

MORNING EARTH

Yearning To Be Round

A Primer in Ecoliteracy in 16 Parts

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Introduction

This collection of essays is directed at anyone who wishes to be functionally literate in ecology, the study of how life on Earth works. It is particularly directed at anyone who educates children. I know of nothing

more important than our raising children who understand what we are, what Earth is, where we came from, and how we relate to the rest of life.

Human understanding of biology and ecology has been revolutionized in the past thirty years. In these essays is new knowledge that all of us need. We can't afford to wait the fifty years it usually takes for new knowledge to trickle down into the classroom—we don't have the time.

We are in the midst of what is called, with a certain smugness, an "information explosion." Information does not become knowledge until it is coherently linked to other information. The task of these essays has been to present this earth information and create these coherent links. Knowledge is not wisdom, but when knowledge has been connected to human experience and valuing it has a chance of becoming wisdom. I hope that some of those connections are in these essays too.

As we engage the new millennium, a new paradigm is emerging, a new model of what life is and what we must become. Ecological literacy is a central part of this emerging paradigm.

A quick word on the plan of this book. Chapters 2 and 3 introduce thought strategies to help educators teach ecological literacy. All the rest is ecology, but it is ecology seen through the lenses of art and of deep ecology.

Arne Naess, the Norwegian 'father' of deep ecology, is fond of quoting the great seventeenth century philosopher Baruch Spinoza. My favorite Spinoza quote serves as a wonderful motto for earth educators and for this book: *We are as large as our loves.*

Chapter One: The Great Yearning



We live in a time of great yearning. Across the 'developed' societies this yearning dominated the end of the millennium, and this ache continues. What is it we long for? Why do we seem to have a hole in our collective heart? We feel incomplete; we sense intuitively that there is something crucial missing, that no matter how much we consume, we will not become filled. This is not news. But the answers to these questions are central to our existence and always have been.

The answers have to do with memory, with belonging, with becoming complete.

We live as well in a time when we are desperate to remember; our whole culture seems to be trying to recall some crucial information that we have forgotten. We yearn for lost community; we hunger for family; we dream again of a Golden Age, when we must have felt whole. We wistfully await, as the Millennium begins, some sort of revelation. What is it we can't remember?

The great Oglala Lakota holy man, Black Elk, said in the 1930s:

The Power of the World always works in circles, and everything tries to be round.... The sky is round, and I have heard that the earth is round like a ball, and so are all the stars. The wind, in its greatest power, whirls. Birds make their nests in circles, for theirs is the same religion as ours. The sun comes forth and goes down again in a circle. The moon does the same, and both are round. Even the seasons form a great circle in their changing, and always come back again to where they were. The life of a man is a circle from childhood to childhood, and so it is in everything where power moves.

"Birds make their nests in circles, for theirs is the same religion as ours."

This sounds like a thing we have not remembered.

Everything tries to be round...what does it mean to try to be round? It means, among other things, that we want to be complete, as a circle is complete. Perhaps our most ancient recognition of this is the Yin and Yang symbol— complementary opposites fused into one. To be complete is to be whole.

One of our basic human drives—a defining drive—is the need to Belong. We each have a driving need to transcend (go beyond) the personal, singular self and become part of something larger than the self, something trans-personal.

We do not, cannot, feel whole until we know we are part of, are connected to, and identify with What-is-Larger-Than-the-Self. In other words, until we belong.

This transpersonal drive can take relatively harmless forms, of course; we become sports fans, we become patriots, we join religions, we identify with all sorts of groups. This drive also takes hugely destructive forms. The new Tribalism sweeping the world is painful evidence. Jingoist Nationalism proclaims itself once again in blood; my country right or wrong. Fundamentalists of all sorts are busily demanding that the world recognize that what they belong to is more important than what anyone else has chosen to belong to. This too is being written in blood.

Our great yearning has to do with much that Western culture has deliberately forgotten. Consider the myth of the Golden Age. Most cultures have such stories The Golden Age myths are of a heaven on earth, a time of peace and harmony. In Europe, the term Golden Age came to name a 'never, never time' when heroes strode like Colossi across the world, and great masculine deeds were routinely done. Titans and Demigods, naiads and wood sprites, the whole Heroic/Romantic panoply of beings. In the West, the stories of ideal peace and harmony became stories for children.

When the European Renaissance catapulted out of the Dark Ages and Western Modernism gradually developed and came to the fore, the Golden Age picture of the human past was gradually replaced with quite another.

Western Culture, unsure of itself, has a long habit of building itself up by tearing others down, debunking all other belief systems. The Golden Age was replaced by a concept of the past as a time when life was, in the

words of Thomas Hobbes in 1651, “nasty, brutish and short.” By the mid-1700s, Samuel Johnson spoke for Modernism when he said, “Human life is everywhere a misery to be endured.” By the late 1800s, earlier cultures came to be seen as peopled by coarser kinds of human, mirrors of the skeletal remains found at Neanderthal, Germany. They were bestial, superstitious, and ignorant.

Now, in our sophisticated time, we pretend, at least on television, that humanity has never had it so good. The Golden Age is here, now. Do not try to count the murdered humans of this century. Do not count the starving children. The promise of abundance, and Heaven on Earth has been realized, and at a profit! Earth herself might be considerably surprised to hear about that, with her fertile soils destroyed, her species dying off fast, and her forests—the creators of our very breath—being cut and burned pell–mell.

What we have forgotten should be the central fact of our lives, and was for the first million years or so. Here is a poem written by 7-year-old Tom Johnson:

CIRCLES

My blood makes a
circle
through my heart.

Earth makes a circle.
We, of Earth, are one
part.

What Tom knows intuitively, what children are still allowed to briefly

know, is what the culture as a whole has forgotten. We already do belong; we just forgot. In our incredible arrogance and hubris, we just plain forgot.

We started forgetting a long time back, probably about the time we started thinking we could own land, and manipulate animals to be whatever we wanted. We started forgetting when we started telling ourselves stories about Gods granting us dominion over Earth. We forgot much when we dreamed that we stood at the center of the circle, and that everything revolved around us. This was only a few thousand years ago, a catch-breath in our species' existence, in the Neolithic Age.

We do belong: We are “of Earth,” in direct and intimate ways. Every atom of our flesh has been taken up from Earth, first by our mothers when we swam in Old Ocean Womb, then by our selves. We are, materially and literally, as Tommy's poem says, one part of Earth. A part within the circle Earth makes.

We do belong: The carbon atoms that are part of our bone and blood were, until quite recently, part of the bodies of living plants. Life shares.

We do belong: Earth has her own versions of immortality; we each consist of physical materials that have been alive before countless times until we ate and drank and breathed them in and once again caught them up in the dance of life. We will each, in our turn, lay them down. That is recycling. We have always belonged.

There was indeed a kind of golden age in our species' past, a collective memory surfacing now in our yearning, an age peopled not with Demigods, but with the ordinary glorious offspring of Earth. Our past

surely includes a time when we had the spiritual comfort of knowing we belonged; a time when we recognized our kinship with Earth's other beings; a time when we lived in more harmony with them, a time when we did not think we were the circle's center.

No, the Lion never lay down with the Lamb. Earth was never sentimental. But killing is for eating. We all eat, and we are all eaten.

How did we forget that we belonged? We dreamed two bizarre dreams about ourselves.

1) We dreamed first that we stood at the center of the circle, and everything, Everything, revolved around us. We dreamed we were the most important thing in the circle.

2) Then, later on, we dreamed we were not part of Earth at all; that human well-being was not connected to Earth's. We decided that we, in the name of Power and Progress, had stepped outside Earth's circle.

We managed to convince ourselves that we were not part of Nature, that we had moved beyond such concerns. Nature is the circle we lived within for a million years. But now, we told ourselves, we are apart, separate, we have lifted ourselves out of all that. Now we could step outside the circle.

3) So we told ourselves another dream—lie about Earth—that Earth was two things: People and Resources, and people could and should do anything they want to do with Resources, because they had the power. Every green thing, every animal breathing on Earth, existed at and for our pleasure, and the water and its creatures, and the air and its creatures, and so on.

In the past two or three centuries, People grew to love this dream-story more and more, and stopped telling each other the old stories. This sad lie we told ourselves (and still do) is like an adolescent child's attempt to reject its family, to deny kinship, an attempt to leave home by denying it.

Earth is our home, and we can't deny her any longer. It is time to remember, time to fill the hole in our hearts. It is time to remember that we are round, that we really do all have the same religion and the same mother. We are within the circle we pretended we had stepped outside of. We are not the center. Earth is. We are whole. We are Home.

Some Sources for *The Great Yearning*

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