

THE
COOL GREEN HILLS
OF
EARTH

by
Elizabeth Watson

I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills from whence cometh my help.

Psalm 121:1

Be not conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewal of your minds, to prove what is the will of God, what is good and pleasing and perfect.

For, by the grace given me, I ask that you not think more highly of yourselves than you ought, but to think with sober mind, according to the measure of faith God has given you.

For as in one body, we have members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and members, one of another.

Romans 12:2-5

THE COOL GREEN HILLS OF EARTH

In the last quarter century we have seen something that no other human beings have ever seen: we have looked at our planet in its totality, seeing it from space. Stand with me for a moment on the moon and look back at Earth. There it is, looking like a little blue and white marble in the vastness and darkness of space. It looks so beautiful, so tiny, so fragile, so vulnerable.

Think for a moment how everything we love is there on that little Christmas tree ornament. All our human history: Socrates, Jesus, Gandhi. All our human culture: the words of Shakespeare, the music of Mozart, the luminous perfection of the Taj Mahal. There are the people we love, our families and friends, and there are the places we love: shorelines, hills, trees, the lake here at Mohonk. On my desk at home is the familiar picture of earth from space, and beneath it the word HOME!

We have named all the other planets of our sun for classic deities: Jupiter, Venus, Mars, and the rest. Our planet we simply call *earth*. The novelist William Golding suggests we name our planet *Gaia* for the primordial Greek Earth Mother.

There is a scientific basis for the name. British physicist James Lovelock and Boston biologist Lynn Margulis have developed what they call the Gaia Hypothesis. They point out that the other planets look different from ours, viewed from space. They look dead. They do not support life. Our planet is living. Lovelock and Margulis perceive that it is a single, living, interdependent organism of which we, like all the other forms of life, are a part. Paul had an inkling of this when he wrote to the church at Rome that we are "members, one of another."

Lovelock says:

If we are all, from bacteria to whales, part of Gaia, then we are all potentially important to her well-being. . . . No longer can we merely regret the passing of one of the great whales, or the blue butterfly. When we eliminate a species from Earth, we have destroyed part of ourselves.

Many of you know the science fiction of Robert Heinlein and will remember his blind balladeer, Rhysling, who sang while bringing the Venus Shuttle in for a safe landing, although it cost him his life:

And we pray for one more landing
On the globe that gave us birth
May we rest our eyes on the fleecy skies
And the cool green hills of Earth.

So, let us now try for a landing back on our beautiful, living planet.

However, as we come nearer to Earth, we see that the fleecy skies are clouds full of acid rain. Lakes and fish and trees are dying. And in many places the hills are neither cool nor green. The trees have been cut down; the soil no longer holds moisture; vegetation is gone, and people and animals are starving.

Lovelock and Margulis say that our living planet is capable of regulating optimum conditions for all the components of Gaia, including us. From time to time natural disasters interrupt this, but now human intervention threatens the entire living entity. Last year George and I went in to Boston to hear Lynn Margulis speak on the Gaia Hypothesis. She said that even more urgent than the holes in the ozone layer is the destruction of the rain forests. If we do not reverse our destruction of trees, Gaia will become a desert, incapable of producing food and oxygen and sustaining life.

How could we be so blind? How could we have done this to our fragile planet and to ourselves? How could we have put our children's future in such jeopardy. The Iroquois Confederacy whose territory was not far from here had as their Great Law:

In every deliberation we must consider the impact of our decisions on the next seven generations.

We have not considered the impact of our actions on our own generation, much less our children's and our children's children's generations. Selfishness and greed blind us to the fact that we are all members, one of another.

Interdependence is the law of our universe. Community was written by God into the nature of things. Our planet is a delicately balanced ecosystem in which everything is interdependent. Earth puts forth grass, trees, plants in endless variety, all giving out oxygen which animals need. Animals in turn breathe out carbon dioxide and provide manure which plants need. Earth has many recycling systems of land, air and water, powered by the sun, all members one of another, a marvelous unity with diversity.

Human society, too, has a foundation of interdependence. Few of us could survive without a vast support system of farmers, storekeepers, builders, repair people, teachers, healers, writers, friends. All of us are threatened when someone is diseased. No one is safe on our city streets when some are poor, or hopeless, or mentally ill. All of us are endangered when nations stockpile nuclear weapons. We are members one of another, whether we like it or not.

If this is so, why do we not automatically have a human community? Why are there homeless and hungry people? Why are nations at war with one another? And why cannot we live in harmony with Gaia, our planetary Earth Mother?

I think Paul put his finger on the problem when he wrote the little church at Rome that they should *not* “be conformed to this age.” In other words, they were not to “do as the Romans do.” We, too, find it hard to detach ourselves from our materialistic, violent culture. Paul further told them, and us also, that we are not to think more highly of ourselves than we ought. We tend to think that being citizens of the United States gives us privileged status in the world, and that being human gives us a right to have dominion over all the rest of creation. In other words, we lack a proper humility.

Several years ago I led a workshop for women in Arizona, urging them to believe in their ideas and abilities and not to sell themselves short with false humility. In an unguarded moment I said, “Humility is a nasty little virtue.” A woman in the group responded, “You need a new definition of humility.” She gave us one from Alcoholics Anonymous:

Humility is the willingness to become teachable.

I needed that lesson, and her words formed the basis for much thought on what it means to be teachable.

Being teachable is opening ourselves to learn from anyone. It is knowing that we do not have all the answers. It is shutting up at times, to let others speak a different point of view. It is the courage to change our minds at times, and to admit that we were wrong. It is becoming a life long learner, open to new ideas as long as we live.

Becoming teachable changes the educational process. A book by Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, written out of his experience with literacy programs in his native Brazil, introduced me to the idea of “the learning community.” Freire did not decide in advance what words he would teach the peasants to read. He built vocabulary out of the words they most wanted to be able to read and then to reproduce. He saw

learning as a two-way street. He had much to learn from the peasants, because they have a wisdom about the earth and about life that educated people have largely lost. He learned from them while they learned from him, and together they all learned new things that emerged from their interaction. Education should be dialogue.

John Wool^{man}, a Quaker living in New Jersey before the American Revolution, provides an example of being teachable. He made a long and arduous journey by horseback and canoe into Indian territory at a time of hostilities. Sitting in his leaking tent one rainy morning, after discovering that his horse had got loose and wandered off in the night, he asked himself why he had ever set out on this impossible journey. He answered in his Journal:

Love was the first motion, and then a concern arose to spend some time with the Indians, that I might feel and understand their life and the spirit they live in, if haply I might receive some instruction from them, or they might in any degree be helped forward by my following the leadings of truth among them.

His friends in New Jersey had tried to dissuade him from making this journey and were concerned about him. Woolman was in no danger from the Indians. They recognized the spirit in which he came and received him with hospitality. Last year George and I made a pilgrimage to India in search of Gandhi and Tagore. We tried to go in the same spirit of wanting to learn, visiting people who had known these men and who are carrying on in their spirit.

One of the hopes for the world now is the number of people travelling to other countries, particularly young people who do not go first class nor stay in Hilton Hotels. Many of them are open to learning from their hosts, trying "to understand their life and the spirit they live in." In this way we begin to create an interdependent world community.

If the Gaia Hypothesis is correct that we are all members one of another, with other species, can we expect to learn from them too? We have cut ourselves off from the other animals. Of course we do have pets whom we train to conform to our lives. Their learning is a one-way street. We must *break* our horses, and *houstrain* our dogs.

Joan McIntyre, editor of *Mind in the Waters: A Book to Celebrate the Consciousness of Whales and Dolphins*, writes:

Animals were once for all of us teachers. They instructed us in ways of being and perceiving that extended our imaginations and that were models for additional possibilities. We watched them

make their way through the intricacies of their lives with wonder and with awe. Seeing the wolf pick his delicate way across the snowy forest floor, the eyes of the owl hold the image of the mouse, the dark shape of the whale break the surface of the sea, reminded us of the grand sweep and diversity of life, and of its infinite possibilities:

Wolf —thirty million years old,

Whale —fifty million years old,

Loon —one hundred sixty million years old. . .

Can we not learn from our elders?

Job said to his friends, who were also his tormentors:

Ask now the beasts and they shall teach thee;

And the birds of the air, and they shall tell thee;

Or speak to the earth, and it shall instruct thee. . .

What would it be like to seek instruction from the earth itself? We have an example in a life lived at Mohonk. Dan Smiley set out to learn from the earth and he recorded every scrap of information on cards, thousands of them during a long life. Some items may have seemed insignificant when noted, but later helped to document a trend. So records of acidity in local lakes in the 1930's became groundwork for later studies of acid rain. Studies of gypsy moths in the 1950's demonstrated that natural methods of control are more effective than poisons and chemicals.

The cool green hills of Mohonk will remain cool and green (if acid rain from elsewhere does not destroy that greenness), because Dan Smiley loved them and cared about them. Mohonk has set aside six thousand acres as a land trust to be forever wild.

“In wildness is the preservation of the world,” as Thoreau observed.

As Dan Smiley's life demonstrates, one person can make a difference. In India we visited Kishore Saint, formerly on the faculty of Friends World College. It was he who first introduced us to Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which he used in his teaching. He lives now in Udaipur in the province of Rajasthan and has been concerned about a tribal people called the Bhils. In Indian society tribal people are even lower than untouchables, although these people have a traditional life style that sees that no one is hungry or left out.

For centuries they have lived in forests in the mountains west of Udaipur in a stable situation which has now been disrupted. After Indian independence, the government began to permit logging interests to cut down

trees on the hills and mountains in the Bhil territory. As vegetation began to dry up, animals grazed more extensively, and soon there was nothing green left. The agricultural economy of the tribe collapsed.

Kish Saint and some friends set up a foundation to raise money to start reforestation. They hired members of the tribe to do the tree planting, giving them a cash income to help them out. The tribal group saw that the old stone fences needed to be repaired and restored to keep their animals from indiscriminate grazing. Vegetation is now returning and people can grow crops again. Kish Saint went to help these people restore their traditional way of life, not to introduce new methods.

He took us by Jeep out of Udaipur, first on a paved road, then on a bumpy, rutted secondary road, then by a track across the countryside, driving at times through shallow streams. At first as we travelled we saw bare hills, denuded of trees and eroded. Then we began to see some hills with partial reforestation as we came into the Bhil territory. In time these hills will be cool and green once more.

Finally we left the Jeep and walked the last mile or so into a clearing where there were a few houses. Representatives of many villages had gathered to plan the work for the next period. They did not speak English, of course, and we could not follow the discussion. We could see that they were enthusiastic and full of hope. Kish introduced us and we spoke a few words of greeting. Then he and we sat in the background while the tribal members ran their own meeting.

In greenness is the preservation of a viable economy.

Joanna Macy says that if we are to save our planet, we must learn “to think like a mountain.” What does a cool green hill think when loggers ruthlessly cut down its trees? What does it feel when its soil is exposed to the heat of the sun?

Buddhist Master, Thich Nhat Hanh, says that we must “hear within ourselves the sound of the earth crying.” Do we feel its woundedness as our own pain? Only if we do will we care passionately enough to change our lives to reflect our concern for Gaia. Only then will we watch vigilantly the actions of our government with regard to the “integrity of creation,” and make our voices heard on behalf of our embattled planet.

George and I not only heard Lynn Margulis last year, we also went to Harvard Divinity School to hear Sallie McFague, professor of theology at Vanderbilt University, speak on “Models of God for an Ecological Age.” Like Lynn Margulis, she sees Earth as one living organism. But, she said, the metaphors for God which we have inherited are not appropriate to our

age. Metaphors like *King* and *Lord* suggest patterns of domination and hierarchy, arbitrary decision-making, and remoteness from earth and its concerns. Lynn Margulis spoke as a scientist. Sallie McFague spoke in a Christian context. She suggests that we see Earth as God's body, God's incarnation, that in which "we live and move and have our being." She echoed Paul, "We though many are one body in Christ."

Native American tribal groups saw Earth as the incarnation of the mother, source of all that is needed for life. They saw animals as brothers and sisters. They lived here for generations without polluting air and water and causing animals to become extinct. Like Woolman we need to "understand their life and the spirit in which they live" so we may learn ways appropriate to us of living more responsibly.

One of the names for God in the Old Testament is El Shaddai, usually translated "God of the Mountains." *El* is the masculine form for God. *Shaddai*, often translated *mountains*, literally means *many breasts*. The cool green hills are the breasts of our Mother Earth, providing nurture for all her creatures.

"I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills (the cool green hills of Earth) from whence cometh my help."

Let us set before ourselves a vision of Earth restored to wholeness, a living entity of which we are all members. Theodore Roszak put it into a poem:

Members all things one of another,
so we of the beasts
and the beasts of the grass
and the grass of the earth
and the earth of the seas
and the seas of the rains
and the rains of the skies
and the skies of the spheres
whose music (but, listen!)
is the lovesong of God for [Creation].

Isaiah heard that music and said, "The hills break forth into singing, and all the trees. . . clap their hands."

If we listen, we can hear it too.

O be swift, my soul, to answer,
Be jubilant, my feet.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

J. E. Lovelock, *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth*. Oxford University Press, 1979.

Robert A. Heinlein, *The Green Hills of Earth*. New York, New American Library, 1973.

Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York, Continuum Publishers, 1970.

The Journal of John Woolman appears in several different editions. The entry quoted was written June 12, 1763.

Joan McIntyre, editor. *Mind in the Waters*. A Book to Celebrate the Consciousness of Whales and Dolphins. New York, Charles Scribner's Sons/Sierra Club Books, 1974.

The passage from Job is Chapter 12, verse 7-8a.

John Seed, Joanna Macy, Pat Fleming, Arne Naess, *Thinking like a Mountain: Towards a Council of All Beings*. Philadelphia, New Society Publishers, 1988.

Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age*. Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1987.

Theodore Roszak, editor, *Sources*. An Anthology of contemporary material useful for preserving personal sanity while braving the great technological wilderness. New York, Harper Colophon Books, 1972. The poem quoted is the second section of the one on page 529. I have taken the liberty of substituting the word *creation* for the phrase *his creatures*.

The passage from Isaiah is part of the 12th verse of Chapter 55.

A Bible scholar, well-known Quaker author and speaker, Elizabeth Watson preached this sermon, The Cool Green Hills of Earth, at Mohonk Mountain House in New Paltz, New York on August 20, 1989. Her writings include: Guests of My Life, Daughters of Zion, and This I know Experimentally. Elizabeth and her husband, George, are members of New England Yearly Meeting.

Printed 1990 by
WIDER QUAKER FELLOWSHIP
a program of the Friends World Committee for Consultation
Section of the Americas
1506 Race Street, Philadelphia, PA 19102 USA