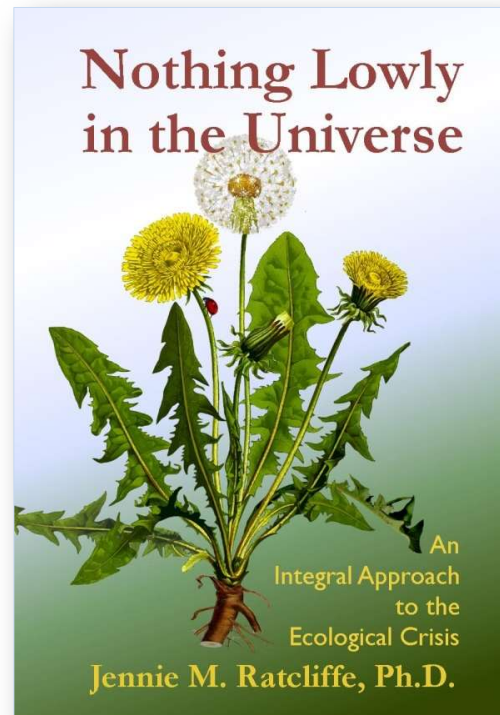


Nothing Lowly in the Universe

An Integral Approach to the Ecological Crisis

Jennie M Ratcliffe, Ph.D.

Jennie M. Ratcliffe is an environmental research scientist, Quaker, and activist. She has worked for the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the US National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences, and the Universities of London and North Carolina, and has been active in peace, social and ecological concerns for many years in the Quaker community and beyond.



The ecological and climate crisis is, at its heart, a spiritual and moral crisis. **Nothing Lowly in the Universe** explores the connections and interactions between the scientific, technological, economic, cultural, psychological and religious forces that are contributing to the crisis and shows how we can transform the ways of thinking and living that got us here.

Our current technological, economic and policy approaches to the crisis can, at best, only delay ecological destruction and conflict unless we address the deeper roots of our predicament. Drawing on the Quaker testimonies of love, integrity, reciprocity, nonviolence, simplicity, and the fundamental equality of all life, on other wisdom traditions, and on the work of visionaries and scientists from Gandhi and Arne Naess to E.F. Schumacher, Thomas Berry, and Donella Meadows, Jennie M. Ratcliffe explores the spiritual principles and practices of an integrated deep ecology, economy and peace. Despite the formidable and urgent challenges we face, these principles and practices, far from being utopian, offer attainable paths to long-term sustainability and a more peaceable and just world for the whole commonwealth of life.

\$27.00 (U.S.) ISBN: 978-1-7336600-0-6

The Crundale Press

Available from major online and independent booksellers worldwide

See below for full Table of Contents

Nothing Lowly in the Universe: An Integral Approach to the Ecological Crisis

By Jennie M. Ratcliffe, Ph.D.

Table of Contents

Introduction

PART I: PREDICAMENT

- Ch 1: **The State of the Earth:** Finite Earth; The Reality of Limits/Overshoot: Ecological Footprints/Who's Got the Biggest Footprints?/Eating the Earth: The Real Cost of Food/Climate Breakdown: The Existential Crisis/Climate and Conflict: The "Threat Multiplier"/The Ecological Costs of War
- Ch 2: **Fixes That Fall Short:** The Population Fix: Misunderstanding the Issues/The Technology Fix: Miracle or Myth?/The Economic Fix: Having Our Cake and Eating It?/What's Wrong with Economic Growth?/Pricing Nature: Conservation or Commodification?
- Ch 3: **Science, Technology, and Religion: Driving Our Predicament?** The Scientific Worldview: A Brief History/Nature as Machine: Modern Critiques of Science/Feminist Critiques: A Different Vision/Religions as Drivers of the Ecological Crisis/God, Humans and Nature: Whose Earth Is It?/Christian Views of Nature—Roots of the Ecological Crisis?
- Ch 4: **Violence to Each Other, Violence to the Earth:** Violence to the Earth: The Outer and Inner Landscape/Darwinism Made Me Do It? Biology and Violence/Violence and the Subordination of the Feminine/The Psychology of Apocalyptic Violence: Climate Breakdown and Nuclear War

PART II: PRINCIPLES

- Ch 5: **Toward a Whole Earth Community: The Spiritual Foundation:** Habits of Mind, Habits of Heart: Our Ways of Thinking/New Paradigms: Reframing Our Thinking/The Systems View of Life/Spirit, Matter and Consciousness as Indivisible/Paths to Integration: The Task of the Inner Psychospiritual Realm/Paths to Integration: Spirit in Action
- Ch 6: **Testimonies and Ecology: A Quaker Perspective:** Quakers and Ecological Concerns: A Brief History/Integrity as Wholeness and Reciprocity/The Principle and Power of Nonviolence/The Richness of Simplicity/Right Relationship in Equality and Community
- Ch 7: **Other Religious Responses to the Ecological Crisis:** The Concept of Earth Stewardship/Beyond Stewardship?/Ecojustice: Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor/The "Greening of World Religions"—Old and New Wisdoms
- Ch 8: **Principles of Deep Ecology, Economy and Peace: An Integral Approach:** Arne Naess and Ecosophy/Thomas Berry and the Great Work/Awakening to Unity: The Experience of Deep Ecology/Integrating Deep Ecology, Deep Economy, and Deep Peace

PART III: PRACTICE

- Ch 9: **The Practice of Deep Ecology:** Conscientious Protection—Conserving the Commonwealth of Life/Equitable Land Ownership and Use/Agroecology: Nonviolent Farming/Can Agroecology Work in Industrialized Countries?/Changing the Way We Eat
- Ch 10: **The Practice of Deep Economy:** A Deep Economy is a Nonviolent Economy/The Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement in Sri Lanka/Nonviolent Economy in the Global North—Utopianism or Emerging Reality?/Deep Economy at the Macro Level: Steady-state Economics/Deep Economy at the Community Level: Transition Communities/Can Individual Actions Make a Difference?/The Need for Good Global Governance/Appropriate Technology/Contraction and Convergence: A Model for Equity
- Ch 11: **The Practice of Deep Peace:** The Inner Landscape of Nonviolence/Practicing Nonviolence in the Real World/The Power of Nonviolence in Practice/Peaceful Production: A Possibility

Afterword: Tipping Point or Turning Point?

Bibliography

Index

About the Author

Introduction

Greta Thunberg is a child of the Anthropocene—the newly-defined age in which humanity, rather than natural forces, has radically impacted the wider natural world. When the then 15-year old Swedish teenager spoke at the 24th UN climate conference in December 2018, she summed up our predicament: “Our biosphere is being sacrificed so that rich people in countries like mine can live in luxury.” She was not sure what future, if any, her generation and those to come would have, but was clear that the world’s leaders had utterly failed them. It is perhaps a symptom of the ecological crisis itself that her message, and increasing evidence of global climate and ecological breakdown, still evoke only passing attention in the rush of mainstream news cycles and the instant world of online social media, and it is now children walking out of schools who must now try to grab the attention of the world’s leaders. The almost incomprehensible reality is that, despite multiple warnings, humanity and the wider natural world are facing an existential crisis—the loss and suffering of much of human life and millions of other life-forms that have evolved over close to four billion years—in what may become the “sixth extinction” event in the history of life on Earth, this time by our own hand. According to a vast body of research by climate scientists, ecologists, and others, the world is rapidly reaching a tipping point. We may now have less than a decade in which to make radical changes in the way many of us currently live if we are to avoid runaway climate breakdown and ecological collapse.

How did we get to this point? It is clear from this evidence that we—by which I mean particularly those of us, mostly in richer countries, who already consume well beyond our essential needs, or who have the lion’s share of global wealth and power—cannot continue with business-as-usual growth on a finite earth. We cannot continue to regard ecological impacts as “externalities” whose cost will come due elsewhere or maybe never, and to use the wider natural world as a commodity for short-term economic gain and deeply unequal consumption and development; and we cannot go on spending vast amounts on our military complexes in the name of security while largely ignoring the far greater threat to the survival of all life from ecological devastation, or the fact that ecological destruction disproportionately impacts the poorest, while “resource wars” amplify the threats from other conflicts and

climate breakdown. Yet we continue to try to have our cake and eat it too, relying on end-of-pipeline technological, economic, social and political fixes that we hope will allow us to “decouple” economic growth and our current ways of living from their ecological impacts, or even using fixes for ecological destruction as yet another source of profit and growth. While urgent measures are now becoming necessary, they will only delay ecological collapse if we fail to address the interconnections between overconsumption, growth, conflict, and inequality, and their deeper causes. In other words, *we have been trying to address the ecological predicament using the same thinking and approaches that got us here in the first place*, despite abundant evidence that they are failing to prevent the looming crisis. Meanwhile, many of us, particularly in some of the richest countries, have lost a sense of what really sustains us in both the material and spiritual realms.

The roots of our predicament lie far deeper than most political, social or economic analyses suggest. What are these roots? And what are the principles and practices that will allow us to make the radical turning that is now called for, a turning that could lead us into what Thomas Berry has called the Ecozoic era and away from the ecological devastation of the Anthropocene?

The ecological crisis is, at its heart, a spiritual and moral crisis. It is a profound failure of moral imagination about what we are really risking, as if we can readily entertain the notion that ecocide and the mass destruction of human life were somehow justified or inevitable; and a spiritual failure of that part of us that knows and responds to the power of life, beauty, and love, and our kinship with all life. We are discovering that we cannot bend the inescapable laws of nature, yet we seem to be trapped between hubris and an inability to imagine a different future. At the root of this crisis is a fundamental belief in separation—between mind, body, heart and soul or spirit; between one human and another, and between ourselves, the wider natural world, and whatever we conceive of as the source of life and the truth of being, whether we call it God, Spirit, One, All That Is, the Infinite Source, Reality, or simply the great mystery. In the West, in particular, we have emphasized an anthropocentric way of thinking (partly from traditional Christian and scientific worldviews) that is predominantly mechanistic, dualistic, and hierarchical, with humans at the apex of life. This way of thinking also fosters violence to each other and the earth, with its emphasis on domination, opposition, competition, win-lose or either-or thinking, and individualism, rather than cooperation, interdependence, and co-responsibility. And by reducing much of nature to insentient object, machine, or even adversary, and regarding our-

selves as superior, or uniquely made in God's image, we have typically thought of nature as a resource to be used, exploited or destroyed at will, even as we are exhorted to be "stewards" or keepers of the earth in our scriptures.

Yet from out of these worldviews, and as part of the process of integrating Eastern and Western philosophies, science and religion, the lost voices of indigenous peoples and women, we are evolving new understandings of the earth's systems, the cosmos, and our capacity for spiritual awe and wonder. The more we realize how indivisible the whole of life is, the more the apparent separation between ourselves and the wider natural world, or the parts of nature we consider useful to humans and those that we (mistakenly) think are not, begins to dissolve. We are also now seeing a creative synthesis of science and spirituality and of our fundamental ideas about the nature of mind, consciousness, matter, and spirit, and envisaging—or restoring—a new, yet ancient, understanding that speaks to the reality of nonduality, interconnection, mutuality, and co-arising. Within ourselves, we are beginning to understand the inner landscape of our violence by integrating the masculine and feminine aspects of ourselves, our projections, and the suppressed parts of our psyches. Further, I believe, we are seeing a greater alignment of the inner realm of spiritual contemplation with outer action in the world.

If separation and distancing are at the heart of our predicament, the restoration of a sense of integrity as the wholeness, interdependence, and reciprocity of all life, is at the heart of its healing. It also reminds us that we are not only sustained by material things but by the wonder and numinosity of life. The nature of integrity, in fact, can be said to constitute life, the truth of our unity with all that is, and nonviolent love. Ultimately, *we cannot so easily destroy that which we come to love, to see as kin, as an integral part of us and the commonwealth of life.*

Far from being esoteric or simply "new age" ways of thinking that are largely irrelevant or naive in the face of the ecological crisis, understanding how to integrate each of these inward and outward levels or spheres—from the psychospiritual to the technological, scientific and economic—is a vital part of realizing and articulating the principles we will need as the foundation of practical action to restore a livable and peaceable earth. A central key to these principles and practices, in this holistic vision, lies in the integration of some of the oldest wisdoms and traditional ways of living with the newest insights in ecology, ecotheology, quantum physics, systems thinking, econom-

ic theories, psychological and consciousness studies, experiments in nonviolence, and political analysis.

The purpose of this book is to explore the roots of the ecological crisis and show how a radical transformation of our ways of living, grounded in spiritual and moral principles common to many of our wisdom traditions, is both vital to the survival and thriving of our world and the commonwealth of life and eminently possible, as demonstrated by many examples of ways these principles are being put into practice around the world. The chapters that follow are organized into three interconnected parts, which trace the causes of the ecological crisis down from the interconnected branches of economic, technological, social, political, and religious and psychological driving forces to their roots in our dominant paradigms, beliefs, and ways of thinking, and explore how these can be reframed or re-rooted in deeper psychospiritual understandings and principles. These, in turn, can transform each of these economic, technological, religious and sociopolitical spheres in new, life-enhancing, and practical ways.

Part I first gives an overview of the ecological crisis, describes the symptoms of our predicament, and analyzes why current and proposed population-based, economic, scientific and technological fixes are failing to ameliorate the ecological crisis. Subsequent chapters analyze the deeper religious, scientific, cultural and psychospiritual causes and drivers of the crisis and how they interact. Based on this analysis, and drawing primarily on a Quaker perspective but also on Buddhist, Abrahamic, Gandhian and other wisdom traditions, Part II explores how we can reframe our habitual paradigms and ways of thinking, and (re)discover the spiritual and moral principles that can ground us in life-sustaining ways of living on an earth restored. The Quaker testimony of integrity, in its deeper meaning of the truth of the unity, reciprocity and sacredness of all things, and the love that springs from that realization, is at the heart of these principles, and gives rise to the interconnected testimonies of peace, simplicity, equality, community and sustainability as branches emerge from a common root. These testimonies bear a striking similarity to the principles articulated by Gandhi and other spiritual visionaries from many other traditions. In turn, they undergird the principles of what I describe as an integrated deep ecology, deep economy, and deep peace, and articulated, for example, in Arne Naess's ecosophy, Thomas Berry's Great Work, and E.F. Schumacher's nonviolent economics. This means a fundamental regard for *all* life as having inherent worth and sacredness, and a search for ways to live in "right relationship" with the whole earth community—nonviolently,

equitably and simply—by satisfying our essential human needs while minimizing our violence to each other and all life-forms. A comparable search can also be discerned in the responses of a number of other faith traditions to the current ecological crisis, and these are also discussed.

Part III re-examines each of the social, economic, scientific and technological spheres critiqued in Part I in the light of the principles explored in Part II, to explore how they can be transformed to bring about the radical changes in the way we live that are now called for. I describe numerous examples of ways that the principles of a deep ecology, economy, and peace can and are being put into workable practice around the world, from agroecology, conservation, and appropriate science and technologies to new “steady-state” economics, self-reliant “transition towns,” clean energy programs, poor people’s campaigns or alternatives to militarism and violence. Each chapter also explores their strengths and limitations in the light of the challenges we face. For example, how can individuals or small local, self-reliant communities address climate breakdown while recognizing that we also need collective action at the state, national and global governance level? And how can the conservation of wilderness or indigenous ways of life and traditional economies, agriculture and technologies be conserved or integrated with modern technologies? Critically, the examples in these combined chapters show that addressing the destruction of other life-forms is an integral part of addressing violence, injustice, inequality, poverty and conflict in human communities and vice versa. Working to prevent war and conflict fosters nonviolence to each other and to the earth; practicing a nonviolent ecology that yields local long-term food security or greater simplicity in our ways of living reduces conflict and provides for human needs and an earth restored. Each depends on the other, if we are to sustain a whole earth community. Rather than simply requiring a sacrifice of our current ways of living among those of us who live in richer countries, which has often been the overriding focus, these principles and practices point the way not only to the future survival of all life but also to a more peaceable, equitable, and sustainable world now.

More than half a century ago, Teilhard de Chardin wrote that humankind was approaching the point where we must choose between “suicide and adoration.” As the ecological crisis deepens, the very urgency of our predicament can produce a transformative realization of our condition and accelerate creative pressure for radical change. Despite formidable challenges, we are already seeing signs of some positive shifts as we approach the middle third of the 21st century. We have something deep within and around us to help

us, if we can pay attention and stay close to the roots—roots from which the power to act wisely on behalf of all life arises. As the Quaker John Woolman wrote in the 18th century, these roots constitute the “pure principle” that belongs to all religions and none, and is woven throughout this book: the realization of the wholeness and unity of all things and the unifying power of nonviolent love, not as an esoteric ideal but as rock-bottom reality. Holding to these roots, it seems to me, means having the humility, patience, and wisdom to remain teachable, to ground our lives in love and the utmost compassion for our condition, and to not give up on the world.



I owe much of my thinking to several interconnected strands that weave throughout the book. First, I draw on my experience of being a long-term member of the Religious Society of Friends and on the wisdom of the testimonies as ways of living. Being among Quakers has also taught me much about how to align the inward guidance and leadings of one’s spirit, soul, conscience, or Inner Light, with outward, practical action in the world. Spiritual realization does not precede but *proceeds* interactively with lived experience and practical work in the world. As we live up to the Light we are given, more will be given, as Quakers put it.

I also draw on a life of participation in peace, justice and ecological concerns at the community level and beyond. This has led me to the work of many Quaker and other visionaries from Gandhi, A.T. Ariyaratne, Arne Naess, E.F. Schumacher, Ivan Illich and Thomas Berry, to Rachel Carson and other conservationists, activists, and pioneers of local community movements. Growing up in a low-income working class family in semi-rural post-war England has been a critical influence, too—from learning how to live simply and thriftily, growing our own food, buying little, and valuing solidarity and sharing with others, to walking in nature. I was also the beneficiary of a larger collective society that provided a basic level of material security in healthcare, education, and welfare, and made educational opportunities possible without deep poverty. I also owe my thinking to over four decades of research work in public health as a biologist and environmental epidemiologist. My principal research work (on environmental carcinogens and reproductive toxins) has illuminated not only ways in which we, sometimes unwittingly, cause violence to life, even down to the molecular level, but also the amazing resilience and healing power of life itself.

Lastly, I continue to be taught and nourished by a lifelong love of the wider natural world. I have found that we don't have to become mystics, or spend decades in solitary contemplation in a desert or mountain hut in order to discover the inherent numinosity, awe and wonder and interdependence of the earth community. We can become aware of the "I-Thou" relationship of which Martin Buber spoke, in multiple ways, gradually or suddenly, through science, art, music, poetry, through meditation, prayer and contemplation, or simply spending time in nature in stillness and silence, noticing a wren building its nest, or sun sparkling on water, or a tiny beetle crawling patiently up a blade of grass in a city park. These various paths have led me to search for ways to integrate these threads, through science, spiritual contemplation, and social action, and to a growing realization of how the poetic and spiritual experience of the natural world and the study of chromosomes, organisms, pathologies and ecologies can be all of a piece, and where "spirit" and "matter," human and other than human, dissolve into one unified whole.

I, like many others, have also been engaged in a very personal search to reconcile times of confusion, doubt, and grief at the violence we are committing to each other and the earth through war or ecological breakdown with a deep inward conviction that transforming the way we live is possible. To me this means rejecting a false, if comforting, optimism, and also recognizing that grief, sorrow, and doubt are an integral part of our human condition—an indivisible part of what enables us to love and cherish each other and the natural world and to seek to live nonviolently, grounded in a growing sense of unity with all life.

I—we—who have any degree of knowledge, choice and power in the world owe it to Greta Thunberg and future generations of children to do everything we can to ensure that theirs is a livable, sustainable and peaceable world. I—we—also owe it to every living creature on this precious earth to do the same, not only because our human lives completely depend on them, and on the air, rocks, rivers, and oceans, but because every living being is a sacred and integral part of the whole commonwealth of life. There is, indeed, nothing lowly in the universe. We don't know what the outcome of our efforts will be, but if we keep faith with life, listening within to conscience, our inner Guide or spirit, and putting love into action together, I believe we will have done what we are called to do.