

In July of 1990 I sat on a rock high above Little Rock Pond, one of my favorite places on Vermont's Long Trail. Near the beginning of a month-long, solitary trek, I wrote these words in my journal:

The religious minded (among whom I include myself) must change our ways. Christians especially foster a sense of human superiority under the power of a benevolent divinity. We think God is in charge, and has created the world for our benefit, so we don't have to worry. It is meant to be as it is. Meanwhile, rapists take what they want from the earth, and the hungry are robbed of their daily bread.

If any Christian teaching can be applied, it is Paul's "...the body is one and has many members..."¹ We must wake up soon to the fact that "if one member suffers, all suffer together with it."² Thus we all suffer with the loss of the rain forests and their inhabitants, the acidification of mountain lakes, the carbonization of the atmosphere, the bleaching of the night sky and the coral reefs. We humans can no longer afford the fantasy that we hold divine right to supremacy, the idolatry that we are God on Earth. We must soon find our proper place among the orders of being.

This was my first attempt to put into the written word my dawning sense of a need for an authentic, ecological spirituality that would erase the false divisions between the spiritual life, the life of the body, and the life of Earth. That body-spirit division lies at the heart of what most people call "spirituality:" a belief that something exists beyond this physical world, and that our true nature, our essence, the thing that makes us most human, belongs to that disembodied realm.

However we conceive the spiritual world, it usually stands in contrast to the material world. I was raised with this belief. I cannot say with absolute certainty that it is incorrect. But I do think that placing our essential nature outside the body, and beyond the Earth, plays a significant part in the disconnection that prevents us from living in balance with the natural world. We can at least begin to consider what an ecological, fully embodied spirituality looks like and how it might restore that balance.³

Spiritus

The word "spirit" comes from the Latin *spiritus*. *Spiritus* is the root of the words "inspiration" and "respiration" and "transpiration." *Spiritus* means "breath." The Indo-European root is likely *(s)pies*, which means "to blow." In its original meaning, spirituality is a physical thing, inhalation and exhalation, the exchange of oxygen and carbon dioxide, the absorption of oxygen into the blood, the movement of blood-borne oxygen throughout the body, the transformation of carbon dioxide and water into stem and branch and leaf and flower. Only in the 14th century did "spirit" start to mean a supernatural, disembodied entity, a ghost.

Breathing, *spiritus*, is the most obvious sign of animal life. It is not the only sign, but it is the most visible, so it is easy to see how breathing became equated with life itself. A

body without movement may be sleeping, but a body that is not breathing is a dead body. *Spiritus* is what animates us, what makes us tick, the difference between life and death. Spirituality is our essential understanding of what animates us, what makes life happen, where life comes from and what keeps it going.

When I speak of spirituality, I am referring to this most fundamental orientation toward reality, our essential understanding of who we are and how the world works, and what the sources of life, creativity and agency are. Who am I? What is real? What makes life? Why do things happen the way they happen? What causes suffering? What is essential, and what is peripheral? What lies at the core of reality, and how do we live within the limits of its requirements? These are spiritual questions. Spirituality is not only a matter of what we believe. Our spirituality, our most fundamental orientation to reality, is shaped by all of the conscious and unconscious forces that determine how we move through the world.

Ecological Spirituality

As I began to awaken to the terrible impact the human presence was and is having on the natural world, I realized that we would never address the root issues as long as we believed ourselves, in essence, to be separate from the natural world, to be above it, and that at death or enlightenment, we would leave it and recover our true nature. With that escape hatch always in the background, how would we ever fully commit our lives to the wellbeing of *this* life, of *this* world?

In 1990 I had also recently made the decision not to become a Benedictine monk. A life in science or in renewable energy development appealed to me, but my time as a monk had given expression to a desire to live in devotion to the deepest truths of existence. As much as I valued scientific inquiry, and still do, it did not touch what I knew as the depths of the spiritual life. My hike on the Long Trail reflected in part the fact that I had made a significant life decision, and did not yet know how to move forward. I had closed a door, and at that point no others had opened. So I took to the mountains, alone, to see what I might find. My search was less conscious than visceral. I was barely beginning to bring together these worlds that we so often hold separate: the spirit and the body; the human and the natural; the inner world of our private experience, and the outer world of the living universe and our cultural inheritance. As I sat above Little Rock Pond, I began to give conscious voice to this longing: to articulate a fully ecological spirituality.

An ecological spirituality ends the centuries of belief in a spirit that inhabits the body but remains essentially separate from it and the natural world. It ends the destructive separation and pervasive loneliness in which the spirit is believed to be superior to the body and the human superior to the animal. It restores us in the most fundamental way to our existence as human animals, one of many expressions of life on Earth, with all of the physical limitations that entails. It deepens our appreciation of the other creatures and elevates their standing as thinking, feeling beings with their own ways of knowing and existing in the world. It lays the groundwork for reestablishing productive, creative relationships with other beings as essentially equal even if utterly different in mode of living and ways of knowing. It speaks to both our outer life as creatures and members of

human communities, and to our inner longings and questions about who we are and what ultimate reality is. It might not answer all of those questions, but it addresses them in a way that is meaningful and rich and satisfying and life affirming.

Ecological spirituality is based in the reality of ecological interconnections, in which nothing exists except that it is part of a system of relationships that ultimately includes everything. Since ecology is based in the relationships between plants and animals and their physical environments, an ecological spirituality must be practical, not theoretical. It must be based in relationships with other living beings, not in ideas about them that are divorced from actual engagement and representation. From an ecological perspective we see other lives not merely as objects to study and certainly not as resources to exploit, but as partners in the creative unfolding of life. In my own life, listening to the animals and the many sounds of nature has opened a rich world of musical collaboration. Compositions have flowed out of that listening that never would have existed without it. Without the whales and the seals and the frogs and the wind and the flowing waters, I would not be a musician. The living world is the source of all music, and it is very specifically the source of the music I perform.

I think that many of us confuse physicality with materialism and consumerism. Some people see a disembodied spirituality as an antidote to rampant consumption and the endless pursuit of status through wealth. The way that I understand and experience ecological spirituality, it does indeed stand in contrast to that kind of materialism, but without throwing away our essential physical existence as animal members of ecological communities. The problem of materialism is not that we are physical bodies, not that we are animals with biological needs, not that we love and stand in awe of this Earth. The problem is that we *think* we are separate selves, and with that error in thought comes limitless desire projected onto the physical world. Physical bodies have modest needs. The imaginary self has limitless desires. Ecological spirituality provides an alternative to materialism and consumerism by grounding us in ecological reality rather than in a belief in a disembodied self.

To be relevant to the ecological crisis, ecological spirituality must also be able to explain why we are so violent, what drives our exploitation of others, how it is that we fall into confusion about our true nature, and what has driven our separation from the living Earth. Our violence is often blamed on our animal nature, and civilization is offered as the solution. But what about civilization's institutionalized violence? What about the violence of industry and logging and drilling and mining and destroying indigenous cultures and forcing people and animals into slave labor and unspeakably depraved working and living conditions? Ecological spirituality must offer an alternative. Ecological spirituality must give us a place to stand that frees us from the ceaseless noise of a society bent on growing infinitely; endlessly fanning the flames of human desire for status, dominance and wealth; pressing us into the narrow confines of an identity as "consumers." It must offer a better way than that, one founded on the most fundamental truths of existence, our true nature, our actual identity.

Most important, to be relevant to the ecological crisis, it must change our behavior. We too easily think that if we have the right ideas and beliefs, we are off the hook from

having to change how we live. In this age of mass extinction and climate catastrophe, any spirituality, any belief or practice that purports to be in touch with reality and bring ultimate meaning to our lives, must be evaluated in terms of whether it brings us into balance with the natural world, with the way of life on Earth. If it makes us *feel* better, but does not make us *live* better, it is irrelevant. Any spirituality or religion must, at its root, be in touch with reality. Religion claims to express the deepest truths. If it ignores the truth or does not know what the truth is, it has no claim on our loyalty. One of the truths of this age is that we are threatening the viability of life on Earth. Because we are out of touch with reality, we are putting at risk the only world that we know harbors life. We have forgotten who we are and we do not know what the world is, and our spirituality has become divorced from Earth. Ecological spirituality aims to reconnect Earth and spirit, not by imposing a belief system, nor by trying to resurrect an imagined golden age when religion and spirituality and Earth were conjoined, but by engaging with this time, with this world, with the reality of now.

Reorienting Away From the Mind

Thirty years after my first attempt to articulate an ecological spirituality, I am not finding it much easier to put it into words. The ecological spirituality I am trying to communicate is not a set of ideas or beliefs. It is not a story or a vision. It is not in any way a product of the human mind. It is a reorientation away from the mind's dominance, toward the whole movement of life. Ecological spirituality lives and breathes in our relationships with the other creatures and each other, in our sensitive attention to and honoring of the world in all its complexity and beauty. It also requires that we see and understand the illusions created by the mind, and most especially the illusion of a self or spirit or mind that is disembodied, separate from everything else, and superior to everything else.

The qualities we value most about our species; our self-consciousness, our self-awareness, our symbolic language, our accumulation of knowledge, our story-telling capacity, our imagination, and our inventiveness: these are also our greatest dangers because they can separate us from reality. Our thoughts too easily become our beliefs, which become our objects of worship, which, to use an old religious word, is called idolatry, the worship of images. Our devotion to them can drown out the signals reality is sending us. We tend to prefer the products of our own minds to reality. Our devotion to our mindscape, the effort spent in defending and augmenting our opinions and beliefs and fundamental worldviews, eclipses reality. How often do we hold on too long to a way of seeing things that is no longer useful, no longer true, despite all the signals telling us we need to change? We are so devoted to our mindscapes, our personal and cultural ways of understanding the world, that we will fight to the death to defend them. We would rather wipe out the entire non-human world than surrender our self-centered worldview in which we reign supreme as masters of the world and its star attraction.

Ecological spirituality means little unless it means being in touch with reality. Being in touch with reality does not mean having the "right" ideas about the world; it means paying attention to the world—the whole world, the good and the bad, the comfortable and the uncomfortable, the inner and the outer—as it unfolds in every new moment. If it becomes just another belief system, it will do nothing to address the roots of the

ecological crisis, it will do nothing to change how we live, and it will not satisfy our deepest longings.

Paying Attention in the Natural World

The heart of ecological spirituality is our relationship with the natural world. As self-concern and human preeminence diminish, a particular affection for other lives blossoms, lives with whom we have daily contact but whom we barely comprehend. I have written and talked extensively about whales and seals. They have played a central part in making me aware of the presence and the beauty and the intelligence and the consciousness and the creativity and the communicative abilities of our non-human kin; but so also have the trees, the birds, the streams, the soil, the insects, the stones. The whole Earth is speaking all the time. The only question is whether we are listening. The world is full of life and communication and music, some of it obvious and some of it extremely subtle. We are much poorer when we cut ourselves off from that community of life. I am not inclined to offer practices or even to give examples of what those relationships should look like. Our practice must grow out of those relationships, sensitive to the specific needs of the place and the creatures where we live. Imposing practices onto those relationships once again puts the mind's dominance above the quality of the relationships themselves.

If I have anything to offer in the way of practical wisdom, it is to listen. Listen to the birds. Listen to the wind. Listen to the movement of trees. Listen to the run of streams. Listen into the space between the sounds. Dwell in listening silence as often as you can. We are too eager to act on the world, so our actions are often inappropriate and self-serving. To move in concert with others, we must be able to listen to them with our whole attention. We can't help Earth if we don't have a relationship with it. We can't know how to help if we are not listening to it speak. As in any relationship, we can't control it and it might significantly inconvenience us. To make room for other beings to be what they are, and to give ourselves the space to know them on their terms and be challenged and changed by them, might be very inconvenient. But the abandonment of materialism and self-centeredness is supported by a relationship with the living world, which is creative, endlessly fascinating and infinitely surprising. We may lose many of our possessions, we may be made more vulnerable, we may become less certain about exactly who we are, but we gain the dynamic creativity, and the comforting presence, of the whole living world.

Lying in wait behind renewed attention to the living world is the fundamental question of our status within that world. The challenge of being fully open to the natural world is that it threatens our sense of supremacy and permanence. The lesson of ecology is plain. We are no better or higher or more special than anything else. Everything that is born also dies, and this is not a problem. Humans do, of course, have special abilities that make us unique, but so do all creatures. Our special abilities—logic and language, self-consciousness and choice—are impressive, to be sure; but the intelligence, forethought and communicative ability of other creatures are also impressive, and their own particular specializations even more so. The closer I look, the more marvelous and complex non-human life becomes for me. I cannot live among the other animals, the wind and rain, the trees and grasses and soil; and salvage any exalted place for human kind. Our non-human

kin are wonderful in their own ways, and since our own existence is inextricably dependent on theirs, it falls naturally to us to see to it that our ways of life benefit them in every way possible.

Contemplative Spirituality

My understanding of ecological spirituality is based in my experience of contemplation. Contemplation is an encounter with emptiness. Emptiness is the immeasurable. Emptiness is the unfathomable. Emptiness is the living truth. The word "emptiness" points to the fact that the encounter with reality in its fullness requires that we be emptied of all of our beliefs and habitual ways of behaving, our familiar ways of interpreting the world. Since our sense of being a separate self is woven from our beliefs and memories and habitual ways of behaving, when we are emptied of those things, we experience it as a loss of self. Initially, seeing through the conditional, ephemeral, fictional nature of the separate self might be a free fall into emptiness with no promise of emergence. The mind cannot grasp it. But that same emptiness is also the unfathomable, living presence of everything, whose vital actuality is beyond description. In the encounter with emptiness, with reality, with the immeasurable, with the unfathomable, we lose what we think we are, but we gain what we actually are. We think we are separate selves; we are the whole movement of everything.

So direct relationship with the living world is essential but it is a relationship with the unknowable. The real cannot be known. The known isn't real. The known is dead and gone. The real is alive and creative and present and we belong to that movement, but we are also capable of distorting it, of becoming completely out of touch with it. Thought, attention, consciousness, and sensory experience are just the tip of the existential iceberg. The real action is out of sight, out of mind. Our conscious experiences are waves on the surface of a very deep ocean of life. This makes no sense to the intellect, which is only comfortable with that which can be known. This relationship with and respect for the unknowable is profoundly different from the scientific method, which must be concerned with the expansion and dissemination of knowledge. To be in touch with reality means being open to the incomprehensible. It means being touched and moved by forces beyond our understanding. It means setting aside certainty and being embraced by the unknowable.

As long as imagination expresses a relationship with the whole living world, and is informed and corrected by it, it may not lead to delusion so easily, although I think that danger always remains for us. Thought becomes disconnected and self-absorbed very easily and soon begins to impose itself onto the world instead of listening to the world and expressing its limited comprehension of the world.

Emptiness and the whole movement of life form the foundation of ecological spirituality. Fully realized, they reorient our lives. But to address the ecological crisis directly, we need to change how we live. We need to radically reduce our consumption of energy and materials. How we go about doing that will look very different if it is coming out of emptiness/wholeness than if it is intertwined with our inexhaustible desire for more and more self-augmentation. We can't grow our way out of this problem. Any "solution" that

continues to demand infinite material growth on a finite planet is going to fail. We need to be comfortable with loss, with giving up much of what we have and think that we need.

Spiritual Revolution

We need a spiritual revolution, a revolution in our most fundamental sense of who we are and how the world works. Thousands of books have been written about the interconnection and interdependence of living systems. But the *ideas* of interconnection and interdependence are not enough to overcome the inertia of our beliefs and habits. We need an experiential revolution, a fundamental change at the root of our destructive behavior, not just a new set of beliefs or ideas. We need a spiritual revolution, a conversion, a fundamental change of direction, that goes to the very core of our being, and reorients the deep, unconscious layers of the mind where most of our behaviors originate.

It's not enough to say we need to change. Something actually needs to change us at the core. Something needs to stop us in our tracks. Something needs to put a stick in the spokes of the human industrial juggernaut *and* the perpetual motion of the self. From my perspective, that something is the encounter with infinite emptiness and the fullness of the whole movement of life. Emptiness stops us in our tracks. The whole movement of life gives us a new way to walk.

Ecological spirituality is not peripherally ecological; it is fundamentally ecological. It is a spirituality that is not merely concerned *about* the natural world; it is grounded *in* the natural world and in wild emptiness. Our essential nature, our spirit, resides in interactive interdependence with the whole movement of life. There is no such thing as a separate thing. There is no such thing as a separate self. Our sense of separation and independence are illusions. The defense of the self is the destruction of life. Caught in the net of selfhood, we seek endless distraction and satisfaction through acquisition.

The sooner we see that very clearly and concretely, the sooner we can open our ears and eyes and noses and mouths and the surface of our skin and our sense of position in space and let the living world in. Emptiness without sensory awareness becomes detached and disinterested. Sensuality without emptiness becomes greedy and grasping and hedonistic. Emptiness and the whole movement of life walk together and keep each other in balance. Realizing our radical kinship with all forms of life, we find deep satisfaction simply in being alive and being in relationship with everything. The sooner we stop living in defense of our selves, the sooner we start living in support of the whole living world.

Encountering essential emptiness and listening to Earth speak, we are addressing the ecological crisis at its root, because at its root the ecological crisis is not about the natural world, it is about us; it is about our alienation from Earth; it is about our devotion to our selves; it is about our obsession with a mind-made illusion that is destroying the living world.

The first time I met a whale, time slowed to a trickle. Fifteen seconds became an eternity. A gaping hole opened and I fell into a heart of stillness in which it was irrevocably clear that the whale and I were members of a single movement of life that includes everything. My memories, my plans and schemes, my beliefs and needs, all fell away. For those fifteen seconds of eternity, that whale and I swam together in the depths of the living universe, and for the first time in my life, I knew who I was; I knew what life is; I knew that *spirit* is the creative intertwining of everything.

Our minds have confused themselves with illusions of separation. When we let go of everything we think we need, everything we desire, everything we cling to, including our illusory selves, when we let go completely of every illusory thing our minds invent, we fall into the immeasurable, unfathomable abundance of this living Earth and find our home here where it has always been among the animals, among the plants, among the flowing waters and the living ground. At the very heart of our being, we are intertwined with everything.

Embodying an ecological spirituality means knowing that sense of belonging viscerally, encountering that reality of interconnection unequivocally, and living every day in the understanding that the real world—the living world in its dynamic actuality—lies beyond the narrow confines of the mind's grasp. Therefore we live with great care and humility and sensitivity and attentiveness. Our needs are modest and our demands on others are minimal. We live with generosity toward all living beings, not because we think we should, but because we know we must, because we have been touched by the infinite emptiness, animated by the whole movement of life, and we know that is who we are.

¹ It is possible that Paul's intent with his discourse on the members of the body was opposite to mine. Perhaps he was emphasizing the worth of the individual believer against the power of group and cultural belief. Perhaps his emphasis was on the distinctiveness of the members, not the unity of the body. Yet he does write, "by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body... there are many parts, yet one body." For Paul, of course, that body is the unity of belief in Christ, not the ecological unity of Earth. I do not claim that Paul was an ecologist, only that his metaphor of body and member is no metaphor at all when it comes to our ecological relationships; it is literal truth. Cultures and individuals struggle constantly with the tension between the group and the individual. Neither the group nor any one individual should have absolute power over the other, and history is full of the playing out of that tension when one attempts to assert control over the other. Ecologically, such assertions of control make no sense. There is only one body, and it has many, many members, and neither the body nor the members can be in conflict when the individuals who think they are separate from the body, and the other members, realize that they are members of one body with all others. There is no separate individual. And there is no problem with being an individual. Members and bodies exist simultaneously and interdependently. If the heart were in conflict with the lungs, thinking itself to exist separately, the heart, the lungs, and indeed the whole body would soon perish. In other words, separation exists only in thought, not in reality.

² ¹² For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. ¹³ For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit. ¹⁴ For the body does not consist of one member but of many. ¹⁵ If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁶ And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁷ If the whole body were an eye, where would be the hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? ¹⁸ But as it is,

God arranged the organs in the body, each one of them, as he chose. ¹⁹ If all were a single organ, where would the body be? ²⁰ As it is, there are many parts, yet one body. ²¹ The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." ²² On the contrary, the parts of the body which seem to be weaker are indispensable, ²³ and those parts of the body which we think less honorable we invest with the greater honor, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, ²⁴ which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior part, ²⁵ that there may be no discord in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. ²⁶ If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together. (1 Corinthians 12:12-26. RSV)

³ Paul may well have been emphasizing in his letter, not the importance of the whole body, but the importance of the individual members. Individualism had not even been invented in the first century. Family was everything. But the pendulum has swung, and the individual has become central at least in western societies, and especially in the United States. In 1990 I was feeling strongly that our existence as members of a larger body that includes the natural, non-human world, needed to be recovered. The reality of existence is interconnection and interdependence. The individual is a fiction. It had to be invented. It might be a useful fiction for the protection of the wellbeing of those who do not belong to privileged groups (men, property owners, heads of households, pink skins), but it remains a fiction. There is no such thing as a separate thing. There is no such thing as a separate self. There is no such thing as a disembodied spirit.