

John Jeffery
Spiritual Ecology: DR517
Assignment #1
Green Spirit: A New Consciousness

**Pastoral Care
in an
Era of Ecological Collapse**

A Personal Point of Departure

*Let yourself be silently drawn
by the strange pull of what you really love
It will not lead you astray.*

-Rumi

In the weeks following Donald Trump's election, I received numerous telephone calls and emails from my former Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) students. Each of them, now professional chaplains, pastoral counselors and spiritual directors, work in ministry settings across the United States. All of these conversations were motivated by deep feelings of despair, anger and confusion caused by the November 2016 elections. Each of my former students expressed their unique questions about how to move forward and how to help their clients deal with the existential upheaval created by the traumatic election. I was glad to talk with my students because I was having many of the same intense feelings myself.

In the course of those conversations, I realized I was saying the same thing over and over again: *"each of us needs to feel the grief and fear that this event is evoking and let it remind us of what we love most deeply in our life. Then turn our attention toward that love and allow its inherent wisdom to inform and guide us into the future."*

I think the reason I chose to re-enroll in the GMU ThD program is because I took my own advice. I too recognized that something I deeply love is now on the edge of dying and the grief awoke decades of my own complacency.

Joanna Macy captures the essence of this experience:

...the expression of sorrow is an expression of love. You mourn what you love. Grief for the world and love for the world are two sides of same coin. Inseparable.... If you try to pave over the pain because it hurts or pathologize it or drug it then you are losing touch with that great love which, as you experience it, is the great reciprocity at the heart of the universe. It is a two way street. As you allow yourself to love your world it is loving you back. It is here to discover like jewels in this time of darkness.

The work for this course and subsequent ThD project is my commitment to follow the wisdom that flows from loving what I love.

My intention for the Spiritual Ecology course is to update my knowledge and awareness about eco-spirituality, eco-psychology and deep ecology. I wish also, in the two essays required for this course, to explore a few core themes that might serve as the foundation for my subsequent ThD project of increasing the awareness of my professional colleagues about how our global environmental crisis impacts the spiritual well-being of the clients, parishioners and counselees we serve. "What is the effect, consciously and unconsciously, of environment related dis-ease in the lives of our clients?" I will begin exploring the need for chaplains, pastoral counselors and spiritual directors¹ to bring a greater ecological awareness to their pastoral interactions. More specifically, in this essay I will address the need for pastoral counselors to bring a skilled attentiveness to their client's relationship with Creation and how personal relationship with Place (Creation), significantly affects the healing potential of

engagement with the at times terrifying existential anxieties of human living. For the purposes of this assignment, I will use chapters written by Matthew Fox and David Korten in *Green Spirit: Path to New Consciousness* points of departure.

Fires, Hurricanes and then More Fires...

This Fall, multiple natural disasters have captured the attention of our world. Three hurricanes, each of which had record setting intensities, struck several Southern states and Puerto Rico. In October, one of the most ferocious fires in American history struck Santa Rosa, CA. This fire was a personal event for me as Santa Rosa is my hometown. I have family members and lifelong friends whose homes were burned to the ground in a matter of minutes. Whole subdivisions of homes, that my father helped to construct, are now ashes. Countless wild spots in the county, sacred places where I experienced my earliest emotional and spiritual connections with nature and the earth are now scorched dead.

Beyond my personal heartache, there were nearly 50 deaths, 20,000 refugees along with over 6,400 homes and 1100 other buildings destroyed.^{2 3} The intensity of heat and speed of the fire made it uncontrollable for five days and it became the worst fire catastrophe in California history. The uncontrollability was not only the result of years of drought, but it was also due to a seldom seen meteorological phenomena composed of multi-directional, horizontal, and vertical winds which blew with severe intensity. It is believed by climatologists that the 'natural' ferociousness of this wildfire was significantly exacerbated by human caused human influenced climate change.

The effect of disasters, intensified by human-caused climate change, is coming 'home to roost' in the United States. Climate change refugees are not just something happening in distant lands but are now part of the American landscape. On a global scale, the United Nations Council on Human Rights (UNCHR) has estimated that since 2009 one person every second has been displaced by natural disaster.⁴ Those numbers now include members of my own family in Santa Rosa. Though I have always considered myself to be well informed about contemporary environmental issues, the matter of environmental collapse due to climate change and other ecosystemic decline it is no longer a remote abstraction and the pain has been a sharp awakening for me.

In 2011 The American Psychological Association adopted a position on climate change. The position affirms that even though long term climate is a phenomenon not easily detected by personal experience, it is nonetheless one that impacts the psychological wellbeing of clients. The APA adopted their Climate Change Task Force Report which affirms that psychologists should consider and assess the impact of climate in their work by addressing six key questions:

- How do people understand the risks imposed by climate change?
- What are the human behavioral contributions to climate change and the psychological and contextual drivers of these contributions?
- What are the psychosocial impacts of climate change?
- How do people adapt to and cope with the perceived threat and unfolding impacts of climate change?
- Which psychological barriers limit climate change action?
- How can psychologists assist in limiting climate change?

What happens to our hearts and souls when we are dislocated from our homes and our sense of place is disrupted by human caused environmental collapse? Since

the beginning of human history people have experienced mass destruction due to disease, war, natural disasters. But never before have we faced the knowing that the “natural” disasters we are experiencing are exacerbated and, at times, caused by our own environmentally destructive human behavior. Never before as a species have we faced the fact of our own extinction. What is the effect upon our consciousness when the destruction of our home on a global scale is, in fact, caused by our own actions?⁵

Even though I did not personally experience the trauma caused by the fires in my home town of Santa Rosa, my consciousness had been changed. The consequences of changing and collapsing environmental systems is not in something happening in the future, it is now....'real-time.' Through this experience, my own dissonance has resolved into a conclusion that we are actually living the midst of the Sixth Great Extinction.⁶ Our own species may be facing demise far sooner than any of us thought possible. To deeply accept this notion has resulted in a cataclysmic shift in the soul of my consciousness. Who I am and what I must do at this moment in time has changed.

Listening to the pain-filled and horrific stories told by my friends and family created a jarring crack in consciousness. I could feel a shifting in my own relationship to Creation. My body experienced a long and deep sensation of melting and merging. It was indeed a feeling of grief, but it was also a somatic knowing that felt primordial in nature. Inside of me there was a feeling of settling down, of deep resolve and confidence.

As I continued to listen to the voices of my family and friends and as I read articles about these climate disasters, the psycho-spiritual stories revolve around the themes of:

Uncertainty, Existential Anxiety, Despair and Fear

PASTORAL CARE IN AN ERA OF ECOLOGICAL COLLAPSE

Hummm.... *Uncertainty, Existential Anxiety, Despair and Fear*. These are very familiar terms in my professional world. These words describe the territory that professional pastoral care work in everyday. Clearly, Chaplains, Pastoral Counselors and Spiritual Directors must have something to say about how environmental distress impacts the minds, hearts and souls our clients?

Soon after the Santa Rosa disaster, I sent an email to nearly 500 of my professional colleagues and I posted a short article in the national and international newsletter of one of the most progressive professional pastoral care organizations. It was an invitation for interested chaplains, counselors and spiritual directors to join me in a conversation about the role of spiritual care in this era of ecological collapse.⁷ I received one response.

Even though I did not expect to receive many responses, I must say that only one reply was a bit disheartening. It confirmed that my professional discipline is still strangely silent on matters of social justice and seemingly unable or slow to integrate the psycho-spiritual effects of ecological demise into their work of chaplaincy, counseling and spiritual direction.

Chaplains and Spiritual Directors are educated and trained to work intimately in the extremities of life. We dwell in the existential realities of birth, love, illness, injury, aging and death. My colleagues are courageous, agile and compassionate in turning toward the suffering of people. But what about the wounded and suffering planet? And what about an awareness of how the suffering of our planet consciously or unconsciously impacts the spiritual health and wellbeing of the people we serve in hospitals, hospices, and counseling? The silence is disturbing to me, and yet I think the problem is more complex than simple silence.

I know nearly all of my colleagues value and appreciate some aspect of the natural environment. I believe my professional colleagues are extremely sensitive and sympathetic to the realities of global ecological crisis. In the 1980s when fears and anxiety about nuclear war filled our social awareness, pastoral counselors immediately integrated the concepts of global dread into their work with clients. Yet, I am mystified about how easily my colleagues go about their daily work in providing pastoral care seeming to relegate the psychospiritual aspects of environmental degradation to the periphery of their daily work.

In 1972, the psychologist Harold Searles addressed the heart of this matter:

“My hypothesis is that man (sic) is hampered in his meeting of this environmental crisis by a severe and pervasive apathy which is based largely upon feeling and attitudes of which he is unconscious.”⁸

I suspect my colleagues are neither apathetic nor unconscious. They are, I believe, unable to ‘connect’ the matters of global ecological distress with the suffering

they encounter in their daily work as chaplains, pastoral counselors and spiritual directors. I consider this to be the core issue I wish to transform in my profession.

Making Connections Through Stories of Home

David Korten's chapter in *GreenSpirit: Path to a New Consciousness* provides a great starting point.

Korten has been significantly influenced by Thomas Berry's 1990 book *The Dream of the Earth*. Korten was inspired by Berry's recognition that the collective cosmological stories we tell ourselves about the Universe shape the values society holds toward the environment. Based upon this premise, Korten wrote his well known article: *Religion, Science, and Spirit: A Sacred Story for Our Time*. In this essay Korten identifies three distinct cosmologies that have been the primary influences of shaping the Western worldview. The first two of the cosmologies are familiar. The third, which is the most relevant for our contemporary world, is least known.

Korten frames the importance of these cosmological stories by quoting Berry:

The deepest crisis experienced by any society are those moments of change when the story becomes inadequate for meeting the survival demands of a present situation.

Korten notes that this is exactly what is happening in our world today.

Namely that humanity's current behavior threatens Earth's capacity to support life....and this self-destructive behavior and our seemingly inability to change have deep roots in the stories by which we understand the nature and meaning of our existence.⁹

The challenge before us, he says, is to create a new society based upon a “new cosmology which is a story of the origin, nature and purpose of creation and guides us to a mature relationship with one another and a living Earth.”¹⁰

Korten essay succinctly outlines the three cosmological stories that have shaped our contemporary society:

Cosmos Created by a Distant Patriarch
Cosmos as a Great Machine
Cosmos as Integral Spirit

(Detailed description of these three cosmologies can be found in the Appendix of this paper)

Healing Begins When Creation Stories Become Personal

Matthew Fox emphasises the need to make a personal connection between our own story, the story of the universe and, most experientially, the story of Earth.¹¹ Our connectedness to the Earth and Universe is a crisis and, as Fox strongly asserts, the crisis is especially evident in worlds of religion. “We’re living in a time when the religious consciousness of humanity has to wake up, has to be reinvented, reborn, simplified and the name for simplification of religion has been spirituality.”¹²

I appreciate Fox’s bold and honest observation that contemporary expressions of religiosity are disconnected from the sensation of our relationship with Creation and the Universe. We are disconnected with our larger sense of place in the universe. This realization helps to explain why the Story of our Universe does not show up in the conscious narratives that pastoral counselors hear from their clients. Fox evokes the

thoughts of Thomas Berry in saying that our task is to help others find a way to 'place ourselves into the history of the universe and, of course, the history of earth.

The act of re-feeling and reflecting upon our experience of the place we call home, be it a physical house or a cosmic connection, is a starting point in making the Story of the Universe personal. Naming and revisiting the home of our heart which is oftentimes a real and physical place is the gateway to connection to the bigger universe. The task of pastoral counselors is to guide clients in the understanding and experiencing of their connection with a personal historic home. This basic recognition on the part of a client is the entryway to connection with the universe as home.

For many years I worked as a hospice chaplain. I companioned hundreds of individuals across their final passage. As I sat the the beside of those who were dying I always attempted to explore what my patient's relationship was with existence. Of course, I never just outright asked that question, but rather I would engage in a soft and attentive inquiry with the individual about what they loved in life and in what ways they experienced the mystery of 'something greater than themselves.' These and other inquiries would often reveal a mosaic of the person's relationship with existence. Does the individual have a sense of their place in Creation? Does he or she hold a feeling of confidence or trust in the universe? Do they have an inner fear? Does the individual feel peace or solace in knowing they were part of something far larger than themselves? In my work, I found that the degree to which an individual is able to honestly clarify their own unique relationship with existence, the greater the likelihood the individual would have an integrated and wholesome experience in dying.

The journey toward greater awareness and integration of ecological distress into pastoral care begins with an exploration of how our (and our clients) relationship to home shapes our attitudes, values and beliefs about what it means to be human. As pastoral counselors, the crucial inquiries we must make of our clients revolves around the exploration of how they relate to existence (the Universe). An intentional exploration of how our client defines and feels about their personal 'sense of home' may be an indicator of how our client will cope and process whatever existential crisis they are facing.

The theme of "Returning Home" is a considered by many to be a core psychospiritual archetypal developmental task. The feelings of attachment and identification we development early in our lives give rise to our sense of home. This felt sensation of home, that we experienced as a child, forms the basis for our psychospiritual craving to seek kindred connections as we grow older. The drive to "return to home" is an especially important task as one approaches the final chapters life. It's a primordial urge. It is what causes wounded animals to walk toward the place of their birth and salmon to seek their ancestral riverbeds. It's what happens to old people as they approach death and want to return to their native place. It's Carrie Watts,¹⁴ after an unstoppable journey sitting on the porch of her broken down childhood home dreamily seeing her long dead parents come walking through the door as she was a young girl again. It's my father, deep in the throes of Alzheimer's begging me, the son he no longer remembered, to take him home. And how, after six years of

complete memory loss, he walked into the house he built as a young man and wept; hugging and kissing the walls.

It is this deep intimacy, familiarity and feeling of home that we must help people reconnect with in order to reconnect with Creation as a whole. Carl Jung once said: “The development of Western philosophy during the last two centuries has succeeded in isolating the mind in its own sphere and in severing it from its primordial oneness with the universe.” Our job as pastoral counselors is nothing less than reconnect ourselves and our clients to this primordial connection.

Concluding Reflections

In 1975 I read an essay called “A Native Hill” by Wendell Berry. I was 20 years old and the essay changed the way I understood my own experience of connectedness to land, wilderness, earth and creation. His words stirred an awareness of my own feeling of intimacy with the earth. Namely, that the closeness I felt to the natural world emerged from attentiveness to the unique feeling that a specific place evoked within my own sense of knowing. It is how the contours of a hillside creates a sensation of softness in my gut, or how the protrusions of granite outcroppings shifts my consciousness to a timeless wonder, or how the edges of a meadow melting into a Douglas Fir forest causes feeling in me of pure love. Wendell’s writings have always reminded me that my connection to the immenseness of Creation is through relationship to specific places I have come to know. Places my heart calls Home. If a chaplain or pastoral counselor came to my bedside, in my own moments of illness or dying, and

failed to inquire about where I felt most at home in the world, he or she would probably fail to touch the depths of my soul. How I know my unique place in the Story of the Universe is through my intimate experience of place, my sensation of being at home. Professional pastoral care has prided itself as being a specialized discipline that, in the words of Anton Boisen (the founder of Clinical Pastoral Education), sees the individual as a 'living human document.' The goal of this approach is to understand the psychodynamic makeup of each person which sees the individual through a lens of family and social histories. Seldom does this way of relating to our clients include a recognition of connectedness to place, planet or universe. These matters generally remain outside the attention of the chaplain or pastoral counselor. And in this blindness, professional pastoral care is missing not only an opportunity for healing the individual, but misses also the opportunity for healing the planet.

The meaning and experience of home is different for everyone. For many, a conventional understanding of 'home' may not be a positive remembrance. Yet, somewhere inside of each of us, even if broken or wounded, there is a place we call home and this place is the link to our connectedness with something much greater than ourselves.

Increasingly I see my profession as one of guiding the art of re-connection and re-inhabitation with home - with earth and creation. I think we need to find ways to skillfully and therapeutically discover each person's unique 'Story of the Universe' and explore the inherent challenge, wisdom and healing those stories evoke.

In order for a spiritual ecology to manifest in pastoral care, we need to begin with the unique story each individual provides and guide them to the greater sense of connectedness.

Appendix

The Three Cosmologies

Cosmos Created by a Distant Patriarch

This cosmology is the foundational story for those faith traditions emerging from the Ancient Near East (Judaism, Christianity, Islam). In essence this story views creation as the work of an omnipotent, all-powerful generally male God who resides in a separate, sacred dimension often referred to as Heaven. This God observes and judges humanity according to rules and 'commandments' handed down to us through sacred texts and interpreted by anointed religious authorities.

While this cosmology holds individual relationship with Deity as a central belief, the relationship is of a distant nature since God resides in a separate realm. The visual image of this system of belief is Michelangelo's famous painting of a God portrayed in the image of man who reaches down to humanity. The cosmology holds that our human relationships with one another and with nature are secondary to this primary relationship between a heavenly God (The Father) and the individual person. Although some adherents believe that humanity has an obligation to care for God's creation and to show compassion to our fellow human beings, many interpretations of this story, depict life on Earth as only a 'way station' on the journey to everlasting heaven. In other words Nature and the environment exists for solely for humanity's temporary human use and comfort. This dual and separatist cosmology also designates authority in human society to specific individuals, who claim to have a special relationship or knowledge of the Divine and His intentions.

Cosmos as a Grand Machine

Out of the Enlightenment Era emerged a new cosmological story. This story is commonly associated with modern science. The foundation of this belief system Newtonian physics, evolutionary biology, and scientific research. In this cosmology only matter is real. The formation and function of the cosmos and the evolution of life are consequences of a combination of physical mechanism and random chance. The presence of life itself is a bit of a coincidence and does not imply any larger meaning or purpose. The concepts of Consciousness, Divinity and free will are all illusions created by human beings to comfort our not-knowing minds.

This cosmological story is sometimes depicts creation as a mechanical clock that is gradually running down as its spring unwinds. According to this cosmology, a brutal competition for survival, territory, and reproductive advantage is the basic law of nature, and these same instincts define our human nature and social interactions.

Cosmos as Integral Spirit

This cosmology has ancient human roots and a growing modern following, but is not widely recognized. This view of creation has come to be known as the Gaia Hypothesis which views the entire Creation as one cosmic living being that is the expression of an integral spiritual intelligence engaged in a sacred journey to discover and actualize its possibilities through an ongoing process of becoming. Thus our world, and all the material universe, is more than something created by God, but rather it is literally “God made flesh.” God is in the world and the world is in God, yet they are not identical. Theologically this is expressed that the spirit is imminent, and also transcendent. In the world of comparative religions, this is known as Panentheism and also referred to as The Integral Spirit Cosmology. All beings, stars, planets, humans, animals, plants, rocks, and rivers are expressions of this divine force—each with its place and function in the journey of the whole. Humans come to know the nature, purpose, and intention of this Integral Spirit through both our inner experience and our observation of its physical manifestations in creation. Integral Spirit cosmology recognizes that life is a fundamentally cooperative enterprise.

Threads of this story are found in traditional wisdom teachings of indigenous peoples and the mystical traditions of all faiths, including the Ancient Near Eastern faiths mentioned above. The Integral Spirit cosmology believes that humans participate in and contribute to the divine journey. Humans reflective and collective consciousness and advances creation’s evolutionary movement toward ever more creative possibilities, or to disrupt it. The individual and social choices of human beings participate in determining the collective fate and shape the course of the cosmic journey far beyond our time.

The Integral Spirit cosmology is consistent with the findings of quantum physics, which reveals that the apparent solid nature of matter is an illusion and at the deepest level of understanding only relationships among and between parts of creation are real.

Endnotes

1. Professional Chaplaincy, Pastoral Counseling and Spiritual Directions represent three distinct disciplines. Chaplains generally work in public settings and bring an interfaith, psychodynamically informed methodology. Pastoral Counselors mostly work 1:1 with clients and offer theologically focused psychotherapeutic care. Spiritual Directors are trained in the art of spiritual discernment and presence. In this paper I will often use the term 'pastoral care' to inclusively describe all three disciplines.
2. Mark Trahant, "We Don't Think of Californians as Climate Change Refugees Yet, But We Should", Yes Magazine, October 24, 2017
3. As I write these paragraphs, a new fire has erupted in Southern California which may be larger than the Santa Rosa fire. It is literally blowing fire into the Pacific Ocean.
4. United Nations Council on Human Rights Website, www.UNCHR.org
5. The Australian philosopher Glenn Albrecht has developed a psychological concept of "psychoterratic and somaterratic disorders" of which Solistalgia describes the 'form of psychic or existential distress caused by environmental change. Solistalgia is a term referring to the experience of having one's home and sense of place destroyed or impacted by environmental degradation.
6. In 2016 a working group of geologists proposed to the International Geological Congress a change in the current periodization of Earth history. The proposal declares that the Holocene (the 'entirely new epoch') has ended, and in approximately 1950 a new epoch called the Anthropocene (the human epoch) began.
7. *SpiritMatters The Newsletter of The Center for Spiritual Care and Pastoral Formation* www.CSCPF.org.
8. Searles, Harold, *Unconscious Process in the Environmental Crisis*, 228
9. Korten, David *Religion, Science and Spirit: A Sacred Story for Our Time*, Yes Magazine, January 17, 2013
10. Ibid
11. Fox, Matthew, Something is Amiss in the World of Religion, in *GreenSpirit: Path to a New Consciousness*, ed. Marian Van Eyk McCain, 2010
12. Ibid
13. Korten
14. Trip to Bountiful, 1985

Selected Bibliography

Davenport, Leslie, *Emotional Resilience in the Era of Climate Change: A Clinician's Guide*, 2016

Lane, Belden, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes*, 1988

Nicholson, Shierry Webber, *The Love of Nature and the End of the World*, 2002

Searles, Harold, *Unconscious Process in Relation to the Environmental Crisis*, 1972

Van Der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*, 2015

Van Eyk, Marian McCain, *GreenSpirit: Path to a New Consciousness*, 2010

Vaughan-Lee, Llewellyn, ed. *Spiritual Ecology: The Cry of the Earth*, 2016