

Partnering with the Earth to Heal the Wounds of an Abusive Relationship

—Margaret Swedish

“Disruption of the biological integrity of the planet is the indictment that must be brought against the extractive economy. Only a restoration of the biological integrity of the planet with its various bioregions can assure the integral survival of Earth into the Future.”

~ Thomas Berry in *The Great Work*

Let's just start by admitting that there is nothing easy about living in times like these. Humans face a crisis that not long ago would have been unimaginable. So badly have we treated this planet that we are on the brink of destroying the very life-giving systems that gave birth to us and that we need in order to survive.

Read that again. Take it in. It's where we are in the course of our human journey right now. How did we get here? How do we get out of the mess we have made?

We actually know a lot about how we got here; it was by way of what Berry calls “the extractive economy” (chapter 12 in *The Great Work*) and Joanna Macy terms “the industrial growth economy.” The two together describe the path: industrial growth that insists on more and more, faster and faster and that extracts from the Earth what's deemed necessary to feed the ever-accelerating growth: growth in population, growth in consumers, growth in demand needing growth in supply, each feeding on the other, until economic/industrial/technological growth itself becomes the main driver of the human condition on the planet.



Photo by Bill Fleming

“This planet...is a sphere, a living system that has encircled around itself an atmosphere and biosphere containing the ingredients for the evolution of life. A sphere is not linear and does not have infinite capacity.”

This planet Gaia, this web of connections and interrelations across space and time, is **a sphere**, a living system that has encircled around itself an atmosphere and biosphere containing the ingredients for the evolution of life. A

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EDITOR'S LETTER

You may have heard in news reports over the last several months that Pope Francis will publish an encyclical on climate change later this year. We know already that the Pope stands squarely on the side of science as it calls out human activity as a central cause of Earth's warming temperatures. We at *SpiritEarth*, in solidarity with the Pope and all who speak and act on behalf of our suffering planet, will focus our 2015 issues around reverence and care for creation.

In our spring issue we offer two pieces from Catholic communities of women religious as they wake up the world to our oneness with each other and all creation. Thanks to the Catholic Sisters for a Healthy Earth who share a link to their "Earth As Our Home" reflection booklet as well as an Earth Day prayer service. Our piece from the Congregation of St. Joseph highlights that community's creativity and innovation in the area of sustainability. Thanks, also, to Margaret Swedish for her passionate piece and to Susan Lucci for her sharing on the glory of trees.

We plan this fall to offer some thoughts on the forthcoming papal encyclical.

Barbara Foreman
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SpiritEarth is a publication that expands and advances The Well Spirituality Center's mission as a regional center for telling and engaging our Sacred Universe Story and fostering the evolving role of humankind in this great drama.

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I Love Trees

—Susan Lucci



Photo by Bill Fleming

“When I am among the trees...” I recite on my daily walk through Lindberg Park, in Oak Park. So begins Mary Oliver’s poem that I hold so dear I memorized it last year. It is forever “written on my bones” per the advice of Kim Rosen (*Saved by a Poem: The Transformative Power of Words*). Oak Park, Illinois, is home to 18,000 trees and is well on its way to being granted arboretum status—only the second municipal arboretum in the U.S. I have always lived among and loved trees!

My love of trees began when I built my first tree house in the summer of 1975. It was the perfect eagle-eye escape, towering over our three-acre back yard, in Cincinnati, Ohio. When I wasn’t cutting grass, pulling weeds, or milking goats, I retreated to that sky-high tree house, especially if the ground-based secret hiding space nature provided us beneath the trio of blue spruces was taken by my siblings. The best apples came from the towering apple tree by the barn, which could be reached only by riding on the back of my horse. The summer the horses moved on to larger pastures, we planted dozens of cherry, apple, and plum trees. Nearly every scene from my childhood includes trees.

It will come as no surprise then that my favorite childhood book is *The Giving Tree* by Shel Silverstein. One day, I, too, went away to the city—just like the boy in the story who grows too big to climb and play. I moved to New England to study and make my way in the world, where I spent far more time with man-made tree products (books and papers) than among the trees. When my husband and I moved to Chicago, we had one requirement: to live in a town with lots of old trees! Oak Park was a perfect fit! We spent weekends digging lots of deep holes to plant dozens of trees, raising our family among the trees.

I fell in love with trees even more deeply a few years ago when an undiagnosable illness zapped nearly 100% of my energy for 100 days. For days on end, I sat and watched every single leaf fall from the hundred-year-old sugar maple in my back yard. When literally nothing else gave me respite or renewal, the trees did; “Just a quiet place to sit and rest” (*The Giving Tree*). They breathed me back to life. One day as I sat up against an oak tree, an old man walking his dog surprised me by asking, “Are you OK?”

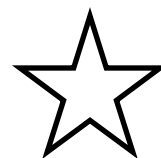
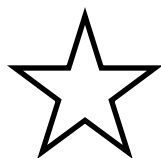
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Upon reflection, I wondered why I looked stranger than he did, as he stooped over—plastic bag in hand—to remove dog poop. “Tree hugger,” he muttered. I smiled, and hugged tighter. Nature was an awesome healing grace in my life at that time.

Mary Oliver’s poem came to mind in a favorite recent moment “among the trees” as I sat surrounded by the coastal redwoods at Muir Woods in San Francisco while my trio of teens hiked onward. The largest species in the world called to me, “Stay awhile!” and “the light (that flowed) from their branches” was invigorating! Trees frequently remind me that I “have come into the world to do this: to go easy, to be filled with light, and to shine.”

I am inspired by the work of Wangari Maathai, who sparked the Green Belt Movement, which has planted more than 50 million trees! And so, my activist heart aches to plant trees, to share my love of trees with youth so they will plant more trees, to protect the trees we have among us, and to shine, shine, shine!

Susan Lucci is mother to three teens, a community activist and a passionate facilitator of deep dialogue in her Centering Circles (www.2big4words.org). She loves activating locally in the Oak Park/River Forest, IL, area with Green Community Connections, especially facilitating discussions for their One Earth Film Festival (<http://www.greencommunityconnections.org/one-earth-film-fest/>) and ProAction Cafes, bringing together local activists in the sustainability movement (<http://www.greencommunityconnections.org/green-proaction-cafe-tuesday-february-10/>). She has also sparked and spearheaded community service-learning programs that engage students in environmental and social activism.



Women Religious Waking Up The World

Congregation of St. Joseph: Leaders and Innovators in Sustainability

The Congregation of St. Joseph has made a commitment to strengthen, heal, and renew Earth. This has led them into a process of right-sizing their buildings in order to reduce their carbon footprint while, at the same time, addressing the needs of their local geographic areas.

Their planning involves two LEED-certified housing and ministry centers and two other such centers built to LEED specifications. Included in their planning are three solar fields.

They have been working with architects from the Netherlands, who know how to manage flood waters,

for their property in New Orleans, which had been devastated by Katrina. Together with a gifted architect, the sisters have developed a water garden design complete with playing field as well as a field house for use in ecological education on their property. In a storm this design will retain and manage flood waters until the levees can handle the excess water. When completed, their land will provide protection from flood waters for thousands of acres around their property. Thus, these sisters are providing a model for other urban properties in New Orleans as well as the Northeastern U.S. that suffer the effects of hurricanes.

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Catholic Sisters Release “Earth As Our Home” Resources

Catholic Sisters for a Healthy Earth (CSHE) is made up of representatives from congregations of women religious from the upper Mississippi Valley in eastern Iowa and southwestern Wisconsin. The group recently released the well-received “Earth as Our Home” reflection booklet, and in time for Earth Day 2015, has released a prayer service to be used in connection with the booklet.

The “Earth as Our Home” booklet takes a look at the various rooms of a house, placing each room and its activities into the broader context of our Earth-home. The booklet and prayer service are available as a free download at <http://www.clintonfranciscans.com/earth.html>. More information, as well as copies of the booklet, can be obtained from Laura Anderson, Sisters of St. Francis, 563-242-7611, office@clintonfranciscans.com.

“The booklet invites us to step back and take a look at how the choices we make impact our Earth,” said Carol Marie Baum, who became a founding member of CSHE in 2010 after spending a three-month sabbatical at the White Violet Center for Eco-Justice, Saint Mary-of-the-Woods, IN.

The prayer service was created to meet the needs of several faith-based organiza-

tions that had expressed interest in supplemental resources for the booklet. The service includes suggested adaptations designed for the unique needs of various groups: communities and families alike. It can be used as a physical pilgrimage—moving from room to room of a home—as well as a guided meditation, either alone or in a group.

“After a journey, how many of us say, ‘It is so good to be home!’? What if we could say that every day?” reflects Michelle Balek, author of the prayer service. “And not only

about returning to the building we inhabit and the relationships there, but the entire environment, the entire Earth Community in which we move every day. It IS good to be here in this home we call Earth.”

The congregations with representatives include: Congregation of the Humility of Mary, Davenport, IA; School Sisters of Notre Dame, Central Pacific Province, St. Louis, MO; Sinsinawa Dominican Sisters, Sinsinawa, WI; Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Dubuque, IA; Sisters of

St. Francis, Clinton, IA; Sisters of St. Francis, Dubuque, IA, and the Sisters of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Dubuque, IA. Each congregation contributed seed money to help with initial projects, according to Baum. The mission of the group states: “Respecting the interdependence of creation, we will promote eco-literacy and influence a just relationship with the environment.”



sphere is not linear and does not have infinite capacity. Earth created life out of a mix of millions upon millions of interconnections from which we emerged. On this sphere we invented a human economy based on linear thinking—a belief that we can go on and on in one direction only without regard for the limits of the Earth’s magnificent web of life. We have become mesmerized by our own cleverness as we manipulate energies and “resources” and to harness the planet’s material substance in evermore ingenious ways in order to create the world we have today.



Photo by Bill Fleming

In the space of a couple of days in late February, as I was trolling the news for the latest occurrences on the planet that should give us all pause, I came upon these stories:

- ◆ from an article by Jon Queally in *Common Dreams*, Lester Brown, who is about to retire from the Earth Policy Institute, reports on the mega-dust bowls developing over northern African and China, dust bowls that are making ours of the 1930s pale by comparison. These mega-dust bowls are expanding deserts by millions of acres every year;
- ◆ a study reported on by James Gerken in the *Huff Post Green* revealing that sea levels along the northeast coast of the U.S. have risen by nearly 4 inches in just the past two years;
- ◆ National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s announcement that January 2015 was the second warmest January on record.

These stories follow on recent announcements:

- ⇒ that 2014 was the warmest year on record globally;
- ⇒ that in January the Bay Area of California did not receive one drop of precipitation (which had never before happened in recorded history);
- ⇒ that Alaska, Siberia, and the northern polar region are warming faster than any other part of the world;
- ⇒ that we are fishing out the oceans;
- ⇒ and that we are facing critical shortages of water this century, and yet we still drink soda and pour billions upon billions of gallons of water laced with toxins deep into the fractures created by the fracking industry, thereby removing that water from the hydrological cycle forever.

And so it goes, as profits are made, as ingenious consumer gadgets are invented, as more forests are felled for beef, as more people travel all around the world...

From the *Washington Post*, Jan. 22: "Last year, we learned what is probably the worst global warming news yet—that we may have irrevocably destabilized the massive ice sheet of West Antarctica, which contains the equivalent of nearly 11 feet of sea level rise. The rate of West Antarctic ice loss has been ominously increasing, and there are fears that if too much goes, the slow and long-term process of ice sheet disintegration could accelerate." The headline for this article lays out the very uncomfortable moral challenge for us: *The U.S. has caused more global warming than any other country.*

We are in a profoundly abusive relationship with our planet, with the eco-communities that have held us in deep biological intimacy over the hundreds of thousands of years of our evolution. What early cultures (and some still remaining) saw as a reality steeped in mystery and the sacred, Western economic culture has seen as dead matter to be put to use for human gain and pleasure, as if we are some separate being outside and above nature and therefore not subject to its limits and dynamisms, subject to how nature actually works.

Now we are discovering just how false our relationship with nature has been. And we are seeing the results of our delusion in the unfolding ecological crisis. That crisis reveals to us that our way of being in relationship with Earth must change—immediately, urgently, with a sense of mission and fierce focus because of what is at stake.

It's time for some serious healing of our relationship with Earth. What evolutionary biology has taught us is that everything exists in interconnection with everything else. It's those connections that matter, that keep life alive and the planet teeming with abundance. It's what makes it possible for evolution to continue. If those connections are sick, frayed, broken, so are we. We are as healthy as those connections.

And that's how it is that everything we do, every action we take or do not take, every choice we make, matters. That's how it is that life in our time has become profoundly, deeply meaningful. Never has what we do or don't do borne such significance. The responsibility we bear can make us feel overwhelmed, scared, depressed, even paralyzed. Or we can take up the challenge, knowing this as the most exhilarating adventure in the history of the human.

Outside Middleton, Wisconsin, a group of ecumenical Benedictine women has rebuilt their monastery with a LEEDs-awarded building covered in solar panels, windows open to the light of the world. The impression is that of being embedded in nature. All around them they have restored or are in the process of restoring what was once native prairie. The loving relationship these women have with that prairieland where they have lived for generations is palpable and deeply moving. They have responded to the need for healing by entering into a partnership with the Earth in their immediate community.

In western Pennsylvania, the Sisters of the Humility of Mary now find the land on which they have lived for more than 150 years, land that holds an organic farm, cows, woods, precious wetlands and various ministries, surrounded—and threatened—by fracking wells. They have a land ethic based on sustainability principles, which provided the basis for their refusal to allow well pads, pipelines, or roads on their property, despite pressure from the fracking company. They are engaged in learning, in advocacy, in town hall meetings, in conversations with their surrounding neighbors—all because of a deep relationship with the land, with the gifts of the Earth that have been part of their religious identity since arriving there in the 1800s.

This is the work now, the work of healing and of prophetic witness, a work of the spirit and of social and ecological justice.

It is time to enter once again into deep relationship with our biological communities, to understand what is happening to them, to identify the threats and the damage, and to partner with the Earth in the journey of healing. We do this with our hands and our voices. We work in defense of our places. We vow to live in balance with the life around us. We commit to the deep life changes that bring us back to Gaia, to the Sacred, to the Source of Life itself, to our true identities, to what it means to BE on this precious planet Earth.

We don't do this to save ourselves; we do this out of gratitude and love.

Margaret Swedish
Center for New Creation
www.ecologicalhope.org



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for creation
is an instruction
of God...”*

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Pope Francis