

# *Breath of the Universe*

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I live in the woods. I'd like to say I went there to live deliberately, but that's not true; we moved largely to get away from crowded roads and busy stores. But now that I'm there, my attention and my priorities have shifted and refocused. In the woods, I am a resident among many, all of whom live on the 5 acres we occupy. I am one of 32 visible animal species. Graham, Zachary and I share our space with turtles, foxes, pheasants, woodpeckers and wild turkeys, as well as oak and maple and cherry trees, some of which have been there for hundreds of years. Together we live on our shared land, each eating the Earth, each breathing the air that has kept us alive generation after generation.

Earth is ancient and vulnerable. About 4 billion years ago, our planet Earth formed around a star. For millions of years it cooled and over time the gasses rose above this young planet to form an atmospheric envelope of what we call greenhouse gases that protect Earth from the sun. Without these gases, Earth would be as cold as it is in outer space, but, acting like the panes of a greenhouse, they keep the warmth of the sun's light inside.

2 1/2 billion years ago, a group of microorganisms evolved a method of capturing the light from the sun and converting it into energy. This process of photosynthesis transformed the nature of life on this planet. Little by little, generation after generation, these microscopic plants performed their solar powered chemistry imperceptibly but inexorably creating the oxygen rich atmosphere we have today. Over an immense period of time, plants were established as dominant life forms on land and in the oceans, encouraging the growth of herbivore animals and soon the carnivores that ate them. For millennia, these animals and plants lived and died, piling carcasses upon the earth's crust that decomposed. Ultimately, those chains of carbon became the fossil fuels we utilize today.

Atmosphere stabilized with just the right amount of oxygen- 21%- to support life. At 25% the air would ignite and at 15% we'd suffocate. It's a delicate balance. Earth has reached a fragile stage of harmony and stability.

But over the past 150 years, change has been happening very quickly as human technology pushes the system. The photosynthesizing plants are crucial to maintaining the balance of oxygen and carbon in the atmosphere but the carbon being released by industry and transportation are tipping the scales rapidly in favor of carbon based air quality.

The plants and trees have been the breathing and sustaining force on this planet, creating a life-affirming balance of carbon, methane and oxygen unknown elsewhere in our solar system.

Now this balance is radically threatened. How is it possible that we have created a crisis of such magnificent proportions? The current and impending fatal alteration of Earth's atmosphere is only part of the degradation of the planet in which we have taken part. Half the world's oxygen producing tropical and temperate forests are now gone, half the wetlands, twenty percent of the corals and two thirds of the oceans are fished to capacity; deforestation continues at just over an acre a second, and there are almost two-hundred dead zones in the seas; one third of all fresh water fish are on the brink of extinction, twenty five percent of plants and amphibians, thirty five percent of birds and mammals, and everywhere Earth's ice fields are melting; species are disappearing a thousand times faster than ever. We are in an extinction spasm and the world of nature is disappearing by our own hand.

Ours is a moment of supreme crisis presenting an almost incomprehensible emergency, and now, for the sake of planetary survival, ecological thinking has to become the hallmark of the new millennium. Much of the public discourse focuses on the small picture - protecting individual rights to property ownership, creating initiatives that can survive United Nations negotiations, bringing our own bags to the supermarket - without acknowledgment of the massive crisis we're facing. Earth cannot wait. Our planet, our mother Gaia, which from her awesome beginnings has bountifully and mysteriously sustained the life of incalculable species, has been so

violated and exhausted by her most recent offspring that her own survival is now in our hands, we, her youngest and most reckless child.

The logic that led to slavery and colonization and the degradation of humans at various times in history is the same that has led to the destruction of the earth. It is the framework that suggests everything is in service to the dominant class. People who fight racism or sexism but don't extend the models of oppression to Earth are supporting the degradation of the planet and people who work for environmental sustainability but not socially sustainable models are supporting the dominant structure which will ultimately defeat Earth or, at the very least, will terminate her ability to maintain human life. The fight for justice is the fight for life in every form. The dismantling of the power structure of dominance is the dismantling of the same structure that dominates Earth.

Systems that support the dominant structure can be defined as prejudice + power. It is the use of power to isolate and exploit the Other. This isolation and exploitation is grounded in the belief that one is more important or more valuable than the Other. It confers privilege on the dominant group. Dominance is maintained by the legal, cultural, religious, educational, economic, political, environmental, and military institutions. The patterns of dominant culture, the culture that created and supported slavery, that committed genocide on the indigenous people of this continent, that institutionalized the repression of women for centuries, has also approached Earth with a power-over mentality.

Our instincts for social justice are necessary in the fight for planetary survival. The circle we're trying to redraw to include the people on the margins needs to be stretched wide enough to include Earth. Of course, the language of social justice, inclusion and civil rights alone might suggest that Earth be given the same rights for which we fight for the oppressed peoples of our planet. This brings us to an important question.

Do the trees have rights? Do the birds? Does the land?

"We can sense the tectonic plates of unsustainable commerce and insatiable consumption dangerously shifting beneath us. We realize in horror that it is not just an empire falling, but the platform of creation itself, falling under the weight of our wants, our greed, our ignorance and arrogance, our waste, our need, our mechanization, our militarization, our exponentially increasing population that stands at the top of a food chain on the verge of depletion. Our planet, once the support of all life, now herself needs life-support, and for the most part, until this moment, the generational cohorts of modernity—particularly our captains of industry and government—have been clueless. Now we face ecocide and find ourselves bereft of even the moral and legal categories to address it."<sup>i</sup>

So, do the trees have rights? It sounds like an absurd question. How can tree have rights if they can't speak for themselves? For millennia, the idea of slaves or women or children having rights seemed equally as absurd. They don't speak for themselves. They can't understand the issues. They are property. Of course, universities, corporations and states can't speak for themselves, but they have rights. And, they have lawyers. They don't need to speak for themselves. Those rights have been defined and protected.

Property, of course, doesn't have rights. We get rid of property as expeditiously as we like. There are no questions of morality involved. If I want to sell my house and the 5 acres on which it sits, I will. Not a moral issue. If the next owner would like to clear the land- plow down those 200 year old oaks and maples, he can. The only fight he might get is from my neighbors. They have rights. The trees do not. I'm not suggesting unlimited rights for every element of Earth. Children, after all, now have rights, but they don't have the right to vote. They do, however, have the right to exist, even if they can't speak or participate in their own defense.

An ethic of the land<sup>ii</sup> would affirm Earth's right to existence without interference. Our task is to convert our ethical categories to include Earth as a part of our community, to see ourselves not as victor or conqueror, but neighbor. Each species has the right to exist regardless of its benefit to us. As part of the community, no special interest has the right to eliminate another for the sake of a gain to itself. White cedar, Hemlock, Cypress and other trees are being bred out b/c they take too long to grow; they can't replenish fast enough to make using them economically feasible, so they are removed and replaced with faster growing species. Lack of economic value is an issue for entire biotic groups like marshes, bogs, dunes and deserts that are eliminated without thought when we decide we need a new housing development or mall or highway.

At the turn of the last century, there was a campaign to save the songbirds; the argument put forth and

seen as valid was that we needed to birds to eat insects or we'd be overrun. Bottom line- they should exist because there is a direct benefit for us. Not that they should exist because they are alive or because they are part of this glorious, wild and incomprehensible system that is our planet.

I believe that it is Martin Luther King's vision of the Beloved Community that will be our salvation. It is our ability to recognize our dramatic interconnectedness which is well illustrated by our atmosphere, our air.

I am in partnership with 5 acres of trees and fields and ferns and flowers in creating breathable air. All of us on this planet are actively sustaining the delicate balance in our atmosphere.

From our first cry at birth to the last sigh at death, our need for air is absolute. Every breath is a sacrament, an essential ritual physically linking us with all other beings on the planet, past, present and future.

Here in this Beloved Community, we are all caught in the same matrix of oxygen and the power of carbon monoxide, carbon dioxide and methane. We exist in a myth of independence, as if we are biologically separate from each other, but in reality, we are completely dependent and permanently connected to the other. Inside as well as outside, we are minutely designed for the central activity of our existence-drawing the atmosphere into the center of our being, deep into the moist, membranous labyrinth within our chests.

Take a deep breath.

In this sanctuary, we are breathing in the air that was expelled by the others in the room. We very quickly absorb atoms that were only moments ago integral parts of the body of someone else. It has been calculated that every person over the age of 20 has inhaled atoms released in the first breath of every child born the year before.

Chances are, your next breath will contain argon atoms exhaled by Gandhi during his long life. We are breathing in atoms of air exhaled by Yeats and Shakespeare, from the battle cries of the Children's Crusade and Normandy, even of snakes and birds and every other aerobic life form. The longer we live, the more likely that we'll absorb air released by Jesus and Siddhartha Gautama and William Ellery Channing and Neanderthals and woolly mammoths. As we breathe in our forebears, so our children and grandchildren will take us in with their breath.

We are inexorably, members of this Beloved Community, each with the other sitting in this room, each with the people in these Rivertowns and Westchester County and the State of New York and the USA, each with the peoples of the globe, of the past and present and future who have breathed or will breathe our oxygen rich atmosphere. We are members of this Beloved Community with the birds and the fish, the water and soil and trees. We are the life that formed over billions of years, the life that has been sustained by our powerful, mysterious and vulnerable planet Earth. And in our Beloved Community, we, that young reckless child, hold the potential for death or the continuation of life. Let's take a deep breath, adding our breath to each other's, and hope, as in that Pueblo Prayer, that our days may be long upon this earth<sup>iii</sup>.

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<sup>i</sup> (Kathleen Deignan, 2009)

<sup>ii</sup> The concept of a Land Ethic comes from Aldo Leopold, an American scientist, forester and environmentalist from the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

<sup>iii</sup> This comes from a Pueblo Prayer used as a meditation before the sermon-text available here.

Take a Deep Breath and Exhale

I add my breath to your breath

That our days may be long on the earth,

That the days of our people and of all the plants and animals  
may be long,

That we shall be as one.