

“Native Earthling”
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Let’s hope, with Rachel Carson, that the Good Fairy who bestows the indestructible sense of wonder has touched Emi, and Nik, and all our children, and has reawakened those of us who had forgotten it. Keeping wonder alive is actually something that the generations do for each other. We pass the flame back and forth.

Witnessing children’s raw sensitivity to the world, enjoying vicariously their process of discovery, helps us grownups shake ourselves from the blindness of habit and predictability. In turn, our task is to pass on to them an understanding of the natural world, to help them appreciate it and love it scientifically and spiritually, and to impart to them a sense of gratitude and stewardship.

Debra Frasier’s storybook, “On the Day You Were Born,” makes the link between the sheer awesomeness of nature and the sense of gratitude for the way it cradles us. Her poem captures all the essentials that make earth home for us:

The grounding force of gravity,
the earth turning toward the warmth and brilliance of the sun,
the regular oscillation of day and night,
the phases of the moon in the night sky,
and the moon’s pull on the ocean’s tides,
the stars rotating around the pole star,
the migrating animals and their calls to one another,
the forests of breathing trees and the plains of grass,
the sensation of the wind,
the protection of the atmosphere,
the life-giving rains and weather patterns,
the seasons and cycles,
and the circle of human community that gives us our specific sense of belonging,
within the larger circle of belonging to the whole community of life.

Thomas Berry is a philosopher of myth and religion who, decades ago, turned his attention to the looming ecological problems the world is facing. He says that the outer world gives us our inner world. We need all these things—we need the sun and moon and the forests and tides and animals because they provide our inner landscapes of symbol and meaning. They give us our first, original, sense of sacred power and mystery.

If we lived on the moon, our inner life would correlate with those images, those sensations. Our imaginations would resonate with the gray, pocked lunar landscape, the overwhelming immediacy of stars and deep space, and the great glowing blue ball floating over our horizon. Our sense of the Divine would reflect these things.

But we are earthlings, and our innermost nature rises directly from our life in this natural world. If we lose the beauty of the outer world, if we are deprived of it, if we destroy it, we continue to have a profound need and longing for it emotionally, imaginatively, spiritually, because our intelligence and soulfulness as a species have literally been born out of the matrix of that beauty.

Berry says: “Human intelligence requires a magnificent world, a beautiful world, a world of resonance and meaning. For humans to bear the burden of intelligence and responsibility, we need a beautiful world to inspire and heal us.”

Speaking of inspiration, speaking of a sense of wonder, and speaking of being grounded in the earth, one of my own most staggering experiences of the wonder of nature came when I was reading Peter Tomkins and Christopher Bird’s book, *Secrets of the Soil*.

When we think of the marvels of the natural world, we may be inclined toward more dramatic images of mountains or sea or sky. But it was a chapter titled “Microcosmos” that almost knocked me off my chair. It is all about dirt, or more specifically, microorganisms, fungi, and worms. They may not be beautiful, but they certainly are wonderful!

They don’t just live in the soil. They are the soil. They made it, ingesting the base mineral compounds and laying down their bodies to turn what was a bare rock of a planet into an Eden.

Here are some interesting numbers for you: A single microbe, reaching reproductive maturity in less than half an hour, can, in the course of a single day, grow into 300 million more, and in another day, its progeny can outnumber all the human beings that have ever lived. The sheer tonnage of microbial weight within the soil far outnumbers all of the animal and insect life that lives above it.

The awe I experienced in learning about these things was joined with a gut feeling of my absolute indebtedness and humility before these humblest of creatures. They are, after all, pretty much responsible for sustaining just about everything that lives; they are the alpha and omega of the food chain. Without incalculable droves of them living, working, dying inside us, and all around us, we can neither grow food nor digest it.

Such realizations remind us of how radically dependent we are, and how misguided and cavalier are our human illusions of dominance and autonomy. To think, all the world’s moguls and millionaires, tyrants and armies, all human governments and industries, all grinding to a halt before the final truth of the humble microbe.

In the biblical book of Genesis, in the second creation account (for there are two, side by side), God forms the first human out of the soil, the mud. The name “Adam,” in fact, can be translated from the ancient Hebrew to mean “earth creature” or “soil creature,” or perhaps, with a little stretch, even “earthling.” Into the earth person God breathed the breath of spirit and consciousness.

Although five thousand years old, this account points to the truth, like so many other ancient creation stories. Our very existence, in evolutionary terms, and in our continued life, emerges from the humus. We are earth-made and earth-bound, and yet, we are also endowed with a peculiar intelligence and with immortal longings.

It is the other Genesis creation story, the first one, that tells how the earth was formed by the Creator in six days. Writer and musician David Bower offers a synthesis of the Biblical and the evolutionary accounts of the history of the earth.

He asks us to consider the six days of the Genesis creation story as a figure of speech for what has, in fact, been four billion years of the earth's existence. In this metaphor, each one of the six days would then equal something like six hundred and sixty-six million years.

Our six days will run from 12:00 a.m. on Monday to midnight on Saturday. That means that all day Monday and until Tuesday noon, creation was busy just getting the earth ready for life.

On Tuesday at noon, life emerged from a polymer soup in the form of minuscule proto-organisms, and the whole interconnected organic nature of it developed furiously over the next four days (Tuesday through Saturday—that's almost six days right there!). It was not until 4:00 p.m. on Saturday afternoon, the very last day, that the dinosaurs came on the scene. Five hours later, (that's 138 million 750 thousand years later) when the redwoods appeared, the big reptiles had fulfilled the arc and descent of their reign and were gone.

At three minutes before midnight on Saturday night, homo sapien sapiens appeared—that's us. Two and three-quarters minutes later (that's one-fourth of one second before midnight), Jesus appeared.

At one fortieth of one second before midnight on the last day, the industrial revolution began. And here we are, living in the modern world that we know, the world of our making.

If this six-day metaphor shows us anything, it's how embedded we humans are in the unfathomably huge scope of evolution, what newcomers we are, how brief our tenure has been so far, and how we carry within our genetic material the entire three-billion-year drama of the evolution of the natural world.

We are more than 95% genetically identical not only to chimpanzees (our closest cousins in the animal world) but to other mammals such as mice, and even share a large portion of genetic similarity to many plants.

And yet in modern society we experience ourselves as almost completely removed from that entire ground of being.

David Bower concludes his six-day metaphor by saying, “We are a people who think that what we have been doing for this last one-fortieth of a second can go on indefinitely. We think it is normal, but we are stark, raving mad.”

Well, one could get into doom and gloom here. One could focus on where we’ve gone astray, but that’s not my intention. It’s easy to see that we can be destructive, but what is our gift to the Creation, what special contribution arises from our nature? What is our calling?

Thomas Berry says, “When it comes to flying, birds are the best. When it comes to swimming, fish are the best. But when it comes to reflexive thinking, human beings are the best. The contribution that [we] make to the universe is that we enable the universe to reflect on itself and in a sense to smile at, and enjoy and celebrate itself in light of the numinous mystery that is expressed in everything.”

Our gift is to be aware of ourselves in relation: to self-consciously experience and reflect upon the nature of things, upon ourselves, and upon relationships in all their manifestations. The indigenous peoples of North America often began their prayers by calling “To all my relations,” by acknowledging themselves within that network, that kinship. The religious impulse, the mythic impulse has always been about a sense of the magnificence of the cosmic and our place within it. The creative and artistic and scientific impulses all express the need to reflect and know the world we find ourselves in.

It’s possible that our self-consciousness is at the bottom of our troubles, because we have lost the thread of simply belonging and have been overcome by anxiety. But self-awareness is also the only way out of that. To become again like our aboriginal ancestors, aware of ourselves in relation to the whole, is the only tenable path for us. As modern earthlings, we will have to integrate that understanding with our intense creative and consumptive drives.

Thomas Berry is asked if he is hopeful for humankind. He finds it a difficult question, although he asserts that there is no future, no existence, without hope.

“I think constantly of the future—of the children, and of the need for all children to go into the future as a single sacred community. The children of the trees, the children of the birds, the children of the animals, the children of the insects—all children, including human children, must go together into the future. There is no future for human children if there is no future for the children of the other life forms.”

And so it is our work to help the generations coming up, by our example, by our awareness. It is our task to remember that we can go forward only within the whole family of life.

How will we remember? Perhaps by at least paying awareness to those fundamental things that Debra Frasier speaks of in “On the Day You Were Born.”

Notice the earth turning toward the radiance of the sun, and then slipping forward again into the deepening evening and the velvet night....

Feel the pull of gravity holding us....

Notice the migrating birds calling to one another....

Look up into the breathing trees, into the rotating stars, into the face of the changing moon....

Feel the breeze on our faces and breathe in the scent of the damp sweet earth as it warms in the spring...

...And remember where we come from.

And then let us teach the young ones how to be honest earth creatures, connected to life, indebted to life, cradled and sustained by the earth, and reverent of its beauty, its delicacy, its majesty.

May it be so.