

Chapter 7

Earth Day, Easter and Human Extinction

"Mother Earth hears the call; she awakens, she arises; she feels the breath of the new born Dawn. The leaves and the grass stir; all things move with the breath of the new day. Everywhere life is renewed...we are speaking of something very sacred, although it happens every day" (The Kurahus, Hako, Birth of Dawn, Pawnee - Lombardi, 1982: 17-18).

Mahatma Gandhi said, "The world has enough for everyone's need, but not enough for everyone's greed."¹ It is a saying that forces us to ponder the difference between living with what is necessary for our reasonable comfort and dignity, and what we do not need but long for and hoard out of wanton selfishness.

Two centuries ago, however, it was thought the world would eventually reach the condition where it could not supply everyone's need. This was expressed in what became known as the Malthusian Theory, a model that influenced Charles Darwin and which served as the prevailing worldview from the 19th to the mid 20th century. English clergyman and mathematician Thomas Malthus asserted that humanity's exponential population growth would eventually outpace food production. In other words, the world will eventually reach the point where there will simply not be enough to go around. In 1968 Paul R. Ehrlich published the controversial book *The Population Bomb*. Ehrlich envisioned a "Malthusian Catastrophe" with mass famine and starvation occurring in the 1970's and 80's, a prediction that fortunately, never materialized.

Prior to Ehrlich, there were many who questioned Malthus' conclusion. Wars, natural disasters and falling population growth due to industrialization were cited as natural mechanisms that would curb population growth. But in 1969, R. Buckminster Fuller, the visionary architect and designer of the geodesic dome, published a series of lectures under the title of *Operating Manual for Spaceship Earth*. Like others before him,

¹ The United Nations Declaration of Human Rights.

Fuller challenged the idea of a Malthusian Catastrophe. But his argument was grounded not in the occurrence of wars and natural disasters but in the first law of thermodynamics, known as the law of conservation of energy. Fuller explained that while energy is finite, it is also "infinitely conserved" (1969:89 Energy may be transferred from one state to another (e.g.; from potential energy to kinetic energy), but we cannot exhaust the energy we have available to us. Moreover, the Earth is an open system, sustained by the virtually unlimited energy from the sun. Thus the world has available to it all the energy it needs to provide for humankind. We simply need to harness the vast amount of energy available to us. In Fuller's words, the "main engine" of spaceship earth, "the life regenerating processes, must operate exclusively on our vast daily energy income from the powers of wind, tide, water, and the direct sun radiation energy." (1969: 123).

Fuller further asserted that complex systems behave in ways that cannot be predicted by the behavior of the system's complex individual parts. This concept is referred to as "synergy," which Fuller observed at work in the universe and in the evolution of life. He saw the universe as a "perpetual motion process" that was "evolving without beginning or end" (1969:65). Life therefore is regenerative by nature, and it should be humanity's goals not to compete for resources, but rather, capitalize on our sun-earth system's synergy and regenerative power.

I often think that Fuller, in asserting life's perpetually regenerative nature, was merely using 20th century scientific jargon to revisit an idea expressed thousands of years ago in the ancient myth and religion. The Native American author quoted at the beginning of this chapter, expressed it less scientifically when he wrote "...all things move with the breath of the new day. Everywhere life is renewed...we are speaking of something very sacred, although it happens every day." To the tribal Shamans, the sacred is all around us, happening every day in the blooming of a flower, the birth of a child, the rising of the sun, the radiance of the moon, or the changing of the seasons. And while indigenous Americans were forced to acclimate to the European invaders and eventually to the industrial age, they spiritual awareness has preserved their connection to, and appreciation for, the regenerative power seen in the natural world.

America's greatest natural philosopher, Henry David Thoreau, in observing the breaking up of ice on Walden Pond during the early spring, expressed it more poetically

with the words "Walden was dead and is alive again." Indeed, it is fitting that Earth Day falls so close to Easter, as we celebrate the wondrous and sacred resurrection of life each passing year.

The Triumphant Phoenix

The most prominent ancient myth to laud the regenerative power of Creation became known as the Phoenix. Flying out of the sun with wings of fire, this great mythological bird was said to journey to earth to die by cremation. It then would resurrects from its own ashes, concluding its life cycle by ascending back to heaven and thereby reign supreme after its magnificent conquest of death.

The oldest meanings attributed to this myth deal with the movement of the sun through the sky, that the sun "dies" in the evening when it sets, and is reborn each morning as it rises. In the ancient world, the myth also offered an explanation for how fire came to earth from heaven. Later the Phoenix came to reflect the ancient view that Creation is self-sacrificial by design. As Alan Watts explains in his book, *Myth and Ritual in Christianity*, living things live by killing and devouring other forms of life. Life in the generic sense sacrifices itself to itself in order to perpetuate itself - every creature that is killed offering itself in sacrifice (Watts, 1968: 37).

This great paradox, that life is actually sustained through death, was embodied in the ancient Phoenix myth, conveying the belief that death is not an end to life, but rather, a means through which it is transformed. As with energy as defined today by science, life energy in the ancient world was conceived of as indestructible. It was believed that humans have a dual nature; that is, a lower animal nature which is material and temporal, and a higher spiritual nature which, while bound in the physical body was destined to ascend so as to return to its heavenly home and eternally reside with the Creator. But one did not have to wait until physical death to experience one's higher spiritual nature. We simply had to undergo a trial in life, a period of adversity or "baptism by fire," which would awaken our higher spiritual nature bestowing on us new life and the realization that the soul exists autonomously from the body. Such an experience would cause one to "die within," so that a person would, as if, be born a second time in

this life and thereafter be guided by one's higher spiritual nature.

Anyone who enjoys natural philosophy will appreciate the butterfly as a metaphor for this spiritual birth.² The butterfly spends the first portion of its life crawling on the earth as a caterpillar, after which it enters its cocoon, and from a seemingly lifeless state, emerges as a glorious creature, ascending to enjoy its newly acquired domain and power of flight. Thoreau in his conclusion to his literary masterpiece, *Walden*, tells the story of a "strong and beautiful bug which came out of the dry leaf of an old table of apple-tree wood which had stood in a farmer's kitchen for 60 years...from a egg deposited in the living tree many years earlier...hatched perchance by the heat of an urn." He then asks the question: "Who does not feel his faith in resurrection and immortality strengthened by hearing of this?" Most certainly long ago someone must have pondered the question: Are we humans capable of such a metamorphosis, not physically of course, but psychologically and spiritually?

To fully appreciate this concept of second birth, we much understand that there are two definitions for life. The first is what we all learn in our high school biology classes. Two crucial characteristics are necessary to fulfill this biological definition, these being 1) that the organism be able to reproduce itself, and 2) that it responds to stimuli. This biological definition of life is cut and dried. Either the organism we are observing is alive, or it is dead.

The second definition of life is an aesthetic or, you could say, spiritual definition. Unlike the biological definition, this explanation is not dualistic. In this case, you can be more alive or less alive, and the property of life can even be ascribed to something which is biologically lifeless. We say that a sculptor can aesthetically infuse life into a piece of marble, or that the orchestra made a Beethoven symphony "come alive." We may refer to someone as the "life" of the party, or if not much is happening, speak of the party as being "dead." And let's not forget the familiar phrase "life begins at 40!"

In the Gospel of John, when Jesus says, "I come that you may have life, and have it more abundantly," (John 10:10b). In using such language, we clearly are not defining life in dualistic biological terms. Rather it is the quality and meaning of life we seek, or

² The expression "born again" as translated from the Greek in the Gospel of John literally means "born from above."

the awakening we experience when we encounter a life-changing event. Second birth is what makes possible an inner psychological transformation some have labeled as spiritual metamorphosis.³

While the story of the phoenix is most known as an Egyptian myth, it is perhaps the most pervasive myth of the ancient world. It is also found in Russian mythology where it is known as the "Firebird." Igor Stravinsky's Firebird Suite was composed to accompany the ballet version of this myth. But the oldest written rendition of the Phoenix is in the Hindu scripture known as the Rig Veda where it is referred to as the "sunbird." The following lines of poetry from the Rig Veda deal with this image. In these verses, "Varuna" refers to the "guardian of sacred laws and cosmic order," and the word "Yama" is the Hindu name for the god of death.

Longing for you in their heart, they saw you flying
to the dome of the sky as an eagle, the golden winged messenger
of Varuna, the bird hastening into the womb of Yama.

Then the divine youth climbed straight back up to the dome of the
sky bearing his many-colored weapons.
Dressing himself in a perfumed robe, looking like sunlight,
he gives birth to his own names...

The wise see in their heart, in their spirit, the bird anointed...
The poets see him inside the ocean; the sages seek the footprints of
this rays. (Rig Veda, 10,123.6 and 7; 10.124, 1 - as translated by
O'Flaherty, 1981, pg. 191, 193).

In the first verse quoted above, we find the word eagle, which, in the Rig Veda is a symbol for the Sunbird. We find this same symbol in the Hebrew scriptures where it becomes a symbol for spiritual ascension. God says, for example, to the ancient Israelites in the book of Exodus, "...I bore you up on eagle's wings and brought you to myself" (Exodus 19:4). But what is most odd about the Vedic text is the phrase "womb of Yama." The womb is something we associate with birth rather than death! How is it then, that the Hindu god of death could have a womb? The answer most given, is that death in the Vedas is not viewed as an end, but as a means of renewal, as the leaves die in the fall only to nourish the soil in preparation for the rebirth of spring.

³ When asked by fundamentalist Christians if I have been born again, I answer that I have been "not twice but thrice born."

Beyond the symbol of the eagle, the image of the sunbird is further found in Judaism and Christianity. A verse in the Hebrew book of Malachi reads: "the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings" (Malachi 4: 1,2 RSV). I mentioned earlier how the Phoenix myth may have helped explain to ancient peoples how fire came to earth. The Gospel of Luke, chapter 12, verse 49, describes Jesus as a bringer of fire, quoting him as saying that he "came to cast fire upon the earth" (Luke 12:49). But Jesus was speaking not of literal fire, but of the spiritual fire that awakens the seeker and which descended upon the Apostles at Pentecost. Thus, the Christ figure in the Christian Gospels is the sunbird given a human form, a person in whom myth and history are united. For like the phoenix, he dies, resurrects and ascends back to heaven, the ascension corresponding to the flight of the sunbird back to the sun.

The Sustainability Paradigm

Several years ago, I realized there was a connection between the self-sacrificial message of the phoenix myth, the miracle of Easter, and the teachings Buckminster Fuller. The prevailing model for interdisciplinary studies in the 1960's and 70's was known as General Systems Theory. As a systems theorist, Fuller saw the universe as a regenerative system, able to perpetually renew itself. Practically speaking, we see this in the changing of the seasons and in ecosystems as they recover from natural disasters. In the 1990's, Yellowstone National Park was stricken by a great forest fire, and there was much controversy over the policy of the National Park Service to simply allow the park to burn. The fire was seen by ecologists as a necessary part of the life cycle of the forest, and eventually from the ashes of this disaster emerged a regenerated ecosystem.

We further see this renewal in our own lives as we cope with and strive to overcome personal disappointments and tragedy. Christopher Reeves may have played Superman in his popular movie series, but his true strength was revealed in his efforts to transform his life after his paralyzing accident and constructively lobby for stem cell research which has the potential to regenerate human cells.

The realization that life is regenerative, and the recognition that fossil fuels and other non-renewable resources are rapidly being depleted has contributed to the rise of

what is being called the “Sustainability Paradigm.” Through the Sustainability we seek to cooperate with the regenerative nature of the Earth's ecosystem by shifting our reliance from expendable fossil fuels to “green” renewable resources. We also seek to apply agricultural practices which rejuvenate the soil, increase food production and deter further destruction of the earth’s life-giving rain forests.

In contrast, those familiar with the Jewish and Christian traditions will recall the verse in the book of Genesis where God commands Adam and Eve to “be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over every living thing that moves upon the Earth” (Gen...). Allied with the capitalist economic system, this anthropocentric teaching, which I refer to as the “Dominion Paradigm,” sees humans as superior to, and masters of, the natural world. Indeed, human beings have been remarkably successful at subduing the earth, even to the point of manipulating the atomic building blocks of matter. But taken to the extreme, the Dominion Paradigm results in exploitation whereby we rape the earth and its resources, even to the point of possibly destroying the very life-support system on which civilization as we know it depends.

Celebrating Earth Day inevitably reminds me of the damage humans continue to wreak on their planetary home. In a world that is losing its rain forests, where our polluted oceans are losing the ability to sustain fish populations, and where glaciers are melting at unprecedented rates, it becomes all that more important for us to reflect on the environmental degradation humanity has been contributing to over the past 150 years. And it is more disturbing to learn of the thousands of species that are becoming extinct every year. Indeed, the majority of biologists now are saying that the earth is undergoing the greatest mass extinction since the time of the dinosaurs.

In the mid 1990’s, Harvard naturalist Edward O. Wilson began estimating that 30,000 species of a year were becoming extinct (1992). This is between 100 and 1000 times greater than what is considered by biologists to be the “background extinction rate.” (Connor: 2009). Furthermore, according to the Evolution Library, “the past 400 years have seen 89 mammalian extinctions, almost 45 times the predicted rate.”⁴ Researchers estimate that if the current rate continues, half the land animals will be extinct by 2100. And the cause is no longer natural disasters but human activity in the

⁴ www.pbs.org/wgbh/evolution/library/03/2/1_032_04.html

form of pollution, habitat destruction, climate change and the introduction of invasive species.⁵

It is humbling to think that we humans could be the next specie to become endangered by our own short-sighted, anthropocentric exploitation as we continue with our delusion that we were destined to be masters of the natural world. We must remember, however, that life is regenerative. If humans do become extinct, biological life will go on. The evolutionary process will no-doubt replace us with some new specie which will rise out of our ashes, as millions of years ago, mammals took advantage of the niche that opened when the dinosaurs breathed their last. But I predict when this happens, this new specie that will inherit the earth will be more intelligent, living in a higher state of consciousness, and the earth will at last be inhabited by a race of butterflies rather than a race of maggots.

To prevent our own demise, we must commit ourselves to the sustainability paradigm. We must intelligently managing the earth's resources and seek new technologies to power our civilization as Buckminster Fuller called upon us to do 40 years ago. Moreover, the sustainability paradigm requires us to we see beyond religious, ethnic and nationalistic boundaries in our fight for social justice.

To symbolize our commitment to long-term sustainability, I propose that every nation fly the Earth Flag. I further propose that all the countries of the world fly the Earth Flag *above* their own national flag! This symbol, constantly present, should help remind us to place global interests over short-term national self-interests, as we set aside personal and national greed in an effort to meet everyone's need.

⁵ sitehoppin.com/Www.well.com/user/davidu/extinction.html

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