

Renewing the sacred balance

...A challenge and an opportunity

THE ETHICAL CRISIS WE FACE IS AN OPPORTUNITY FOR ALL THE SPIRITUAL WISDOMS OF THE EARTH TO WORK TOGETHER, UNITED IN A COMMON TASK

High in the Andes of Peru lies an enchanted land, cradled in the embrace of two chains of mountains, the Cordilleras Blanca and Negra. This is the Callejón de Huaylas, a green valley nestled over 3,000 metres above sea level, whose encircling peaks sometimes surpass 6,000 metres. The indigenous culture of the area is still very much alive. The people wear colourful, eye-dazzling dress, and many speak only Quechua. Indeed, this area could be considered the cradle of Andean civilization—the great culture of Chavín arose nearly 4,000 years ago in a nearby valley. Not surprisingly, a sense of something both ancient and timeless pervades all.

During the years I worked as a Scarboro lay missionary in Peru, I had the privilege to visit this area five times. Arriving after a ten-hour bus journey from the dusty coastal plain far below, I had the experience of waking up, as if for the first time. The words of Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hahn would echo in my heart: “I have become a child again today.”

Somehow, the Callejón de Huaylas holds a unique quality for me. Perhaps it is the light. Equatorial sunlight at a high altitude reflecting off snow-crowned peaks clearly defines every form in sharp, clear outlines. Colours have a new intensity. Reality seems more “real.” Time, too, has a different quality. Parts of this region seem untouched by the tides of history.



The overall effect can only be described as magical. It inspires awe. There, my attention is tightly focused and a deep joy flows from within.

For me, this is my quintessential experience of the sacred balance. In the Callejón de Huaylas, my experience of God as revealed in the harmony of nature is simply overwhelming.

The interconnection of creation

At one time, all people may have lived with a deep sense of the sacred balance. Humans were born into a stunningly beautiful world where the intricate web of life had not yet been torn. We lived in intimate contact with other creatures, close to the



By Mark Hathaway

rhythms of the land. No doubt, life was more difficult and dangerous, yet we may also have lived with a greater intensity and an innate experience of connection to a greater whole.

Most of us now live in comfortable, climate-controlled homes, and move around in the protective shell of an automobile. Walking in nature, tending the soil and caring for animals (with the possible exception of pets) have become activities for special occasions, not a part of everyday life. We no longer know the names of the plants, birds and wildlife that inhabit our local regions. We have lost much of our connection with the greater community of life. Indeed, the wider cosmos itself has been effectively lost to us—the lights of our cities make it impossible to see any but the brightest celestial bodies. Our universe has contracted.

In many ways, this may seem ironic. Our scientific knowledge has expanded greatly over the past century. We now know that the entire cosmos was born from a single generative nucleus with a burst of creative energy some 15 billion years ago. We are beginning to understand the series of miraculous emergences that gave birth to the galaxies, stars and planets—and to life on Earth. The cosmos is far vaster, far more complex, than we once imagined.

As well, we perceive more clearly the fundamental interconnection of the creatures that share our planet with us. It is becoming

“HUMANS WERE BORN INTO A STUNNINGLY BEAUTIFUL WORLD WHERE THE INTRICATE WEB OF LIFE HAD NOT YET BEEN BROKEN.”

increasingly evident that this greater community of life works together in some mysterious way—to regulate temperature, the salinity of the seas and the composition of the atmosphere, so that the ideal conditions for life are maintained. (Without life, it is estimated that the Earth’s surface temperature would be about 300° C, versus 13° with life.) In some ways, the Earth functions as though it was a single living organism.

We know also that the cosmos itself lives in us—most of the elements in our bodies were formed in supernova explosions aeons ago. We are stardust brought to life.

For many peoples of faith, all of this manifests the wisdom, love and artistry of the Creator. The intricate connections that bind together the entire web of life form a sacred balance. The entire cosmos, and particularly this wondrous planet that we call Earth, are a revelation of God.

Yet, as our knowledge of the sacred balance has increased, our lived experience of it has diminished. Perhaps, in part, our disconnection with the wider community of life explains why humanity has been waging an unprecedented assault on the Earth and all its creatures. We are disrupting the sacred balance that God created, but we often seem to be unaware that we are doing so.

The balance broken

For tens of thousands of years, our human presence had little

impact on the wider community of life. However, this slowly began to change with the invention of agriculture and the domesticating of plants and animals. Our interventions increased further as we moved from farms and built and inhabited cities.

As Europe transformed itself into a technological society and expanded its power through colonial exploits, humanity began to have an even greater impact on the world’s ecosystems. It is during this time that the gap between rich and poor began to widen.

Since 1950—a brief flicker of time in relation to the more than four billion years of Earth’s evolution—the rhythm of exploitation and ecological destruction has accelerated dramatically:

- We have released immense amounts of carbon and other greenhouse gasses into the atmosphere, initiating a dangerous cycle of global warming and climatic instability.
- We have destroyed over half of the Earth’s great forests—the lungs of our planet.
- We have undermined the fertility of the soil and its capacity to sustain plant life: 65% of once-arable land has now been lost and a further 15% of land surface is turning into deserts.
- We have released thousands of new chemicals into the air, soil and water, slowly poisoning the processes of life. We have created deadly nuclear wastes that will remain radioactive for many hundreds of thousands of years.

IN AN INSTANT OF TIME, WE ARE DESTROYING THE SACRED BALANCE THAT GOD CREATED OVER BILLIONS OF YEARS.



- We have destroyed hundreds of thousands of plant and animal species. Scientists project that 20 to 50% of all species will disappear over the next 30 years if current trends continue.

So much destruction in so little time. And for what? The “benefits” of this way of life have gone to a very small proportion of humanity: the richest 20 percent of the world’s population now earns 150 times more than the poorest 20 percent, and the gap between rich and poor is growing, not shrinking.

A relatively small minority of humanity is devouring our planet—this precious revelation of the sacred. Every major ecosystem on Earth has experienced significant degradation over the past 50 years. In an instant of time, we are destroying the sacred balance that God created over billions of years. Why?

Christianity and the sacred balance

Many have observed that Christianity may have played a role in the destruction of the sacred balance. Indeed, the idea that forests, rivers, minerals, land, creatures and even people are simply resources to be exploited and commodities to be bought and sold has become almost synonymous with modern Western civilization that developed under the influence of Christianity. Why should this be so? Did Christianity really play a role?

In one way, it would seem so.

Many Christians have interpreted the first chapter of Genesis to mean that humans must subdue and dominate nature. Others, distorting the teachings of St. Paul, have asserted that “flesh” is evil while “spirit” is good. In this view, we must forget “worldly” things and pursue a future “kingdom of heaven” divorced from Earthly life. The body is seen as a source of temptation—and by extension, nature itself is seen as a corrupting force.

On closer examination, though, we now know that these beliefs are actually at odds with the Christian message.

Genesis teaches us that all of creation belongs to God alone and it is “very good” and blessed. God forms humans (*adam*) out of the earth (*adama*) and breathes life into us—we are breathing, walking earth.

In Leviticus (25:23), we hear that the land belongs to God alone. Many of the Psalms celebrate the beauty of creation: “O Lord, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all” (*Psalms 104:24*).

The idea of the incarnation of Christ is an affirmation of the goodness of the body. God becomes human, becomes flesh and blood. Spirit and body are not in opposition. Indeed, the words used for “spirit” in both Hebrew and Aramaic mean “breath”—that which sustains life in the body.

Jesus’ teachings are full of references to growing things, to animals (sheep, fish), to the fruit-

fulness of the Earth and to God’s care for all creatures. He almost always prayed out-of-doors, and preached beside the Sea of Galilee, surrounded by the beauty of creation.

In the Beatitudes, Jesus teaches us that the humble, those who have truly surrendered to God and softened all that is rigid within, shall receive the vigour and strength of the Earth itself (*Matthew 5:5*).

Since the time of Jesus, many others have shared this understanding of the sacred balance. St. Basil (329-379), the father of monasticism in the Eastern Church, prayed:

“O God, enlarge within us a sense of fellowship with all living things, our brothers and sisters the animals, to whom you gave the earth as their home in common with us. We remember with shame that in the past we have exercised high dominion with ruthless cruelty, so that the voice of the earth, which should have gone up to you in song, has been a groan of travail. May we realize that they live not for us alone but for themselves and for you, and that they love the sweetness of life.”

St. Francis, too, taught us to praise God for “brother Sun, sister Moon, brother Wind, and sister Water.” Indeed, many Christian saints and mystics have experienced and celebrated God’s presence in the midst of creation. The great theologian, St. Thomas

IN SEEKING A NEW PATH, WE MUST CONSIDER THE WISDOM OF ALL THE WORLD’S CULTURES AND SPIRITUAL TRADITIONS.



Aquinas, wrote that, “The whole universe together participates in divine goodness more perfectly, and represents it better, than any single creature whatever.” Martin Luther King wrote that, “God writes the Gospel, not in the Bible alone, but on trees, flowers, clouds and stars.”

Renewing the sacred balance

It is clear that authentic Christianity calls us to care for the Earth and to renew the sacred balance that God created. To wantonly destroy creation is to desecrate the artistry of the Creator.

Thomas Berry, a Catholic priest who is also one of the great ecological thinkers of our time, has written that we are currently facing the deepest moral crisis of all times:

“We find ourselves ethically destitute just when, for the first time, we are faced with ultimacy, the irreversible closing down of the Earth’s functioning in its major life systems. Our ethical traditions know how to deal with suicide, homicide and even genocide, but these traditions collapse entirely when confronted with biocide, the killing of the life systems of the Earth, and genocide, the devastation of the Earth itself.”

Berry believes that we have become “autistic” to the voice of the Earth. We need to open our-

selves again to the murmur of the wind in the trees, to the laughter of water splashing on rocks, to the dance of sunlight reflected on water, and to the singing of the birds. We also have to open ourselves to the suffering voices—the felled forests, the polluted streams and the wasted lands. We must lament what has been lost, celebrate what we still have, and undergo a deep “metanoia”—a fundamental turn in the direction of our lives.

In so doing, each of us must reflect on how we live. If the entire world were to consume the resources that an average North American uses, we would need at least ten Earths to sustain our way of life. We simply cannot continue to live this way. In any case, has this reckless consumption brought us true happiness? What really matters to us? How can we fundamentally reorder our values and change the way we walk on this Earth?

In seeking a new path, we must consider the wisdom of all the world’s cultures and spiritual traditions. Many of the Earth’s aboriginal peoples, including those in Canada, have preserved ancient ecological wisdom that takes on a new importance in our time. We need to open ourselves to these voices, treating these teachings with profound respect and gratitude.

Similarly, we can learn from the many faith traditions present in our land. In 1986, a group of Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Muslim and Jewish religious leaders

met in Assisi to share perspectives on ecology. The words that Father Serrini of the Franciscan Order used to welcome the participants share an important insight:

“Each religion will celebrate the dignity of nature and the duty of every person to live harmoniously within the natural world. We are convinced of the inestimable value of our respective traditions and of what they can offer to re-establish ecological harmony; but, at the same time, we are humble enough to desire to learn from each other. The very richness of our diversity lends strength to our shared concern and responsibility for our Planet Earth.”

Perhaps in the midst of crisis, there is also an opportunity. The ethical crisis we face—the urgent possibility of ecocide and genocide—may bring all the spiritual wisdoms of the Earth together and unite us in a common task—the renewal of the sacred balance.∞

Mark Hathaway was a Scarborough lay missionary from 1982 to 1998. Currently, he works half-time for The United Church of Canada on issues of biotechnology and food security and half-time as a freelance educator, writer and web designer.