

*Part One, Sonnet IV*, by Rainer Maria Rilke,  
as translated by Joanna Macy and Anita Barrows

You, who let yourselves feel, enter the breathing that is more than your own. Let it brush your cheeks, as it divides and rejoins behind you.

Blessed ones, whole ones, you where the heart begins. You are the bow that shoots the arrows, and you are the target.

Fear not the pain. Let its weight fall back into the Earth, for heavy are the mountains, heavy the seas.

The trees you planted in childhood have grown too heavy; you cannot bring them along. Give yourselves to the air, to what you cannot hold.

*Invocation*, by John Seed:

We ask for the presence of the spirit of Gaia and pray that the breath of life continues to caress this planet home.

May we grow into true understanding—a deep understanding that inspires us to protect the tree on which we bloom, and the water, soil, and atmosphere without which we have no existence.

May we turn inwards and stumble upon our true roots in the intertwining biology of this exquisite planet. May nourishment and power pulse through these roots, and fierce determination to continue the billion-year dance.

May love well up and burst forth from our hearts.

May there be a new dispensation of pure and powerful consciousness and the charter to witness and facilitate the healing of the tattered biosphere.

We ask for the presence of the spirit of Gaia to be with us here. To reveal to us all that we need to see, for our own highest good and for the highest good of all.

We call upon the spirit of evolution, the miraculous force that inspires rocks and dust to weave themselves into biology. You have stood by us for millions and billions of years—do not forsake us now. Empower us and awaken in us pure and dazzling creativity. You that can turn scales into feathers, seawater to blood, caterpillars to butterflies, metamorphose our species, awaken in us the powers that we need to survive the present crisis and evolve into more aeons of our solar journey.

Awaken in us a sense of who we truly are: tiny ephemeral blossoms on the Tree of Life. Make the purposes and destiny of that tree our own purpose and destiny.

Fill each of us with love for our true Self, which includes all of the creatures and plants and landscapes of the world. Fill us with a powerful urge for the well-being and continual unfolding of this Self.

May we speak in all human councils on behalf of the animals and plants and landscapes of the Earth.

May we shine with a pure inner passion that will spread rapidly through these leaden times.

May we all awaken to our true and only nature—none other than the nature of Gaia, this living planet Earth.

We call upon the power which sustains the planets in their orbits, that wheels our Milky Way in its 200-million-year spiral, to imbue our personalities and our relationships with harmony, endurance and joy. Fill us with a sense of immense time so that our brief, flickering lives may truly reflect the work of vast ages past and also the millions of years of evolution whose potential lies in our trembling hands.

O stars, lend us your burning passion.

O silence, give weight to our voice.

We ask for the presence of the spirit of Gaia.

This invocation, the poem we used to light our chalice, the songs we've joined our voices in singing, are all efforts to create a new story. This story seeks to reframe who we are in the universe and how we will walk with our fellow beings, human, animal, and plant. This story is the efforts of many, using many means from science to songs, to help us understand in our hearts the need and the joy that this story holds for us all.

I became aware of the interesting intersections of this new story in an unlikely way, in the controversy surrounding a Hollywood blockbuster. When the release of the science-fiction fantasy film *The Golden Compass* was greeted by a variety of attacks, I knew that I had to go see it. The film, based on the first of a three-book series by Philip Pullman and assailed as anti-religious, more specifically anti-God, really didn't live up to the negative hype. After seeing the movie and not getting a satisfactory taste of its originator's irreligious intent, I went to the source and read the books. I'd tried to read this trilogy several years ago but couldn't get through it. The idea of parallel universes just didn't work for me. But, whether a sign of growth in my ability to consider metaphoric writing as conveying deeper truths or just my tenacious desire to be seen reading a book that some people didn't like, this time I read all three volumes. While they include strong condemnation of the type of institutional church that uses its power to inhibit personal freedom, knowingly teaches falsehoods to maintain order, and uses whatever means necessary to hold onto power, none of that was what captivated me in Pullman's story.

Instead, it was his vision of what happens to us after death. Pullman creates a netherworld where the dead live in a transparent limbo. The two young heroes release the spirits of the dead, who then, with a look of rapture, become elemental dust that rejoins and energizes the world. For Pullman, this is the best life after death, each of us returning to the elemental beginning, part of the process of life regenerating. Then, as our heroes reach the end of their journey, another subtle curve reframes the usefulness of the metaphor of alternate universes. It seems that traveling back and forth between these alternate possibilities is not good for the human body. Each of us is made for our own universe, our place in the fabric of reality. When the gaps between the universes open, bad things happen; when people travel back and forth, they eventually become ill.

The reason that this really intrigued me had to do with another story I was reading at the same time. This story wasn't science fiction. It was about what a scientist in this universe learned when he, too, was exploring elemental particles of reality. I have a habit of reading three or four books at once; sometimes they are totally unrelated, other times they feed on each other. It was mealtime with these books.

Pullman's fictional idea resonated with the conclusions reached by James Lovelock.<sup>1</sup> Lovelock was also looking for elemental particles, the smallest possible particles.

His quest led him to create an instrument that could detect parts per trillion. With this machine, he detected chlorofluorocarbons, or CFCs, in the atmosphere above Antarctica, leading to the discovery of ozone depletion. Because of his work, he was asked for advice about a lunar surveyor and instruments for detecting life on Mars. This got him thinking about life itself. His explorations of small particles then led him into a mystery worthy of any science-fiction story. After exploring how minerals leach from rocks and create the saltiness of the seas, he wondered why the oceans haven't become too salty. After learning that our sun's temperature has increased by 25 percent since it was formed, he wondered why our atmosphere has remained fairly stable. Further observation into these and other such consistencies lead him to conclude that all living things on the Earth operate as a single system, keeping the elements of our planet's biosphere, its temperature and the saltiness of the oceans, relatively constant. Everything is in collusion to keep a relative balance that sustains life. This scientist, who'd studied the smallest of particles of reality, found that these particles are all intimately interrelated, all creating a self-regulating whole that, in the earliest of times, began to move us toward life.

He decided to call this process the Gaia hypothesis. Gaia, the mother Goddess, the creator of life, object of worship of the Greeks. Greek poet Hesiod said of her in his creation story:

Gaia, the beautiful, rose up, broad-blossomed, she that is the steadfast base  
of all things. And fair Gaia first bore the starry Heaven, equal to herself,  
to cover her on all sides and to be a home forever for the blessed Gods.

All those centuries ago, Hesiod realized what had dawned on James Lovelock, the existence of this foundational Gaia, which is all life and supports that life at the same time. In the beginning, Lovelock and others expressed great excitement about taking the elements that make Gaia to another planet and copying Earth, creating another Gaia on, say, Mars. Maybe they were captivated by the fantasy of sci-fi writers who seemed bent on taking us away from our planet, Earth. But while fictional humans survive on other worlds, Lovelock's explorations led him to conclude that these new worlds wouldn't be Gaia. He soon came to see that this idea was another escape fantasy that refused to acknowledge the importance of this biosphere, this planet Earth, this reality that we inhabit. Just as in Pullman's alternative universes, this is the Gaia we have, and it's here. Maybe that desire to flee our problems on Earth for distant galaxies was part of our evolutionary, teenage desire to leave our mother, while taking all the comforts of home with us. But, just as Pullman's characters learned about their alternative universes, we can't leave this Gaia of ours.

That's where this mother metaphor shows a potential weakness, in assuming that the mother and human beings are somehow separate. Rather than children of the Earth, we are of the Earth itself. We are products of Earth's gravity and chemical composition. Eventually, most human beings leave their mothers; some return several times over the years, for varying lengths of time. But we never leave the Earth other than to look back on it. At a workshop led by Unitarian Universalist Michael Dowd, who calls himself an evolutionary evangelist, he described the Apollo astronauts as the Earth looking back on itself, Gaia conscious of its own existence. We aren't just *of* earth; we *are* earth. We are interwoven into this complex Gaia that should be self-regulating to maintain and create life. In our adolescent angst, we've sought to subdue and control our mother Earth. Now, with this photograph from space, we've

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<sup>1</sup> Suzuki, David, and Amanda McConnell. *The Sacred Balance: Rediscovering Our Place in Nature*, pp. 142-145.

come to see that this form of control, based on plundering and selfishness, is leading toward her destruction. We're starting to realize that maybe mom wasn't in need of our redesign; maybe we should start working *with* this metaphorical parent. Instead of trying to boldly go where no one has gone before, perhaps we should boldly seek our role in this new story here, caring for the future generations of beings who will live right here in Gaia. It's not that studying the stars is unimportant. After all, we are equally part of that entire universe, and it is from those stars that we owe our origins. Instead, we might look for a deeper relationship with it all, rather than seeking a new home out there somewhere, as though this Gaia of ours is merely a shell that we, like hermit crabs, can shed for a new one. We are part of the arrow of life, moving toward the target of the next epoch of existence.

Often human beings define ourselves as the peak of evolution, the top of the food chain, the best of the best. But are we really? Instead, what if we begin to see our species as a character in an evolutionary drama, one in which we play a part, but it isn't just about us. Each character in this drama is essential to the story; without all the other actors, we'll be without a prompt for our next line. Each character has an equally important role to play, from the smallest plankton to the largest redwood. Then we might ask, what's our part? What's our motivation in this scene? Throughout human history, our motivation has changed. In the beginning, it was survival. We were relatively scrawny but smart. And we used those smarts as we created communities to support each other, to acquire food and protection. Then, as we began to thrive and became a species capable of altering the landscape in drastic ways, exploring and conquering our surroundings became our motivations. All human families did not follow the same script, but, as many societies became more mobile, the connection to Earth as nurturing home seemed to deteriorate. It was these mobile actors who wrote the story that dominates our time.

Now science again gives us a metaphor pregnant with meaning, one that reconnects us with the nurturing, sustaining qualities of the Earth and implores us to understand ourselves as part of this complex, life-seeking system. The stories we tell ourselves about who we are matter a whole lot. They help determine how we will relate to one another and to our mother Earth. Albert Einstein understood this as he wrote, "A human being is part of the whole, called by us the universe, a part limited in time and space. [Humans] experience [themselves], [their] thoughts and feelings, as something separate from the rest, a kind of optical delusion of [their] consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desire and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures."<sup>2</sup>

At this point in our human evolutionary story, we're called to understand that we can't survive alone, as individuals, as clans, as nations, as a species. We can't survive alone. To suppose that we can is our delusion. To suppose that, if another has a different color of skin, she is not my sister; to suppose that, because someone has less material wealth than I do, he is not my equal; to imagine that, because someone subscribes to a different creed than do I, that person is my intellectual inferior; to be separated from any other woman or man, beast or bird, fish or fowl, plant or rock is our delusion. To destroy that delusion and enlarge our compassion is what we are called to do. The differences between all people, all beings, aren't to be ignored. That would also be a delusion. Instead, they are to be celebrated, as each tells its own story, and each story strengthens the understanding of the whole. Too often we're taught to fear what is different rather than embrace and celebrate others' stories. Fear of the other or of the future is too often used as a tool. But, ultimately, fear will not be enough for us to heed this call to connection. On the contrary, fear is much more likely to keep us penned in this prison. Instead, it will take love. This

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<sup>2</sup> Suzuki and McConnell, p. 26.

is why, for many, the mother Goddess image is so potent. With this sense of all-embracing love, the symbol of the Goddess becomes a metaphor of unity, all life. Starhawk writes, “People often ask me if I *believe* in the Goddess. I reply, ‘Do you believe in rocks?’ ... In the craft, we do not *believe* in the Goddess—we connect with Her: through the moon, the stars, the ocean, the Earth, through trees, animals, through other human beings, through ourselves. She is here. She is within us all.”<sup>3</sup> It’s our hearts Starhawk seeks to touch.

Whether it’s the metaphors of a wise woman, the images of a science-fiction writer, the hymn from an ancient poet’s creation story, or the observations of a scientist, each points us toward a change of heart. This change of heart may lead us to relate to Jennifer Welwood’s experience in her poem *Unconditional*:

Willing to experience aloneness,  
I discover connection everywhere;  
Turning to face my fear,  
I meet the warrior who lives within;  
Opening to my loss,  
I gain the embrace of the universe;  
Surrendering into emptiness,  
I find fullness without end.  
Each condition I flee from pursues me,  
Each condition I welcome transforms me  
And becomes itself transformed  
Into its radiant jewel-like essence.  
I bow to the one who has made it so,  
Who has crafted this Master Game.  
To play it is purest delight;  
To honor its form—true devotion.

This discovery that we are part of all this, that we are another connection in a web of myriad relationships, may be frightening. We may fear losing our sense of being at the top of the heap; we may fear that this means our home is really here and not some other planet; we may fear that we really, really do have to take responsibility for this Gaia of which we are part.

But then there is the chance to turn and face that fear and discover the warrior within, the primordial person we all have who can look upon the world and know it for our home, who can see in the sunrise a new dawn of possibility and in each plant and animal a relative whose life we depend on and who depends on us. Our hearts are called to be warriors who will fight for the lives of each being, each rock, and each stream, knowing that each one is our family. This leads to that transformation, to feel that each of us is a jewel at the intersection of the web of existence; each of us is transformed by and, at the same time, transforms this universe in which we live. “Now,” wrote Gary Snyder, “we must become warrior-lovers in the service of the great goddess Gaia, Mother of the Buddha.”<sup>4</sup>

Mother of the Buddha, of the Cosmic Christ, of dharma, of science. Every story can be woven into the tale of Gaia. Both Goddess and scientific hypothesis, Gaia transforms not just our individual acts but

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<sup>3</sup> Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess*, reprint, 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1979), pp. 91-92.

<sup>4</sup> Hunt-Badiner, Alan. *Dharma Gaia: A Harvest of Essays in Buddhism and Ecology*, (Parallax, 1990), p. 1.

also the communities we create. Snyder challenges his own Buddhist community to see themselves as part of a larger whole, part of the unfolding drama, part of the retelling of our story, part of Gaia. Individually, we can't make this story real, but communities give it a voice that will be heard by all living beings.

These communities will find the joy of lifting our voices together in praise and adoration of this planet. We will find genuine contentment in the change of heart that leads us to understand that defining our value in our material wealth is a delusion, one that has corrupted our sense of connection, one that has led us to destroy what is really real—our interconnected lives with each other, with Gaia. This may be our role in this next story of Gaia. The arrow of the preceding generations has pointed us to this target, to become the consciousness of Gaia. We are the first part of this evolving planet to look back upon itself in awe, to see the beauty of this fragile, wonderful world, and to find deep in our very beings love for this mother Earth.

May each step you take be as a prayer, caressing and caressed by the earth. May each breath you take be as a blessing, inhaling love, exhaling peace. May each moment you live be an act of devotion, to yourself as a precious part of the universe and to all of Gaia in gratitude and reverence. May it be so.

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