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JUST CITIES

THE CITY IS A JANUS-FACED ENIGMA, at least in the Western political tradition. According to the book of Genesis (4:17), the first city was established by Cain, and all cities partake of the problematical character of this original founder. Archeologists agree that the appearance of cities marked a fundamental transition in the history of human culture as a sedentary society of agriculture came to dominate over the more nomadic existence of hunting and gathering and pastoral husbandry. In historical time, the city has taken on two fundamental, coexisting identities. It is a space of market transactions and the birthplace of individualistic self-identity. It is also the birthplace of politics in the West—in particular the fifth century BCE Greek city-state—which offered a setting of political community, democratic citizenship, and civic virtue. Again, the ancient legacy endures: the city remains democracy’s only and best hope for renewal and its worst enemy, its moral antithesis. Hadley Arkes captures these two faces of the city in a striking way in his book *The Philosopher and the City*:

All about us today urban life is celebrated, but largely for the wrong reasons. When the city is valued, it is valued as the theater of diversity, the center of a cosmopolitan culture, the breeding ground of freedom and tolerance. …But these virtues are the virtues of the marketplace or of the city as “hotel.” What they leave out, conspicuously, is any sense of the city as a source of obligation—not an arena for pursuing wants, a place for indulging tastes of literally any description, with no governing sense of character, but a place where people learn the lessons of propriety and self-control. …What is lost, then, in this vision of the city as a shopping center is the sense of a people joined together in a perception of common ends; who found their common life on procedures they regard, by and large, as just, and who cultivate an understanding of justice as morals in one another through the things they hold up to the community with the force of law. What is lost, in a word, is the sense of the city as a polity (p. 3).

In a similar vein I broach the question of the role of the city in the future patterns of relationship between humans and nature. Some in the environmental and conservation movements have tended to view the world of the city as the antithesis of the natural and sustainable world, a viewpoint understandable in the industrial era of the nineteenth century and not altogether without merit today. But we are living in the midst of one of the most rapid and massive migrations in human history and are headed toward a time when cities—always powerful and influential—will define the terms of experience for the vast majority of people. That may be the key to a human future of justice and responsibility—Arkes’ city as a polity, or what I shall refer to below as “the civic”—or it may bring about a destabilization of meaning (a radical break with traditions of social justice and democratic citizenship), as dire in its own way as the cognate bio-physical destabilization brought about by climate change.

From Fritz Lang’s silent classic, “Metropolis,” to contemporary analyses of the so-called OverCity and UnderCity,
the prospect of a dehumanizing urban future of elite technocratic autocracy and extreme social stratification awaits those who follow the logical implications of the city under current conditions of global capitalism and neoliberal market ideology. It is essential, then, to rethink the concept of the city, as well as to understand its emerging sociological, economic, and political possibilities. What does the city promise ecologically and morally? What are the potential structures of relationship and places or modes of cohabitation that cities can offer?

Taking the city seriously means focusing on it not only as a “space”—a physical location, a population, a cluster of buildings and streets, or a statistical construct (a Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area [SMSA])—but also as a “place”—a way of seeing, thinking, and acting, and a particular form of the human moral and political imagination. The idea of the city denotes a form of life, a state of mind, and a way of being in the world; and the actual lived experience of the city is no less imaginative than it is social and material.

As Fustel de Coulanges points out in his classic book *The Ancient City*, in both Greek and Latin the idea of the city is given two distinct meanings marked by different words. In classical Greek, the terms are *asty* and *polis*; in Latin the parallel terms are *urbs* and *civitas*. Indeed, the concept of the city in the West does offer two imaginative possibilities that are heuristically and conceptually distinct but are in reality often intertwined. These are a market society of competitors and exchangers (urbs or the urban) and a moral and political community of equality under law and active pursuit of shared purpose.

An urbs is an area of mass assembly: originally a site of religious gathering and ritual, and later a center for commercial transactions and exchange. As it lost its association with the religious or ritual center of the society, the urbs became the center of commerce and economic exchange; the urbs is where everything and everybody has its price, is for sale, is a commodity. An urbs is a market, and the forms of life there consist primarily in the pursuit of material self-interest and the gratification of desire. In the early modern period the urbs also became a new and virtually unprecedented space of individuation, privacy, and anonymity; the city as urbs is the dwelling place of strangers; cooperative strangers, to be sure, but strangers nonetheless. The city generically is also the theater for the invention and reinvention of the self. In the urbs one’s persona is negotiated through instrumental relationships or transactions with others who are engaged in equally calculating strategies of selfhood.

By contrast, the notion of civitas or polis (“city state”) and politeia (“constitution” or “political form”) grows out of the political theory of the ancient Greek oligarchies and democracies and the classical Roman republic. In the civitas the persona is shaped by a mutuality of common good and civic virtue. Private individuals reinvent themselves—at least periodically and for important occasions—as public citizens. If the urbs is a market of entrepreneurial and strategic endeavor, civitas connotes a political and legal community created for the purpose of pursuing the common good. This civic notion of the good is not necessarily essentialist, as in natural law theories, nor
equivalent to the notion of aggregate net benefit, as in utilitarianism and modern economic theory. Properly understood today, the civic good is a developmental conception—it is not given by a unchanging core of traits or dispositions, but rather is an active life of diverse and resilient flourishing lived in an environment that permits the realization of multi-faceted capabilities and “functionings” or activities. The civic is a structure of citizenship ordered by reciprocity, equity, and just and proportionate laws. It is not content merely to protect the security and person of its citizens (important as those negative rights are) but also seeks to extend positive rights of equal voice, mutual assistance, and a setting conducive to the realization of a broad range of capabilities and a reasonably open future.

The distinction between the civic and the urban provides a vocabulary for comprehending the ethical and practical difference between commonality and cooperation—that is to say, the difference between a genuine mutuality of, and commitment to, common rules and restraints and a strategically self-interested acceptance of rules and restraints, sometimes called “enlightened self-interest” or “self-interest, rightly understood.” Commonality is a shared self-governance that has intrinsic meaning and value to its participants because it is rooted in an appreciation of underlying interdependency. Cooperation, as I am using it here, is a self-governance that has instrumental meaning and value to its participants, which is always calculated and provisional because it is rooted in an aspiration of individual interest and control.

What we might call a just ecological city will revitalize the sense of civic place and return us to founding roots of the city, which are communal in ways that embrace diversity, mobility, and self-discovery, and just in ways that empower parity of participation and voice. In his book *All Over the Map*, urban designer Michael Sorkin argues that we need to invent a new kind of city:

one that builds on thousands of years of thinking about and making good cities,

one that recognizes a radically reconfigured urban situation as its inescapable site, one that takes the survival and happiness of the species as its predicates, one that finds and defends numerous routes to meaningful difference, and one that advances the project of freedom. There is intense need for research and speculation into what the forms and agencies of these cities might be (p. 375).

That needed research is philosophical as well as architectural and sociological. Theories of community and justice do not always embrace these aspects of the city as civitas. Community can press the values of stability and conformity rather than dynamism and experiments in living. Justice can emphasize a rational distributional pattern and paternalistic planning from the top down rather than the praxis of democratic discourse and participation. But through community that is alive and justice that is a practice, the contemporary city provides a ground for a dynamic, differentiated, and democratic political and moral sensibility. Can this be precisely the sensibility we need in order to motivate a new kind of human relationship to the natural world?
It is essential not to let this opportunity for ethical and political reconstruction in the city as civitas slip by. Why? Because the strategic pursuit of competitive interests in the urban marketplace has corroded community, and the rational persons who are supposed to design and run institutions governed by principles of impartiality, merit, and fairness are nowhere to be found among the leadership elites of nations and international affairs today. New senses of community and interdependence can emerge from a recognition of our dire ecological and planetary situation, and new forms of just democracy can emerge in the context of cities (even very large ones) more readily than in the context of the nation state. These fundamental possibilities are explored by thinkers such as Susan Fainstein in *The Just City* and Benjamin Barber in *If Mayors Ruled the World*. For Barber cities are well positioned to articulate global community with local participation—to be “glocal,” as he puts it. Finally, the city as civitas may prove to be a place equal to the task of transforming justice and democracy still further into an ecological democracy that respects the integrity and resilience of nature and that respects and preserves, as matters of solidarity, justice, and right, the capabilities of future generations of human beings.

As I read them, the essays in this issue of *Minding Nature* are looking for a new consciousness and will to curb humankind’s destructive economic and ecological behavior in a city of civic commonality rather than in a city of urban self-interested cooperation. Heaven knows, there are powerful reasons of enlightened self-interest that by their own logic should lead to the steps required to limit the damage we are doing to the climate system and the other fundamental planetary systems of life (biodiversity, nitrogen load, fresh water, and so on). And yet look at what is happening and what seems likely to happen. Consider, for instance, a recent report from an interdisciplinary team of leading scientists providing evidence that further delay in drastically reducing atmospheric carbon (through both reducing emissions and enhancing natural sinks) will have long-term lag effects that are much more severe than previously recognized.

Hence, self-interest rightly understood is not cutting it. Apparently, the reasons of enlightened self-interest are weaker than the logic of competitive advantage in market economics and market politics, and our institutions of governance are so constructed that they are overwhelmed by more short-term, short-sighted forces. As dangerous as flirting with Ecotopia may be, embracing the ideal of the city as a civic commons and enacting shared rules and restraints based on an understanding of the good of human and natural flourishing may be the only way out. The good news is that we don’t have to make this stuff up as we go along. These alternative understandings have been available for centuries, and the history of their interpretation and philosophical refinement is there to guide us. The city as a place of civic democracy—a place beyond the market society—is very old, but that antiquity can also be its novelty, its vitality, its future relevance.

No one should underestimate the stakes or the difficulty of the conceptual and the practical work—the moral and the political work—ahead. In his important book on climate change *A Perfect Moral Storm*, Stephen Gardiner outlines...
three significant challenges that the city of the future will have to meet if it is to be the institutional venue to overcome the monumental ethical failure of our time.

First, can we achieve global justice? It is those of us in the developed parts of the world, (North America, Europe, and now India and China) who have brought about—and are now bringing about—the carbon emissions leading to destabilizing global warming, while those in the less developed areas are going to bear the brunt of the dislocations. The distribution of these benefits and burdens is clearly unjust, and this injustice piles on top of the long-standing injustice of the distribution of global wealth and income and of health and welfare. The old paradigm of development economics—growth through the dissemination of carbon intensive energy use and technology—won’t work. That rising tide will swamp all boats. Can we find a way to share wealth and power more equitably in a world of lower growth?

Second, as difficult as the challenge of practically meeting the requirements of contemporaneous global justice may be, the problem of intergenerational justice is even more perplexing. The task of getting the rich to recognize the rights and common humanity of the poor is common to both problems of justice, but it is complicated in intergenerational justice by the issue of the moral standing of persons who only exist statistically and probabilistically, not individually and concretely. Can we find a place for those yet unborn in a new global social contract of justice and governance?

Third, can we overcome the temptations of self-deception that are reinforced by powerful reasons of interest and powerful emotions of denial? This is a challenge that goes beyond the ethical recognition of obligations and what we owe others, to an altered worldview or an ontological recognition of relationships and interdependency. This ontological recognition is what allows ethical recognition to take hold. All individuals living in a particular place at a particular time—a here and now—have a relationship of interdependency with the natural world both locally and globally currently and in the future—in other words, both here and now and there and then. The same is true for the solidarity of each individual and all other human beings—both others here and now and others there and then.

I believe that if these questions can be answered in cities, indeed if they can be answered anyplace, they will require the imagination of the civitas not the imagination of the urbs. In saying that I realize that I may be pressing this distinction too hard and too far. I have done so in order to push back against the dominant, ubiquitous discourse of our time in which voices trumpeting the urban market mentality shout while civic democratic voices whisper. Of course, actual cities are both civic and urban; civitas and urbs coexist and intertwine as they always have.

We must beware of having a market without a polis, but we don’t need to go to the other extreme of having a polis without a market at all. Integration and synthesis, proper proportion and balance between the aspirations of competitive self-interest and communal solidarity—entrepreneurialism and citizenship—are what is needed. In a variety of ways and in interestingly different registers, the essays in this issue of *Minding Nature* each explore such a synthetic vision.
What can save us? Just cities.

In his essay Benjamin Barber considers the potential for timely and effective ecological governance that is arising out of global networks of major cities today. Recognizing that their geography and ecological circumstances make them particularly vulnerable to the disruptions of climate change and sea-level rise, the leaders of many cities began to interact several years ago in the face of the inability of the international climate governance process to make headway and the failure of major nation-states to curb their carbon emissions. Detailing many intercity organizations and city-based initiatives around the world, Barber sees in them not only a new tool for taking effective climate action but also a revitalization of democratic governance within sovereign states and across state boundaries. He closes with suggestions about how to develop this innovative kind of global governance so as to break out of the impasse of international politics into a pragmatic and problem solving-kind of politics for which the city is a well-suited form.

Julian Agyeman’s essay turns to questions of design and planning and the lived experience of the global city. While Barber stresses democratic participation, Agyeman focuses on the condition that he calls “difference,” a term that he prefers to “diversity.” The city is an open environment for difference and otherness, offering “a complex, dynamic, and embodied set of realities in which people re/create identities, meanings, and values.” He sees a connection between this intercultural social reality of the city and conservation and ecological management practices. Traditional practices in conservation and environment restoration have been trying to reduce ecological differences in favor of a more static normative notion of a healthy ecosystem—for example, by removing non-native species. Ecological thinking today is questioning many of these past assumptions and Agyeman looks forward to a time of exploration and discovery not only in the social/cultural experience of the city environment and also in our understanding of nature within it.

Julianne Lutz Warren’s evocative essay focuses on the ontological, indeed cosmological, fallacy of a human-centered understanding of our own conditions of existence and the dis-valuation of other forms of life. In that context, she appraises the phenomenon of urban ecology and cities as human habitations. She sees like Barber many problems but also promise, and like Agyeman a richness and dynamism of texture and experience. A promise of cities is that they may reflect the choice of life over money; efficiently metabolize energy, and choose mutual health over unequal wealth.

Two reflections in this issue by Patricia Tull and Gavin Van Horn cover different points on the broad spectrum of cultural and natural meaning.

An underlying theme of all our work is changing human behavior toward the natural world to make it more sustainable and responsible, more appreciative and joyful. Changing behavior requires changing motivation, and changing motivation requires new forms of sensibility and imagination—as well as new reasons and arguments—that individuals derive from their sources of cultural meaning and value. The reflection by Patricia Tull follows that lead in recognizing
the Bible as a significant source of meaning and inspiration for large numbers of people in the world today, including those devout Christians who take the teachings of scripture very seriously. Accordingly, it is important to comprehend the richness of the understanding of nature that is contained in the Bible. Tull shows that humankind’s place in the creation has been misunderstood as, for example, in passages that refer to man’s dominion or rule over nature. Tull argues that the proper interpretation here is that mankind has an obligation that is generative, not exploitative or human-centered.

Adding to the brief discussion of restoration ecology in Agyeman’s essay, Gavin Van Horn writes about the various dimensions of what William Jordan and George Lubick in their book Making Nature Whole, call “ecocentric restoration.” The perspective here is that restoration work—and it is hard work resulting in aching muscles and an expanded imagination at the end of the day—has several dimensions. It is a form of play or performance that brings the human into special contact with the natural, reminding us of the otherness of nature and of our own profound effects on it. It is also a kind of tribute that reminds us to have respect and to be humble. It is a controlling activity that leads us to see beyond purpose of control to a broader, deeper sense of purpose. Van Horn asks why it is worthwhile to restore an ecosystem. His eloquent answer is: “because it implicates us as participants, partners, and co-creators in the well-being of living systems, prompting questions about our role in the destruction or alteration of parts or all of a landscape and directly engaging us in more-than-human worlds.”

The Last Word comes from Kate Cummings. She engages us with a meditation on love and death, words and unmediated experience. It should be read, not summarized.
In an ideal world, democratic regimes pressured by informed (and alarmed!) citizens would presumably move aggressively to address global warming. After all, protecting the future of the planet with vigorous policies, curbing carbon emissions, and incentivizing alternative (renewable) energy would (and should) come naturally to conscientious nations responding to energized citizens. Democratic deliberation is designed precisely to help selfish individuals reformulate their interests in the language of the communities to which they belong—to move from “me thinking” to “we thinking.” Deliberation substitutes for the short-term horizons associated with present-minded special interest thinking the long-term horizons associated with future-minded thinking. At its best, democracy allows private opinion to be shaped by shared civic belief and the discipline of inter-subjective (“scientific”) knowledge. Applied to climate change, the deliberative process should produce successful and sustainable environmental policies.

It is pretty obvious, however, that we do not live in an ideal world. In the real world of corrupted, minimalist government dominated by money and special interests in which we currently dwell, democracy is hardly at its best. Under the sway of market fundamentalism, we actually instruct citizens to eschew deliberation: to think of their task as expressing impulsive private preferences, encouraging them to regard the public good as little more than an aggregation of those preferences. We allow them to confound opinion and knowledge to the detriment of judgment. Sometimes we even seem to think that by denying expert science we honor “democratic” thinking—as if shared ignorance and democracy are the same thing.

In this corrupted version of democracy, “now” trumps “later,” today takes precedence over tomorrow, and no one recognizes that more expansive democratic social contract about which Edmund Burke spoke: the democratic contract that encompasses not only the interests of the living, but the interests of those who are gone and those as yet unborn. This kind of inter-generational thinking can only be cultivated in a setting of prudent deliberation; contrarily, our short-term present-mindedness shrinks the temporal zone and privileges narcissism.

Consequently, our democracy—under siege from corporate capital and beholden more to the private sector than to public goods—tends to augment rather than to mitigate the crisis in sustainability. The word sustainability should push citizens out of the “now” temporal zone and allow them to temper today’s needs by considering tomorrow’s responsibilities. But when citizens fail as deliberative judges of their own long-term interests, it suggests that a benevolent tyrant with an understanding of climate science is more likely to address climate change effectively than so-called citizens; that is to say, that the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist government is more likely to
act responsibly than the U.S. Congress. How can advocates of democratic governance respond to so perverse a conclusion? Do we give up on democracy? Or on sustainability?

Neither. What we must do is to challenge the notion that it is democracy that is culpable. The lassitude of nations in the face of the climate crisis—demonstrated once again in the failure to slow the pace of warming of the four rounds of meetings since Copenhagen (COP 15), the most recent in Warsaw (COP 19)—is in truth a result of a democratic deficit. For when states are held captive by money—business and banking interests, as well as a wholly corporate-owned media that, far from informing the public, participates in misleading it—it is not democracy but the failure of democracy that is to blame. In the United States, the Supreme Court has been complicit in democracy’s corruption. Its stunning decisions not only recently in Citizens United (which treated corporations as persons with free speech rights) but in Buckley v. Valeo in the 1970s (which treated money as speech) have given the corruption of democracy by money constitutional legitimacy. Meanwhile, faux “charitable” lobbies such as ALEC (the American Legislative Exchange Council, a tax deductible “charity” to which taxpayers unwittingly contribute) give private corporate power a public voice in thwarting sustainable policies by buying off lawmakers, often dictating to them the precise language of prospective legislation that serves their special interests.

Yet even were democracy less compromised than it is today, even were it more an argument against than the rationalization for plutocracy it has become, democracy would remain trapped inside the box of national sovereignty. Hence the dilemma: bordered and blinkered independent states confronting borderless, interdependent problems. Every challenge we face today crosses borders. Climate change; terrorism; economic markets in labor, commodities, and capital; health pandemics; crime; drugs; weapons of mass destruction; and technology are all global in their causes and consequences. No Chicago warming, only global warming; no Brooklyn flu, but Mexican pig virus and Hong Kong flu; no state-based war, but malevolent NGOs like Al Qaeda and civil wars that know no patriotism.

We confront this planet of brutally interdependent challenges with antiquated nation-states, wrapped up in their sovereignty and independence and incapable of meeting the new perils. We have HIV without borders, war without borders, immigration without borders, a digital web without borders, but we do not have citizens without borders or democracy without borders. On this devastating asymmetry between problems and responses rests the future of our planet. Unless we find ways to globalize democracy or to democratize globalization, humankind will be at ever-greater peril.

I want to suggest that we can find an answer to this perplexing dilemma, and thus to our inability to address climate change effectively through democracy, by changing the subject from states to cities; from prime ministers and presidents to mayors. For our most ancient and enduring political bodies—our towns and cities—offer an attractive alternative to dysfunctional nations. Let interdependent cities do globally what independent nations no longer can do: let mayors and their neighbors, the citizens of the world’s cities, address climate, regulate carbon, and in this way, guarantee sustainability through cooperative action.

There are good reasons why cities can effect changes nations cannot. We have always been what Edward Glaeser calls “an urban species.” Today more than one-half of the world’s population is comprised by urban dwellers; in the developed world, more than three-quarters. China is growing new cities of more than a million at a dizzying rate, while global megacities in Africa and Latin America are making New York and London look positively modest. Moreover, nearly 80 percent of GDP as well as 80 percent of greenhouse gases are generated in cities. Cities create much of the problem, and cities can contribute significantly to the solution if they can maintain access to their resources and act with some autonomy in the face of the obstructive national government to which they are constitutionally subsidiary.

The city in fact stands at the beginning of our history. Human civilization was born in cities, and democracy was first nurtured in the polis. Cities are the most enduring of political bodies. Rome is much older than Italy, Istanbul older than Turkey, Boston older than the United States, Damascus older than Syria. Cities are where we are born, grow up, go to school, marry, and have children; where we work, play, pray, grow old, and die. They define our essential communitarian habitat in a way that nations cannot.

Nations are too large for participation and engagement, but too small to control and contain the global centers of power; too big for community and association, but too small for the world economy. Cities are
closer to us, more human in scale, more trusted by citizens. Where less than half of Americans trust the president or the Supreme Court and less than ten percent trust the Congress they themselves elect, 70 percent or better trust their mayors and municipal councilors.

To respond effectively to climate change then, we need to restore democracy to its deliberative roots in competent citizenship; we need to liberate popular government from money and reinstate it as a domain of civic competence and citizen participation; and we need to help democracy cross borders that are more obsolete to address global problems. Enter the city. For the bottom line is we will only have environmental sustainability when we have sustainable democracy. And democracy is sustainable today above all in cities, which are local but also global — are glocal, both devolved downward to the local level of the city, and simultaneously linked through networks that encompass the global.

Cities have then an enormous potential for ecological cooperation. Indeed, they are already actively engaged in seeking sustainability within and across their borders. While nation-states are growing ever-more dysfunctional, cities are increasingly proving themselves capable of deliberative democratic action on behalf of sustainability, both one by one but also through little known but highly effective intercity associations that allow cooperating cities to do what nations have failed to do. If presidents and prime ministers cannot summon the will to work for a sustainable planet, mayors can. If citizens defined by the province and nation are spectators to their own destiny and tend to think ideologically and divisively, neighbors and citizens of towns and cities are active and engaged and tend to think publicly and cooperatively.

The devastation of extreme weather events like Hurricanes Katrina and Sandy in the United States and Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines notwithstanding, the United Nations-sponsored framework meetings aimed at nation-states never gained traction. The effort to improve and extend the Kyoto Protocol since Copenhagen in 2009 (COP 15)—right through Cancun in 2010, Durban in 2011, Doha in 2012, and Warsaw in 2013 (COP 19)—has engendered only frustration. A less familiar story, however, is the story of the mayors who also gathered at Copenhagen (at the invitation of Copenhagen’s mayor, who had formerly been Denmark’s environmental minister) as a kind of urban Rump Parliament to do informally, city to city, what nation-states had not done in their formal (and futile) proceedings. With 80 percent of carbon emissions coming from within metropolitan regions, it was clear to the mayors that cities could make a difference even when states did nothing. And with 90 percent of cities built on water—rivers, lakes, seas, and oceans—it was clear to them that if they did not act, they would likely become the first victims of climate change and ocean rise. They also knew that there were already intercity associations engaged in emission reductions; that individual cities were in a position to address climate change forcefully, with or without the help of their national politicians. Their actions converged with the activities of such intercity associations as ICLEI and the C-40. In the years since Copenhagen, mayors and their networks have had a significant impact on greenhouse gases.

Before Copenhagen and after, intercity organizations such as CityNet (the Asian city network), CIty Protocol (the Barcelona-based web network partnered by Cisco Systems) and UCLG (United Cities and Local Governments) were permitting the viral sharing of best urban practices and promoting networking and cooperation. UCLG may be the most important global political body no one has ever heard of. Although it brings together thousands of cities around the world in an annual congress and ongoing cooperative projects arising out of urban challenges, its name evokes blank stares among schoolchildren who can easily identify the Concert of Nations, the League of Nations, and the United Nations. Yet there are dozens of these associations besides UCLG: Cities for Mobility, CLAIR or the Council of Local Authorities, CityNet and Delgosea, Southeast Asian city networks, ICMA and INTA, global management and development organizations, the League of Historical Cities, Mayors for Peace, Metropolis (the world organization of major metropolises), Sister Cities International, and many others.

None, however, have had the impact of the growing handful devoted to combating climate change. Among the most important are these:

Let interdependent cities do globally what independent nations no longer can do: ... guarantee sustainability through cooperative action.
Many other networks not specifically devoted to the environment nonetheless also concern themselves with climate change—for example, EuroCities, Metropolis, United Cities and Local Governments, and the U.S. Conference of Mayors. The efficacy of the cooperation around sustainability such networks pursue reflects some simple realities. As we have noted, 80 percent of carbon emissions come from cities (corresponding to the approximately 80 percent of GDP generated by cities) and hence can be addressed in cities, whether or not their host states wish to cooperate with one another; meanwhile, nine of ten cities are built next to the very waters that, through climate warming, are likely to inundate and destroy them. Moreover, the density that is the city's greatest virtue, giving the city dweller a much smaller carbon footprint than exurban...
residents have, also makes cities the primary generators of greenhouse gases and pollution (witness Beijing!). Given such conditions, voluntary cooperation within and among cities has the potential to address a significant part of the environmental challenge, nation-state intransigence notwithstanding.

Among the active global networks listed above, the best known and most effective have been ICLEI and the C-40 Climate Leadership Group. With fifty-eight city members in 2012, the C-40 works closely with the Clinton Climate Initiative and describes itself on its website as a “network of large and engaged cities from around the world committed to implementing meaningful and sustainable climate-related actions locally that will help address climate change globally. Our global field staff works with city governments, supported by our technical experts across a range of program areas.” The C-40 was created in 2006 by London’s then-mayor Ken Livingston, and “forged a partnership in 2006 with the Cities program of President Clinton’s Climate Initiative (CCI) to reduce carbon emissions and increase energy efficiency in large cities across the world.” Its leadership since then has involved Mayor David Miller of Toronto (crazy Rob Ford’s sane predecessor) and the current chair, former Mayor Michael Bloomberg of New York (whose Bloomberg Philanthropies proffered a grant that allowed for the full integration of the CCI Cities Program). The C-40 Steering Committee—Berlin, Hong Kong, Jakarta, Johannesburg, Los Angeles, London, New York City, Sao Paulo, Seoul, and Tokyo—plays a key role in guiding and directing the collective.

The C-40 has seized the limelight, but ICLEI—the older and more established, if more modest, International Council for Local Environmental Issues (with 1,200 members across seventy countries)—has a much longer history of significant intercity cooperation. Formal city networks are not, however, the whole story. Urban-based nongovernmental organizations and concerned groups of citizens with environmental agendas also network through journals, citizens’ collectives, and “movements.” Useful online informational websites such as UNHabitat.org, UntappedCitizerns.org, Planetization.org, and the Streetblogs network abound. In the crucial domain of sustainability, a few stand out, including the Garrison Institute’s site, Grist.org, and especially Sustainable Cities Collective. In other words, city-to-city cooperation also takes place at the civil society and citizen level, on and off the web, where borrowing, imitation, and shared experimentation are as important as formal governmental networking.

To take one example, in 1997, with a push from Mayor Leoluca Orlando of Palermo, the European Union founded “The Car-Free Cities Network.” But banning cars from cities is nearly as old as cities themselves. In the early 1920s (as depicted in my book, The Death of Communal Liberty: A History of Freedom in a Swiss Mountain Canton), the Swiss canton of Graubuenden imposed a brief cantonal ban on the newfangled automobile, less to protect large cities (of which it had none) than to protect its narrow-gauge Raetian railways system, but astonishing for that era in any case. And recently, it has been citizens and civic NGOs that have taken the lead in the urban battle against the automobile, promoting pedestrian-only zones, encouraging bike-share schemes and bicycle lanes, organizing recycling campaigns, and campaigning for conversion to cleaner energy in public and private buildings, all of which hold the potential to impact sustainability profoundly.

New York City, an urban sustainability leader, was only the most recent of more than three hundred cities worldwide that have introduced bike-share programs (including more than thirty cities in France, thirty in Germany, a dozen in the United States, and at least four in China, including Shanghai and Beijing), with cities like Bogota mandating weekend bikes-only traffic on major thoroughfares (“ciclovias”). Bike-share programs are often associated with other civic issues and movements, which broadens their membership and increases their civic power. Portland, Oregon, was the first city to do this back in 1965, reflecting its status as a global green leader. In Tucson, Arizona, the bike-share campaign came out of a movement focused on the homeless and reflecting anti-war (!) sentiment; it was launched under the rubric “bikes not bombs.” For decades, China’s urban transportation depended heavily on bicycles (including those hauling one-ton flatbeds!), but today, in the new age of automobiles, cities in China have come back to bike share as a way out of urban congestion and pollution.

Individual cities have also pioneered emission reduction programs tailored to their particular urban environments that can be imitated by other cities with like circumstances. Three salient projects in Los An-
geles, New York, and Bogota have both embodied and been inspired by analogous programs in other cities. In Los Angeles, the target was the port; in New York, the aging building infrastructure; in Bogota, the car-clogged surface transportation system.

When Anton Villaraigosa was elected Mayor of Los Angeles in 2005, he moved to address carbon emissions, as both the state of California and many California cities were doing. Although the freeways might have seemed the most likely target for action, it turned out that the port—America’s largest—was responsible for up to 40 percent of the city’s emissions. A diesel powered freighter can use fifty to sixty megawatts of power during just a few minutes of offloading cargo. After the election of Barack Obama, the mayor tried to get the support of the Obama White House to green up his city’s vast port facilities, but when it became apparent such support was beyond the capacity of the White House, Villaraigosa embarked on a local program of public/private initiatives focused on two goals: getting container ships and tankers to turn off their idling diesel engines while in port by providing titanic electric cables that would access dockside electrical sources; and upgrading the engines of the twelve thousand or so trucks coming in and out of the port each day. Over his term of office, Mayor Villaraigosa was able nearly to halve emissions from the port, resulting in city-wide reductions in greenhouse gases of almost 20 percent.

In New York City during the same period, as part of his PlaNYC program calling for congestion fees and other green measures, Mayor Bloomberg targeted the Big Apple’s energy weak spot: a residential and office building infrastructure as old as any in the nation, and one that leaked heat in the winter and air conditioning in the summer. Although the city’s high population density and low automobile use make it one of the lowest emission cities in the United States, its old building infrastructure presents serious problems for energy use. Bloomberg’s new insulation standards for new construction and mandatory retro-fitting of old stock, along with some special measures like painting the city’s ubiquitous black tar rooftops white, resulted in a significant reduction in energy wasted—perhaps 8 percent of total energy usage.

In Bogota (as in so many other Latin American cities), inefficient public transportation on roads clogged with private cars not only wasted energy but created impossibly burdensome commuting times of three hours or more each way for workers living in suburban favelas and slums trying to get to inner city jobs. Mayor or Antanus Mockus looked to new systems of surface transportation being developed around Latin America and introduced dedicated surface bus lanes, curbed on both sides to prevent other traffic from encroaching and with stops every three or four blocks only to keep buses moving and attract people. The impact on both emissions and traffic flow of this new surface rapid transit system was immediate: for roughly 5 percent the cost of building an underground system, Bogota got a rapid transit surface system that pulled people from their cars to the buses and cut commuting times by as much as two-thirds, improving the working conditions for hundreds of thousands of commuters even as it curbed carbon emissions.

These three cities had three different, city-specific approaches, each one resulting in significant energy savings and reduced carbon emissions, and all of them easy to copy and adapt to conditions in cities around the world. But diversity of conditions shaping climate change is the universal reality. In India, for example, cell phone towers are the second largest users of energy. In Europe, on the other hand, the region in Germany south of the Elbe River (that traverses Hamburg) is one of the nation’s largest industrial zones, where 29 percent of CO2 gases are generated by industry, 18 percent by the service economy, 22 percent by residential dwellings, and 29 percent by transportation. Its challenges are quite different from, say, Oslo’s, where a stunning 65 percent of emissions come from transport but where other carbon sources are much less potent. In Brussels, 55 percent of the emissions come from residential infrastructure, suggesting a situation more like New York’s. In nearby Rotterdam, however, up to 77 percent of emissions derive from petrochemical refineries.

Like Los Angeles, New York, and Bogota, then, cities everywhere must explore their own particular environmental contexts and develop appropriate approaches—though ideally in ways that can be shared by and imitated in other cities. There are a number of nearly universal green programs, including bike shares and downtown pedestrian zones, that have spread from a few cities in Latin America and Germany to cities all over the world. But most cities still must develop their own unique menu of strategies.
Take one example, the old Hansa League city of Hamburg in Germany, both a city and a Land (state) that has produced a compound approach using a number of parallel tactics.

Hamburg is a great German port city connecting the great trading cities along the North Sea as the medieval Hanseatic League once did, a city whose population is expected to rise to two million by 2030. But Hamburg has done much more than address its port issues. Recognized for its innovations as the European Union’s 2011 “Green Capital”—it was Germany’s first electric city back in 1882!—under Mayor Olaf Scholz it has today become an urban wind capital of Europe. Like London, which deploys England’s largest turbine combine in the Thames estuary (covering up to 30 percent of its energy needs), Hamburg deploys turbines both in and around Hamburg proper. (Germany derives nearly 8 percent of its energy from nearly 25,000 wind turbines, a preponderance in the windy northern Ländber around Hamburg). But the city does not rest content with wind energy. It also has a growing fleet of zero-emission (hydrogen) buses, low sulfur ships, and “compact neighborhoods” that try to create low-energy use communities with reduced carbon footprints through ecological building design, green transportation, and pedestrian zones. It supports research on storing energy, a significant problem with wind energy, which is often created at times when it cannot be used and has insufficient storage technologies to permit it to be used later.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, although it is a city defined by its port and global sea trade in material goods, Hamburg under Mayor Scholz has opted to focus on trade in non-material goods: on the knowledge economy and new technologies that enhance productivity and prosperity without burdening the environment. Mayor Scholz has been notable in trying to mediate the classic debate that pits sustainability against development, making conservation an enemy of consumerism (an argument I take up in my book Consumed). Scholz believes that avoiding consumerism and trade (as Club of Rome pessimists such as Ashlock Khosla urge us to do) is unrealistic and corrosive of not just prosperity but equality (which prosperity and productivity alone can secure). Though it is hard not to agree with Khosla that if consumerism is capitalism’s only driver, and capitalism is the engine of global growth, achieving sustainability will be difficult, it is also true that pitting development and social justice against sustainability is a losing proposition either way. On a rapidly urbanizing planet where more than three-quarters of the population in the developing world already live in cities, Scholz is understandably dubious about the more extreme versions of the argument for radical anti-growth strategies; about the dooms claim, for example, that cities are “parasites on nature” and hence “entropy accelerators,” rushing hubristic humankind towards rapid extinction.

Although he is certainly not a techno-zealot, Scholz insists that cities cannot and must not turn their backs on their own urban virtues in pursuing the reduction of emissions. The pessimism of Club of Rome skeptics like Khosla produces self-fulfilling prophecies. But when proper attention is paid to the natural creativity and innovation of the city (upon which Richard Florida has written so compellingly), the knowledge economy can produce both prosperity and sustainability, growth and social justice. By preferring incentives to penalties and developing “Umwelt” environmental partnerships with more than a thousand private companies, Mayor Scholz has pointed a sustainable way forward that does not put prosperity or justice at risk.

Hamburg has the unusual advantage of being both a city and a province (“Land”) where the mayor can control the finances and assets of both the city and the surrounding countryside. Generally speaking, cities in federal states where there is some vertical separation of powers (as in Germany, Mexico, Canada, Brazil, and the United States) enjoy more autonomy and jurisdictional independence than those caught in unitary, centralized states like France, Japan, and the United Kingdom. But either way, cities need to find ways to maximize their authority in dealing with issues the nation-states that control them won’t or can’t deal with, whether it is through combating climate change or mitigating its consequences. Many cities such as San Francisco and New York are increasingly invested in planning for, dealing with, and ameliorating the consequences of an ocean rise that looks ever-less avoidable. London built its first Thames Estuary flood barrier back in the 1970s (used nowadays five or six time a year). In New York today, engineers are looking to thwart storm surges with sea walls or to plug subway entrances with soft rubber air balloons (lower Manhattan’s subways were
flooded during Hurricane Sandy in 2012). San Francisco, with its expansive bay waters, is also focusing on mitigation strategies. Meanwhile, in Seoul a highway cutting through the city has been reconverted to the ancient canal it once was, restoring water to its proper place in the urban center.

Social justice issues, then, can and do intersect with sustainability issues. In Indian cities like Mumbai and Pakistani cities like Karachi, the informal economy offers answers to questions of both climate change and social equity. In Karachi, for example, it is estimated that 15 percent of the population of 20 million people live in informal housing (squats), and even more are employed in the informal economy. In this way, the per se appalling work children do in combing vast garbage dumps in Mumbai’s slums looking for usable, sellable, and recyclable detritus (see Katherine Boo’s book Beyond the Beautiful Forever) actually contributes meaningfully to recycling material goods and to the informal economy—that is to say, it becomes a way out of the slums. As Herbert Giradet, the co-founder of the World Future Council and the winner of the United Nations 500 Award to environmental achievement has argued, cities must find ways to “re-generate” themselves, to move (in the language of John van Tunen) from the ancient “Agropolis” to today’s “Petropolis” to a future “Ecopolis.” Hernando de Soto (in his provocative The Mystery of Capital) and other champions of exploiting and eventually formalizing the informal economy in the name of greater social equity suggest how that might be done. Such innovative urban strategies are vital, for while cities comprise less than 3.5 percent of the planet’s land mass, they make up half its population and generate more than 80 percent of its wealth, its GDP, its pollution, and its greenhouse gases. With megalcity populations of 33 million (Tokyo), 32 million (Chungking), 20 million (Seoul and Mexico City), and 18 million (Jakarta, Delhi, Sao Paulo, and Osaka), and new cities of over a million springing up like mushrooms in China, the challenge of urban growth is now. Cities such as Dekwa, in the South of Sweden, are potent models for what is possible. With a zero-emission rating today, with trees being used for biomass energy yet forests replanted as part of the same process, with a mayor who back in 1995 (a full year before the original 1996 Kyoto Protocol) called for a total ban on carbon, and with a bipartisan council since then seeking other innovative routes to sustainability like recycling ashes in nearby forests and using sludge and waste as biomehtane fuel, the town of Dekwa has piloted on a small scale what might be possible on a large scale in every city in the world.

Cities and their networks can achieve much. But we also need to recognize that much of what constitutes cross-border cooperation and informal governance grows out of voluntary actions undertaken by individual citizens and civic associations in response to common problems. The result can be innovative programs that spread virally rather than legislatively, via choice and public opinion as well as mayoral leadership rather than via legislation or collective executive fiat. This kind of soft governance is crucial in changing actual human behavior and reflects the kind of bottom-up governance likely to make our unruly world modestly ruly. Cities don’t have to wait for states to achieve a measure of security or a degree of sustainability. Civil society doesn’t have to wait for city government to take action. And citizens don’t have to wait for civil society to work together. The web stands ready, bypassing traditional forms of political association, a global network in waiting, informal for now, becoming as formal over time as we choose to make it.

If cities are a key to democratic sustainability, however, their jurisdictional authority and global reach need to be amplified. I will conclude by offering two proposals for furthering and formalizing developments that are, to be sure, already underway: first, to convene a global parliament of mayors as a keystone in the rising arch of intercity networks already in place; and second, to launch a global urban party that focuses on the politics of urban public goods, for the global good turns out to be urban goods aggregated. A global parliament of mayors, for which a planning process has already been launched, and a new political movement in the form of an urban party exploiting the global urban majority that already exists, can together comprise a palpable and viable strategy for global sustainability and social justice; for combating climate change without surrendering democracy.

The notion of a global parliament of mayors is set forth in the final chapter of If Mayors Ruled the World in considerable detail, and I will not elaborate it here. It envisions a bottom-up and opt-in institution whose success will depend on consensus from participating cities and on the shaping national interests by global public opinion. The Parliament itself—better called an
“audiament,” or place of listening!—would represent several tranches of cities, from those of just half a million to megacities with tens of millions; it would focus on sharing information and best practices, developing common strategies, and bridging the many distinct collaborative silos into which intercity efforts too often separate themselves. As what I have called the keystone in the arch of intercity networks, it would thus help make the local global. In as much as its success would depend more on public opinion than on mandatory legislation—on soft, bottom-up governance than on hard, top-down government—it would not have the look or feel of some vast new global bureaucracy, a kind of fearful “world government” patrolled by black helicopters and bent on creating some vast European Commission style regulatory agency for a supine planet. On the contrary, with a majority of cities in which the global majority live agreeing on common practices and opting into common regulations, the outcome would be a strong form of local democracy with a global face.

The good news about the GPM is that it is already an idea city mayors in the United States, Latin America, Europe, and Asia are exploring. Meetings have been held in Seoul, Korea, and New York, with mayors, as well as NGO and other civic leaders, participating. Meetings are planned for Amsterdam and London later in 2013, with a possible pilot parliament envisioned for late 2015 or 2016. The GPM is an idea with legs, and the legs belong to standing mayors hoping to walk the talk of collaboration, taking the reality of intercity cooperation to a new level. (More information can be found at InterdependenceMovement.com)

The politics of establishing a successful global parliament of mayors will obviously depend on the actions not only of mayors but of engaged urban citizens committed to sustainable global goods. This points to a second strategy, complementary to convening a GPM: establishing and developing a global urban party for universal sustainability (GUPUS) among whose objectives would be the GPM. Politics delimited by national borders remain ideological and dualistic: Tories and Conservatives, Christian Democrats and Socialists, Republicans and Democrats. Yet such party divisions reflect the political divisions of nineteenth century nation-state industrial capitalism and have little to do with today’s struggle for sustainability, global public goods, and citizens without borders inhabiting a knowledge-society planet. The old parties are inclined to the ideological reductionism and rigidity that mark too many national politicians. An urban party seeing in urban public goods a manifestation of global public goods could reorient politics: it could precipitate a pragmatic, cross-border movement whose ultimate goal would be an effective democratic framework for sustainable living.

The obsession with power and ideology has led many today to forget that politics is instrumental: a way to create the infrastructure for the non-political living that defines the values and purposes of human life and that is defined by all the things we care about, from love and art to religion and culture; from work and play to health and happiness. The politics of the city have always been more about these simple goods than about grand political principle, which is why mayors are problem solvers and pragmatists, and why you cannot “close” a city the way you can “shut down” a national government. Put another way, life is not about politics; politics is about affording life its full scope and potential, about doing what must be done to create conditions for liberty, equality, and justice, and then getting out of the way so the fruits of liberty, equality, and justice can be enjoyed. Statists think politics is the purpose; libertarians and market fundamentalists think politics has no purpose. True strong democrats grasp that self-government is what allows politics to serve us without subordinating us and hence seek a strong democratic constitution. With the help of mayors, strong democracy is what city politics does locally. With the help of global public opinion and a global urban party, it is what a global parliament of mayors can do globally. Finally, both democracy and sustainability are “glocal,” a dialectical idea in which the tensions between what is democratic and what is sustainable—the tensions that have animated this essay—can be overcome and transcended.

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FORETHOUGHT

Before I answer the question: “How is nature critical to a twenty-first century urban ethic?” I first need to ask the more fundamental question: “What is nature and how is it constructed by people in our increasingly different and diverse urban communities?” Cities of difference are places where we are “in the presence of otherness,” as Sennett puts it—namely, our increasingly different, diverse, and culturally heterogeneous urban areas. Difference is, in my opinion, a more expansive and useful concept than diversity, which has become virtually synonymous, in the United States at least, with race/ethnicity and/or gender. Sandercock points out that “Difference . . . takes many forms. It acknowledges that population groups, differentiated by criteria of age, gender, class, dis/ability, ethnicity, sexual preference, culture and religion, have different claims on the city for a full life and, in particular, on the built environment.”

In my view, culture is predicated on difference and on otherness, and is a complex, dynamic, and embodied set of realities in which people re/create identities, meanings, and values. Overlaying this is the reality of hybrid or multiple cultural and group affiliations. In this sense, no one person can be reduced to one single or fixed cultural or other form of identity, and all, as Sandercock says, “have different claims on the city” and a Right to the City, including its nature(s).

NATURE(S), SPACE/PLACE AND “THE LOCAL”

Four vignettes—which look at differing perceptions of the issues of nature(s), space/place, and “the local”—illustrate the relational, messy, and contested concept of “what is urban nature.”

First, in the early 1980s, the parks department of the city of Bristol in southwest England was persuaded by the local wildlife trust to develop wildflower meadows in city parks, which like most parks were dominated by hard-wearing, close-mown, multipurpose ryegrass. The parks department obliged, applying an appropriate management regimen and, within a few seasons, had beautiful native wildflower swards replete with a rich fauna towering above the ryegrass. The wildlife trust and most of the public liked it, except for the local Asian and African Caribbean population, who refused to go near the long grass. Why was this? It was because of a residual fear of snakes in long grass. An environmentally and ecologically beneficial management regime had negative effects on the cultural diversity of the park. This dilemma is supported by Low, Taplin, and Scheld’s point that: “In this new century, we are facing a different kind of threat to public space—not one of disuse, but of patterns of design and management that exclude some people and reduce social and cultural diversity.”

There are many ways of looking at this issue. One is to say what if a member of the local wildlife trust or the park’s management team was Asian or African Ca-
ribbean? Would alarm bells have been raised? Another way is to say that there is only one venomous snake in the United Kingdom, the Adder (Vipera berus), and its venom is rarely life threatening (but this misses the point that snakes are deeply imbued with mythological traits). Another way is to say that perhaps there is no “answer”, but that someone should have thought to ask the right questions.

Second, in the mid- to late 1980s, I was working as an environmental education adviser, first in a south, then in a north London borough. While some of the schools in these boroughs wanted advice on creating “nature gardens” using native species, which they had been told by ecologists were “better” for wildlife, others wanted advice on creating what I called “multicultural” or “world” gardens in which teachers and parents were intentional in selecting plant species from the diverse countries of origin of pupils in the school. The London Borough of Southwark developed Chumleigh Multicultural Garden in Burgess Park and the London Borough of Lewisham produced a guide on plants for a multicultural garden. These gardens were in effect autotopographies: cultural and community inscriptions on the cityscape that offered a statement of presence, of recognition, that both humans and nature(s) in cities are becoming increasingly different, diverse, and cosmopolitan, and are welcome.

Third, in a challenge to the clarion call from alternative food movement (AFM) advocates to “buy and grow local,” Filipino immigrants in San Diego, California, see their food as local food. They cook it at home and eat it in local restaurants. This demonstration of “translocalism,” which is also in evidence when they cultivate their fruit and vegetable gardens in city neighborhoods, ruptures the dominant, geographic notion of “local food” and highlights the need for greater reflexivity within the AFM. Similarly, Mares and Peña use two predominantly Latino/a urban community garden projects—the now-defunct South Central Farm (SCF) in Los Angeles and Puget Sound Urban Farmers (now the Seattle Urban Farm Company)—to analyze how food and farming can connect growers to local and extra-local landscapes, creating an “autotopography” that links their life experiences to a deep sense of place. In effect, they are writing their cultural stories on the land- or cityscape. This is a type of cultural place-making through the growth and celebration of culturally appropriate foods. Mares and Peña report that:

One gardener at the SCF, a thirty year old Zapotec woman, described her involvement at the farm in the following way: “I planted this garden because it is a little space like home. I grow the same plants that I had back in my garden in Oaxaca. We can eat like we ate at home and this makes us feel like ourselves. It allows us to keep a part of who we are after coming to the United States.”

Fourth, Lanfer and Taylor write about Latino/a immigrants in Boston, Massachusetts, who transform public spaces into familiar landscapes found in their home countries. One group has adopted Herter Park on the Charles River in Boston’s Allston-Brighton neighborhood because it reminds them of the river-banks and the willow trees they left behind in Guatemala. Lanfer and Taylor quote one Guatemalan American as saying:

I think one of the reasons that that place . . . is so popular with us, Latinos, is because of the willows. Willows in Guatemala are very common. They grow beside rivers. People like Herter Park because it looks like home.

This construction of nature, typical of immigrant groups, can be characterized as nature as refuge. These vignettes are important because they problematize the dominant, often expert-imposed monolithic notion of nature, as opposed to a more negotiated and constructed notion of natures. They illustrate two ends of a continuum containing many different constructions of nature and the related concept of “the local.”

**TRADITIONAL ECOLOGY, FIXED AND NATIVE**

One construction—let’s call it “traditional ecology,” which has its roots in the Enlightenment and in Transcendentalism—sees dualism: nature as separate from humans. It offers a prescriptive, scientific/eco-
logical focus on nature as what should be there and nature as fixed/native.

This construction is typical of most of the ecological, conservation, and environmental stewardship literature and is enacted faithfully and vigorously through the ecological management plans of nature-based organizations. Indeed Zimmer reminds us that “One of the tenets of conservation management holds that alien species are ecologically harmful.” Having been involved in the 1980s in the London Wildlife Trust, where “syccie bashing” (eradication of non-native sycamore *Acer pseudoplatanus*) was a standard volunteer task that was carried out unquestioningly, and having heard of practices in Snowdonia National Park in Wales, where “rhodo-bashing” was used to manage *Rhododendron ponticum* planted by the Victorians, I began to question both the pervasiveness and wisdom of the native-alien binary, and the use of a brutal, anthropomorphic language among conservationists in their ecological management work. I then realized that this language was not simply related to eradication and removal of non-natives or alien species, but to “othering”—questioning the very presence of such species in places where someone (a.k.a., a conservationist) decided they were not meant to be.

Consider the following language from the United Kingdom: “sometimes they are disliked simply because they are ‘foreign’ and therefore out of place in native plant communities”; or, “They are . . . alien imports, plainly lacking the cultural credentials of the native broadleaf . . . like other immigrants these fir trees all look the same to the affronted native eye.” Or, more disturbingly still:

Dislike of alien species is indeed similar to racial discrimination—wanting to preserve the culture and genetic integrity of one’s own stock (a natural human failing). Alien species are welcome in strictly defined areas (gardens) but must not be allowed to pollute the native culture (the wider countryside).

One British journalist, however, took us to new heights in disseminating such ideas. In the Sunday edition of the well-respected, left-leaning newspaper *The Independent*, he wrote a highly provocative article called “The Barbarians in Britain’s Backyards” in which he attempted to popularize the native-versus-alien species dichotomy in conservation by appealing bluntly to peoples’ xenophobia. His choice of archaic and pejorative phrases is wide ranging and unguarded. One can only assume that his sources (conservationists and ecologists?) fed him their own prejudices, which he then adapted into an aggressive and emotional populism. He talks of “encroaching foreigners” “running riot,” “ferocious, fast growing foreign plants,” “the villainous and the benign,” “acceptable aliens,” “staggering penetration,” “ruthlessly ousting the natives,” “pink and green Japanese terror,” and plants that “brutalise the native flora.” This undisguised xenophobia, including sexual metaphor (“staggering penetration”), is an indication of the depth of feeling (and fear) that “pollution” by “the alien” raises.

However, this xenophobia is well documented by Doughty, who, like Fenton, takes the argument to its logical conclusion by noting the popular comparison in the nineteenth century United States between alien plants or animals and human immigrants. He discusses the feelings of Americans to the immigration of the English house sparrow into the United States in the nineteenth century and wryly observes that, according to Berrey’s *American Thesaurus of Slang*, “Irishmen were also nicknamed sparrows because they were so numerous and prolific.” From this viewpoint, sparrows and immigrants had “low morals”, reproduced at amazing rates, and appeared to be plotting and conspiring to exploit the United States at the expense of native-born Americans. In contrast, native birds were clean, tidy and hardworking who preferred country living and fulfilled the “yeoman myth.”

NEW ECOCOLOGIES, FLUX, AND CROSSINGOVER

Another construction, which Castree and others call the “new ecology,” has its origins in biology and in cultural and environmental geography. It recognizes that increasing difference and diversity in our cities means both different and diverse constructions
of nature and different natures. It doesn’t see nature-human dualism but “nature-society hybrids” and nature as what is there: nature as fluid/cosmopolitan.

Zimmerer argues that:

The fullness of conservation, particularly the emphasis on flux (rather than fixity) and crossingover (rather than cordoning off), can contribute toward an enlarged and enhanced engagement with the politics of the environment. I would hope that, in the future, purely scientific or simply preset prerogatives will be thought of as unhelpful in guiding resource management, nature protection, and environmental restoration.

Schlaepfer, Sax, and Olden predict “the proportion of non-native species that are viewed as benign or even desirable will slowly increase over time as their potential contributions to society and to achieving conservation objectives become well recognized and realized.”

Building on this Del Tredici, talking about so-called urban “wasteland” notes:

Learning how to manage spontaneous urban vegetation to increase its ecological and social values may be a more sustainable strategy than attempting to restore historical ecosystems that flourished before the city existed.

More recently, Davis and eighteen other leading international ecologists published a Comment in the highly influential journal Nature arguing that “Increasingly, the practical value of the native-versus-alien species dichotomy in conservation is declining, and even becoming counterproductive. Yet many conservationists still consider the distinction a core guiding principle.”

Similarly, Lugo argues that “the eradication of species is not as simple as assigning evil qualities to exotic species and benevolent qualities to natives.” He continues by saying that:

Responsible ecological stewardship requires an open mind to all species and the roles they play. It is a mistake to judge a species by its origin (exotic or native). We no longer live in a pristine world, if such a world ever existed. We are moving towards a landscape where human influence will be pervasive. All species have a role to play.

Elsewhere Barker adds that:

In Britain we often qualify the term “wildlife”, whatever we understand by it, by distinguishing “native wildlife” from “alien wildlife”. I would contend that this particular distinction in Britain is not only indefensible to an ecologist but also lies at the root of an unhelpful nature conservation mythology which encourages activity without any thought about why that activity is taking place.

This approach is gaining ground scientifically through the related concept of “conciliation biology” that looks anew at the schism in attitudes toward native/non-native organisms arguing for a conciliatory approach that will become all the more pressing as climate change takes hold and reconfigures local ecologies:

A conciliatory approach to managing systems [is] where novel organisms cannot or should not be eradicated. Conciliatory strategies incorporate benefits of nonnatives to address many practical needs including slowing rates of resistance evolution, promoting evolution of indigenous biological control, cultivating replacement services and novel functions, and managing native–nonnative coevolution.

ENTERING COSMOPOLIS

I would argue, extending Zimmerer’s points about fluidity and crossingover, that the corollary of the new ecology in terms of human society is the emerging concept of interculturalism. Tully, like Amin, argues that our societies are intercultural because of the cross-cultural overlap, interaction, and negotiation—the “politics of recognition”—that occur out of necessity in the formation of our society.

This is what Amin calls the “negotiation of difference within local micropublics of everyday interaction.” An acknowledgment of this dynamic cultural nature of society—both the “politics of recognition” and “negotiation of difference”—is the basis of interculturalism.

Consider Bloomfield and Bianchini’s paean to this emerging concept:

The interculturalism approach goes beyond opportunities and respect for existing cultural differences, to the pluralist transformation of public space, civic culture and institutions. So it does not recognise cultural boundaries as fixed but as in a state of flux and remaking. An interculturalist approach aims to facilitate dialogue, exchange and reciprocal understanding between people of different cultural backgrounds. Cities need to develop policies which prioritise funding for projects where different
cultures intersect, “contaminate” each other and hybridize. . . . In other words, city governments should promote cross-fertilisation across all cultural boundaries, between “majority” and “minorities”, “dominant” and “sub” cultures, localities, classes, faiths, disciplines and genres, as the source of cultural, social, political and economic innovation.²⁴

THE INTERCULTURAL CITY ECOSYSTEM

So if nature is quite literally in the eye of the beholder, how is it critical to a twenty-first century urban ethic where we live in cities of difference—in effect, intercultural city ecosystems? Every culture has a relation to nature in general, and urban nature specifically. Some want the solitude it can offer, some want the socialization; some want recreation, some want relaxation; some want reflection, some want refuge.

Furthermore, what is the role of municipal planners, parks managers, urban and landscape designers, and others in catering to difference and diversity, to recognition and negotiation, to the intercultural city ecosystem/new ecology, while still respecting the traditional ecology? Can they help us think about, design, and manage what I call “culturally inclusive spaces”—spaces of encounter with different people/natures?²⁵ Can such spaces be designed and constructed to have meaning and authenticity to the multiple publics that inhabit intercultural city ecosystems? There is a solid case to be made that the training and recruitment of such professionals should more fully reflect the make-up of our cities of difference. This would help speed the production, quality, and maintenance of culturally inclusive spaces, and, critically, the embedding and ultimately the mainstreaming of culturally inclusive practice within those professions.

Similarly, the implications of this “new ecology” for ecological and environmental stewardship organizations are profound in at least three key ways.

First, as I’ve indicated above, the vast majority of these organizations are deeply anchored in traditional ecological thought and management practices and are reluctant to change this. While the provocative language may have changed since the 1980s and 1990s, the practices have substantively not.

Second, by 2042 the population of U.S. metropolitan areas will be predominantly made up of people of color, with immigrants forming a large portion of that population. The current leaders of ecological and environmental stewardship organizations will have retired, so who/where are the new leaders who can tell the story of this “new ecology”? A posting by Whybrow in the Land Trust Alliance’s newsletter described a 2010 leadership retreat developed as an
ongoing collaboration between the Center for Diversity and the Environment, based in Portland, Oregon, and the Center for Whole Communities in Vermont. The meeting, for diverse conservation leaders under thirty-five, was a memorable event where, “for most of them, this [was] the first time they [had] been in a group of conservationists where people of color [were] the majority.” Are any of the major conservation organizations looking to these new leaders?

Third, how should conservation organizations in the U.S. and elsewhere respond to the demographic and cultural shifts that are unfolding and will gain pace? What strategies for the inclusion of a more diverse membership base should be developed now that this is not only a moral question, but one of organizational effectiveness and even survival? What will some of these organizational Annual General Meetings look like? I hope they look like America.

So, let’s start from a position of humility. We are entering cosmopolis and no one has a roadmap nor all the answers in how to do this, so let’s begin the journey by making sure we’re asking the right questions.

First and foremost, do we want to live in cities where we tolerate the tedium and misery of cities of indifference? Or do we want to live in intercultural city ecosystems where we recognize, understand, and engage with difference, diversity, and cultural heterogeneity in creative and productive ways, changing ecological management practices in the direction of “new ecology” thinking?

Second, let’s recognize that the much discussed Right to the City is not just about rights to enter and shape physical spaces and places, but it is also about how to see, understand and socially construct the intercultural city ecosystem. Finally, how do we—whether in our municipalities or in our ecological and environmental stewardship organizations—recognize and embed the new ecology while still respecting the needs of those whose construction is that of a traditional ecology?

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Novel Cities: A Revolution in Generativity

By JULIANNE LUTZ WARREN

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair...

—Charles Dickens
A Tale of Two Cities (1859)

THE PERIOD

Dickens was describing an earlier epoch of revolution. Today another epoch of revolution has arrived, a recurring event in the histories of the universe, Earth’s community, and humanity. These embedded histories of change are wheels within wheels. They sometimes turn together, spinning out intricate weaves of increasing complexity. They sometimes whirl in opposition, destroying what the other has created and creating something new out of what the other has destroyed. They are always in relationship with one another.

Individuals—whether desperate or carefree—flock into cities to become part of complex communities of exciting possibility. More than half of all people alive today are city dwellers. It is likely that in the next quarter century urban populations and the extent of lands they inhabit will expand more than in all history. Cities are covering Earth like a growing, electrified constellation of bright, shimmering stars. This network is outshining old boundaries between humanity and global nature, metropolis and hinterland, and the proportional influence of each person’s will while, paradoxically, it is also uniting billions of imaginations into a thrilling, collective synergy of inventive power.

Since that power has been directed by the standards of a human culture of empire, however, it has been spinning out innovation in opposition to the innate creativity of the planet. That is, in order to make things of interest only to humans, modern, urbanizing humans have been destroying relationships between themselves and other members of the world-of-life. We also have been causing other members of the world-of-life to lose their long-evolved interrelationships with one another. Somehow we have been thinking, moreover, that this general pattern of dominance has been settled forever—that human rule of earth’s community produces wealth, secures freedom, and will eventually lead to our sovereignty over other planets and the stars, forever.

The embedded wheels of the cosmos, earth community, and humanity turn one way or another in relationship to each other, however, and there is no escaping this mutual dependency. For as long as we have spun out our humanity based in an aggrandizing belief to the contrary, the wheel of the rest of earth’s community in relationship with the Sun has been turning in opposition—in revolt. Warming and rising oceans, currents of carbon-filled air, barren soils stripped of their native, co-evolved plants, animals, and indige-
The roads that lay before us

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other...

In “The Road Not Taken” (1916), Robert Frost famously describes an earlier choice he had made “that has made all the difference.” Our present epoch of earth revolution is likewise a time of crucial choices—for humanity seeking not only safety and wealth, but meaning and resilience in relation to the creative prospects of the greater Earth and vast universe. To be part of this universe evolving along its irreversible arrow of time is to be certain that the future is at least partly unknowable. To be human is, perhaps, to be able to see farther down the road than most other kinds of beings. It is also to be able to join ignorance and knowledge together with sympathy and self-interest into actions consonant with complex moral thinking. So, going forward, we do well now to pause a moment to look down the more trodden path as far as we can—the path of the “terminal paradox.” And, then, we do well to consider choosing another path—a path of generativity.²

Terminal Paradox

Because of the complex, interdependently embedded nature of Nature, when one wheel of change turns only for itself, it turns against the rest and, paradoxically, leads to its own end. It is true within individual humans—when a solitary virtue prevails over a greater host, suffocating all virtues’ fullest promise. It is true for the earth community when a disambiguated master narrative of one species overpowers the rest, bringing disaster to all. It is true for stars—when the diverse stellar elements burn forcefully into all one element, ending the star. This trajectory of self-wreckage, akin to a Pyrrhic victory, is what Czech novelist Milan Kundera calls a “terminal paradox”—the ambiguity of a total victory that is also a total defeat. It is similar to what Shakespeare put into the mouth of King Claudius: “For goodness, growing to a pleurisy, Dies in his own too much.”

A solitary virtue: The suffocation of love

Reverence—Deep respect, veneration, or admiration for someone or something, especially a person or thing regarded as sacred or holy.
—Oxford English Dictionary³

I am fourteen years old. I turn on the television. The show Cosmos is playing. There are images of vast darkness spangled with bright, colorful stars and swirling galaxies. Spine-tingling electronic piano and string chords spill confidence and mystery into my family’s living room, supporting Carl Sagan’s nasally spoken words: “The surface of the earth is the shore of the Cosmic Ocean. On this shore we’ve learned most of what we know. . . . Some part of our being knows this is where we came from.” My stomach feels light. My father rushes in from the other room. He stands in front of the screen and switches off the television.

“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom,” says the book of Proverbs, a book of my family’s Christian religion. And, in Genesis, God said that he had created the heavens and earth. The New Testament book of Ephesians commands children to obey their parents “so that it may be well with you and you may live well on Earth.”

That was it for Cosmos.

I was impressed with God’s power both as creator and disciplinarian. After creating the first humans, God had given them dominion over all the earth. God made one rule—they were not to eat the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. A serpent, though, had convinced the first woman to eat the forbidden fruit. She then gave some to the man, who also ate it. The terrible consequence was that from then on all humans would die. Because of their misdeeds, God also made serpents thereafter fear women, women fear men, and men fear the land. In the place of a pleasant garden the ground would grow thorns and thistles. And beyond earth were also the tortures of hell or the raptures of heaven.

I had the will to live well on Earth and to stay out

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of hell and head for paradise. So, I combed through
the Bible for more and more rules about how to do this
and—out of strict reverence toward God—I piled them
up like sand bags all around me:
“*I will know nothing of evil.*
“Be subject to one another out of reverence for
Christ.”
“Wives be subject to your husbands as you are
to the Lord”
“No one comes to the Father except through
me.”
“If any want to become my followers, let them
deny themselves.”
Buried beneath the overburdens of reverence,
there was little left to deny. Too much reverence for
reverence, paradoxically, had turned the wheel suf-
focatingly inward, isolating me from the threatening
community outside. Reverence had turned against the
virtues of faith and hope it more properly supported,
ending wisdom. Moreover, reverence, taking control,
had turned against the since-forgotten nature of the
God I had once imagined to revere—that outreaching
mystery called love.  

A DISAMBIGUATING NARRATIVE OF LOVE: LAYING WASTE
EARTH’S COMMUNITY

“Only let the human race recover the right over na-
ture that belongs to it by divine bequest, and let power
be given it; the exercise thereof will be governed by
sound reason and true religion,” wrote English natu-
ral philosopher Francis Bacon (1561–1626).  Since the
first humans had eaten the fruit of the tree of knowl-
edge of good and evil, humankind’s God-given domin-
ion had been compromised. Rather than sandbagging
ourselves with reverence against recklessness or wal-
looring in regret, however, our species, according to
Bacon’s compelling narrative, should get to work re-
suming our rights.

With their special endowment of reason people
could—indeed, should—reclaim their sovereignty by
penetrating the secrets of how the observable world
worked in order to command its causes for desirable
effects. The identification of desirable effects would be
governed by the virtue of love—that is, more precise-
ly, by *Philanthropia*, or love of mankind—which, by
Bacon’s definition, was the balance of all virtues and
thus not vulnerable to excess. The expression of this
virtue, however, was susceptible to errors that should
be avoided, including: extending it to living creatures
other than humans, like dogs and birds; giving extra

rewards to undeserving people (including women who
might be witches); and forgetting that self-love was
the proper pattern for how to love others.  Ultimately,
then, the combined power of human-reason-loving-
humans would guide the whole creation forward to,
as he put it in his utopian story, *New Atlantis* (1627),
“the enlarging of the bounds of Human Empire, to the
effecting of all things possible”—that is, create heaven
on earth for humans.

Here are just a few of the “wonderful works of
Nature, chiefly such as benefit mankind” that Bacon
imagined:

- curing diseases counted incurable
- increasing the ability to suffer torture or pain
- increasing and exalting the intellectual parts
- making new species
- transplanting one species into another
- making instruments of destruction, such as
  war and poison
- making rich composts for the earth
- turning crude and watery substances into oily
  and unctuous substances
- producing artificial minerals and cements

In fact, in *New Atlantis*—a blueprint for the gild-
ed, straight-streeted city of the future—Bacon imag-
ined experimental caves for studying minerals and
mining methods and a scheme for organizing scienti-
fic research, which collaborators championed. The
Royal Society, founded in 1660 in London, launched
an endeavor that forwarded the process for making
bubbling Champagne; observing the first micro-or-
ganisms; discovering the action of gravity; inoculating
against smallpox; demonstrating the electrical nature
of lightning; discovering the hidden lives of nesting
birds, the influences of earthworms on soil, and the
bones of the first land dinosaur; detecting the neutron
with applications that released the atom’s power; rec-
ognizing the need to study and thus protect frail eco-
systems, like that of Aldabra Atoll, from militarization;
determining the structure of DNA; noticing the disap-
pearance of ozone over Antarctica; studying potential
nanotechnology applications; and summarizing the
causes, consequences, and uncertainties of global cli-
mate change, among many other things.

In 1636, Bacon’s protégé, Thomas Bushnell, ob-
tained the grant to royal mines in Wales where he in-
vented new methods for getting at more ore. He also
recognized the convenience of erecting a mint near the
mines where silver coins were issued.  Mining was an

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MINDING NATURE 7.1
ancient practice, but never before had it occurred at the escalating scale of the sixteenth century. Increasing human population, combined with the rise of capitalism across most of western Europe, quadrupled metal mining operations globally. At the same time, as large swaths of forest communities were cut down, shortages of wood used for smelting ores made coal increasingly important. Over the next one hundred years, coal became England’s chief form of energy for industrialization. Moreover, cities were spreading as centers of trade and market production, generating wealth for ambitious leaders of strengthening nation-states and, later, of large corporations. In addition to coal, by the end of the nineteenth century, oil and gas had become prime commercial energy sources fueling the escalation of this rapid growth.

If trends continue, nearly 90 percent of a human population of 10 billion will live in cities by 2100. Cities—like the moon reflecting the Sun—mirror humanity’s virtues and values. Given Philanthropia as an inclination and the capacity for reason to carry it forward, up until now we have effectively built cities for the comfort of our own species alone. Given self-love as the pattern for love of our fellows, our collective urban inventiveness has been geared toward personal gain. Given distribution of gain based on merit, cities stimulate class divides.

New York City, for example, one of the world’s largest cities within one of the world’s most powerful nations, is home to more than eight million unique people, but has excluded many other species and races once growing together there—Lenape people, wolves and deer, southern flying squirrels and trout, mountain laurel and skunkweed, milksnakes, green frogs, Eskimo curlew, and Hollis soil. The city is warring against others that have become pests, like cockroaches, rats, and pigeons. It stops and frisks blacks and Latinos. New York City is famous for art galleries and theaters and for immense personal wealth, with a GDP of over 1,000 billion dollars and the second highest number of billionaires on Earth. It is also infamous for ingenious crime as it is home to Wall Street, the center of the 2008 financial crisis, though not a single top Wall Street or large commercial bank executive has been convicted of criminal charges. New York City also is home to over sixty-four thousand homeless people, a number that has risen 13 percent in the past year. The city’s poor and homeless are marooned on the bleak side of a widening gap between the 99 percent and 1 percent, though still situated on the abundant edge of the widening divide between rich nations like the United States and poor ones like Mozambique.

Cities, like animal bodies, require energy to live and grow. Worldwide, cities consume more than 66 percent of the total energy burned by humanity. Because they burn mostly fossil fuels, cities emit more than 70 percent of total anthropogenic greenhouse gases. Cities, though, have the potential to be more efficient as they get bigger and denser. Like an elephant, for instance, which is ten thousand times larger than a guinea pig but needs only one thousand times its calories, New Yorkers per capita emit half the carbon dioxide that inhabitants of smaller, roomier Denver do.

Cities, like stars, however, also burn faster and brighter the more massive they are. The entire population of New York City, for example—in total—emits at least six times more carbon dioxide than that of Denver. All American cities with hinterlands combined are responsible for emitting 26 percent of the global total accumulating in the atmosphere through the industrializing era. In fact, the effect of the whole array of forces pulsing through the worldwide network of cities has been toward escalating the fossil fuel energy consumed and greenhouse gases dissipated as well as, at the same time, amplifying transformational demands on lands and waters near and far to supply and militantly protect proliferating human desires.

An individual may isolate and feed a virtue—like reverence—within herself. If that virtue grows to overpower its complements—like faith, hope, and love—however, its victory defeats a full, reverent life. Likewise, a master narrative of disambiguated love focused only on mankind—that is, of a culture of Reasoned Philanthropia—whirls against the virtues of others in the world-of-life—ancient, buried phytoplankton that breathed carbon from the air and buried it below soil-forming mosses and a complement of oak trees and foxes, wolves and nightingales, large blue butterflies, cold-water corals, and dolphins. Because humanity is ecologically embedded within this world, humanity...
loving only itself—favoring its most meritorious—has been spinning its inventive power against love for itself, toward death... the atmosphere contains more carbon dioxide—over 400 ppm—than it has in the past 800,000 years. This is causing oceans to acidify, further affecting relationships between species. The extra greenhouse gases are blanketing the Earth in rising warmth, causing melting ice, rising sea levels, fierce “weird” weather, and further stresses on living beings, including ourselves, who may or may not have the flexibility to adapt. 19

As Bacon wrote—though without foreseeing what it would mean after men replaced God on creation’s throne—“The example of God teacheth the lesson truly; ‘He sendeth his rain, and maketh his Sun to shine, upon the just and unjust,’ but he doth not rain wealth, nor shine honour and virtues, upon men equally.” On October 29, 2012, Superstorm Sandy—a record-breaking, climate-change-intensified event—shut down New York City, killed hundreds of people, and cost the nation billions of dollars in infrastructure damages. 20 Then this: although the accumulated greenhouse gas contribution of Filipinos is negligible and their economy is shaky, in early November 2013, Supertyphoon Haiyan—one of the strongest storms ever recorded—slammed their islands. This storm killed thousands more people, members of earth’s whole community being laid to waste by its revolution.

THE DEATH OF A STAR

As an individual person in isolating a virtue is spun by too much of that virtue into herself and away from others; as a world of cities dominated by a cultural narrative reverencing solely its dominators is flooded by its “own too much”; so, too, as a burning star transforms into just one element its dynamic turns out to be a terminal paradox. The star implodes, ending itself.

On the night of September 23, 1987, astronomical observers noticed a change in the sky—a bright light that had not been there before—a supernova, which scientists named SN 1987A. For more than 10 million years out there in a neighboring galaxy a massive star—far more massive than earth’s Sun—had shimmered. It had been held together for all this time by the complementary play of the forces of nuclear fusion and gravity. It had continually contracted and expanded, cycling through the universe’s host of elements as it burned—hydrogen, helium, carbon and oxygen, sulfur and silicon, and finally iron. The star, now all of iron, became too heavy to expand, which gave the force of gravity full command. The star contracted, its matter plunging inward faster and faster until it deepened into a catastrophic collapse pulling into the limit of its core.

GENERATIVITY: THE SURPRISE OF DEATH, A WORLD-OF-LIFE

As the contracting star hit the limit of its core, a shockwave sent the star’s matter rebounding in an explosion that, with the help of neutrinos, blew it apart some 166,000 years ago, radiating as much heat as the combined total of all the galaxies of stars of the total visible universe and creating the light that finally reached human perception that September night of 1987. That supernova was so powerful that it re-generated in that flash at once all the different elements of the universe—from iron to gold, silver, silicon, oxygen, carbon, to helium, and hydrogen

Out of such particular elements heaved into the darkness by the similar ending of another massive star a much longer time ago materialized countless other stars, including the infant Sun of the solar system with its eight planets, one of them Earth—the world-of-life. 21

LOVING THE WORLD-OF-LIFE: A THINKING COMMUNITY

“Then on a still night,” wrote twentieth century American ecologist Aldo Leopold (1887–1948), “when the campfire is low and the Pleiades have climbed over rimrocks, sit quietly and listen for a wolf to howl, and think hard of everything you have seen and tried to understand. Then you may hear it—a vast pulsing harmony—its score inscribed on a thousand hills, its notes the lives and deaths of plants and animals, its rhythms spanning the seconds and centuries.” 22 The scientific process that Bacon urged in order to “enlarge the bounds of Human Empire” ironically has taught us that we are inescapably part of some-
Furthering social bonds. This capacity added another layer of interdependency to earth’s life by connecting beings emotionally within and between species—through reciprocal exchanges of anger, happiness, sadness, disgust, fear, and surprise—helping the greatest number to flourish.

Human beings’ capacity to feel and empathize as well as to reason and reflect has also brought forth our species’ capacity for moral imagination. That is, we have an ability, perhaps unique in the vast universe, to evaluate the consequences of past actions against a standard of good that includes but extends beyond our individual selves in time and space, and then to adjust future actions accordingly. Answering to that capacity is our quest for its meaning. Human beings also are story-telling animals with the ability to experiment with ideas, discover insight, and, by communicating these stories to others, explore meaning and learn how better to live together, if not flourish.

This integration of human reason with other sensibilities is the kind of “hard thinking” Leopold was practicing as he listened for a wolf howl on a still night, granting him from time to time a hearing of the cosmic music he described. This was the music of “land health”—the “capacity of Earth for self-renewal.” Leopold tried putting this into words by telling story after complex story conveying to others the “prodigious drama” of the land’s workings full of all the ambiguity of a classic novel. “Once you learn to read the land,” Leopold once told his students at the University of Wisconsin, “I have no fear of what you will do to it, or with it. And I know many pleasant things it will do to you.” And who knows, he mused, perhaps “God himself likes to hear birds sing and see flowers grow.”

“A deep chesty bawl echoes from rimrock to rimrock, rolls down the mountain, and fades into the far blackness of night,” Leopold wrote, and it meant different things to different listeners:

To the deer on the mountainside, hearing the wolf’s bawl reminded her of “the way of all flesh.”
To the pine tree, it was a forecast of “midnight scuffles and blood upon the snow.”
To the coyote, it meant the “promise of gleanings to come.”
To the cowman, it was the “threat of red ink at the bank.”
To the hunter, it aroused a “challenge of fang against bullet.”

To the starlit mountain as a whole, the wolf’s bawl meant salvation from the destruction of any single element overpowering the rest of the interconnected community of fertile soils, pine trees, flowing waters, habitable atmosphere, deer and coyotes, cowmen and hunters, songbirds and scientists, authors, street musicians and students, professors, theologians and shamans, businessmen, city mayors, and every other kind of being living together wild and free, the future unknown.

To the human lover of land, the wolf’s howl meant “contempt for all the adversities of the world.” By this Leopold was not suggesting scorn for any individual in particular, but rather for a state opposed to good for all. In other words, the bawl sounded out resistance against the conditions of terminal paradox of “Human Empire” and a positive desire for the continuation of the “vast pulsing harmony” of Nature.

The moral position of the hard-thinking community that Leopold encouraged was one of wild liberty, in fact. This attitude, which he also called “thinking like a mountain,” might also be viewed, paradoxically, as the refusal to take a moral position in the sense that novelist-philosopher Simone de Beauvoir urged: “A freedom which is interested in denying freedom must be denied.” Indeed, an ethic of wild liberty or land health, in other words, respects the world-of-life as an arena wherein a self-organizing welter of diverse interests, though often seemingly conflicting, are necessary to each member’s flourishing. The wolf needs the deer for food. The deer and the hunter also need the wolf to keep the deer population from getting so large that they browse all the pines, which hold the soils, which support the pines, deer, hunters and wolves.
At the same time, each individual deer tries not to get eaten. Each wolf tries not to starve. Each is at liberty to succeed or fail, passing on helpful characteristics to future generations who accumulate this knowledge.

It was out of such living drama that human moral imagination emerged with the capacity to play out stories of such complex interrelationships—crafting communities—in our minds. The history of the novel, according to Kundera, is a “treasure chest” of human essence whose originality is inseparable from our belonging in the world-of-life. The art of the novel, mirroring this belonging, opens up experimental commons where a welter of perspectives has free play. Such art is a wild salvation from destruction by dogma overpowering a diversity of feelings and ideas. Its attitude is one of suspended judgment, preferring to encourage a multiplicity of inclinations toward creative self-assembly, which is in tune with Earth and its cosmos.

As the embedded wheels of humanity, ecological communities, and shimmering stars spin together, they power the heartbeat of a generative paradox. That is, in notpossessing the complete truth each chemical element, each individual being, each constellation of beings in every unique place can continually participate with others in revealing Nature’s whole creative immensity. This unfolding wisdom might be called not merely Philanthropia, but true love.

Cities, then, can be likened to:
• moons, reflecting humanity’s virtues and values—choosing life over money;
• animal bodies, efficiently metabolizing energy—choosing clean not carbon;
• stars, rapidly dissipating bright innovation—generating mutual health over unequal wealth; and,
• living novels—discovering what we would not live without, which remains always out of reach.

It was a dark and stormy night. The lights were out in lower Manhattan, Breezy Point, Far Rockaway, with the city soaking under seawater. A rumbling, four-toned siren echoed from sandstone to brick, tickled under the ribs of a woman walking quickly along the sidewalk, and faded into the far darkness of Wall Street, now sand-bagged. A homeless man had taken refuge in a subway station uptown before the shutdown. Somehow, he had managed to stay out of sight of the authorities with his baby carriage, which cradled a potted fern with brown, dried out leaves. The man frequently misted the dead plant with a water bottle as he leaned up against an iron post, puddles rising around his feet. He remembered once standing on the Bow Bridge, the moon shining full in a clear, star-spangled sky before dawn. A great egret lifted from the bank of Central Park Lake, drawing its feathery shadow across the grey water....

REVERENCE REBORN: A REVOLUTION OF GRACE

Grace—a gift from heaven; healing power, health-giving properties; thanksgiving; the part or aspect of something from which its beauty derives.
—Oxford English Dictionary

Grace, suggests ecological anthropologist Gregory Bateson, is a matter of integrating the diverse parts of the mind. For the attainment of grace, he says, just as the humanity of the city must be consonant with the creativity of earth’s co-evolving community and that community with its cosmos—so, too, within each human being, “the reasons of the heart must be integrated with the reasons of reason.”

I am fourteen years old. I head out to the porch where my father and I have our growing collection of birds’ nests and snake skins, plant specimens we both admire, and a monarch butterfly, whom we will soon release, just emerged from its pale green and gold-gilded chrysalis. We are also working on an experiment here together. First we planted bean seeds in paper cups of soil. Now that the plants have sprouted, we are placing half of them on an old stereo turntable each day to spin for a number of hours. Every week we compare the growth of the rotating plants with the growth of the controls. We discover that the whirling plants grow more slowly and, unexpectedly to us, bend in the direction of the turning wheel.

“...just as the humanity of the city must be consonant with the creativity of earth’s co-evolving community and that community with its cosmos—so, too, [it is] within each human being...
being who may, like a massive star, come round to explode, intermingle—in sympathy—and create!

UNPRECEDENTED EVENTS OF IRREVERSIBLE TIME

There are things done now that cannot be undone. The future has always been uncertain. Today’s future, however, is unprecedentedly so. Our species, along with many others, has never lived on a planet like today’s planet. It is a tempestuous globe in revolution against unbalanced energy flows—between sunlight and earthheat—and against the rise of one species, divided against itself, over the long, co-evolved multiplicity of others. Many lives have already been lost. No one can say how many more will be taken, or spared.

If for Dickens the French Revolution was the worst of times, the epoch we are in now is vastly more so, as it is also the age of the gravest foolishness, incredulity, darkness, and despair. This period, which may last for thousands of years, may also be the best of times—an age of wisdom, belief, light, and hope wherein we have everything before us. The possibilities of rising grace, expanding reverence, and encompassing love remain. Human beings can choose to mutually, skillfully, and creatively enrich the world-of-life to which we belong from here on, for as long as we shall live, as our stories unfold.

“I see a beautiful city and a brilliant people rising,” concludes Dickens’s hero in Tale of Two Cities, anticipating his death amidst a city in ruins. I see people whose children understand that which today has become unprecedentedly certain: A twenty-first century urban ethic—the path, that, in Frost’s words, will “make all the difference”—is the tangled one braiding its bended way out of mystery to stars, to Earth, to each one of us and all others—myriads of creatures, large and small, moving on together.

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NOTES

4. E.g., “God is love” in 1 John 4:8.
City not quite four times more emitting than Denver, but the general point remains the same.


14. data sources are Carbon Dioxide Information Analysis Center, Oak Ridge National Laboratory, and British Petroleum.


26. M. Kundera, The Art of the Novel (New York: Grove Press, 1988); M. Kundera, Testaments Betrayed: An Essay in Nine Parts, transl. L. Asher (New York: HarperCollins, 1995); see also S. Keene, Empathy and the Novel (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 2010) for a look at how neuroscience informs understandings of how readers and authors relate to stories. Keene argues that while there is sparse evidence supporting the claim that reading or writing novels translates into “prosocial” behavior, novels do provide experimental places in which it is “safe” to try out feelings and thoughts, imagine their consequences, and evaluate them. Also of interest, Keene notes some evidence that discussing novels in places in which it is “safe” to try out feelings and thoughts, imagine their consequences, and evaluate them. Also of interest, Keene notes some evidence that discussing novels in groups may help foster more caring engagement with others.


In 2007–2008 I took a year-long sabbatical supported by a Lilly Faculty Fellowship from teaching Hebrew Bible at Louisville Presbyterian Seminary to write a commentary on the book of the eighth century B.C.E. prophet Isaiah. During that same year my spouse and I attended a master gardener class through the Purdue Agricultural Extension Service in Indiana. These two activities converged as I noticed, more clearly than I had seen in many years of studying Isaiah, the ancient prophet’s own observations of the natural world. He may not have been the earth’s first naturalist poet, but he is certainly one of the oldest who is still read today.

Isaiah begins, before addressing any humans at all, by calling heaven and earth as witnesses to divine frustration with God’s human “children,” who, Isaiah claims, know less about what is good for them than domestic animals do. In Isaiah’s first speech Judah is compared to a spent cucumber field and an empty vineyard. Listeners are told that social justice will allow the community to “eat the good of the land,” but continued inequities will cause them to be “eaten by the sword.” Rebels are warned that they will wither like desiccated trees and unwatered gardens.

Isaiah goes on like this, drawing imagery from a deep reservoir of natural knowledge. Empires, kings, and merchants might rise and fall, even the Nile may dry up, but the earth and its wild inhabitants remain. Lebanon’s giant cedars live to taunt the tyrant who would clear-cut them for profit. Mountains and trees break into song as they witness ever-newer acts of creation. People resemble grass; princes are mere stubbable. Thorns and thistles thrive where civilizations have fallen to ruin. Streams water the desert.

In short, Isaiah’s imaginative world vibrates with nature’s buzzing. Yet the Bible knows no word for “nature,” nor for “culture,” and no division between them. Humans inhabit the earth the way grasshoppers inhabit a field. We may call ourselves great, but on a cosmic scale, even whole nations are as insubstantial as fine dust.

The prophet invokes the larger-than-human world in very particular ways, ranging far and wide in botanical imagery, filling his poetry with trees, vines, crops, and grasses. But he is not alone in this fascination. Other biblical prophets hone in on agriculture, criticizing an international economy based on exported cash crops such as wheat, wine, and olive oil that enrich the elite at the expense of subsistence farmers. Yet other writers draw lessons in human humility from the wild animals with which we share the earth, or direct humans to live lightly with their land because it is only a loan from God.

Students of other traditional cultures and religions observe parallel interests among ancient writers worldwide. In fact, it is only relatively recently that humans have ignored the non-human world, trivializing it as vacation scenery or saleable resources. For most human generations, the earth has been viewed as home. Home, perhaps in the sense that our families are home: not always warm and fuzzy, not always safe, nor comfortable, but absolutely inevitable and fundamentally formative.

After completing the first volume of the Isaiah commentary, I paused to write another book, Inhabiting Eden: Christians, the Bible, and the Ecological Crisis. I wrote this book not because I believe the Christian scriptures offer modern people a blueprint for ecologically sensible living, but because so many Christians—as well as those from other faith traditions—do seek to learn from the Bible, and many Christians consider it authoritative. Yet just as most modern people fail to
see the natural world alive around us, many also read the Bible without noticing its grounding in nature. My hope was to demonstrate that, if we listen carefully to our own religious traditions, they show us how far our present generation has strayed, and how we might re-discover human life as it was made to be lived.

DOMINION’S DOMINATION

Ask any group in the Western world, whether religious or not, what people think the Bible has to say about the natural world, and they will reply in unison, “Dominion!” Christian and Jewish readers often recognize that commercial exploitation and even destruction of mountains, oceans, and species bears little resemblance to either stewardship or gratitude. But most remain convinced that the first chapter of Genesis, the creation account itself, offers humans license to do with the natural world whatever we would like for our own benefit. Most people are not aware that the concept of dominion found in Genesis 1:26–28 has nothing to do with such behaviors. In fact, self-seeking human greed is inimical to biblical ethics. Even fewer readers know that the notion of “dominion” is by no means the sole or even primary understanding among scriptural writers of the human place in creation. Rather, it is a minority view.

Theological focus on the divine plan announced in Gen 1:26 for humankind to “have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth” has made this one of the Old Testament’s better known verses, virtually guaranteed to enter most contemporary environmental conversations, whether as defense of human actions or—as opportunity to deflect blame to the past for what humans are doing now to the earth and its inhabitants. As biblical scholar Theodore Hiebert has observed:

Of all biblical texts, none has been discussed more in recent ecological literature than Genesis 1:26-28. . . . Such widespread attention to a single image stems from and contributes to the belief that this is the biblical view. And thus almost all intellectual energy has been poured into the debate about whether this particular picture will work or not, whether it is an image of unbounded power that must be abandoned or an image of responsible stewardship that must be recovered.6

In the late 1960s, medievalist Lynn Townsend White famously laid the growing ecological crisis at the door of Western Christian ideas about “dominion,” ideas that in his words made Christianity “the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen,” so that “no item in the physical creation had any purpose save to serve man’s purposes”: “although man’s body is made of clay, he is not simply part of nature: he is made in God’s image.”7

Although White laid blame on the Bible itself, Carol Merchant and Anne M. Clifford have cited Francis Bacon’s seventeenth-century interpretation of Genesis 2–3 to promote nature’s subjugation.8 In his Interpretation of Nature, Bacon argued that knowledge and control of nature were lost in the fall, but could be regained through its conquest. The metaphors he employed, his “image of nature as a female to be controlled and penetrated,” which “has served to legitimate the exploitation and the rape of the earth’s natural resources” are shockingly violent.9

The much-abused idea of human dominion comes from isolating three verses—less than ten percent—of the first creation story in Genesis 1. Reading Genesis 1:26-28 in relation to the other nine-tenths of Genesis 1 yields a very different reading.10 Even more strikingly, other biblical accounts of creation portray humans as far less powerful, far less central.

Reflecting human self-fascination, the notion of dominion has received much more than its share of press, but reading the first creation story calls forth the following observations:
First, most of the creation story as told in Genesis 1 precedes humans. This order resembles that of scientific accounts, which situate hominids on the cosmic timeline “within three hours of the stroke of midnight on New Year’s Eve, and *Homo sapiens* a mere twenty seconds before the hour.”

Second, in this account God speaks creation into being as if it possessed intelligence, summoning light, earth, sky, vegetation and animals to emerge. Each of these responds immediately and directly to God’s voice. In the five and a half days before humans enter the picture, God calls creation good six different times, displaying pleasure with the pre-human, non-human world.

Third, a tenfold repetition in Genesis 1:11-25 of the term *min* (kind, species, as in “of every kind”), referring to plants, fruit trees, sea creatures, birds, land animals both (from the human viewpoint) wild and domesticated, and “creepers,” indicates divine fascination not with a single species, but with a wide variety of swarming, teeming life on earth, what Genesis 2:1 calls “their multitude” or “their vast array.”

Fourth, sea creatures and birds are blessed and told to multiply long before humans are (1:22).

Fifth, even the command to “have dominion” (New Revised Standard Version) or to “rule” (New International Version) implies neither greed nor exploitation. If, as these verses claim, humans reflect God’s image, whatever rule these pronouncements may imagine is not self-seeking but generative. Further, the list of dominion’s subjects is far from exhaustive. Animals are named: fish, birds, cattle, wild animals, and creeping things. But if we accept the New Revised Standard Version’s and New International Version’s correction of verse 26 on the basis of ancient translations, and in accord with surrounding verses, the world’s plants and non-living elements are not included, and this creation story does not authorize destruction of mountains, rivers, or coastlines.

Sixth, all animals, including humans, are offered the same food supply, intended for all together (verses 29-30). In fact, according to this account, plan A was universal vegetarianism. These verses do not support indirect killing through destruction of habitats and food systems, much less direct killing for food, fur, or fun.

Seventh, it is not until all is completed that anything is described as “very good.” This divine satisfaction applies not to humans but to everything, the sum total, all creation (verse 31).

With so many qualifiers to human importance embedded even within the passage that declares us rulers over other animals, it is perplexing that interpreters have so long fixated on ourselves. Many Christians, troubled by the disconnect between contemporary ecological realities and what they have always assumed about human dominion, are ready to hear something else.

**SERVERS AND PRESERVERS**

Two different accounts of creation in the Bible’s first two chapters suggest some breadth of cosmologies even in tiny ancient Israel. In the alternative story that begins in Genesis 2:4, even though the human’s appearance precedes that of other species, this earthling is not called ruler, but servant of the ground. Translations have obscured this role. The popular New Revised Standard Version, for instance, reads Genesis 2:15 as: “The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it,” and other contemporary translations read similarly. The final verb *leshamrah* (to keep, watch, guard it) is translated accurately enough. But the preceding one, *le’abdhah,*...
when thinned down to “till,” loses its semantic resonance. Intransitive, this verb can mean “to work.” But when transitive, as here, its meaning doesn’t become, as in English, “to work something,” that is, “to make something else work.” Rather it means “to serve” something, in this case the garden of Eden. The human’s place is not to make the garden work, but to work for it. Genesis 2 pictures the human’s role not as ruler but as servant or caretaker.

Sharp distinctions between humans and animals are difficult to draw from Genesis 2. In Genesis, both humans and animals are called nephesh hayah, living creatures. This phrase applies to aquatic life (Genesis 1:20, 21), land animals (verse 24; 2:19; 9:10), birds (9:10), and in fact “all flesh” (9:15, 16)—and in 2:7 it also applies to humans. Translators obscure this: almost all recent translations read here “living being.” But the ancient writer did not make this distinction.

In addition, whereas in Genesis 1 each group of living creatures is spawned by its own habitat (the sea, the land, etc.), in Genesis 2 we all come from the same place. In this agriculturally infused story, humans are formed from the ground, just as all other life is. 

Genesis 2 is by no means alone in drawing the human role differently from “dominion.” Psalm 104 places humans in a timeshare with the lions, who roam the same haunts at night that humans do in the day. Although the psalm displays interest in and knowledge about the natural world—from meteorology to astronomy to physical geography to natural habitats of many species—it nowhere implies that humans are any more than one of the many fascinating creatures that reflect—in their dependence, life, and death—their creator’s glory.

Descriptions of creation in Isaiah 40:12-31 and in the divine speeches in Job 38-39 emphasize not human centrality or control, but our transience, our weakness, even our non-comprehension of the created world: “The nations are like a drop from a bucket,” the exilic prophet called “Second Isaiah” asserts, and human rulers are as ephemeral as winter wheat: “Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown, scarcely is their shoot rooted in the earth when God breathes on them and they dry up, and the tempest carries them off like stubble” (verse 24). For his part, Job, who was not present when God laid the earth’s foundations, can’t claim to know anything about the world’s workings (Job 38:24-27). He cannot explain the life cycles of mountain goats and deer, nor tame wild animals, nor comprehend God’s affection for creatures that seem foolish (39:1-25). Even a domesticated horse is too powerful for human command.

Other scriptural writers likewise imagine humans inhabiting a world far more powerful than we are that we can neither understand nor control. It is populated by wild animals and wild vegetation (Isaiah 34:11-15). It is characterized by wild forces—earthquakes (Psalm 68:8), storms (Psalm 57:1), flood (Psalm 69:2), drought (Jeremiah 14:1-6). The prophets compare empires to powerful floods sweeping lands away and envision restoration as verdant fields and vines. The book of Proverbs instructs humans to learn from ants, spiders, lions, and eagles. Sometimes majestically and sometimes terrifyingly, biblical poetry and narrative announce that we are anything but in control. Biblical scriptures as a whole voice reverence and care for, not self-centered rule over, the larger-than-human world.

**RELEARNING KINSHIP**

For many years I have taken seminary students newly initiated in the Hebrew language to a neighboring synagogue to take part in the Friday evening prayers. Many have never visited either a synagogue or a mosque and find themselves intrigued with the similarities to and differences from worship they know. One night the young woman who sat next to me cried silently through the entire service. Afterward, thinking perhaps that the vulnerability of worship had touched some hidden pain, I asked her if she were all right. “More than fine,” she answered, startled as if
waking from sleep. “Being here tonight is like finding out I have family I didn’t know I had.”

She woke up that evening to human neighbors she had not recognized as kin before. I have often seen others, perhaps in less dramatic ways, waking to awareness of bonds with an even wider family, the family of verdant life on our planet, a web of being that encompasses us all. This web is being badly shaken now; it is being torn by us, because we haven’t yet learned how to live well within its bounds.

Many are saying the human disconnection from the natural world is not primarily a technological problem, but a spiritual one—we don’t understand what humans are here for, or what we need, or what satisfies our longings. We have been conditioned, especially in the past two generations, to turn our backs on traditional values such as humility, frugality, gratitude, and simplicity, and to allow ourselves to be tyrannized by carefully pre-programmed cravings for material goods that far exceed our needs and capacities. We need something else to live for.

I wrote Inhabiting Eden with the hope of helping Christians regain an appropriate awe for, and active concern for, all life on earth. The book begins by exploring the problem of change and the many precedents for productive changes in human thinking and action. It goes on to discuss relations between humans and nature as they unfold in the first four chapters of Genesis, and to bring biblical ethics to bear on several interrelated ecological issues: consumerism, agriculture, toxic waste, and climate change.

I hope groups of Christians will read and discuss this book together and allow a different vision to take shape in their communities: a vision of human flourishing in a flourishing world; a vision of serving and preserving the Eden we inhabit. I also hope it will be a useful tool for environmental advocates who wish to address spiritual themes and language underlying Western understandings of the human place and role on earth. The remaining sections of this essay draw upon the opening chapter of Inhabiting Eden.

THE CHALLENGE

One January I was traveling in South India with my daughter Claire, who lives in Nepal. When our host in Coimbatore took us to the train station to return to Bangalore, he boarded with us, settling us across the aisle from a nun in full habit, explaining to her in Tamil who we were, where we were going, and for all we knew, how ignorant we were about Indian transit. She nodded in our direction. She was wearing the white and blue habit of Mother Teresa’s Missionaries of Charity, and I was entranced. All my romanticism about Mother Teresa, about nuns, and about travel in India drowned out apprehensions about finding our way.

We set out among the mountains. Throughout South India’s flatlands, everywhere we had traveled, along every road, we had passed masses of people working, walking, driving, biking, sitting, eating, sweeping, bathing, cooking, laughing—as if all humanity had congregated on the tip of South Asia to sink it. But there was no road beside this track, and for the first time in three weeks we saw open countryside, mountains almost close enough to touch. I smiled at my daughter and then at the sister, who was eating her lunch, a box of chicken. We ate a couple of bananas and I looked for a waste bin and, finding none, wondered if it was proper to throw the peels from the train. The sister finished her chicken, stood up, leaned over the two people sitting between her and the open window, and tossed box, drinking cup, napkins, fork, bones, the whole litter of a fast food meal, into the...
multiple ecological problems we face, but the questions are really human ones: What do we value? How do our lives and values line up? Do we see ourselves as part of the magnificent web of life, or do we, like Esau, trade our birthright for a momentary mess of stew?

Wilson argues that science can provide information about the biosphere, “the totality of all life, creator of all air, cleanser of all water, manager of all soil, but itself a fragile membrane that barely clings to the face of the planet.” Religious leaders, he said, help shape awareness of and gratitude for this complex and tender sphere. There can be no change in action without changes in perception of who we are and to whom and what we owe allegiance.

Many people look to the Bible for guidance in contemporary life. Scripture doesn’t by any means tell us all that we might like to understand. But if we remove some modern blinders we will find it says a great deal more than we think about our ties with the rest of creation; ties we must now reclaim; ties that will not only lead us into restoring our surroundings, but into joys that consumer culture cannot offer.

Scripture tells us that our original forebears lost the garden of Eden before they realized what they had. Not ever having been there myself, I have trouble picturing a world more exquisite than our own. It’s not just the snowcapped peak of Fishtale Mountain behind my daughter’s house in Pokhara, nor the vast red hues of the Grand Canyon, nor the Smoky Mountains and Shenandoah Valley. It’s the mockingbird practicing its repertoire in the burning bush; it’s the maple tree in the backyard, changing with the seasons from greens to oranges to intricate, rugged browns. Each locale has its bits of Eden, habitats to inherit, enjoy, tend, and bequeath to our descendants.

We are approaching a turning point in history, one that will tell us whether we truly are the *Homo sapiens*, the “wise ones,” we call ourselves. It’s time to dig into our spiritual heritage to find wisdom for crucial decisions that face us all.
We are not alone in this. Every generation faces challenges for which our upbringing has not directly prepared us—challenges economic, military, moral, religious, and social. To overcome problems our parents and grandparents did not foresee, we find ourselves forced to re-examine established assumptions. Change is hard enough for individuals. It is far more difficult to motivate a whole society to work together, particularly in a time as contentious and individualistic as our own. Until a critical mass of people are convinced of the necessity—convinced in heart and soul, as well as mind—change does not take root. Such conviction is hard to find when the crisis is unprecedented. What the world has not seen before, we resist seeing now.

Christians who rely on Scripture for guidance are sometimes dismayed that the Bible does not give clear direction about contemporary issues unknown to the ancient world. We search the Bible to see whether passages overlooked in the past, when asked new questions, may offer unforeseen wisdom. Careful reading of Scripture can indeed lend insight for approaching the current ecological crisis.

This crisis is both multifaceted and urgent. Despite strides made over the past several decades, challenges continue to intensify:

**Water.** Because of overuse and misuse, and because of increasing population, drought, and pollution, fewer and fewer of the earth’s people enjoy access to clean, drinkable water. What was once seen as a basic right is being commodified as the “new gold.” Many say that the next war will not be fought over oil, but water. Oceans are warming and acidifying, and seas are overfished. Nitrogen runoff from farming has created algae blooms that kill ocean plants and animals, creating large dead zones along the coasts.

**Land use.** As the population not only expands numerically but demands more, wild lands worldwide have vanished into suburban sprawl and industrial farms. Top soil is disappearing. Tropical rainforests are being clear-cut for timber and for cattle grazing. Species that made their homes in these places have become extinct, upsetting nature’s balance.

**Trash and toxic waste.** Non-biodegradable waste is filling the planet. In each of the earth’s oceans floats a large patch of plastic waste. Some say that the Pacific Garbage Patch is as large as the United States, poisoning sea creatures that try to feed from it. Industries and individuals use the air, water, and ground as toxic garbage dumps, sickening people and other life. Newer generations of electronic toys have created new toxicities as computer waste is dumped into landfills or sent to developing countries for dismantling, exposing families to toxic metals.

**Energy.** Increasingly over the past century, most of our energy has come from non-renewable coal, oil, and natural gas. As these resources become less accessible, it takes more energy and more risk to mine them. Wars are being fought over access. As the population increases and as more people prosper, demand and competition are rising.

**Climate change.** According to environmental scientists worldwide, other problems pale next to the swiftly growing crisis of global climate change, signaled by severe weather events such as heat waves, droughts, deluges, winds, and hurricanes. Immediate, broadscale energy conservation measures and development of renewable energy can prevent destruction of life as we know it. Though scientists agree that the problems are severe but solvable, political debates—especially in the United States—continue to stall meaningful action.

**TO DWELL IS TO SERVE**

As humans we can cure these ills, but only if we accept the challenge of change. We tend toward inertia, toward thinking that whatever we grew up with was normative, even our God-given right. In the United States we have believed in unlimited resources and ever-increasing wealth, yesterday’s luxuries becom-
changed relationships with both Jews and Gentiles. Scripture is filled with such turning points. And so is modern history. Consider the abolition of the slave trade and of slavery in the nineteenth century, and the continuing struggle against human trafficking around the world today. This struggle is not over, but we have made progress. The ongoing pursuit of women’s equality and rights has taken many generations, but our lives are different today from those even fifty years ago. Important environmental gains also mark the last two generations in much of the world, even as we face daunting global ecological challenges ahead.

But the combined power of religion and science of which Wilson speaks, and the lessons of the Bible itself, remind us that the human experience consists of significant turns away from destructive prior norms and toward greater justice and responsibility. Today humanity is called to make such a turn, consonant with the meaning and potential of our own creation. Faith and hope tell us that we can answer that call—that concerned individuals, businesses, and governments acting together can change human behavior and serve the living planet, the Eden in which we dwell.

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NOTES

4. See, for example, the discussions of religious texts in B. Taylor, ed., The Encyclopedia


12. Much has come to light about the ancient worldview underlying the dual notions of “image of God” and “dominion” found in Genesis 1. Ancient kings, viewed as “divine image-bearers, appointed representatives of God on earth,” placed statues, or images, of themselves throughout their empires to remind subjects of their presence. P. Enns, The Evolution of Adam: What the Bible Does and Doesn’t Say about Human Origins (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2012), xv.

13. The New Revised Standard Version and New International Version follow the ancient Syriac translation and the opinions of a large number of scholars in restoring the three-letter word meaning “wild animals (of the earth)” to verse 26 (as in verse 25), rather than reading “all (the earth),” which abruptly interrupts the list of species.

14. Other observations that may be made about Genesis 2 include a more equal and egalitarian understanding of the relationship between the humans and animals of the garden than interpreters have read, since “helper” in Hebrew (used to describe God in the Psalms) does not connote “assistant,” and even naming does not imply superiority, but rather the human preference for speech. In Genesis 16:13, even God is renamed by a human, a homeless pregnant woman named Hagar.


16. Ibid., 27.
THREE DISTINGUISHING FEATURES

If you have not read *Making Nature Whole*, then it is doubtful that you have yet heard of ecocentric restoration. This would not necessarily be due to unfamiliarity with conservation literature or practice; it is because Jordan and Lubick invented the term. (Inventing terminology seems to come naturally to Jordan, who—with his colleague, Keith Wendt—was also responsible for coining the term “restoration ecology” in 1977.) When we spoke recently, Jordan told me that he and Lubick intended that the epigraph for *Making Nature Whole* would be “Brave the distinctions.” The phrase, taken from an editorial by *New Republic* editor Leon Wieseltier, wound up being misplaced in production, but was to have signaled to the reader that the book would insist on the distinction between self-interested and other-oriented conservation practices and, perhaps more provocatively, the importance of those distinctions in developing these practices as performing arts—that is, contexts for dramatizing the “otherness” of the natural world.

Braving the distinctions, then, the authors assert that ecocentric restoration is a distinctive game to be playing with nature, a symbolic performance of sorts that involves at least three distinguishing features: (1) a “self-conscious encounter with nature as other” (nature goes on without our help, and its purpose is not centered on us), (2) proactive engagement that makes us deeply aware of human influences on ecosystems, and (3) a form of tribute (to nature’s intrinsic value, in which all the parts—not just the convenient ones—are restored)—that is, a giving back in full knowledge that this giving will never be sufficient. Jordan and Lubick observe that ecocentric restoration is also an idea “that takes shape pretty naturally once the key elements—concern for the old ecosystems, a sense of historical time, perhaps a bit of nostalgia, the idea of restoration as redemptive, and ecology—come together” (84).

But ecocentric restoration is clearly not the only
land management game in town. One way to divvy up the ecosystem management pie is to picture a large slice that represents what the authors call meliorative land management. This would include any form of land or water remediation or restoration that focuses on improving the status or condition of a valued species or habitat (be this for financial reasons, or for aesthetic enjoyment, or to avoid legal repercussions, as might be the case in the creation of a wetland to “replace” one that has been destroyed). There may be many motives for meliorative management, but the benefit to humans drives the practice.

An even larger slice of the pie would be represented by “working landscapes” that are cared for with a long-term interest in their sustainability or as an amenable site of human habitation. Selective logging might be an example of this, or an organic farm with a conservation easement, or rotational cattle grazing that protects surface water and stream banks.

Another pie slice would be represented by a more hands-off, preservationist approach, based on the idea of “untrammelled” wilderness—lands that are minimally managed and protected from certain forms of human use (though as Jordan and Lubick rightly insist, these lands are not protected from environmental change or “ecological drift”).

A small sliver of pie now remains in our metaphorical pie tin. Actually, in deference to the authors—who compare ecocentric restoration to a Sabbath practice (173,188), in which work for material gain ceases and one honors the intrinsic (or God-given) “otherness” of creation—let us say that one-seventh of the pie remains. This one-seventh is ecocentric restoration, a type of restoration practice that is distinguished by its insistence “on the literal re-creation of a previously existing ecosystem, including not just some but all its parts and processes” as well as “an ongoing attempt to compensate for novel or ‘outside’ influences on it in such a way that it continues to behave or can resume behaving as if these influences were not present” (2). Or as the authors describe this—admittedly impossible—task elsewhere, importing “the [ecological] past back into the present” (117).

What unites all of these land-management practices—what makes them pieces of the same “pie”—is that they are all responses to unwanted and/or undesirable ecosystem change. But the authors are more interested in what divides the pie than in what unites it. The book, as I mentioned, is about “braving the distinctions,” and Jordan and Lubick stake out their ground in no uncertain terms: “As self-conscious creatures, humans experience the world as something they are both part of and apart from. That being the case, if the aim of environmentalism is to provide the means for negotiating a healthy relationship with the environment, then it has to provide psychologically effective ways of dealing with both aspects of this experience. From this perspective there are just two forms of land management: ecocentric restoration and all the others” (5).

"[The] fourth dimension [of environmental restoration] is the dimension of imagination, performance, and meaning, the why of what we do as we directly confront our deep dependence on nature as well as the limitations of our own ability to manipulate it..."

Making Nature Whole makes many important—indeed, unique—contributions to the ongoing articulation about what restoration is and why it is valuable. Perhaps foremost among these contributions is that it skillfully traces the social history of the idea of ecocentric restoration, offering “a story not of a great watershed and wild surmise but of stepping-stones, of seat-of-the-pants experiments, modest insights, and small
realizations, not by one or two but by dozens and even hundreds of people” (38). The story arc is one that includes modest pioneering attempts and fruitful starts at ecocentric restoration in the early part of the twentieth century; a decades-long period of neglect from the 1940s to the 1970s in institutional contexts (e.g., the National Parks Service, The Nature Conservancy); and the emergence of community-based restoration programs during the 1980s and 1990s, which the authors highlight as ecocentric restoration’s coming-of-age as a communal experience. Along the way, the reader is treated to insightful commentary on how and why the story of the UW-Arboretum has become an “origin myth” for restoration (75-83); an exploration of Aldo Leopold’s recreational restoration with his family at “the Shack” (87-93), which strikes me as a novel contribution to Leopold scholarship; interesting material about the early experimental efforts of Paul Shepard in the 1950s, which anticipated future volunteer-based restoration in the Chicago region (108-113); and convincing arguments about why tallgrass prairies in particular acted as “a prominent incubator and proving ground for ecocentric restoration . . . in its most ambitious form” (108), which helps explain the vigor of the restoration “culture” characteristic of the Midwest (38, 80-81,122,138). In recent decades, Jordan and Lubick argue, the proliferation of citizen-based ecocentric restoration groups has “constituted a kind of revolution in the organizations and communities involved,” for it has become a way “to connect large numbers of people with old ecosystems, linking ecology with sociology and history.” Restoration has thus moved beyond an eccentric or specialist form of land management toward a practice “involving thousands of people who work to restore endangered native ecosystems in their neighborhoods or in parks, preserves, and other public lands” (179).

**PART AND APART**

Readers of Making Nature Whole are sure to gain an expanded appreciation for the various tributaries that feed into the idea of ecocentric restoration, and its subtitle, “A History of Ecological Restoration,” is not false advertising. A history it is. But Making Nature Whole is also equal parts sociology and moral anthropology. It is the latter subject—what makes us human and how arguments about restoration’s goals and practices reflect this—that makes the book utterly unconventional.

For if one layer of Making Nature Whole is about the emergence of different forms of ecological restoration (before this practice had a name) over the last one hundred years, a deeper stratum of the book points to a perennial human problem: how to humbly and respectfully negotiate our relationships with non-human “others” whose interests may not now or ever be compatible with our own. Ecocentric restoration, the attempt to restore all the “parts” of a living system, provides a direct means for confronting the question: “How does a society come to transcend this apparently natural anthropocentrism, ethnocentrism or self-centrism and to recognize or confer value not only on the members of the community made valuable by their familiarity but also on the unfamiliar other?” (18). Jordan and Lubick remark that, in this respect, ecocentric restoration offers “a way of carrying out one of humankind’s most ancient tasks” (179).

I turned the last page convinced that ecocentric restoration does indeed describe a distinctive way of engaging the “otherness” of nature—and does, as the authors contend, confer its own set of values and deserve its own label. There is a provocative tension in the book regarding the human experience of apartness (from nature) as a necessary precondition to
bringing a system back (14-15). Indeed, the authors write that the “objectification of nature [is] essential to ecological restoration” (34), for it is necessary to perceive nature from “outside” in order to comprehend the extent and degree of human impacts upon it. (Such consciousness, I would assume, may even precipitate acute feelings of alienation that, in turn, provide the ethical impetus to reconnect or more justly relate to nature.)

The book focuses on the history of an idea, and tracing this idea is an imaginative exercise that requires a partial “view from above.” But ecocentric restoration did not emerge from brains in glass jars—it came about as a response to real places, by real bodies in place, from people who became invested in renewing relations between humans and non-human species that share (or once shared) a particular history. The success of volunteer restoration efforts—what may be seen as the emergence of a culture of restorationists, which *Making Nature Whole* tracks so well—is dependent on physical expressions of care for local places.

At the heart of ecocentric restoration’s distinctive value, then, is a place-based physicality that should not be overlooked. If it is true, as Jordan and Lubick argue, that ecocentric restoration depends on an objectifying gaze—the human capacity to see the forest for the trees, so to speak—then it should not be lost that the practice of ecocentric restoration does not happen by telepathy. As helpful and as necessary as it is to step back and ponder the history of a changing landscape, we can never really step out of our physical and social entanglement with the natural world; ecocentric restoration is not merely a mind game.

**SWEATY SACRIFICES**

I’d like to speculate on a couple of ways in which place and body matter deeply to ecocentric restoration—not as a corrective to the book so much as a complement, a way of indicating one productive direction that the conversation about ecocentric restoration could travel.

It’s sometimes painful to wake up for a restoration workday, occasionally awkward to join with others in this common task, and often physically demanding. Anthropologist Laura DeLind refers to such bodily investment in community-building as “sweaty sacrifices.” This is the demanding work that binds a community together, that creates a sense of “we-ness.” It would be wrong to read “community” as only the bleary-eyed group of humans that gather on Saturday or Sunday to clear out invasive honeysuckle or fill Hefty bags with garlic mustard. This community includes the land. The land doesn’t just shape people in a poetic or metaphorical sense; it also physically shapes individual bodies. Buckthorn-scratched forearms. Raised welts from poison oak. Twisted shoulders. Overtaxed lumbar. Torn clothing. Maybe even a couple of burn scars from stray brush-pile ashes. This kind of giving of oneself creates relationship; restorationists in a sense are responding to the landscape’s gifts by giving a small measure of themselves, in body and mind. If heavy is the head that wears the crown, as the old saying goes, then calloused are the hands that hold the loppers.

As *Making Nature Whole* makes clear, ecocentric restoration is clearly something other than a naïve nature Romanticism. There are beautiful odes to nature, as there are to lovers. But ecocentric restoration thrusts a person beyond a naïve love; it embroils one in the difficult work of navigating the relationship between self/other, human/nature, objectivity/subjectivity, and rational evaluation and empathic vulnerability. There is potential value here for a love that has much greater depth than star-struck fawning—because it is tested; because it asks something of us; because it demands our sacrificing something of ourselves to discover something greater.

These sweaty sacrifices are balanced by the pleasures derived from self-abnegation—in momentarily
transcending one’s own limited self-interests, the spirit swells. These pleasures may include the experience of running one’s fingers through the silky hairs of Indian grass; marveling at the vivid purple petals of a coneflower or spiderwort; learning to read the history of a landscape by recognizing its plant associations; sensing the seasonal cycle through the caress and smell of the wind; gathering the offerings of rare plants and sowing seeds in areas bereft of them; feeling one’s muscles harden as they are shaped by resistance; and exploring what has been in a landscape and imagining what could be there with enough care and attention. We, in essence, can discover who we are by relating (bodily) to where we are.

A growing literature (especially among philosophers, geographers, and conservation psychologists) on “bodies as placeholders”—and humans as bodies in place—would be useful in further considering the distinctive value of ecocentric restoration. Much of this literature reflects a deep dissatisfaction with Western “modernist” narratives, in which consciousness-blessed human subjects manipulate a world of objects, and the dualisms of mind and body, culture and nature, spirit and matter are presumed. Indeed, there are those who argue that the only way to approximate objectivity is through greater inclusion of diverse subjectivities—what Donna Haraway calls “situated knowledges,” and others have named intersubjectivity, relational epistemology, or vernacular ethics.

I suspect that many of us need a way to effectively respond to the gift (Jordan and Lubik call it the “given-ness”) of nature. We need a way to craft an etiquette, develop a way of being, and process a way of thinking about the land with our hands. We become aware of landscape change—and the extent and depth of those changes—by involving our bodies. Indeed, it could be that, as philosopher Jim Cheney has written, “the body is the instrument of our knowledge of the world” and “the inscribing of the nervous system in the landscape” is the ground out of which understandings of self and community, myth and culture, emerge.

If this is true, then the means of restoration are as important as the ends. Though it might be more expedient to hire contract laborers with heavy machinery to restore a site (an “engineering paradigm”), the involvement of local citizens in long-term restoration provides a context for cultivating more than merely land. Meaningful relationships are invited, forged, and restored in such places, providing opportunities to experience nature as a trans-active event, a socio-ecological system, and a biocultural process. Ecocentric restoration, understood in these terms, can be construed as a series of faithful responses to place (see Van Wieren for an interesting related discussion of restoration as a “public spiritual practice”).

A remarkable number of groups of volunteer restorationists currently labor in the Chicago metropolitan area, the region I inhabit. These are people who care deeply about their local woods, savannas, prairies, fens, and other ecosystems. They carry on and nurture the tradition of citizen science, or what at another time in history was the valued tradition of polymath-amateur-naturalists. They are maven of local landscapes, village elders, and medicine women and men. Among these people, I have met those who know the Latin binomials of hundreds of plants; they can discuss soil types and hydrology in historical perspective; they can touch glaciers through imagination; they can identify bird species by the trill of a few notes. In ecocentric restoration of the kind Jordan and Lubick discuss in their book, ideally, one becomes a part of an embodied and ongoing conversation with the landscape and its human inhabitants. This dialectic involves a faithful commitment to a landscape’s history and its possibilities, and this give-and-take, push-and-pull, changes...
not only the land to be restored but the people participating in the restoration.

So to return to the question with which I began: Why is it worthwhile to restore an ecosystem? Why should a person or a group of people put time and effort into such activities if change is the only constant? I would argue this: because it implicates us as participants, partners, and co-creators in the well-being of living systems, prompting questions about our role in the destruction or alteration of parts or all of a landscape and directly engaging us in more-than-human worlds. What may be regarded as disposable—those woods over there, that patch of weeds between buildings, that field by the construction site—becomes known as a place with its own history and with a history that we, with our bodies, consciously or unconsciously direct. In short, we become more attuned to what we are: related.

As Jordan and Lubick repeatedly assert, no one type of land management is sufficient to meet all ecological or social needs, and the demands of ecocentric restoration may limit the breadth of its appeal. I entertain visions, however, of ecocentric restoration becoming a more widely practiced public expression of a bioregional ethic (as does Jordan, elsewhere8). (And as long as I’m dreaming, how about zoning ordinances that allow “ecocentric commons” for each neighborhood, and where feasible, between towns and cities?) If such visions are compelling, it is worth exploring how ecocentric restoration intersects with placemaking—how the process of becoming part of place may involve concerted, long-term efforts to return all the other non-human denizens of that place. Making Nature Whole provides a magnificent cartography for why “it is arguably by way of just such small, symbolic projects, which reduce effective work to an expressive act, that people negotiate the inner transformation of mind and spirit on which the fate of the world ultimately depends”(212; 194-199). No doubt the work of Jordan’s “Values Roundtable”9 will begin to provide topographical relief for that map. Having been given such a solid foundation in Making Nature Whole, perhaps it is appropriate now to shift metaphors from the visual to the haptic10—what we touch and are touched by—for as Jordan and Lubick state, “the clearest expression of the value of this work for the people involved is not yet in print but on the ground” (179).

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NOTES

CHN BOOKSHELF

A regular feature calling attention to important books and articles that CHN staff, board, and collaborating scholars are reading and recommend. *Quot libros, quam breve tempus.*


B. R. Barber, If Mayors Ruled the World: Dysfunctional Nations, Rising Cities (Yale University Press, 2013)


S. Feinstein, The Just City (Cornell University Press, 2011)

K. J. Gergen, Relational Being: Beyond Self and Community (Oxford University Press, 2009)


A. Honneth, The I in the We (Polity Press 2012)


M. Z. Stange, Woman the Hunter (Beacon Press, 1997)

TIME TO LOVE

EARTH AND ITS MEMBERS ARE SUFFERING catastrophically, reflecting the domination of some over others imposing simplistic desires for generating money over truly enriching ones for all unique life.

—Julianne Lutz Warren
    *Becoming City in Five Short Acts*

The time to love is now. Now, while we can choose how to live and how to die. Now, with beauty apparent: breathe, look, touch, savor, and listen. Listen to learn, for you cannot love what you do not know. You can control, contain, and even kill, but you cannot love without first learning.

The strongest acts of love are grounded in the most intimate knowledge of well-being for another because love—despite all the cultural confusion and carelessness surrounding it—is doing the best for what we value the most with no expectation of return; only the sincere hope that with loving, what we value will thrive.

Love offers a way of living beyond mere survival, our salvation from selfishness, our connection to community.

When we set aside the words that beguile us, what would we give more for than life? Life, in which cicadas hum; life, in which wild roses climb; life, wending in seasons and cycles, flowing between the illusory dichotomies that separate us. What is more precious than life that draws us together, except for death that allows us to live?

A year ago I was called to extract a baby bird from a warehouse. The nest was far out of reach, wedged between rafters and roof. The tiny bird had tumbled from thirty feet aloft onto concrete and was amazingly, in the moment, alive. It seemed either a miracle or a mistake. I took the bird home, prepared to bring it to a wildlife clinic the next day. He died overnight. I opened the small cardboard box the next morning to discover his limp body, nested in terrycloth. With a clenched jaw I turned and left the dead bird in his box on the porch. Despite the inevitability of it all, I didn’t want to begin my day with a burial. Last year I told stories that had endings. I thought primarily in lines.

It was early summer, and the warmth of that season stimulates life. That evening, I carried the box out to the yard where I’d made a small grave behind the asters. Looking through the cracks between the cardboard I spied the bird’s wing moving. My mind was suddenly awash in adrenaline—was I so inattentive to have mistaken sleep for death? But he was so limp, so lifeless . . . I pulled back the flaps prepared to witness a miracle and saw life plainly: the bird, dead as before, dead but moving with the life of a whole larval community. Life animating death. Death animating life? It was difficult to discern the difference as the bird’s body wriggled, its head bobbing gently. The beautiful, unsung dance of life embracing life. Mortality uplifted.

Our lives spring from love: the sacrifice of a limited world of life. In this context, death can be an act of love. From the vantage point of survival, death holds no potential for us. But within the broad community of life, death is a gift. When we fear death and scheme to survive perhaps it is because we have forgotten how beautiful death can be, knit back into
life. Once my grandmother’s body would have nourished the soil, nourishing the life on which my family lives.

Instead we box death up and stare at it strangely. We do not see how it relates to us, to our lives. We talk about ends. We look only to take, forgetting that to take you must also give. This is not abstract poetry. It’s the way life happens. We are each soil and stars and millions of microbes bound together by acts of love, gifts of sacrifice. We can survive or we can thrive. It’s all in the action.

Love does not arise out of letters. It cannot be activated by words. It’s not something you say, it is something you do—whether for a patch of prairie, a barred owl, a brother, or a shore pine. The sacrifices we make for the well-being of another, the sacrifices we make for what we value. This fundamental act of being in community, love, binds us through and despite all.

As humans we have constructed a parallel world of words. We wrap ourselves in language so much that we cannot always feel what we touch. We thought up this word, love, that distracts us from loving. We decided on love in our minds, forgetting that love is part of matter. Love is possible in every action, present in every being.

Anthropologists discuss emic and etic perspectives in their fieldwork—the difference between understanding a culture from within and without. Can we cultivate an anthropological approach to love where we set aside our etic conceptions, ourselves—focusing on understanding and acting in the interest of the emic, the other? Doing what we know to do, giving what we have. We cannot love without sacrifice, and we cannot live without death.

And yet, we deny death’s role in our lives. We dismiss the dying. We are prepared to lose the greater part of life’s diversity, for what exactly? Convenience? Fear? We have invented a word, biophilia, but how can we apply this term when what we do does not love life? Hiding out from mortality, clinging to a cult of our own creation, we think too much, talk too much, listen little, observe even less.

It is autumn. Walking with my dog through the forest I am reminded of just how useless words are in a world of shadow, snap, crunch, smell. She bounds ahead, reading stories written across the trail in various strengths of stench. Stories without endings. At the base of an oak she pauses, burrowing her nose through the leaf layers, sniffing and snorting, interpreting a scene long since past, etched in odor, transformed over time. “What is it, girl?” I say, in that futile way people talk at other animals, to relate on human terms, taking the familiar “etic” approach.

I crouch beside her. With deep breaths I inhale an inch above the earth. I cannot sense the importance of this particular mix of moss-bark-rotting leaf-soil. I can barely sense the specifics of the odor at all. But it must be meaningful because she stands fixed with her nose against the ground awhile longer.

I gaze skyward. Bare branches etch over the clear blue wash of sky beyond. I lean back, a wet, matted leaf tapestry molding my head, crisp edges caressing my ear. A woodpecker’s drumming punctuates the murmuring of movement in the leaf litter and underground. I marvel at the full, diverse expressions of life.
in this place. It takes more than one species, more than one language, more than one life to comprehend it all.
Forum on Ethics and Nature

A Cascade of Loss, an Ethics of Recovery

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