

Dig Where You Stand: Ethics of Place

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I spent a lot of my life wearing an ill fitting suit. I don't know that it started out that way, but as I grew the religion of my youth didn't seem to fit me any more. Eventually I felt like the person in our story, twisting my life to try and fit a suit that didn't fit me. Since that time I've been continually reshaping my religious garment so that it helps me to live the way I want to in the world. I've had many tailors who've helped me to refashion this theological suit so that it matches how I believe I should be in the world. Today I want to share the insights from three of these tailors.

The dialogues that follow are fictitious conversations. They've occurred in my head for the past eight years with the people who've shaped my thinking. I've only met one of these authors, yet each has shaped me as profoundly as any teacher I've known. The dialogues are real, honest discussions between me and the ideas I encountered.

It begins in 1997. I'm sitting in my new office in the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Ames reading the latest issue of the Humanist. Then a sentence in the essay of the Humanist of the year jumps out at me. "In day to day life, I worship the Earth as God". What? The earth as god? In a humanist magazine? Alice Walker nods her head slowly and gives me a smile. "More and more," she says to me, "people are decolonizing their spirits. Their not allowing the religion of the past that isn't about them to keep them afraid and separated. This is an act that might return our reverence to the earth, thereby saving it."

Decolonizing their spirits? What does that mean? "Simply put people are trying to come out from under the assumptions that the male-dominated western religious dogma they grew up with is the only god available. All people deserve a god who worships them. It's fatal to love a god who doesn't love you; the religion of my ancestors connected us to all creation. Never will mother earth find anything wrong with your natural way.

Everyone deserves a god who adores our freedom. Nature would never advise us to do anything but be ourselves. So I say I am pagan, worshiping the earth." I thought about ancestors, realizing that we all have them, those ancestors who worried about the change of the season more than the state of their eternal souls. Those ancestors who prayed that the fire would light so they could be warm and praised the rain so that they could eat. In the course of human history we don't have to look that far back to find our pagan ancestors who knew what it was like to worship the Earth as God in their day to day lives.

I recalled what I'd read in Emily Town's book about how love is the center of womanist theology. "Womanist" is a word coined by Walker to indicate the difference of African American women's quest for justice. Womanist she had written is from the statement "you're acting womish. Usually referring to outrageous, courageous or willful behavior. Womanists are committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female." This quest begins with finding one's own humanity, finding love for ones self, then allowing oneself to risk loving another.

Envisioning this expanding circle of love: beginning with self, leading to nature, I could see that circle, or maybe it's really a double spiral. As we reach out to it we sense the loving embrace of nature holding and supporting our lives and then empowered by our contact, it radiates out from us.

Walker nods her head slowly, in agreement with my line of thinking. I continue, Women and African people became nothing more than property and the religion of the masters told them it was so. There is a strong link between racism and sexism, both look at human beings as things and these human beings, these women begin to believe they are things. Walker adds, "The earth, mother nature didn't make us this way. We human beings lost our way and made ourselves slaves some slaves of the body others slaves of the soul but all losing out of that perfect love which nature intends for us. It's been a long road to find the ability to love ourselves. When we find ourselves nestled in the acceptance embrace of Mother Nature, who loves us for who we are, then we can find the strength to fight for others."

I consider she and I, a black woman writer and poet who's profoundly influenced the world I inhabit, and me descendant of the race that enslaved her fore parents and brought them here. Each of us captive of our history and trying to break free. Male, female; Black white, but all part of the humanity. Walker says, "Womanist thinking is Universalist like the child who says, "Mama, why are we brown, pink, and yellow and our cousins are white, beige and black?" Answer, "Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden with every color flower represented."

That universality leads to a desire for justice for each flower in the garden. Against the gardeners who would cut them down. But it seems there are more scythes than ever trying to cut us to ribbons. Seeing the resignation in my eyes Walker says, "I do realize it's pretty messy all around. Lots of suffering, lots of pain. And I have just decided that there are places where I feel I am uniquely suited to be, and causes that just fit, where I feel I can actually do this without being insulting or ignorant or unhelpful. And that's it. I give to the extent that I can, and then I sit back and I eat tomatoes. And I enjoy them, and I look out at the landscape and I love it, and I walk and I go swimming and I love being alive. And then when I get my strength back, I go out again. You know, what are hearts for? Hearts are there to be broken, and I say that because that seems to be just part of what happens with hearts. I mean, mine has been broken so many times that I have lost count. But it just seems to be broken open more and more and more, and it just gets bigger. The thing about love that I've discovered in my life is that one love leads to another. It just gets bigger and bigger. You can start with a flower, but if you sincerely see it and if you sincerely love it, then it's like the key. The flower is like a key to a big, big, big storeroom. Then everything becomes something that is lovable."

Even through the pain of growing up in a racist, sexist world, you're able to let your heart be broken so that you can love? How can you do that?" I ask, "Open your heart and take those kinds of risks?" "It takes practice." She gives me a wry smile and begins to walk boldly back into my imagination. "Practice? What do you mean?" And as she disappears

into bright recesses of my mind another figure steps out from the east. I find myself sitting, in the middle of this room, sun light streams in through the windows as we face the bright tapestries in the half lotus position, knees too sore for a full lotus. As I settle into my position I feel my legs and body begin to melt, slowly dissolving into the floor and soil below me all being absorbed into all. A distant voice says, “Master they will see you now.” I open my eyes to find myself in a forest path, before me sits Vietnamese Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh. He points down the path and we begin to walk. A leaf falls to the ground before us, Thich Nhat Hanh watches with a smile. “Ah leaf,” he says, “you are pretending to die yet I can see how you are becoming one with all the elements of life, merging with the moist soil and preparing to appear on the tree in the spring in another form.” He looks at me as we walk, “Everything is pretending to die and be born, all is really part of the ultimate dimension. When we can realize this it can transform the spot you are standing on, when you realize that this spot is part of the entire universe.”

I look at the trees surrounding me and try to see the ultimate dimension in each leaf, instead I get dizzy. Realizing my befuddlement, Thich Nhat Hanh smiles and then a look of deep compassion comes over his face. I can sense as he looks at the trees that he is remembering the time when this realization became clear to him. It was after he arrived in France, exiled from his home in Viet Nam. He was painfully home sick, missing the plants and birds of his home. He sat in meditation, dwelling in the present moment and began to see in each tree in France the same beauty that he found in those of his home, in each child’s smile he saw the same beauty of the children he’d known in Viet Nam. “Our true home,” he says, “Is the present moment. To live in the present moment is a miracle. The miracle is not to walk on water. The miracle is to walk on the green Earth in the present moment, to appreciate the peace and beauty that are available now. Once we learn to touch this peace we will be healed and transformed. It is not a matter of faith it is a matter of practice.”

As we walk I begin to feel the ground in a new way, as though the soles of my shoes have melted away and I am actually touching the soil. This soil that’s bubbling up between my toes has nurtured generations of plants and animals. Parts of it have come to this place from all over the world. This simple practice of walking mindfully on the earth has helped me to touch it in an entirely new way. Practice, little moments when we intentionally remember why we are, that we are, when the simple act of breathing binds us back to the reality that we’re part of something greater than ourselves. From this practice comes acceptance, gratitude and liberation. Liberation from the striving to be something else, to be richer, or more beautiful, perfect in what ever way, what ever causes us to destroy who we are – as Mother Nature intended, beautiful as we are. Instead, we can be rooted in the present moment seeking to create. He breaks into my musings saying, “Such a change allows us to transform the ignorance that brought about wrong actions of speech, body and mind and helps you cultivate your mind of love. Shame and guilt disappear and you experience the joy of being alive.”

I begin to understand that the question is spiritual; it is at the deepest connections, the fibers that animate our lives. I’ve read many an article about the species lost and the rain

forest destroyed, many books of the atrocities committed and the wages of poverty. Yet it's too easy to intellectualize them all as happening to other people, not me. Thich Nhat Hanh asks us to go deeper than our minds, deeper than our hearts to the very core of our existence. There we realize the animating force the breath of our lives intimately connects us to all that is. The practice, I see through my teacher's example can be as simple as walking, sitting, eating a piece of fruit. But it becomes as difficult as consciously deciding "Will I drive or will I walk? Do I really need to buy that new car? What will my decisions mean for the world?" Acting in such a way we seek harmony with nature and the people around us. People, community, I think. Then I ask, "I've learned of the importance of love in transforming oppression, of mindfulness in transforming ourselves, but what about communities?" Thich Nhat Hanh smiles, "the Buddha says, 'When the student is ready the teacher appears.'"

From the forest I find we've walked to the top of a heather covered hill. The ocean before us is whipped by waves and great stone pillars arranged in a circle surround us. A fiery voice to my left distracts me and I turn to see a bearded man reciting in more of a yell than a voice something like a poem. When I turn back, Thich Nhat Hanh is gone. I turn back to the voice, knowing immediately it's Alastair MacIntosh.

Ohhh ... friends we call across the seas to you from echo chamber of the soul
we call now stirred by rhythm that you drum
We call upon the triple billion year old songlines of world's oldest rock
"I lift a stone; it is the meaning of life I clasp" - says the bard MacDiarmid
So let us honour stone. Let us call afresh the foundational litany:
The Cairngorm Mountains and sparkling Aberdeenshire granite
The Old Red Sandstone
The Durness limestone
The idle pebbles ...
tossed to and fro, round and round, inwards outwards
dark moon full moon vortexing on today's high tide at noon
Ohhh ... the rocks the rocks the rocks
we call on you ...
Rise up from sleep sunk strata beds!
Giant women, wizened men, totemic creatures once laid down to be our hills
Wake up! Wake up! Wake up and waulk this Earth in us!
... bring back the land within the people's care
... bring back the care to touch from hand to land

As he pauses, I remember his work to stop strip mining Mount Roineabhail on South Harris and the community buy-out that returned the land of the Isle of Eigg to the people. When he'd appealed for their help, the rocks had listened. "Alastair," I begin, "When you call the rocks for aid, how do we know they'll listen?"

"First, we have to be on their side don't we? We have to be indigenous people to know the rock we call upon for strength." Puzzled I ask, "Most of us are immigrants, how can we be indigenous?" He looks at me with those steely eyes and says, "To be indigenous doesn't mean you can count the generations that have lived in a place. It means you

advocate for the land. We must see ourselves a part of the land, not apart from it, part of the ecosystem not the lords of it all. This is Celtic ecology.” Celtic ecology, as Alastair describes it, is a learned way of being in harmony with nature. By understanding that poisons dumped into the water poison your very blood. They understand nature as having its own soul and we are part of that soul as well. When the soul of nature is abused and misused, when the land is destroyed and left fallow it is a spiritual as well as physical assault. It’s this spiritual understanding that helps us fully appreciate the necessity of our material connection to world

Such a spiritual understanding helps sustain a desire for change. Alastair says, “If activism is not grounded in spirituality it cannot be sustained in the long run: we either burn out or sell out as the oil of life runs low. We need replenishment from the wellheads of life itself, and no matter what religious tradition we may or may not be coming from, this re-sourcing is ultimately a question of spirituality. Spiritual justice may be understood as the avoidance of spiritual delusion. Spiritual justice means seeing life reverentially, seeing with eyes that accord with God’s love and not with eyes set upon some lesser “god” such as money, status, or a human leader. As social and ecological justice follows on from spiritual justice, and as community and therefore peace arise at the confluence of all three faces of justice, it follows, as the prophets repeatedly saw, that the most fundamental barrier to creating a peaceful world is idolatry.

Seems that it would be difficult to do such work surrounded by the tumultuous, seductive times in which we live. He smiles saying, “A gentle Buddhist monk from Thailand [who had been persecuted] for organising controversial social justice activities in his home country . . . came one day and silently left a beautiful rice paper brush and ink drawing on the floor of our simple abode in the forest. It was of a rampant tiger with the caption, “The best place for meditation is in the tiger’s mouth.”

“If we want to create change in the world we must constantly strive to strengthen community – first by making community with the soil, working with rather than against nature’s providence.” Second is making human community, sharing wealth, putting children and elderly first (their needs ahead of tax cuts and corporate bail outs). And third (but not last) we need a community of the soul. Alastair says that what ever your religion – or lack of one – we need spaces to rest, compose and compost our inner stuff. (Walking with Thich Nhat Hanh, eating Tomatoes with Alice Walker) By keeping an eye to the ground and the stars we can be more deeply present in our universe, and our lives. Then we can touch that mystery, that miracle which too often eludes us when we strive for it. Alistair adds, "We need to remember that when we let loose our wildness in creatively it is God the Goddess – or call it Christ, or Allah or Krishna or the Tao – that pours forth. It does so from within, as a never-ending stream.” Where can we start? “Test any course of action with the touchstone of service. Ask: does it help the poor? Does it restore the broken nature? Does it bring music to the soul? In short is it concerned with the blossoms?”

I remember Alice Walkers’ description of all humanity as a garden and it all makes sense.

Suddenly that ill-fitting suit of clothing I've been wearing for most of my life began to fit. I remembered reading about something called 'the forest of your heart'. This place, deep inside each of us, is an echo of the primordial forest, the first forest. But this echo is different for each of us. It reflects where we are nurtured, where the love of mother earth touches our hearts and fills us with a sense of belonging. Each of my teachers asks us to seek that place in ourselves. Whether their languages came from the womanist tradition, Buddhism or Celtic Christianity, each one found their centre in loving the earth.

From my journey through my imagination, I'm here again. The forest of my heart gradually awakening. Now, it's up to me to nurture it, help it to grow and seek the wisdom that abides there. For the most important lesson I've learned from these three teachers is that they can do nothing more than point the way, it's up to me to walk the path.

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