

The Spiritual Dimension—Why We Care for the Earth

WHAT DO WE MEAN by saying, “Our concern for the earth is a spiritual one”?

By recognizing this concern as spiritual, we are acknowledging that God’s presence permeates all things. We are also acknowledging that significant changes in how humans treat the Earth and its creatures will not take place until there are significant changes in how we feel about the Earth. When the heart is engaged, loving actions will follow.

For some people, the religious principle of continuing revelation has yielded an “Eleventh Commandment,” expressing God’s will that we treat his entire Creation lovingly. When Jesus was asked which is the greatest commandment, he selected two out of his tradition: loving God and loving your neighbor as yourself. Since he was very in touch with his time, I think he might in our time give a third great commandment, such as: “You shall love the earth as you love yourself; care for her health and fitness and beauty as you care for your own body; and protect the Earth as you would your own private property.” I believe that Jesus would understand that our neighbors are all living creatures, not only our fellow human beings.

Other people, coming from different religious traditions or inspired by such writers as Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and Albert Schweitzer, recognize an invisible bond between themselves and the physical world—a universal stream of inner vitality that many label “spiritual.” Their experience of being “in unity with nature” isn’t mere aesthetic appreciation; it is a profound recognition that humankind and the earth share a common lifeblood, a common pulse, and a common destiny.

Whatever the origins of our Earth-consciousness, we can explore and nurture it by intimate contact with nature herself:

Lie on grass, watch clouds. Caress white



birches, embrace an oak, climb an apple tree. Go barefoot in dirt and dunes. Float naked in a lake. Stroll on a beach, be beaten about by surf. Sing and circle-dance with friends in the woods or on the beach.

Rejoice in rain, stand in storms, enjoy shoveling snow. Listen to crickets and crows, whistle back to songbirds, hoot softly back to an owl. Take a night walk in the woods. Watch high-flying geese, look into the curious eyes of a deer. Smell pines, eat wild berries. Make up songs about experiences like these.

SOME PEOPLE yearn to leave the earth, to colonize the moon or Mars. Perhaps someday that will happen. But life beyond Earth’s fragile biosphere would be life without rivers, lakes, or waterfalls. A world with no meadows

or jungles! No rainbows, red clouds, black clouds, lightning, or thunder. No marshland, moss, or loons. No bamboo, cypress, or cedars. No bees, bears, or beavers. No meadowlarks, monkeys, or elephants. No zebras, azaleas, or hibiscus. No gulls, bluebirds, or hummingbirds. (Someone may mock: No scorpions, rattlesnakes, mosquitoes, or poison ivy? Yes, amen)

No sharks, no whales, no dolphins! No squid, no deer, no sheep. No clams, no oysters, no lobsters. No coral, no angelfish. No limestone, no fossils. No wild rice, wild strawberries, or wild beasts. No bananas, walnuts, or grapevines. No tigers, cougars, or jaguars. No eagles, falcons, or rabbits. No doves, ducks, or aningas. No showers, willows, or warm breezes.

AND THESE wonders are united in a Great Wonder—an intricately interwoven ecosystem, in which each wonder works and lives. We know of no other such wonder in the universe. As a ready-made home for human life, there can be no other. For the earth is, as Jacques Cousteau said, “an oasis in space.”

How, then, shall we face the insensitivity and stupidity of humankind’s destructive abuse of this our home and mother? Or of the sin of extinguishing even one species of such wonder? Can contemplating the earth’s wonders motivate and empower us to move from abuse to protection, from exploitation to Earthcare? Can our inner Light help us discern and speak Truth to corporate/political forces that use deception to mask their plunder?

Concern for planet Earth—sacred, fragile, and threatened—led to the founding of Quaker Earthcare Witness (QEW) in 1987. We felt the need to develop a testimony for an earth restored as clear as that held by Friends for peace and justice.

QEW vision and witness

- * We are called to live in right relationship with all Creation, recognizing that the entire world is interconnected and is a manifestation of God.
- * We work to integrate into the beliefs and practices of the Religious Society of Friends the Truth that God's creation is to be respected, protected, and held in reverence in its own right, and the Truth that human aspirations for peace and justice depend upon restoring the earth's ecological integrity.
- * We promote these Truths by being patterns and examples, by communicating our message, and by providing spiritual and material support to those engaged in the compelling task of transforming our relationship with the earth.

OUR CONCERN for the earth is a spiritual one. We feel a need to examine our faith and practice in the context of this concern. We invite and celebrate the Light that each Meeting has shed on this.

—Minute from Pacific Yearly Meeting conference on Being in Unity with Nature

THE EARTH we share is limited in its capacity to support life and to provide resources for our survival. The environment that has provided sustenance for generations must be protected for generations to come.

We have an obligation, therefore, to be responsible stewards of the earth, to restore its natural habitat where it has been damaged and to maintain its vitality.

Friends' historic testimonies on simplicity have long stressed that the quality of life does not depend upon immodest consumption...

—Friends Committee on National Legislation, policy statement, 1987

QEW Publications

Books and booklets

Caring for Creation: Reflections on the Biblical Basis of Earthcare, by Lisa Gould.

Earthcare for Children, a First Day School Curriculum, by Farley, Egly, & Farley.

Earthcare for Friends, a Study Guide for Individuals and Faith Communities.

Healing Ourselves and the Earth, by Elizabeth G. Watson.

Population is People, a Friends Perspective.

Sustainability and Spirituality, a Study Guide for Friends and Others.

Walking Gently on the Earth, an Earthcare Checklist, by Jack Phillips.

Trifolds/Quadfolds

Simplicity as Spiritual Exercise series:

–Freeing Ourselves from Possessions.

–Friends and Renewable Energy.

–Healthy Food, Healthy Planet.

–Living Lightly on the Earth, in the City.

–Traveling Gently on the Earth—What Would John Woolman Drive?

Friends, Money, and the Earth.

Friends, Slavery, and the Earth.

Friends' Witness on Rapid Population Growth.

How Eco-Friendly is Your Meeting House?

Human-induced Climate Change—A Spiritual Perspective.

Mindful Living, Mindful Giving.

Taking Away the Occasion of Abortion.

BeFriending Creation, the bimonthly newsletter of QEW, free with support/membership.

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