

Chapter 13. Yes, to Honor and Celebrate the Earth and Earth's Systems.

Thomas Berry, "The Great Work"

We have created a disruption so great that we have closed down the Cenozoic era, a lyrical period in Earth's history. To recover from this disruption, we must return to an intimacy with the Earth. This requires a new story of the universe, a science-based story, in which humans are part of the creative flowering of the universe, a means through which the universe celebrates itself. Our Great Work is to transition into the Ecozoic era, when humans are present on the Earth as participating members of a comprehensive Earth community.

Reading Questions

1. Why was the Cenozoic the most lyrical period in Earth's history? Why can no later generation do to the Earth what we have done?
2. What is the universe's story? What is the story's moral significance?
3. Berry make some astounding claims. Do you agree or disagree with the following? If you agree, tell a story that illustrates the insight.
 - a. "We are most ourselves when we are most intimate with the rivers and mountains and woodlands" (p. 398).
 - b. "However we think of eternity, it can only be an aspect of the present" (p. 398).
 - c. "The universe is fulfilled in us" (p. 398).
 - d. "The human might be described as that being in whom the universe reflects on and celebrates itself" (p. 398).
4. What is our Great Work? Are we equal to it?

N. Scott Momaday, "An Ethic of the Earth"

What is the world in relation to our daily lives? Who are we, we humans, in relation to the Earth and the sky? These are the questions we must answer, by concentrating on a particular remembered Earth, a landscape in which we have lived, in which we have felt the wind. This is how we will come to moral terms. There is no alternative.

Reading Questions

1. Tell a story about who you are in relation to the Earth and sky.
2. Tell a story about the place where your grandmother was born. What is lost to you if this knowledge is lost?
3. Tell a story about the first time you saw a falling star.
4. How do stories like this help us “come to moral terms”?

Curt Meine, “Spring’s Hopes Eternal”

Every year, winter has given way to spring, this season of new starts and wonderfully ungrounded hope. But as our actions have changed the geography of spring, so they have changed the phenology of hope. And as spring becomes increasingly a human artifact, so too will hope. We will have to *make* hope. We will have to generate it from the human heart. Heaven help us all.

Reading Questions

1. How have we lost the pure innocence of spring and the easiness of hope?
2. In what way is hope now a human artifact?
3. How can we create hope? What are the building blocks? Or, to use a new metaphor, what are the roots from which it grows? This is a serious question if the absence of hope immobilizes us and causes us to abdicate moral responsibility.

Linda Hogan, “Dawn for All Time”

As the dance of the deer reminds us, we are participants in the world, in the universe. What we do changes things. And just as our actions have changed things in deeply divisive, hurtful ways, our actions can also reconnect us and renew the world. Somewhere in the past, there is the memory of a healthy future. If we live well, it will welcome us.

Reading Questions

1. “Our ancestors survived in order for us to be here, and we have a debt to them” (p. 408), Hogan says. Write a letter to an ancestor, thanking him or her for striving so hard for your sake.
2. Beyond a thank-you note, what are some good ways to acknowledge our debts to our ancestors?
3. If Hogan is right, then somewhere in your past are “the deep channels of memory, the dream water, the tender shoots of green, and the welcome magic of continuing” (p. 409). The welcome magic of continuing! Is that what is at stake? Is that what moves us to act?

Mary Evelyn Tucker and Brian Swimme, “The Universe Story and Planetary Civilization”

For the first time, we have a scientific story of the evolution of the universe that shows us our place in its great creative unfolding. This story shifts our worldview. We are not alone and isolated on a half-submerged planet; rather, we are part of the vast scale of interdependence and kinship of the developing universe. The challenge for ethics and religion is to reflect on our own journey of change and reimagine ourselves as members of the Earth community.

Reading Questions

1. What is the Great Turning?
2. What is the challenge for religion and ethics?
3. Here is a mind-bender: "The energy released at the very beginning has finally become capable, in the human, of reflecting on and exploring its own journey of change" (p. 416). Using other words, explain this fact to a friend. What is its significance?

Ethics Background: What is the is-ought problem?

Can the way the world is tell us how the world *ought* to be? Can the fact that wolves exist tell us that wolves ought to exist? Can the beauty of the Earth tell us that it *ought* to be preserved? Philosophers ever since David Hume have said, No, you can't derive an *ought* from an *is*. In other words, you can't draw a conclusion about what ought to be the case if your only evidence is a set of facts about what is empirically true. If you do so—if you try to argue that certain moral values or moral imperatives follow logically from facts about the world—you are said to have committed the *Naturalistic Fallacy*. This is the *is-ought problem*.

So what are we to do if certain facts about the world seem to have moral import? The astonishment of the Earth is one such fact. The uniqueness of life on Earth, the wonder of its unfolding, the sheer improbability of it, its powerful creativity—all these facts seem to call us to a moral response characterized by wonder, respect, and responsible use. Is that fallacious thinking?

No, at all. A moral imperative does indeed follow logically from a set of facts if you also affirm a moral principle that relates them. The creativity of the universe and the astounding fertility of the Earth (the *is*) do call us to a moral response (the *ought*) if we also affirm the moral premise that connects the two: In our actions, we ought to honor the creativity and fertility of the Earth.

It seems that often, when we respond morally to a set of facts, we are implicitly affirming a moral principle that makes the connection between the way the world is and the way it ought to be. When the beauty of the Earth calls us to protect it, we affirm the moral principle that it's wrong to destroy what is beautiful. When the love we feel for a place calls us to defend it against destruction, we affirm the moral principle that we ought to protect the object of our love. When the prospect that climate change will eliminate many species (those that are still left after we get done destroying their habitats) calls us to reduce greenhouse gases, we affirm the moral principles that it's wrong to wreck the Earth and that taking what we want for our profligate lives and leaving an impoverished and dangerously unstable world for those who will follow is not worthy of us as moral beings.

So if a person tells you that you can't derive an *ought* from an *is*, you can tell them that you can indeed. Of course you can—if you are willing to take a moral stand about what it means to respond decently and responsibly to the facts about this beautiful Earth and its terrible peril.

Activity / Application: The Journey of the Universe

Watch the film *The Journey of the Universe* by Brian Swimme and Mary Evelyn Tucker. It is available from Amazon and other outlets.

Imagine that you are present at the premiere of this film and have been asked to make a few remarks after the film, exploring its significance. What would you say?

Then consider this set of remarks, delivered by *Moral Ground* coeditor Kathleen Dean Moore:

I have heard it said that even the most tragic and dreadful circumstances give rise to the conditions of their own healing. It may be that we are witnessing this tonight. In a time of terrible peril, here is a new story about who we are and what we must do. This is a great gift to us.

There are three great questions of the human condition: What is the world? What is the place of humans in the world? How, then, shall we live? Brian Swimme and Mary Evelyn Tucker have taken on all of them from the cosmological to the ethical.

Tonight, I want to call attention to the profound moral significance of *Journey's* undertaking, to call attention to the fact that this story about the universe is also a story about who we are when we are at our best.

I believe that this is its central argument (if I may try to summarize *The Journey of the Universe* in one sentence): If this is the way the world is—beautiful, astonishing, mysterious, enfolding and unfolding, grand beyond words, wonderful beyond imagining—then this is the way we ought to live in the world—with awe, with wonder, with gratitude and celebration, with respect, reverence, profound humanity, and caring.

From what is, we can learn what ought to be.

Some people say you can't deduce an ought from an is, that you can't reach a conclusion about what you ought to do from factual premises, no matter how complete. But of course you can. Of course you can, if you are willing to affirm the missing premises, the unspoken moral convictions that link a story of the universe with a moral story. What are those premises?

- The conviction that it is wrong to take what we need for our comfortable, profligate lives, and leave a ransacked and dangerously unstable world behind.
- The conviction that to let it all slip away, through indifference or recklessness or (god forbid) higher priorities, to let it all slip away—the billions of years it takes to grow the song in a frog and the purple stripe in the throat of a lily—that's an abomination, not worthy of us as moral beings.
- The conviction that we have affirmative moral obligations to leave a world as rich in creative possibilities as our own—obligations based on justice, compassion, personal integrity, and reverence.
- And the conviction that our moral obligations trump every economic argument and every appeal to short-term advantage and corporate rights.

If we affirm these principles, and if we understand what Mary Evelyn and Brian have shown us, then we cannot fail to act to protect this beautiful Earth and still call ourselves moral beings.

Mary Evelyn asked me to speak from the heart, and I will, but it's a broken heart that's talking here. But maybe that's as it should be, because maybe only a heart broken open is big enough to hold the import of the universe story.

Grief is essential, because it is a measure of the worth of what we stand to lose, and shame is a measure of what we have to ask of ourselves.

The Canadian songwriter Leonard Cohen said in an interview, "Yes, we live in a broken world, with broken hearts, but that's no excuse for anything. We have to sing a broken-hearted halleluiah."

That what this film is—a beautiful, ringing halleluiah chorus for a broken time. It says, "Look! Just look at the astonishing fact of this universe and our participation in its creative unfurling. Hold that in your mind. Imagine! Rejoice."

The beauty and the healing of this story—the healing of the rifts in our lives and hearts—call us to what is best in ourselves. The film calls us to recover a sense of wonder and joyous astonishment. It calls us to humility. It calls us to a new intimacy, even with a universe on this grand a scale, to know, in this sacred story, that we belong here, part of the world's unfolding, like the leaves of the corn lily, or the crinkled wings of a dragonfly. It calls us, above all, to gratitude. That we are alive in the midst of all this life. That we are breathing, in the midst of all these breaths, the in and the out.

We didn't earn these gifts. If they were taken away, there would be nothing we could do to get them back. They are gifts. So we are called to live our lives gladly—in full acknowledgment of the magnificence of the gifts of the universe.

If these aren't the virtues that will carry us forward, I don't know what will.

Chapter 14. Yes, Because Our Moral Integrity Requires Us to Do What is Right.

Ernest Partridge, “Moral Responsibility Is the Price of Progress”

If you know the harm you are causing, if there are options to do otherwise, if you have the ability to choose those options, and if the stakes are high, then you have the moral responsibility to make different choices. Given this analysis and given the facts of climate disruption, the burden of responsibility on our generation is unprecedented. There are no excuses.

Reading Questions

1. What are the elements of responsibility? Illustrate each with an example.
2. List the guidelines for our policies toward future generations. Now choose one and consider:
 - a. Give an example of something we are doing now that violates those guidelines.
 - b. Give an example of one change you would need to make in your life to follow those guidelines.
- c. Try to make the argument that you shouldn't have to make that change. Refute yourself.

Terry Tempest Williams, “Climate Change: What Is Required of Us?”

The nonviolent, compassion-driven movements of our past establish the need for passionate, direct-action responses to climate change. We must use our heart as the “path to wisdom because it dares to be vulnerable in the presence of power” (p. 431) and evokes change within each of us to stop waiting and act now.

Reading Questions

1. One of the most difficult decisions that climate change activists have to make is whether to encourage young people to acts of civil disobedience. What do you think?
2. Think of the collective actions that have actually changed the course of American history. What do they have in common? What does that tell us about how to make effective change?
3. Ask Terry's question (p. 431): “Do we have enough resolve in our hearts to act courageously, relentlessly, without giving up—ever?”

David James Duncan, “Being Cool in the Face of Global Warming”

To find peace on the planet, maybe we need to find peace within ourselves. To heal the planet, maybe we need to heal ourselves. To cool the planet, maybe we need to bank the fires in our own agitated, news-blasted hearts.

Reading Questions

1. Imagine a conversation between David James Duncan and Sulak Sivaraksa, the advocate of socially engaged Buddhism (pp. 283–85).
2. How might Duncan respond to Sivaraksa’s claim (p. 284) that “politics without spirituality is cold and blind” and “spirituality without politics is simply inconsequential”?
3. Will cooling ourselves help cool the planet? Or does the work of cooling the planet require the most fired-up resolve?

Paul B. Thompson, “Everything Must Go”

What do you do once you figure out that we’ve made a mess of the planet and that we are, basically, screwed? Is there any comfort in the ongoing cycles of change, the endurance of equilibrium? Is there comfort in the beauty of the day?

Reading Questions

1. Paul Thompson presents probably the most pessimistic analysis of our situation. What are his central reasons for thinking “we’re screwed”?
2. Are we?
3. If so, how should we live now? What should we do?

Joerg Chet Tremmel, “The No-Man’s-Land of Ethics”

The “good neighbor” ethic, based on compassion and kinship, is no longer sufficient. The “bad neighbor” ethic, based on reciprocal limits on rights, is no longer sufficient. The enormous scope and power of humankind’s ability to change the Earth forever render compassion and mutual threats impotent. We have entered an ethical no-man’s-land.

Reading Questions

1. All empirical (and, Tremmel claims, ethical) knowledge—that is, all knowledge gained from experience—is based on the assumption that the future will resemble the past. So Tremmel raises an interesting point. If we are approaching a tipping point, where everything rapidly changes, how will we know how to act?
2. Can you think of any way that those who live in the next generations can impose sanctions on us for the harm we are doing to them today? Is there such a thing as postmortem shame?

José Galizia Tundisi, “The Advocacy Responsibility of the Scientist”

José Galizia Tundisi calls on today’s scientists to take the knowledge they gather about the Earth and actually use it as “a method for social transformation.” We need more than data, he notes; we need scientists to respond to their obligation to act and “be that change they want to see in the world” (p. 451).

Reading Questions

1. Scientists have made heroic efforts to inform the public about the predicted consequences of increased levels of greenhouse gases. No one can fault them on that, can they? Should scientists take responsibility for widely distributing their findings?
2. Okay. So, should they go beyond that? Should they advocate for reducing greenhouse gas emissions?
3. Does the practical syllogism in the Introduction to *Moral Ground* and in the introduction to this guide help explain the role of scientists?

Barbara Kingsolver, “How to Be Hopeful”

Our leaders fear taking action on climate change because it might hurt the economy. The same thing was said about slavery. Then, the people said, “We don’t care. You have to find another way. Enough of this shame” (p. 455). We can find other ways. The hardest part will be to convince ourselves of the possibilities and keep trying. “If you run out of hope at the end of the day, rise in the morning and put it on again with your shoes” (p. 456).

Reading Questions

1. Kingsolver has some fascinating things to say about the rules of success. For each of these, give an example from your own life:
 - a. The coefficient of drag
 - b. The Rule of Perfect Efficiency
 - c. The Rule of Escalating Isolation
 - d. The strategy of bait-and-switch
 - e. “Your money or your life”
2. How do you keep yourself going? How do you find hope in the morning?

Michael P. Nelson, “To a Future Without Hope”

Contrary to a common refrain when considering our current environmental situation, Michael Nelson urges us to empower and liberate ourselves by abandoning hope. He describes hope as a dangerous excuse for ignoring our resolve to act rightly and argues that we must abandon hope and replace it with integrity of action through living a moral life. Doing so, he says, will leave us “free to act rightly, because it is the right way to act and not because your action will move you or the world toward some future state” (p. 461).

Reading Questions

When students in an Oregon class were asked to vote for the reasons to take action on climate change that spoke most strongly to them, the polling resulted in this order of arguments, from the strongest to the weakest (the number is the chapter number):

- Because moral integrity requires us to do what is right (14)
- Because justice demands it (10)
- For the sake of the Earth itself (3)
- For the sake of all forms of life on the planet (4)
- Because the Earth is beautiful (11)
- To honor and celebrate the Earth and Earth systems (13)
- For the sake of the children (2)
- Because we love the Earth (12)
- To honor our duties of gratitude and reciprocity (5)
- Because virtue requires it (6)
- Because all flourishing is mutual (7)
- Because compassion requires it (9)
- For the sake of the survival of humankind [one lousy third-place vote] (1)
- For the stewardship of God's creation [no votes at all] (8)

1. What arguments spoke most strongly to you?
2. What would Michael Nelson say about the ranking given above?

Paul Hawken, "The Most Amazing Challenge"

"Forget that this task of planet-saving is not possible in the time required. Don't be put off by people who know what is not possible. Do what needs to be done, and check to see if it was impossible only after you are done" (p. 464).

Reading Question

Imagine you were asked to return to your high school or college to give the commencement address: what would you tell the graduating students about the future, about their role in that future, about their obligations as citizens of this world?

Ethics Background: What is integrity?

Don't we all want to think of ourselves as good people? Don't we all have a drive to be respected by others, but also, most important, to be able to respect ourselves? And could that be why we expend such extraordinary effort and creativity to tell ourselves stories about what we do, so that we can continue to do what we know is wrong, even as we think of ourselves as good people?

"I know I should walk to the grocery store instead of drive, but I have to be back in time to take Skye to her dance lessons, and am I not a good mother who keeps her promises?" "I know I have pledged not to eat beef, not while the beef industry continues to be one of the worst sources of greenhouse gases, but I am eating at a friend's house, and don't I owe her at least the courtesy of gratefully receiving this meal, so lovingly charred on her new propane grill?" So we continue to tell stories that justify actions that we know are contributing to the coming calamity. What kind of a mother is that? What kind of friend?

The opposite of *moral self-deception*, as described above, is *moral integrity*. Moral integrity is a matching, or wholeness, between what we believe is right and what we do. It is “walking the talk.” It is doing what is right because it is right—no justifications (“I guess what I thought was wrong is right after all”) or excuses (“I know it’s wrong, but I can’t help it”). Acting with moral integrity might create a better world (or might not), it might get you into heaven (or might not), it might make you a much happier person (and probably will)—but that’s not the point. The point is to create, through your actions, a person you respect. The point is to create, through your actions, a wholeness in a life that is often divided against itself. Integrate: from Latin, *integer*, “whole.” Integrity: from Latin, *integritas*, “soundness.” Soundness: from Old English, *gesund*, “health.”

Activity / Application 1: Tim DeChristopher’s decision

Acting as judge and jury, reach a decision in the *sentencing* of the following case.

The red-rock canyon country of southern Utah is some of the most beautiful and fragile land in America. It is also some of the most threatened by the oil and gas industries. When the federal government held an auction for leases that would permit oil and gas drilling on 110,000 acres of unspoiled desert, Tim DeChristopher, an economics major in college, was there. Sitting alongside representatives of powerful gas and oil interests, DeChristopher bid for, and won, 14 parcels worth \$1.8 million. The trouble was he didn’t have \$1.8 million. His goal was to disrupt the auction in order to protest the drilling and perhaps slow down the destruction.

Federal officials were not amused. DeChristopher’s unauthorized bid stopped the auction and created a national debate about oil and gas drilling in the red-rock canyon. The leases were canceled.

DeChristopher was charged with making false statements and interfering with an auction. His lawyers planned a defense based on the “doctrine of necessity,” which argues that an act that would otherwise be criminal conduct is justifiable if it prevents a worse harm. In this case, DeChristopher planned to argue that the dangers of climate disruption are so severe that illegal acts to prevent it are justified. The judge did not allow that defense. Supporters immediately raised the money to pay for the leases DeChristopher won at auction. Nonetheless, DeChristopher was convicted and sentenced to up to ten years in prison and \$750,000 in fines.

Activity / Application 2: Revisiting hope

Now, having studied *Moral Ground*, we can ask again: On a scale from 0 (There is no hope that we can prevent a catastrophic climate change) to 10 (What climate change? There’s no such problem), where are you positioned today, at the end of this class? How does that compare with where you started? Go around the class circle, telling your number and the reasons that led you to that position.

Activity / Application 3: Hypocrisy?

A 2008 survey of American adults' views and actions related to climate change turned up some surprising results. Ed Maibach and his colleagues reported the following:

- 18 percent of people are alarmed, convinced of the seriousness of global warming and taking steps to alter their behavior
- 33 percent are concerned but not taking action
- 19 percent are cautious, meaning they believe climate change is a problem but don't feel a sense of urgency about it
- 12 percent are doubtful
- 11 percent either don't know much about climate change or don't think it's a big problem
- 7 percent are dismissive, actively campaigning against a national response to climate change

Despite these differences in beliefs, there are no differences in the rate at which the groups conserved energy. Asked to explain the results, Yale University's Tony Leiserowitz suggested that alarmed people have been slow to take action, while others have found many reasons, apart from climate change, to conserve energy, including saving money.

What does this suggest about the integrity of those concerned about climate change? What does it suggest for strategies to reduce carbon emissions?