

Active Hope in the Green Cathedral

Bonnie Beiswenger

19 February 2023

“Something is going deeply wrong in the world.” Do you ever get that feeling? I know I do, but this is not my quote. It is from the famed psychiatrist Carl Jung more than fifty years ago. In his book *Nature Has a Soul*, he voiced serious concern that humans were losing their spiritual connection to the natural world and that the human psyche would suffer from the disconnect. Nature, he said, “is the nourishing soil of the soul.”

Jung traces how this disconnect gradually came about since the Industrial Revolution and how it has damaged both the human psyche and our entire culture. Back in 1945 in a *New York Times* interview, he bemoaned how much had been sacrificed to achieve domination of nature and predicted that “our pathological fascination with speed, conquest, material acquisition and technology will not lead to happy lives.” Can you imagine what he would say now about our utter fascination with robots, AI, and virtual reality, while we give backburner attention to the damage we are wreaking on our earth and each other?

I think Dr. Jung was onto something crucial that threatens our individual and collective humanity. We have deviated so far from our primal nature that we no longer view the natural world as sacred, as a reflection of its Creator God and a precious gift to be treasured. We have only to look at the primal religions of indigenous peoples to see just how disconnected we have become. These people, far from being uncivilized and savage, have had much to teach us for a long time.

In her book *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Robin Kimmerer, a botanist and member of the Potawatomi Nation, balances her scientific training with the true reverence of native Americans for the earth and gives us a mind-change perspective that may help us heal that disconnect between ourselves and the earth.

Kimmerer talks of the deep respect that native people have for every part of the natural world and how this respect is reflected in their languages. She notes that most indigenous languages use the same personal pronouns to address the living world as we use for family, because to them the natural world is their family. There is no equivalent *it* word for rocks, animals, plants, fire, water—they are all addressed as Beings imbued with Spirit. For example, they would not ask of an apple, “What is it?” but rather would ask, “Who is that being?” In English, you are either human or a thing, so our language reflects our subconscious idea that humans are superior to other life forms. If a tree is not a *who* but an *it*, then the tree becomes an object, just a resource for our use. If a tree is an *it*, we can take a chainsaw to it, but if the tree is a *she*, maybe we first

think about what we are doing. If we saw the waters and all the life forms it nurtures as a reflection of our Creator, would we be so quick to use it as a dumping ground, filling it with 46 billion pounds of microplastics—expected to triple by 2060?

And along with respect are the indigenous concepts of gratitude and reciprocity. Native American culture sees the natural world as a sacred gift to be shared and used with gratitude. In that world, one never takes more than one needs, never wastes what is given, and always tries to reciprocate the gift. They recognized their dependency on the earth and so honored and strove to care for it. Before making major decisions, the tribal elders always asked themselves how their actions would affect the seventh generation from theirs. Do our leaders ever stop to consider the long-term consequences of their decisions?

As an illustration, settlers in the Great Lakes wrote in their journals about the abundance of wild rice harvested by the Native peoples. The settlers thought it strange that there was a full day ceremony of thanksgiving before the harvest. Then they were more puzzled that the natives harvested for four days and always stopped, leaving much of the rice unreaped. The settlers viewed this as laziness and lack of initiative.

The native response was “Yes, we could get more, but it must seed itself for next year. And you know we are not the only creatures who like rice. Do you think the ducks would stop here if we took it all?” There is that concept of gratitude and reciprocity. First give thanks, share, and then give something back to the Source. The natives saw themselves as a part of nature, and so it followed that to care for nature was to care for themselves.

Nature itself is a teacher, if we would take the time to observe. As a botanist, Robin Kimmerer talks of the ways trees communicate to each other via pheromones that waft on the breezes to warn each other of invading pests or disease, and how underground through fungal networks they redistribute mineral nutrients like Robin Hood. Trees with surplus nutrients send help to trees in need. They act as a collective, not as greedy individuals.

On an episode of *Nature*, I was astonished at the myriad symbiotic relationships of almost all ocean life, like the anemones and clownfish as just one example. The anemone provides the clownfish protection and shelter, while the clownfish provides the anemone with nutrients from its waste and scares off predators.

Over and over, nature demonstrates to us how to live, the power of unity, how we flourish when we share, how we are just one small part of the web of life, and how what happens to one will happen to all.

So what does Christianity have to say about our relationship to the environment? Of course, in Christ's time, humans had not yet desecrated the earth, and many believed the end times were imminent, so environmental issues were not on the radar. But Christ recognized that nature could teach us, so many of his parables and lessons directed our attention to the natural world. He asked us to consider the flowers of the field, the sparrows, the fig trees and the grapevines, the mustard seed, the wind. He showed us that nature has something to teach us. And what of his command to love our neighbor as ourselves? Doesn't that mean we need to take no more than we need, that our resources need to be shared equitably and cared for so there will be enough for all?

I'd like you to hear what Rev. Rowan Williams, former archbishop of Canterbury, has to say about Christianity and its relationship to the environment.

Video - Rev. Rowan Williams

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=POf0rT5qImI&t=2s>

So God saw that the world was good—and so must we see it as the sacred gift it is and treat it as the green cathedral in which God has His Being.

Take a lesson from the Judaic Jubilee concept. Take a sabbatical from our acquisitiveness and greed. Do we really need one more pair of sneakers, the latest iPhone? Take time to refrain from “getting and spending.” The poet William Wordsworth said it long ago: “Getting and spending we lay waste our powers / Little we have of Nature that is ours.”

Despite the environmental crisis we are experiencing and our dire fears of the future we have created, it falls to us as God's people to maintain active hope and to do what small things we can to heal the earth and each other, to live humbly (because it's not all about us), to see ourselves as one small part of the great Web of Life, to have deep gratitude and return what we can of ourselves to The Source. As Rev. Williams said, “If it's worth doing, it's worth doing. The results will look after themselves.”