe that all things in the universe are connected to one another.

I believe that these connections exist whether or not we know they do.

I believe that humans are an intimate part of nature, that nothing we do can be understood as outside of the actions of all of creation, and I believe that non-human creation is imbued with the same energy that pulses through our cells, the energy that makes us alive and gives us agency to act as moral beings.

I also believe that we must honor the agency and experience of non-human entities in whatever ways we can. In doing so, we show them respect and honor our connection to them.

I'll give you a concrete example from my past. When I was deciding upon a research project in my cell biologist days, my research advisor questioned my choice. Based upon her knowledge that I was, at the time, a vegetarian, she wondered if I knew that the research project I was about to undertake involved the killing of rats. I told her I did, and she asked me how I reconciled that with my ethical views.

Here was my answer: I trusted that the research I was about to do was necessary for humanity. In researching the interactions of lung immune cells with proteins, I would be helping to unravel some of the mysteries of the human response to lung infection.

This research was immediately applicable to people with pneumonia, premature infants with underdeveloped lungs, and those with immune disorders, and I knew that it could one day save human lives. So, first and foremost, I felt the research was necessary.

Next, I knew that if I did the research, it would be done with the fewest number of rats possible, and I could not guarantee that if I let someone else do it. I pledged to take seriously the fact that in order for my research to be done, animals would die.

Finally, I told her, I intended to thank each and every rat for giving up its life, and explain to each one that I trusted its sacrifice would allow countless other beings to live. In five years of research, I did just that. Never did I feel like I was violating my own covenant with our planet and its creatures.

Whether we're talking about medical research or paper recycling, the sources of our electricity or how we get ourselves around town, whether we're looking at the environmental impact of our food choices or trying to remember to bring a canvas bag when we go food shopping, decisions we make every day have far-reaching effects on the planet we call home.

As we near the fortieth celebration of Earth Day, let us hear the call to be in relationship with our planet and its beings. Perhaps it will help you to see our Earth as mother, as goddess, as a living, breathing, sentient being. Perhaps that's just so much spiritual mumbo-jumbo to you. Perhaps you see humanity as the most highly-evolved creature in a pyramid of being, or perhaps you see us as one strand in a web of creation.

Either way, we cannot ignore that what we do is done interdependently with all other beings. We cannot ignore that we have the power of choice, the power to act with intention and conscience. We have the power to treat our Earth as sacred, as holy, as something to be revered, as something to be respected. Let us go forth and do just that. Blessed be.

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