

An Alternative Greening of Power

Rev. Jim Lawrence, Ph.D.
Earth Day Sunday
April 22, 2012

Genesis 1:26 - Genesis 2:15
Revelation 21:1-6

GREEN SPIRITUALITY

What used to be called eco-spirituality is increasingly picking up the name “green spirituality,” and I would like to suggest that there are in fact two kinds of green spirituality that are in a weighty conflict with each other. One cultivates greenscapes, and the other cultivates greenbacks. And I wish to suggest further that the spirituality of greenbacks too often relishes power-over, whereas the spirituality of greenscapes believes in power-for.

Power-over spirituality is so very alluring in our culture, maybe in most and almost every culture. Power-over can be so seductively attractive because it appeals to our base need for survival and security. Power-for usually has no immediate reward other than a spiritual sense of gratification that life forms have been enhanced and supported.

The skill, scope, and sheer magnitude of power-over has been on a meteoric rise with science and technology prowess since the industrial revolution broke loose with mass production technology breakthroughs in the mid-nineteenth century.

Montana lover and author William Kittredge wrote recently a descriptive tale that could be a story about countless settings: “Not long ago in the American West,” he says, “it was easy to think we were living in harmony with an inexhaustible paradise. That became, for many, a habit of mind, hard to shake. But aspects of our paradise have been worked to death. The old-growth timber has been mostly logged; the great salmon runs have vanished, cattle and sheep tromp streambanks into dust and dust again; hard metals percolating up from mine shafts abandoned decades ago poison our mountain waters.”

There is no debate regarding the cause of the physical degradation of this paradise. We have done this—*homo sapiens* in modern civilization with formidable new technologies of power over nature has done this. If such paradises were our Gardens of Eden and if we are the humans put there not only to till the garden but to till it in such a way as to keep it, then we might wonder whether we’re about to get banished ourselves to the land of Nod—somewhere east of Eden in a Steinbeckian travail of woe.

Kittredge suggests that whatever we call where we are now living, “It’s time we gave something back to the natural systems of order that have supported us, some care and tenderness, which is the most operative notion, he says: tenderness. “Maybe it will be like learning a skill: *how* to live in paradise.”

Thus Kittredge also seems to be arguing that two green spiritualities are at odds. But I'm probably not headed where I might seem to be going. I want to consider what our scripture texts offer, and of course one must choose a hermeneutic, for there is no such thing as an objectively correct interpretation.

READING SCRIPTURE

Swedenborg followed in a hermeneutical trail emblazoned by spiritually imaginative readers of sacred scripture in all three Abrahamic religions by seeking psycho-spiritual insights and constructs metaphorically in all manner of scripture passages. Origen and Augustine, Teresa of Avila and Madame Guyon in Christianity, the Zohar and the kabbalists in Judaism, the Sufis in Islam, all found the power of symbol in the great textual myths—found that the oddly stylized text often lends itself quite readily to surprisingly personal applications as a complementary reading of the historical text's surface meaning. For instance, Swedenborg would have the sensitive reader understand that the Garden of Eden symbolizes a holistic eco-psychology, that high-functioning and life-giving ecosystems are very much like the integrated inner dynamics of interpretive thoughts and feelings in a high-functioning and life-producing spiritual person.

Theresa likened the soul to an interior castle, and Swedenborg likens it to a dynamic garden—that, like a garden, our thoughts, our feelings, our visions and doubts, our passions and fears possess psychodynamic force and have direction, and like garden these need cultivation for a vigorous ripening and potent multiplication of wise love and actions—because gardens without conscious care run willy-nilly, whereas cultivation brings forth exquisite beauties that could never have eventuated without guiding interventions. So tilling and keeping that garden is quite like spiritual formation, and we might therefore call becoming wise and loving agents in our world an inner greening.

And now I would like to suggest that there is a relationship between how we till the garden of our soul and how we relate to the garden that is the orb on which we live: that inner greening can and should empower vibrant outer greenscapes of all kinds.

LOVING THE POWERLESS AND THOSE WITH LEAST VOICE

OK, now let us come back to the notion of power: of power-over and power-for. Some people believe that how a society treats those with the least power is the single most revealing indicator of that society's character. And perhaps this can be applied to individual people, too: how we treat those in our midst who have least voice, who have least standing unveils our values, reveals our character. Earth Day asks us to check in on how we're doing with our relationship to those parts of creation with least voice: the animal, plant, and mineral kingdoms. Does their quality of life have standing for us, or do we assume that *homo sapiens* as a life form trumps all and that obviously we must use and consume these other life forms in the creation as a normal and natural mechanism in the great chain of being?

It is not actually a rhetorical question, for there's not a single person in this room who is not overwhelmingly indebted every single day to consumption of other life forms for our continued

existence. Some say dominance among life forms is inevitable; and some say perhaps the human ought to get out of town, has made a mess of things and has forfeited rights to citizenship on this planet.

NARRATIVE BIBLICAL SPIRITUALITY

And this is where I wish to introduce our second scripture pericope: the final image of the Judeo-Christian canon—a Holy City descending from heaven to be upon the earth. We began at the opening of the canon with humanity in a pristine garden, and we close the book at the tail-end of the canon with humanity in a metropolis. What is an urban image doing as the final image of scripture, what in the world is an urban image doing in a queue of Earth Day readings?

Such narrative theologians as Stanley Hauerwas, Delores Williams, and George Lindbeck contend that the Christian faith is most fruitfully explored by entering into scripture as a narrative, a story, rather than looking for propositional truths. And Swedenborgian theologian George Dole, working from the angle of the Bible as a really big narrative, makes suggestive use of the fact that the canon as we have it begins in a teeming Garden and ends in a teeming City. The garden and the city are both intricate and interactive life systems, the difference being the level of wisdom and love of the inhabitants, with the latter vastly outperforming the former.

And just so, I would like to suggest the way out is not back to Eden: it is wrongheaded (though probably not wronghearted) to pine for a restored pristine natural ecology with the human being as an unobtrusive speck in that system.

Hang with me for a second.

When nature romanticism peaked in the nineteenth century, there were still not even one billion human beings living on the earth. We passed that mark at the turn of the twentieth century, which means that it took *homo sapiens* a few hundred thousand years to get to one billion. Yet just a little more than one century later (or in just one five hundred thousandth percentage of time) we are way past six billion and now stalking seven billion humans living at the same time on an earth that hasn't expanded a micrometer. At the dawn of the 20th century only 12 cities in the world had a million or more people. As the 20th century closed, there were 100 cities with a million or more people. At the beginning of the 18th century only 3% of the world's population lived in an urban area. Today, over 55% live in in big cities and that percentage is tilting dramatically upward.

GREEN INFINITIES

Forget a return ticket to Eden. An effective Green spirituality will not be imagining a recreation of Eden—though some really big patches of it will be important—or imagining an ecology in which the human has erased itself. Maybe a more usable vision on Earth Day is surprisingly suggested by the big narrative of scripture, that the greenest future for Earth is paradoxically a Holy City—one fueled and maintained by a kind of green spirituality that builds a holiness throughout the life matrices on our planet such that life achieves a luminescent greenness in a

quality of care, vitality, and love never known and frankly not possible in Eden. A divinely-infused and redeemed human consciousness is part of a new eco-spirituality that opens up vertically and in depthfulness in ways that are unique to the relational powers in God-Human process theology.

Such a green spirituality vision turns on a transformation of how power is understood, used, and enjoyed. That is, we need an alternative greening of power than that which has dominated our way of relating to life forms in the past.

I think it starts with billions of us cultivating our soul gardens, committing to an inner and radical breakthrough in how we imagine that we are watered and nurtured and how we in turn water and nurture. An alternative greening of power turns on a counter-intuitive use of power: that just because we can take it, we don't. We instead give it.

A truly Holy City fueled by an alternative green spirituality to greenback spirituality finds *its* power, its joy, its meaning in empowerment of the least powerful—making the last first.

I come with no political panacea or economic ideology that can be applied in the myriad challenge situations. I prefer to focus on a spirituality of being and let solutions arise via a plethora of hearts, heads, and hands that have become rich with an alternative greening of power. And at the beginning of this spirituality is taking the divine command uttered in Eden—the human responsibility to exercise agency in life systems for an exalted quality of being in a creation that does not feed off itself through ego absorptions but feeds one another through ego transcendence.

We are the only life form in the ecology that can with conscious intentionality act on behalf of other life forms. To speak on behalf of life forms who cannot speak for themselves, and to seek justice for those which cannot ask for it. We are now in a relationship with our environment where we hold virtually all the power: the quality of life and life itself of animals and plants is often directly in our hands, and I would extend the object of such protective care to children and those with special challenges, as well.

An alternative greening of power spirituality practice can be exercised on small and large scales. What about a spiritual practice of seeking one opportunity a day to go out of one's way to assist an animal or a plant. This cultivates a consciousness of daily agency for the least powerful life forms. It is such a joyful and easy thing to do. And as difficult as it is, honoring our power inherent human agency for intelligent attention and action in public debate and policy setting for how our shared economic complex affects other life forms is essential.

Maintaining such practices on small and large scales makes a real difference in actual life forms for each and every one of us. From our individual Gardens of Eden we can become ever-more effective agents in our civic and political roles helping to transform how power is understood and how power is experienced, the counter-intuitive irony of the much richer quality of life through empowering the powerless instead rather than stockpiling toys for the ego. Or, as Teilhard de Chardin famously said, "The day will come when, after harnessing space, the winds, the tides, gravitation, we shall harness for God the energies of love. And, on that day, for the second time in the history of the world, man will have discovered fire."

Indeed, this alternative greening of power becomes a holy human consciousness at work in an Earth that though teeming with cities is wondrously wiser, more impressively loving, more effectively proactive—and yes, far greener than Earth ever has been or even was at its reputed idyllic origins.

So, on to the future with the One who was, and who is, and who is to come.