Visions of a Living Earth

The Soul of Nature

Edited by Michael Tobias and Georgianne Cowan

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The Soul of Nature

+ Happy Birthday to You,
dear Nancy!

Hope you will like this book and
my own small contribution to it (p.197).

With grateful love
and a Birthday hug,

MD

—The Soul of Nature—

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Belonging to the Universe

David Steindl-Rast

(From a lecture at the Earth Trust Foundation)

Belonging to the universe. . . . I use the key word, *belonging*. . . . I suspect that most of us find the conflict of belonging somewhat problematic or else we wouldn't be here. And the problematical belonging begins long before it's a matter of belonging to the universe. It's a belonging on every level, belonging to our families, belonging to our communities, belonging to our country. On all different levels, belonging is for us today a key issue. And a problematic issue. Because our main problem today is alienation. We all experience alienation . . . in different ways. Beginning with alienation from ourselves, alienation from others, alienation from our feelings. The word *alienation* is almost the one word that sums up our problems, and between these two poles of belonging and alienation is the realm of life.

The realm of spiritual life. Because for me, spiritual life is not a separate department from life. But when I use the word *spiritual* it means, as the root meaning of the word it is, aliveness. Spirit, *spiritus,* is the life breath and so spirituality is aliveness. An aliveness on all levels in all areas, and that aliveness, that spirituality, moves between belonging and alienation. Or, you could say it is a move to ever greater aliveness and that means a move to ever deeper belonging. Or, an increasing discovery of that belonging, which we have from the very beginning.

As T. S. Eliot says in *The Four Quartets*, "We shall not cease from exploration. And the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time." And in a more explicitly religious context, Augustine says of this starting point, "God is closer to us than we are to ourselves in our heart of hearts." And yet he also says, "restless is our heart until it rests in You, oh God." And so from that starting point, which is home, we are already closer to the ultimate than we are to ourselves, to discovering this belonging.

Between those two points lies this longing to belong which continuously drives us on until we enter through what Eliot calls in the same passage, "the unknown remembered gate."

It us unknown and yet it is somehow remembered because it is where we start from. And that is our spiritual quest. And now to bring this home to ourselves, each one of us. And to explore it together and to see some of the implications of this quest to belong. Of this longing to belong to the universe and to that which goes beyond the universe to the horizon beyond all horizons. In order to do that together we have to appeal to our personal experience in which we have the deepest sense of belonging. And those are the moments which psychology calls peak experiences or peak moments. Everyone has these experiences and most people very early on in life, in childhood, quite frequently.

Even if it's only a split moment. Our whole heart goes out and says, "This is it." In the sense of "That's what I've always been waiting for." "That's what I've always been longing for." And that longing is a longing to belong. And for a split moment we belong. And then we lose it again. It's gone. And usually what triggers these experiences isn't even as spectacular as a sunset or a waterfall, it may just be the dimples in your baby's cheeks as you're looking at your baby. Or it may be the way a squirrel takes a nut from your hand when you are feeding it in the park.

Abraham Maslow, the great psychiatrist, in the middle of this century coined the term *peak experience* based on what is known as a mystic experience. The only reason why he switched is that in psychologic literature mystic experience sounded a little too mystic and it didn't quite sit. So he had to say something that was a little more kosher in the context of psychological literature.

All those books of mysticism are about the mystic experience. But, ultimately, this is inexpressible. So the one way in which it is somewhat accessible to us is through poetry. Kenneth Rexroth's "The Heart of Hercules" is obviously inspired by one of these experiences.

> Lying under the stars in the summer night
> Late while the autumn constellations climb the sky
> as the cluster of Hercules falls down the west
> I put the telescope by . . .
>
> my body is asleep only my eyes and brain are awake
> the stars stand around me like gold eyes
> I can no longer tell where I begin and leave off
> the faint breeze in the dark pines and the
> invisible grass
> the tipping earth
> the swarming stars have an eye that sees itself.

All this has an eye that sees itself. And of course, there is even a play on words because they have an eye and who is that I. I am that eye of the universe that sees itself.

All the different key words are translated into experience here, translated into image. The aliveness, obviously, the meaning. This is a meaningful moment. The belonging, "I can no longer tell where I leave off and where I begin." I merge. I merge with the universe. And it is in that sense truly a peak experience. Peak of awareness, peak of aliveness, and truly a mystic experience. It is not only a contact with nature, not only a contact with all that is, but a contact with the horizon beyond all that is. And then identification with that. It's a mystic experience by the most simple definition of the word mystic; an experience that must be personal; an experience of communion in the words of belonging. Of communion with reality. Yes, but with ultimate reality.

And every word in that definition counts.

Let's first look at it as this mystic experience, this encounter with spirit. Mystic experience in the sense of being ultimate; relatedness to the source of all there is. Relatedness to God, if you want to use this term God. I'm always hesitant to use God because you lay yourself open to so many misunderstandings.

What God means, if this word means anything to us, is that limitless belonging that we experience in our peak moments. All theistic religious traditions will agree that this is definitely the denominator for what we mean by God. That to which we ultimately, limitlessly belong. The reference point of this belonging. And in this experience it is no more than a direction. The direction of our belonging. God is the direction of our ultimate belonging.

Then, of course, the different religious traditions fill this in and there's a lot of exploration that you can do in that direction. But at least we have a common denominator and whether we want to use that term God or not, we know how it is correctly used.

But we don't need to use it. We can just speak, for instance, of all things and their course. The source from which all things come forth. That's what we are concerned with in religion. The ultimate source of all there is. Not things yet, but the source. There are things and then there is the source. Just as there is a little stream and there is the source of that stream. Well, the source is not the stream. Where it flows, it's already the stream. What is the source? The source is before it starts flowing. It's really . . . when we speak about all things and the source of all things, then

the only "thing" that the source can be is nothing. If it's a thing, it's already something. It's not the source. If it's not a thing, but the source of all things, it's no thing. But not an empty nothing. Not just a denial of thing, but the source, that nothing out of which the fullness of everything comes. But I'm not concerned with the words, I'm concerned with personal experience; not things, but nothing. Because there are two things that matter in our lives: "things" and "meaning." And meaning is no thing. Meaning is nothing. And meaning is that source out of which everything comes. Meaning is nothing. You're not adding something to your house to make it your home. That's the meaning your home has for you. It's not something that you add to your house like you add a new room, or a new attic, or a new roof. You're adding nothing, but that nothing is what matters to you. So the source is that nothing and that is what religion is about. That source, that horizon, that from which everything gushes forth.

And in our peak moments, in our mystic moments, because we are all mystics, we experience this *meaning*. Meaning beyond all things. Now there is a question that is very important to many people, and that is the question of our relatedness to the ultimate source. And how do we get from that mystic experience to the religions? How do we get from religion with a capital *R* to the religions?

Inevitably our intellect does something with this experience, reflects on it, tries to understand and interpret it. And the moment the intellect interprets what's happening we have myth. And to the extent to which we can understand that poem by Rexroth as a religious poem, and it certainly is, to the extent to which it is the expression of a religious experience, it ends up in a myth. And it's a very beautiful myth that deeply speaks to us, and it is the myth of the universe looking at itself through my heart, through my eyes, with antecedents in more ancient myth; the poetic expression of an inside that is too deep for any other expression. There are insights into the human condition that are so deep that no other language will be strong enough to carry it. And we hit those experiences when we are in love, for instance. And that's why we start writing poetry when we are in love or at least expressing poetically or waxing poetically. Only poetic language can carry it—the poetic expression for an inside that is too great for any other kind of expression like logic, or abstract thought, so that's the first thing that we inevitably get, myth. And myth is an element of every religious tradition.

Secondly, our will does something with this experience. Willingness. Not our willfulness. Our willingness. Our willingness is always after what's good. We can only will what is really good for us. And so our

willingness says, our heart says, "This is terrific. This belonging, in the sense of belonging. This is how I would like to live." And immediately you get ethics, which is the second element of every religion. What all of the ethical systems in the world have in common is that they say, "This is how one lives when one belongs together. That is how one behaves towards animals, toward plants, towards other human beings, towards the whole universe, when one is at home in this earth household." So that's the second element.

And the third element is that our feelings, not only our intellect, our will, but our feelings come in and our feelings celebrate this experience. And this is terrific. And the moment the feelings celebrate the mystic experience, the sense of belonging, we have ritual. And every ritual is a celebration of belonging. Anything from a birthday party to a graduation, to a religious ceremony, to a peace march, everything, every ritual, whether you create it, or whether it's ancient, is always a celebration of belonging. And here we have the three elements that belong to every religion with a small *r*: myth, ethics, and ritual. Of course, they can go wrong; myth can turn into dogmatism. Ethics can turn into moralism, and ritual can turn into ritualism. But when it goes well, then myth will again and again lead us back to the mystic experience. Ethics will be an overflow, will be the social realization of inner achievement and fulfillment, lived out in community. And ritual will be the celebration of it. The joy of life. All of life can become that ritual.

Let us look at this once more. This experience, but not primarily under the religious aspect, not primarily under the aspect of spirit, but now under the aspect of nature and of our dealing with nature. And here you have first what you could call cognition. What nature is, is that which gushes forth without our doing anything. That's what nature is. We spoke before of the source and then we speak about that which gushes forth. And that is nature. And the very term, *nature*, the very root that stands behind this means this gushing forth. You have it in nativity where something comes forth. Our first contact with nature, in this poem, for instance, or in any such situation when we lie under the starry skies is cognition. That is still wordless. And notice that very word, *cognition*, has also the same root in it. It's *co-* that means together and then again this gushing forth. So what we experience in cognition is that we are part of that which gushes forth. All this as Rexroth says here, all this gushing forth of nature has an eye that sees itself. And that's cognition. We are that eye. Cognition is a recognizing, redoing of that first moment. So here it is done in poetry. That recognition. And you have it here in this poem, for instance. When the poet says, "my eyes and

brain are awake . . . the stars stand around me like gold eyes . . . I can no longer tell where I begin and leave off . . . the faint breeze in the dark pines and the invisible grass . . . the tipping earth . . . the swarming stars." All this is recognition. It is expressed poetic language. That recognition of the original cognition.

The third possible step that we can combine with this encounter with nature is reflection. The first was cognition, then recognition, and now reflection in this recognition, and that is science. But there are two very different possibilities for science. We nowadays think only of one and that is exact science, or Cartesian science. But there is originally another kind of science and you may call this chemical science. Alchemy is a reflection on the poetry of the encounter with nature. It includes the personal and the religious.

And then you have the exact science, purged of everything that is poetic, everything that is personal, and everything that is religious. It must be purged. In other words, the science that we call the exact science is not a reflection on the recognition; is not a reflection on the poetry, but goes directly back to the original encounter with nature and tries to do all this unpoetically. And that is why our science, where all the personal is left out, suddenly becomes totally impersonal and we feel totally alienated.

When science is the only recognized access to nature or to reality—and we have a tendency to view it that way—but there is another possibility: we can put science into a much greater context. And every scientist who really reaches a certain stature does that anyway. As a human being realizes that science is not all of life. It is part of life. It is a very important part of life. It can give us important access to life, but it is not enough. Life is greater than science. And that greater aspect is the poetic aspect, is the religious aspect, and it needs to be added.

There is a parallel to this and now I'll go back for a moment to what I said about the intellectual understanding of the mystic experience. I said it leads to myth. The intellect tries to interpret this encounter with ultimate reality, this sense of belonging, and arrives at myth. There are other people who would say it leads to theology. Does it lead to theology? No. Theology stands in the same relationship to myth as science stands to the poetic encounter, to the poetic expression of our encounter with nature. And so theology is really something like literary criticism of our poetic myth. It's as valid as literary criticism is and it also runs all of the risks that literary criticism runs. We all know that literary critics start out with poetry and can do something very valuable there, but they have the tendency to get so caught up with literary criticism that after a while they no longer really

talk about poetry. They talk about literary criticism to literary critics. In very much the same way theologians start out with talking about myth and ultimately about mystic experience and end up talking with other theologians about theology. And that leaves most of us left out in the cold. But we are, if all goes well, concerned with what really matters, and that is the mystic experience and not the reflection on it and the reflection on the reflection.

So what we need to do to bring back that sense of belonging, to find ourselves back there where we really want to be, is put what we have, our theology, if you will, our science, if you will, into this larger context of life—the mystic context. There is one other aspect that I would like to explore briefly with you, because it also belongs to this. I emphasize meaning so much. That these peak moments, these mystic moments are also moments of meaning. It might be helpful for our discussion to clarify what we mean by meaning and purpose. Because in our everyday language we often confuse these two and that is a very difficult and dangerous confusion. When something becomes meaningful to us, we must give ourselves to it. We must allow it to take hold of us. When it is a matter of purpose, we must take things in hand and control them. So it is a totally different inner attitude that we have towards purpose and towards meaning. You know this from your own experience. When you want to achieve a particular purpose you must control things. When does meaning happen to you? When you give yourself to it. When it does something to you. And that meaning whenever it happens has three aspects, and one is, there is something that has meaning. It may be a situation, it may be a thing. It may be an encounter. It may be a landscape. Whatever it is it is something. And we say of it . . . it speaks to me. It tells me something. That's why it has meaning to me. And so the first thing that is always there whenever we talk about meaning is something that speaks to us. But there is something else. Just as we spoke of all that is gushing forth there is that from which it gushes and that is silence. And there cannot be meaning without silence. Because there cannot be word without silence.

We all know very well the difference between chitchat and real dialogue. And real dialogue is not an exchange of words but is really an exchange of silences, often by means of words and sometimes without words. So it's the silence that is another element of meaning. Without silence, nothing can become meaningful. And then there has to be a third element, and that is understanding. Because you cannot imagine that there is a world and there is silence if there is no understanding. Well, if there is no understanding again there is no meaning. These three belong together and

they're a very mysterious threesome because you have no overarching concept of what these three are together. If you have apples and oranges and bananas, you have three kinds of fruit. But if you have silence, word, and understanding, you have three what? You have no overarching concept here, you have three worlds. And yet they're extremely important for us in every moment in which we find meaning. It is another aspect of this longing to belong. The religious quest of humankind throughout the ages is this quest for meaning, an exploration following the word, the one most of us are familiar with because it is the "word of God." This ultimate source that is no thing gushes forth and we can understand that. It speaks to us. In the beginning was the word. That's what the Western traditions have in common. But there is a whole other world of religion, one of which is Buddhism. And there silence is as central as the word is to us.

To take one example; the sermon of Buddha which would correspond to what we call the Sermon on the Mount in the Christian tradition—which is lots of words, three chapters of words in Matthew—is a wordless sermon. And all that Buddha does is he holds up a flower. How can anybody prove that they have understood? If they say anything it is obvious that they have missed it. Because it is about silence. So how should anybody prove that they have understood; well, one smiles. And Buddhists say at that moment the tradition of Buddhism was passed on from the Buddha to his successor, who was the one who smiled. And ever since, the tradition of Buddhism with all its books and sutras and all the rest has been passed on in silence because it's the silence that counts. And I remember my Buddhist teachers whenever we got into any discussion—and they have lots to say about Buddhism just like the mystics have lots to say about mysticism—but whenever my Buddhist teacher would get carried away, he would somewhere in the course of instruction catch himself and say, "Well, I've been talking again. I've become a Christian." And whenever I came to a point where I would have to say, "Well, you know, I can't explain it any further. It's what you call a mystery." The very word *mystery* comes from *wu a yen* which literally means to shut up. So you can't say anything. It's a mystery. So, then, at that moment when it was very tense and I was listening and trying to catch it all. When I said "It's a mystery," he already knew what was coming and he would relax and he would smile and say, "I understand. I understand." We had reached the Buddhist realm of the world religions. And then there is this third realm of understanding, and that is this understanding. It is the process by which you give yourself so deeply to the word that the word takes you where it comes from. The word takes you into the silence. All that gushes forth takes you into its

source. The silence comes to our word. That process, that dance, that movement where it goes from the silence into the word and from the word leads again into the silence, that is understanding. And that is as central to Hinduism as the word is to the Western traditions and the silence is to Buddhism. And in Hinduism, the key that would unlock for you the understanding of any Hindu word or teaching is, "Atman is Brahman and Brahman is Atman." That means that manifest, divine reality is the unmanifest, and the unmanifest is the manifest. Or the word is the silence and the silence is the word. Or that which gushes forth before it gushes forth. The two are one.

And to understand that word is silence and silence is word that is understanding. But it's not an understanding somewhere in the head but an entering into this process. So we have actually that quest for meaning focusing in three different main religious traditions, on three aspects of meaning. Word, silence, and understanding. And the three are one because you cannot have the one without the other. In the Western tradition you certainly have the silence and the understanding because you cannot have word without them, but they are marginal. And in Buddhism you certainly have word and understanding, but they are marginal. And in Hinduism the word and silence are marginal to the understanding. In the Christian tradition these three elements were of course also recognized as divine. And so you speak of the *logos* which is the word. And you speak of God as the abyss of silence, as C. S. Lewis says, "God is that abyss of silence into which creatures can drop down their thoughts forever and ever and never would they hear an echo coming back."

And you speak of a spirit of understanding. God's own self understanding within us. The God who is closer to us than we are to ourselves. We cannot understand God except through God's self-understanding. And so all three are there. And this is what Christians call the triune God and they speak very early on of the round dance of the trinity. The word comes out of the silence and through understanding it turns into the silence. And today, we see this round dance of the trinity because our perspective has become worldwide. We see it reflected, if you want, in the round dance of all the great world religions with one another. And we are all engaged in the same quest for meaning.

But as long as you stand on the outside, and that is one of my favorite images, as you stand on the outside of this round dance, it will always appear to you that those closest to you are going in one direction and those furthest away are going exactly in the opposite direction and there is no way of verifying this vision until you get in.

And the moment you hold hands and you move with it it is absolutely obvious that we are all going in the same direction. And it doesn't make any difference where you get in. It doesn't make any difference. Get in wherever you are because that's the only place where you can get in. You can't very well get in at any place where you are not. So wherever you are you get into this dance, and before you know it you see we are all dancing with one another.

—Contributors—

Angeles Arrien is a cultural anthropologist, award-winning author, educator, and corporate consultant. She lectures internationally and conducts workshops that bridge cultural anthropology, psychology, and comparative religions. She teaches the universal components of communication, leadership skills, education, and health care. She is also the author of *Signs of Life.*

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Joseph Bruchac is a writer and storyteller of Native American and European ancestry and a registered member of the Abenaki Nation of Vermont. A graduate of Cornell University, where he majored in English and minored in wildlife conservation, his most recent books include the novel *Dawn Land*, and two children's books, *The First Strawberries* and *Fox Song*.

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Avram Davis, Ph.D., is the author of many articles and two books. He runs a meditation and Jewish spirituality network in Berkeley, California, and is director of Chochmat HaLev (Wisdom of the Heart), an independent renewal Bet Midrash, or, Wisdom School. The path of particularism and tribalism forms one of the foundations of his spiritual message, a "path of the passionate heart."

Annie Dillard was only twenty-nine when *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, her second book, won a Pulitzer Prize in 1975. Her honors since then have included a National

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Gretel Ehrlich's essays have appeared in *The New York Times*, *Harper's*, and *The Atlantic Monthly*. She is the author of *The Solace of Open Spaces*; *Heart Mountain*; *Islands, The Universe, Home*, and a collection of stories, *Drinking Dry Clouds*. She is a Guggenheim fellowship recipient and lives in Wyoming.

Matthew Fox is the author of several books, including *Sheer Joy*; *Creation Spirituality*; and *Liberating Gifts for the Peoples of the Earth*. A Dominican priest, theologian, and educator, he is the founding director of the Institute in Culture and Creation Spirituality at Holy Names College in Oakland, California, where artists, Native peoples, social transformers, scientists, theologians, and psychologists strive together to discover the cosmology that our times are offering us. In December 1988, under pressure from the Vatican, he was silenced by his order for a year.

Thich Nhat Hanh is a Zen master, poet, and peace advocate. In 1967, Martin Luther King, Jr. nominated him for the Nobel Peace Prize, saying "I do not personally know of anyone more worthy of the Nobel Peace Prize than this gentle monk from Vietnam." Author of *Being Peace*; *Peace Is Every Step*; and the *Miracle of Mindfulness*, he lives in a small community in France, where he teaches, writes, gardens, and works to help refugees worldwide.

Linda Hasselstrom has lived in western South Dakota for forty years, earning her living by ranch work, writing poetry and non-fiction, and teaching workshops in writing. She has written, "I work to bring my life into a circle: writing things I can respect, publishing work I respect, laboring at riding, branding, gardening, taking care of the land, and doing it all with an awareness of how those things fit together." She is the author of several books.

Tom Hayden is a senator in the California legislature. He has played an active role in American politics for over three decades. John Kennedy's speech writer said that Hayden "without knowing it, inspired the Great Society." He chaired the campaign for the Big Green initiative and is the author of seven books, including the forthcoming *Towards a Gospel of the Earth*.

Hazel Henderson is an internationally published futurist, lecturer, and consultant to organizations in over thirty countries. Her books inlcude, *Creating Alternative Futures: The End of Economics* and *Politics of the Solar Age: Alternatives to Economics*. She is the Director of Worldwatch Institute and founded the Center for Sustainable Development and Alternative World Futures.

Petra Kelly—hailed as one of the most influential women in Europe in this century—was a lifelong grass roots activist, a leading figure in the peace and human rights movements, and co-founder of the Green Party, which has profoundly influenced world politics. Kelly served in the West German parliament from 1984 to

1990, and was planning to run for the European parliament in 1994. However, she was murdered in the fall of 1992, a crime still unsolved.

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Thomas Moore, Ph.D., is a writer and psychotherapist living with his family in New England. A leading lecturer in the area of archetypal psychology, he has specialized in the interdisciplinary study of religions, psychology, and the arts. His books include: *Rituals of the Imagination*; *The Planets Within*; the bestselling *Care of the Soul*; and *Soul Mates*.

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