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“On This Day We Restore Earth”

Celebrating the Environmental Sabbath

by Daniel Martin

In 1987, the United Nations Environment Programme launched its annual interfaith Environmental Sabbath celebration, held in conjunction with World Environment Day (June 5), with the purpose of highlighting the religious community's responsibility for the fate of the earth. After three Sabbaths, the enthusiastic response from congregations and local leaders of various faiths is highly encouraging; it is hoped that, given its potential as a focus for myriad efforts worldwide, the project will eventually evolve into an annual global celebration. For this to happen, the Environmental Sabbath will require the endorsement of the leadership of the world's major religious bodies—the project's current goal. For more information, contact UNEP, 2 United Nations Plaza, New York, NY 10017; (212) 963-8094.

Although the word “Sabbath” is most clearly associated with the Bible, it is more than a Judeo-Christian theme. In other faith traditions, it is expressed and celebrated less formally: for example, in an all-pervasive spiritual attitude of reverence and gratitude,

Sabbath (fr. Hebrew shabbath, “rest”): 1 a: the seventh day of the week observed from Friday evening to Saturday evening as a day of rest or worship by Jews and some Christians b: Sunday observed among Christians as a day of rest and worship 2: a time of rest.

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or in periodic ritual related to natural cycles or the processes of human growth. Sabbath refers to rest for all involved in the process of creation—for the earth as well as the human. It is not simply a time for inactivity

but also for renewing basic relationships, for rediscovering roles and duties.

In the biblical tradition of Sabbath, this concept of rest is a symbol of, and a framework for, all life.¹ It is, first of all, a symbol of balanced relationship, of harmony between God and creation—both the human and the natural world. It is a vision of interconnectedness, the awareness of a cycle of creation that consists not simply of work and activity but also of reflection, worship and

celebration. In the Genesis story, Sabbath was an integral part of the act of creation, not something tagged on afterwards when the creator got tired. Without the celebration that Sabbath rest symbolizes, work is actually incomplete. The insight was an important antidote to obsession with work, possessions and power, for it proclaimed that life is greater than any individual's conception of it. Sabbath is also a framework for ethical relationships that encourages and inspires creative living. It grows out of the realization that the basic sin is alienation, estrangement from the processes of life. Such estrangement damages the fundamental harmony of existence, one's relationships with God, other people and the natural world—which underpins the others. Through their relationship with the land, people either learned to share with one another or developed the skills of war.

Biblical law was founded on the Sabbath ideal. It was meant to remind people that they were created in the image of God—not superior to the rest of creation, but caring for creation as God cared. To be fully human, fully alive, meant to care for the earth in a Godlike manner. This was the meaning of holiness. The Holiness Code (Leviticus 19-26) was an expression of Sabbath that inspired personal renewal, calling people away from obsessions with their projections—the fruit of distorted earth-human relations—to a holistic freedom which is the experience of Godlike relationships.

The law also attempted to deal with the dark side of human existence, with the realization that people tended not to live in harmony with their environment. Thus, it called for Sabbath renewal, in order to limit and protect against the un-Godlike habits that exploited and destroyed. Every seven years, debts were to be cancelled; every fifty years, a special Sabbath jubilee legislated for land redistribution. In this way, the weaker and less fortunate were protected by a balance of competitive capitalism and protective socialism against inevitable monopolization. Law, of course, is only as good as its enforcement; these particular laws were more honored in the breach, which gave many of the prophets appropriate targets for their renewal programs.

From this perspective, the Old Testament is not a book of abstract spiritual principles but a concrete, essentially earth-centered reflection on a holistic existence. Its insights come from the realization of the interconnectedness of all life and, therefore, our responsibility for one another. It is inspired by the wisdom of the years that understood that fruitfulness came from good, balanced relationships, and by the memory of a common heritage: that the people of Israel were

How the Environmental Sabbath Began

The concept of the Environmental Sabbath began with Noel Brown, director of UNEP's New York Liaison Office for North America. How did the project take shape? In Brown's words: "It struck me that the environmental crisis is at bottom a moral crisis. How we treat the earth is an index of how we treat each other. Regardless of your religious credo, if you believe that this earth is an object of creation, then you can't serve the creator and mangle his work. If we are indeed faithful to our religious heritage, then we've got to see the earth as an object of affection and protection.

"We first put together a small advisory group and started identifying those religious groups who would be interested and with whom we could work. Then out of that came another dimension. By trying to use the Sabbath to bring all the religious groups together, we're

operating more naturally—more how nature operates—than we would have if we'd acted within normal theological lines. The earth is an integrated, interactive, dynamic entity, even though we have become specialized, fragmented and alienated. We called it the Sabbath to embrace the major religions which observe Friday, Saturday and Sunday; symbolically we were trying to create a framework for cooperation like nature's itself."

What is being planned for World Environment Day 1990? "A global Garbage Day. The idea is to encourage all people everywhere to ponder what we are creating—a garbage sphere, on a collision course with the biosphere—and to see what we can do to ignite our consciousness to reduce litter. Accordingly, for next year's Environmental Sabbath, we will be asking the churches and religious communities to mobilize in connection with a cleanup campaign."

once strangers themselves. The Old Testament is a Sabbath document that knows that all life is a gift and that all life is one. The experience of oneness underpins every true religious expression; the biblical Sabbath resonates, therefore, with the insights of all the faiths of humankind.

Sabbath in Today's World

It is an understatement that we are an alienated species, for not only are we estranged from the earth, but we live increasingly in isolation from one another. Ultimately, we lose ourselves. Today's prophets speak of a shrinking world and the siege mentality of Western society.² Our attitudes and values, structures and laws are all human-centered. Our lives, cut off from the natural processes, sanitized beyond health, have become simply extensions of our own limited insights and prejudices.

This alienation is proving fundamentally destructive, not only to the rest of creation, but increasingly to ourselves. We have exploited rather than participated in life; the effects have become our daily news. We can no longer escape the fruits of this distorted relationship. Our exploitative probings have won us a certain knowledge and power—but this power requires a more mature attitude toward life than we have shown in the past. With our domination and progress fixations, we risk destroying ourselves.

Nature is showing signs of weariness, of frustration with this arrogant species. Soil is disappearing or losing its life force, water is turning to acid and burning our trees as well as our souls, and air is no longer benign, protecting us from harsh rays or carrying pure food for lungs and blood.

The situation demands a fundamentally new approach, a new understanding of our

role within the larger context of creation. Thomas Berry talks of the need to redefine the human. If the source of many of our problems today is distorted human-earth relations, then renewing these relations is the only real way out of our dilemma.³ In effect, this means a rediscovery of the autonomy of nature, of the spiritual quality of all life. It means finding God in nature, not simply as an aesthetic quality or a projection of our own romanticism, but as the all-pervasive divine source of every element of creation, the end toward which every subatomic particle strains in its own way.⁴ It means discovering the fundamental reality of oneness, the interconnectedness of ecosystems, the principles of diversity, autonomy and communion that underpin every life form.⁵

The rediscovery of nature (a statement that immediately reveals our human-centered prejudice) requires two things: a new "story"—an overall vision—and its cultivation through practices eliciting an experience of life to break through our dark arrogance. The new story is the story of origins and growth, source and end, significance and participation: what Berry calls a "functional cosmology" because it enables us to understand where we fit in, what our function is.⁶ It enables us to make sense of the joys and suffering of life, to integrate change, disintegration and finally death into the whole scheme of things. Modern science has offered us the bones of such a story, but it needs to be supplemented by the intuitive wisdom of the past, the revelations of the great religions. While science describes in ever-increasing detail the facts of life, it offers no explanation of their purpose or significance. However, in its deepening insights, it lends clarity to religious truths by deepening our appreciation of nature's marvelous complex-

ities. Thus, the change of mind and heart needed to address our present situation must include the reintegration of science and religion in a mutually enriching relationship.

This new story cannot be simply acknowledged or grasped intellectually if it is to affect our attitudes and values: it must be experienced. Experience of this kind is the basis of ritual and spirituality. Both have become dulled instruments of growth in the narrow, reductionist approach to life that has dominated the last couple of centuries. Without the experience of the whole story, our blindness can only increase, and with it, fear and destruction. And since the whole story is effectively the story of what we call nature, this experience must mean the experience of nature.

Such experience will mean a whole relearning of things forgotten and often feared: sensitivity, sensuality. It will mean the opening of deeper, more intuitive, less intellectually-certain aspects of knowledge; the learning or recovery of a language more clearly symbolic, more awake to spiritual dimensions.⁷ It will mean the "reinstatement" of the body into respectability as creation of earth and expression of the divine. And it will include the rediscovery of the earth as psychic and spiritual, as well as material, reality.

We are speaking of a new openness to what we do not (yet) know: the unconscious—and the wilderness, its external counterpart. In the biblical tradition, God was experienced in the wilderness just as creation was born out of chaos. Our pre-scientific ancestors lived in the experience of the aliveness of nature, of the spiritual quality (however named) that pervaded all reality, and in the participation in this greater reality. People ritualized the movements of the planets in the heavens, the cycles of the seasons of the earth; and they experienced themselves as part of this uncontrollable unfolding.⁸ In the realization of oneness, death could be integrated, fear calmed. God was experienced as the beyond that is in every personal moment and in the infinite diversity of the wilderness. It was a realistic relationship with the cosmos: a "control-as-worship" versus a "control-as-use."

In managing to understand some things, we have fallen into the trap of thinking that reductionist, analytical knowledge will allow us to understand all things. Our estrangement from nature and the objectification this allowed was a mixed blessing: we see all the parts, but miss the overall picture. Such knowledge is not without its importance, but only provided that it can be reintegrated into a larger form of encounter with reality. This will happen when we recover our sense of the oneness and interconnectedness of all life.

Any talk of solutions to our present crisis must therefore begin here. We cannot afford any more "patching up." Our habits need to change; education needs to change, not only in schools, but in every area that touches people's lives: churches, media, social facilities. We all need to be reeducated in our relationship with the earth. Legislation has to be rethought in terms of this new relationship: people must be encouraged to return to the land in order to tend it in a way that our corporations and agribusinesses simply cannot. Our constitutions must be amended to include the rights of all creation;⁹ the United Nations Charter for Nature offers a marvelous example.¹⁰

The Environmental Sabbath

The Environmental Sabbath project grows out of efforts to turn around a rapidly deteriorating ecological situation by transforming human hearts and minds. It challenges people of all faiths to be stewards of creation and custodians of the earth, in accordance with the teachings of their own traditions. All these traditions contain marvelous insights into the relation of humans to the natural world: a treasure buried under the institutionalized fear and arrogance that has dominated human thinking—particularly in the West, though increasingly throughout the world.

The Sabbath points out that the cosmos is indeed the teacher of us all, and that our scriptures offer us a wisdom distilled over many centuries, a divine law to interpret these lessons. One goal of the Environmental Sabbath is a meeting of the many faith perspectives around the issue of our common crisis. For this to happen, an awareness of our crisis and the way forward must be fostered everywhere, beginning in the places where human hearts are still formed: in the shrines of the spirit, the churches, temples and mosques of the world. □

1. Richard C. Austin, "Rights for Life: Rebuilding Human Relationships with Land," in *Theology of the Land*, Bernard F. Evans, Gregory D. Cusack, eds., Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota, 1987.

2. See e.g. Christopher Lasch, *The Minimal Self*, W. W. Norton, 1984; Robert Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart*, Harper & Row, 1985.

3. Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth*, Sierra Club, San Francisco, 1988.

4. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Human Energy*, Harcourt Brace, 1969.

5. Berry, *op. cit.*

6. *Ibid.*

7. See e.g. Richard C. Austin, *Baptized into Wilderness: A Christian Perspective on John Muir and Beauty of the Lord*, Vols. 1 & 2 of a series on *Environmental Theology*, John Knox Press, Atlanta, 1987-88.

8. Joseph Campbell, *The Inner Reaches of Outer Space*, Alfred Van Der Marck, New York, 1985; Joseph Goetz, "La Funzione dei Riti nella Società Umana," *Civiltà Cattolica*, March 1979.

9. Austin, *op. cit.*

10. See also *What Are We Doing to Our Beautiful Land?*, Pastoral Letter of Philippine Catholic Bishops, January 1988 [excerpted in this issue] and *Philippine Charter for Nature*, based on the U.N. document.

Learning the Dance

We are right to worry about our survival, for we foolishly jeopardize it. We are wrong to devote our attention to saving or managing nature. Gaia will save herself—with or without us—and hardly needs advice or help in management. To look out for ourselves, we would be wise to interfere as little as possible in her ways, and to learn as much as possible of them. Our technology has ravaged nature and continues to do so, but the ravages of technology are based on our unnatural greed, our profit motive. There is no intrinsic reason that we humans cannot develop a benign technology once we agree that our desire to maximize profits is completely at odds with nature's dynamic balance—that greed prevents health and welfare for all. No other creatures take more than they need, and this must be our first lesson. Our second is to learn and emulate nature's fine-tuned recycling system, largely powered by free solar energy.

We used to believe that we were put here to do whatever we wanted to with our planet, that we were in charge. Now we see that we are natural creatures which evolved inside a great life system. Whatever we do that is not good for life, the rest of the system will try to undo or balance in any way it can. That is why we must learn Gaia's dance and follow its rhythms and harmonies in our own lives.

Our age-old religious quest for reconnection with origins has been the search not only for our origins, but for our creator as an inspirational source of guidance and security that would lead us to a better life. In the childhood of human civilization we imaged this source as parental deities cast in human images. Then, in our adolescent years, we rejected them all, believing there was nothing greater or more intelligent in all the universe than ourselves. Now, on the brink of maturity, we can see that our early intuitions were valid. The source of our creation is indeed an inspirational being far greater and wiser than ourselves; a being that has nurtured us and can guide us to a better way of life—not a perfect superhuman parent, but the imperfect yet wonderfully resourceful planet of which we are one part, and which may itself be part of a much greater being. Have we the maturity to heed it?

—Elisabet Sahtouris in *Gaia: The Human Journey from Chaos to Cosmos* (Pocket Books, 1989)