

Beyond Stewardship of Nature: Friends and the “Great Story”

DORIS FERM



REPRINTED BY

The Wider Quaker Fellowship

La Asociación de amigos de los Amigos

I N T R O D U C T I O N

This talk was given at a plenary session of Ohio Valley Yearly Meeting in July, 2006. It appeared in the Friends Bulletin/Western Friend, July, 2006, and is reprinted with permission. (www.westernfriend.org) It has been lightly edited by WQF.

A B O U T T H E A U T H O R

A lifelong Friend, Doris Ferm has always had a passion for nature. She has been active with Quaker Earthcare Witness and is now clerk of the Earthcare Committee of Bellingham Friends Meeting.

BEYOND STEWARDSHIP OF NATURE: FRIENDS AND THE GREAT STORY

Good evening Friends! It is lovely to be among you again, after these seven years! You have honored me, who am not an expert on anything, by asking me to speak to you on the topic of the yearly meeting theme: “Seeking an Earth Restored: The Spiritual Path of Stewardship.”

I want to talk briefly about stewardship and the trouble our Earth is in, and then go deeper on the spiritual path, to tell the New Universe Story and what it means for our lives. I’ll relate these new understandings to what Jesus and some of our Quaker forbears told us. And we will end on a note of hope.

I have chosen to title this talk “Stewardship and Beyond” because I feel that the spiritual path carries us beyond the connotation of care-taking.

My dictionary defines stewardship, first as “managing property, employees or any affair.” I like better the second definition: “the employment or use of one’s time, talents and possessions.” As the most powerful creatures on Earth, who have altered the planet in many unfortunate ways, humans surely do have the duty to use our time, talents and possessions in attempts to restore the health of our planet. Nevertheless, the term “stewardship” connotes to me the sense of standing outside of, or above, the rest of the creation.

We are not, however, separate from all that surrounds us. We are embedded in and a part of the natural world, just like squirrels, trees, streams and rocks. To be sure, we have become able to do many things—to manipulate our environment, to plan for the future, to remember the past, to be conscious of our actions and their consequences. Yet we all came from the same source; we are all made of star stuff. We are all imbued with spirit. Environmental activist David Suzuki in *The Sacred Balance* says, “We are creatures of Earth, created out of stardust, energized by the sun, carrying with us fragments of the first life forms—evidence of our kinship with every other creature on the planet.”

To recognize all this and live by it is what I mean by moving beyond stewardship.

You remember how the first astronauts, looking back at our beautiful blue planet, saw it as a living thing. And so it does seem to be—self-organizing, adaptive, maintaining the temperature range within which life is possible; its water cycle, oxygen-carbon dioxide and other cycles keeping plant and animal life functioning. James Lovelock called it the “Gaia hypothesis.” Earth does not exist just for us, although we humans generally behave as if it is ours to use as we wish.

Friends know much about the damage we have done to Earth: the pollution, the extinctions, the loss of biodiversity, the impoverishment of the soils that grow our food. We know about the destruction of the forests, which along with the phytoplankton of the sea provide the oxygen we breathe and absorb the carbon dioxide we exhale. We may know that 90% of the large ocean fish are gone, that once-familiar songbirds have become scarce, that polar bears are having difficulty finding food as Arctic ice sheets melt. We know that we add to the problems of global warming if we drive a car, take an airplane flight, or use electricity generated by burning fossil fuels...

To know all this and more may bring us to the brink of despair. Perhaps, however, that sense of despair is a hopeful sign, because it arises from the realization that we are not separate and above, but that we are all interconnected—animals, people, flowers, insects, the soil, the waters, the micro-organisms, the winds, the solar system—everything!

Let me give an illustration of interconnectedness. I live now in the Pacific Northwest, where an icon of the Native American cultures and a staple of the economy is the salmon. In fact, not only humans, but the very forests themselves and the creatures living within them are dependent upon the salmon. As you know, when the salmon return to their natal streams to spawn and die, they provide food for bears, river otters, eagles and other predators and scavengers. These usually carry the fish up

away from others who might rob them of their prize, to eat at the edge of the woods, often leaving a part of the carcass behind.

The forest soils are deficient in nitrogen, an element necessary for plant life, and an element plentiful in the sea. By means of the remains of their spent bodies, defecated by those who have consumed them, the salmon bring needed nutrients from the ocean to enable the trees of the forests to thrive.

I want to talk a little bit about how it all began, to tell, in brief, the Great Story, the Universe Story. Cosmologist Brian Swimme and ecotheologian Thomas Berry have called it The New Universe Story, and certainly the astronomers, physicists, geologists and other scientists have helped us to understand it in new and wonderful ways. Yet I have been struck by the intuitive—perhaps you would rather say God-given—insight of those ancient authors of the Book of Genesis. In the poetic language of the King James translation, “the earth was without form and void; and darkness was upon the face of the waters. And God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light.” How wonderfully prescient!

Although this book has molded and informed our civilization, its patriarchal, hierarchical teachings have led us to the situation we are now in. This ancient creation story no longer fits our new knowledge. We need a new story to integrate new information and new understanding into the pattern of our lives.

The New Universe Story tells us that in the beginning there was nothingness—or, as Brian Swimme terms it, no-thing-ness. Then out of that emptiness, suddenly there flared forth in a great fireball the beginning of everything that exists—the stars, the galaxies, our Earth with its oceans and creatures, including us humans. All that is, was potential in the creativity inherent in that primeval flaring forth. More astonishing yet, out of that same emptiness, which is what most of the universe is made of, that emptiness—called the “plenum” because it is full of immeasurable potential—out of that realm of power, particles of matter and waves of energy are continually appearing and

disappearing every second, everywhere. Creation is ongoing, not static, not finished.

The implications of this story, this history, are many. For one, you and I are made of the same star stuff as every worm and sea cucumber, every tree and blade of grass. All are our relatives. Listen now to Black Elk, speaking out of Native American wisdom: “It is the story of all life that is holy and is good to tell, and of us two-leggeds sharing in it with the four-leggeds and the wings of the air and all green things; for these are children of our mother and their father is one Spirit.”

The immense creativity in the heart of that starburst has traveled through space and time to be manifested now in each one of us. The energy that danced forth in that first glorious flare, dances still in the emptiness of the plenum where “waveticles” flash in and out of existence. In even the densest matter, the atoms are in motion.

When I studied geology long ago, I learned that if a bar of lead and a bar of gold are left touching each other for long enough—perhaps a few years—molecules of the lead will move into the bar of gold, and molecules of gold can be seen in the lead.

Life is even more amazing! Microorganisms have been found in solid rock four kilometers below Earth’s surface—alive! Bacteria have also been discovered alive in the fossilized gut of a 40-million-year-old bee! And what of our relationships with other forms of life? Let me tell you a story:

George Fox would have us answer to that of God in everyone. A man named Dennis Littleton, who spoke in Bellingham last year, told of being present where several birds of prey were being shown. One was a magnificent eagle, with whom Dennis wanted to form a relationship. He looked the eagle in the eye from across the room and addressed wordlessly the individual within the bird. Whether he expressed sympathy that the eagle was unable to fly free or what, I don’t remember; but that he made a connection was apparent. Much to the handler’s astonishment and perplexity, the great bird began

to screech and hop around on its perch, flapping its wings, in totally unprecedented behavior.

A few nights later I decided to try this on my little calico cat. She is pretty, soft and sweet, but she purrs silently. So one evening when she was on my lap, I consciously centered myself, and then began to direct my thoughts to the individual within this little furry body. Her response was to purr audibly for a minute or two. Were Dennis and I speaking to that of God in these creatures?

You may take these stories with a grain of salt, if you like, but maybe you would like to try it yourself sometime. I have had to wonder how it might make a difference if we always spoke to one another or to our politicians from this deep, inward place to that place of inward Light in them.

“It is God,” says Hildegard of Bingen, “whom human beings know in every creature.” And William Penn wrote, “It would go a long way to caution and direct people in their use of the world that they were better studied and knowing in the creation of it. For how could men find conscience to abuse it, while they should see the Great Creator look them in the face in all and every part thereof?”

Mysticism is not foreign to Quakers; it is of our essence, and we know it because this mysterious creative energy that is the nature of all things is a form of love. Brian Swimme calls it allurements, the attraction of one entity for another. It is what keeps the galaxies in their paths, what keeps the planets rotating around the sun and the electrons around the protons within atoms. It is in the moth attracted to a certain flower that needs it to pollinate the next blossom, in the homing in of a hummingbird to a tubular red flower, in the devotion of parents to their offspring. It is what biologist E.O. Wilson calls “biophilia,” the love of people for nature and animals. Brian Swimme says the destiny of the human is to become love in human form. And we have been told long ago that to live in love is to live in God and God in us. Alfred North Whitehead once

defined God as “the binding element of the universe.” What can that binding element be but the love that the New Universe Story teaches, the love that is God? “For in God we live and move and have our being,” says the Apostle Paul (Acts 17:28).

“This is the unique awareness,” says Thomas Berry, “that begins to take place in our time. The body of Christ is ultimately the entire universe. Otherwise neither the incarnation nor the redemption is complete. Experience of this communion is so strengthening, so ecstatic, that it can provide the energies that we need to carry life on into the difficult future.”

The most important commandment, Jesus said, was “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”

Who is our neighbor? Not only the Samaritan, the outcast, but also the whale, the tiger, the rainforest, the tree, the grass, the fungi...maybe even the invisible bacteria. Paul advises, “Do not be conformed to this age any longer, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may be able to discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Romans 2:2).

So we have talked about our need for a new story upon which to base our lives, one in consonance with our new knowledge. I have tried to convey some of the excitement I feel, and that others have felt. Led by the Spirit, we recognize God’s hand in the wondrous beauties, intricacies and interrelationships within the web of life. We recognize with joy our own connectedness in that web, and our closeness to God in all the Creation. We are humbled by an awareness of our responsibility as conscious participants in the ongoing life of this fragile planet. Earth is not ours to use up, it is a gift to be treasured, to be shared justly and to be passed on still thriving to future generations.

Yet we humans have allowed greed to destroy the beauty of mountains and valleys, the clearness of waters and air, the lives

of countless species. Insofar as Friends are involved in all this—and it is very hard not to be—are we, then, living our Testimony of Peace with trees, songbirds, chickens, and the other creatures and humans who share this Earth with us?

Are we living the testimony of equality with the fish in our streams, the mountains on our horizons, the hungry out of sight on reservations and beyond our borders?

We have amassed goods beyond our needs, using non-renewable parts of the Earth for our pleasure without regard for those who will come after us. Are we living our Testimony of Simplicity?

How can we pray and give thanks to God while forgetting the impact of our lifestyles on the rest of Creation?

Louis Cox of Quaker Earthcare Witness says, “We don’t know where we are, we don’t know what time it is, and we have forgotten who we are.” Perhaps a response lies in the words of Chickasaw author Linda Hogan, who has written (in *Dwellings: A Spiritual History of the Living World*), “Care-taking is the utmost spiritual and physical responsibility of our time, and perhaps that stewardship is finally our place in the web of life, our work, the solution to who we are” (BeFriending Creation, May–June 2006).

We need to commit ourselves to radically changed lives, recognizing the costly implications, yet also knowing the joy, reverence and deep love of God that inspires us. Spirit-filled lives that see every form of life as an expression of universal love enable us to move forward confidently, in faith and in hope.

Yes, hope, in spite of all we know. Quaker writer Elizabeth Watson said we must dwell in possibility, believing that adventuring together into the new world being born we can save this planet for our grandchildren’s grandchildren. We are, after all, part of a continuous field of loving consciousness, co-extensive with the plenum full of limitless possibilities.

“A new culture is emerging globally,” says psychologist Mark Cummings, “a culture of connecting with each other

and the Earth in sustainability, a new planetary culture based on a primary allegiance to the web of life, the planet and the universe.” Environmentalist Paul Hawken, quoted by David Suzuki, says, “Never before in history have independent groups from all around the world derived frameworks of knowledge that are so utterly consonant and in agreement. It is not that they are the same; it is that they do not conflict. This has never happened in politics, in religion, in psychology—not ever.” Suzuki adds that once 10-15% of a human population actively embraces new ideas, the world culture can change rapidly and radically. Feminist theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether in *Gaia and God* says, “What we need is neither optimism nor pessimism... but committed love.”

Environmental activist and author Joanna Macy calls this “the time of the Great Turning,” as people around the world are realizing that we can meet our needs without destroying our world. It is happening now!

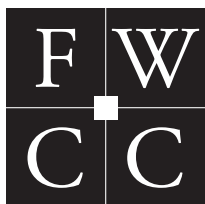
In this fraction of space-time in which we live, there seems to me no doubt that it is of love that our spirits are made. And so it is that we are designed to be channels for the cosmic, the divine Love, to give it forth as it is constantly poured into our lives. To open ourselves to the wonder, the beauty and the marvelous interrelationships of this Earth on which we are nurtured is to know joy and fulfillment. It is to give purpose and endless treasure to our lives.

I will close with some words from evolutionary theologian Michael Dowd’s *EarthSpirit*. He says, “As we pick up our cross to follow Jesus, let us learn from those who plant dates. A date tree takes 80 years from the time it is planted to bear its first fruit. To plant a date tree is an act of faith, a sign of hope, and a symbol of one’s loving commitment to the future... Brazilian theologian Ruben Alves saw this clearly when he said ‘Let us plant dates, even though we who plant them will never eat them. We must live by the love of what we will never see.’”

Q U E R I E S

Following are some queries about the text, which you may wish to use for reflection or study, individually or with others.

1. Is there something about the idea of a “new” story that appeals to you? Do you agree that the “ancient creation story no longer fits our new knowledge”? Why or why not?
 2. What gives you hope for the future of life on Earth?
 3. How do you see the Great Creator in all and every part of the world?
 4. What are you planting that will bear fruit for future generations?
-



Friends World Committee
for Consultation

SECTION OF THE AMERICAS

Comité Mundial de Consulta
de los Amigos

SECCIÓN DE LAS AMÉRICAS

ABOUT THE WIDER QUAKER FELLOWSHIP

The Wider Quaker Fellowship is a program of Friends World Committee for Consultation Section of the Americas. Through our mailings we seek to lift up voices of Friends of different countries, languages, cultures and Quaker traditions, and invite all to enter into spiritual community with Friends.

The Fellowship was founded in 1936 by Rufus M. Jones, a North American Quaker teacher, activist and mystic, as a way for like-minded people who were interested in Quaker beliefs and practices to stay in contact with the Religious Society of Friends, while maintaining their own religious affiliation, if any. Today, WQF Fellows live in over 90 countries, and include non-Friends, inquirers, Quakers living in isolated circumstances, and active members and attenders of Friends meetings and churches. Wider Quaker Fellowship depends on the financial support of its readers to provide this service.

Wider Quaker Fellowship articles are also available on the web at
<http://widerquakerfellowship.org/>

Printed 2011 by The Wider Quaker Fellowship,
a program of Friends World Committee for Consultation Section of the Americas
Friends Center, 1506 Race Street, Philadelphia, PA 19102 USA
tel: 215.241.7250, email: wqf@fwccamericas.org