Spiritual Ecology

The Cry of the Earth

A COLLECTION *of* ESSAYS
EDITED *by* LLEWELLYN VAUGHAN-LEE

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The Greening of the Self

JOANNA MACY

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.
—JOHN SEED

SOMETHING IMPORTANT is happening in our world that you will not read about in the newspapers. I consider it the most fascinating and hopeful development of our time, and it is one of the reasons I am so glad to be alive today. It has to do with our notion of the self.

The self is the metaphoric construct of identity and agency, the hypothetical piece of turf on which we construct our strategies for survival, the notion around which we focus our instincts for self-preservation, our needs for self-approval, and the boundaries of our self- interest. Something is shifting here. The conventional notion of the self with which we have been raised and to which we have been conditioned by mainstream culture is being undermined. What Alan Watts called "the skin-encapsulated ego" and Gregory Bateson referred to as "the epistemological error of Occidental civilization" is being peeled off. It is being replaced by wider constructs of identity and self-interest—by what philosopher Arne Naess termed the ecological self, co-extensive with other beings and the life of our planet. It is what I like to call "the greening of the self."

BODHISATTVAS IN RUBBER BOATS

In a lecture on a college campus some years back, I gave examples of activities being undertaken in defense of life on Earth—actions in which people risk their comfort and even their lives to protect other species. In the Chipko or tree-hugging movement in north India, for example, villagers protect their remaining woodlands from ax and bulldozer by interposing their bodies. On the open seas, Greenpeace activists intervene to protect marine mammals from slaughter. After that talk, I received a letter from a student I'll call Michael. He wrote:

> I think of the tree-huggers hugging my trunk, blocking the chain saws with their bodies. I feel their fingers digging into my bark to stop the steel and let me breathe. I hear the *bodhisattvas* in their rubber boats as they put themselves between the harpoons and me, so I can escape to the depths of the sea. I give thanks for your life and mine, and for life itself. I give thanks for realizing that I too have the powers of the tree-huggers and the *bodhisattvas*.

What is most striking about Michael's words is the shift in identification. Michael is able to extend his sense of self to encompass the self of the tree and of the whale. Tree and whale are no longer removed, separate, disposable objects pertaining to a world "out there"; they are intrinsic to his own vitality. Through the power of his caring, his experience of self is expanded far beyond that skin-encapsulated ego. I quote Michael's words not because they are unusual, but to the contrary, because they express a desire and a capacity that is being released from the prison-cell of old constructs of self. This desire and capacity are arising in more and more

people today, out of deep concern for what is happening to our world, as they begin to speak and act on its behalf.

Among those who are shedding these old constructs of self, like old skin of a confining shell, is John Seed, director of the Rainforest Information Center in Australia. One day we were walking through the rain forest in New South Wales, where he has his office, and I asked him: "You talk about the struggle against the lumber companies and politicians to save the remaining rain forests. How do you deal with the despair?"

He replied, "I try to remember that it's not me, John Seed, trying to protect the rain forest. Rather, I am part of the rain forest protecting itself. I am that part of the rain forest recently emerged into human thinking." This is what I mean by the greening of the self. It involves a combining of the mystical with the pragmatic, transcending separateness, alienation, and fragmentation. It is a shift that Seed himself calls "a spiritual change," generating a sense of profound interconnectedness with all life.

This is hardly new to our species. In the past, poets and mystics have been speaking and writing about these ideas, but not people on the barricades agitating for social change. Now the sense of an encompassing self, that deep identity with the wider reaches of life, is a motivation for action. It is a source of courage that helps us stand up to the powers that are still, through force of inertia, working for the destruction of our world. This expanded sense of self leads to sustained and resilient action on behalf of life.

When you look at what is happening to our world—and it is hard to look at what is happening to our water, our air, our trees, our fellow species—it becomes clear that unless you have some roots in a spiritual practice that holds life sacred and encourages joyful communion with all your fellow beings, facing the enormous challenges ahead becomes nearly impossible.

Robert Bellah's book *Habits of the Heart* is not a place where you are going to read about the greening of the self. But it is where you will read *why* there has to be a greening of the self, because it describes the cramp that our society has gotten itself into. Bellah points out that the individualism embodied in and inflamed by the industrial growth society is accelerating. It not only causes alienation and fragmentation in our century but also is endangering our survival. Bellah calls for a moral ecology. "We must have to treat others as part of who we are," he says, "rather than as a 'them' with whom we are in constant competition."

To Robert Bellah, I respond, "It is happening." It is happening because of three converging developments. First, the conventional small self, or ego-self, is being psychologically and spiritually challenged by confrontation with dangers of mass annihilation. The second force working to dismantle the ego-self is a way of seeing that has arisen out of science. From living systems theory and systems cybernetics emerges a process view of the self as inseparable from the web of relationships that sustain it. The third force is the resurgence in our time of non-dualistic spiritualities. Here I write from my own experience with Buddhism, but I also see it happening in other faith traditions, such as the Jewish Renewal Movement, Creation Spirituality in Christianity, and Sufism in Islam, as well as in the appreciation being given to the message of indigenous cultures. These developments are impinging on the self in ways that are helping it to break out of its old boundaries and definition.

The move to a wider, ecological sense of self is in large part a function of the dangers that threaten to overwhelm us. Given news reports pointing to the progressive destruction of our biosphere, awareness grows that the world as we know it may come to an end. The loss of certainty that there will be a future is, I believe, the pivotal psychological reality of our time. Why do I claim that this erodes the old sense of self? Because once we stop denying the crises of our time and let ourselves experience the depth of our own responses to the pain of our world—whether it is the burning of the Amazon rain forest, the famines of Africa, or the homeless in our own cities—the grief or anger or fear we experience cannot be reduced to concerns for our own individual skin. When we mourn the destruction of our biosphere, it is categorically distinct from grief at the prospect of our own personal death.

Planetary anguish lifts us onto another systemic level where we open to collective experience. It enables us to recognize our profound interconnectedness with all beings. Don't apologize if you cry for the burning of the Amazon or the Appalachian mountains stripped open for coal. The sorrow, grief, and rage you feel are a measure of your humanity and your evolutionary maturity. As your heart breaks open there will be room for the world to heal. That is what is happening as we see people honestly confronting the sorrows of our time. And it is an adaptive response.

The crisis that threatens our planet, whether seen in its military, ecological, or social aspects, derives from a dysfunctional and pathological notion of the self. It derives from a mistake about our place in the order of things. It is the delusion that the self is so separate and fragile that we must delineate and defend its boundaries; that it is so small and so needy that we must endlessly acquire and endlessly consume; and

that as individuals, corporations, nation-states, or a species, we can be immune to what we do to other beings.

The urge to move beyond such a constricted view of self is not new, of course. Many have felt the imperative to extend their self-interest to embrace the whole. What is notable in our situation is that this extension of identity comes not through a desire to be good or altruistic, but simply to be present and own our pain. And that is why this shift in the sense of self is credible to people. As the poet Theodore Roethke said, "I believe my pain."

CYBERNETICS OF THE SELF

Twentieth-century science undermined the notion of a self that is distinct from the world it observes and acts upon. Einstein showed that the self's perceptions are determined by its position in relation to other phenomena. And Heisenberg, in his Uncertainty Principle, demonstrated that its perceptions are changed by the very act of observation.

Systems science goes further in challenging old assumptions about a separate, continuous self, by showing that there is no logical or scientific basis for construing one part of the experienced world as "me" and the rest as "other." That is so because as open, self-organizing systems, our very breathing, acting, and thinking arise in interaction with our shared world through the currents of matter, energy, and information that move through us and sustain us. In the web of relationships that sustain these activities there is no line of demarcation.

As systems theorists say, there is no categorical "I" set over against a categorical "you" or "it." One of the clearest expositions of this is found in the writings of Gregory Bateson, who says that the process that decides and acts cannot be neatly identified with the isolated subjectivity of the

individual or located within the confines of the skin. He contends that "the total self-corrective unit that processes information is a system whose boundaries do not at all coincide with the boundaries either of the body or what is popularly called 'self' or 'consciousness.'" He goes on to say, "The self as ordinarily understood is only a small part of a much larger trial-and-error system which does the thinking, acting, and deciding."

Bateson offers two helpful examples. One is a woodcutter in the process of felling a tree. His hands grip the handle of the ax, there is the head of the ax, the trunk of the tree. Whump, he makes a cut. And then whump, another cut. What is the feedback circuit, where is the information that is guiding that cutting down of the tree? It is a whole circle; you can begin at any point. It moves from the eye of the woodcutter, to the hand, to the ax, and back to the cut in the tree. That self-correcting unit is what is chopping down the tree.

In another illustration, a blind person with a cane is walking along the sidewalk. Tap, tap, whoops, there's a fire hydrant, there's a curb. Who is doing the walking? Where is the self of the blind person? What is doing the perceiving and deciding? The self-corrective feedback circuit includes the arm, the hand, the cane, the curb, and the ear. At that moment, that is the self that is walking. Bateson points out that the self is a false reification of an improperly delimited part of a much larger field of interlocking processes. And he goes on to maintain that "this false reification of the self is basic to the planetary ecological crisis in which we find ourselves. We have imagined that we are a unit of survival and we have to see to our own survival, and we imagine that the unit of survival is the separate individual or a separate species, whereas in reality, through the history of evolution it is the individual plus the environment, the species plus the environment, for they are essentially symbiotic."

The self is a metaphor. We can choose to limit it to our skin, our person, our family, our organization, or our species. We can select its boundaries in objective reality. As Bateson explains, our self-reflective purposive consciousness illuminates but a small arc in the currents and loops of knowing that interweave us. It is just as plausible to conceive of mind as coexistent with these larger circuits, with the entire "pattern that connects."

Do not think that to broaden the construct of self in this way will eclipse your distinctiveness or that you will lose your identity like a drop in the ocean. From the systems perspective, the emergence of larger self-organizing patterns and wholes both requires diversity and generates it in turn. Integration and differentiation go hand in hand. "As you let life live through you," poet Roger Keyes says, you just become "more of who you really are."

SPIRITUAL BREAKTHROUGHS

The third factor that helps dismantle the conventional notion of the self as small and separate is the resurgence of nondualistic spiritualities. This trend can be found in all faith traditions. I have found Buddhism to be distinctive for the clarity and sophistication it brings to understanding the dynamics of the self. In much the same way as systems theory does, Buddhism undermines the dichotomy between self and other and belies the concept of a continuous, self-existent entity. It then goes further than systems theory in showing the pathogenic character of any reifications of the self. It goes further still in offering methods for transcending these difficulties and healing this suffering. What the Buddha woke up to under the bodhi tree was *paticca samuppada*: the dependent co-arising of all phenomena, in which you cannot isolate a separate, continuous self.

Over the eons, in every religion, we have wondered: "What do we do with the self, this clamorous 'I,' always wanting attention, always wanting its goodies? Should we crucify, sacrifice, and mortify it? Or should we affirm, improve, and ennoble it?"

The Buddhist path leads us to realize that all we need to do with the self is see through it. It's just a convention, a convenient convention, to be sure, but with no greater reality than that. When you take it too seriously, when you suppose that it is something enduring which you have to defend and promote, it becomes the foundation of delusion, the motive behind our attachments and aversions.

For a beautiful illustration of how this works in a positive feedback loop, consider the Tibetan wheel of life. Pictured there are the various realms of beings, and at the center of that wheel of *samsara* are three figures: the snake, the rooster, and the pig—delusion, greed, and aversion—and they just chase each other round and round. The linchpin is the notion of our self, the notion that we have to protect that self or promote it or do *something* with it.

Oh, the sweetness of realizing: I am not other than what I'm experiencing. I am this breathing. I am this moment, and it is changing, continually arising in the fountain of life. We are not doomed to the perpetual rat race of self-protection and self-advancement. The vicious circle can be broken by the wisdom, *prajna*, of seeing that "self" is just an idea: by the practice of meditation, *dhyana*, which sustains that insight, and by the practice of morality, *sila*, where attention to our actions can free them from bondage to a separate self. Far from the nihilism and escapism often imputed to the Buddhist path, this liberation puts one *into* the world with a livelier sense of social engagement.

Our pain for the world reveals our true nature as one with the entirety of life. The one who knows that is the *bodhisattva*—and we're all capable of it. Each one can recognize

and act upon our inter-existence with all beings. When we turn our eyes away from that homeless figure, are we indifferent or is the pain of seeing him or her too great? Do not be easily duped about the apparent indifference of those around you. What looks like apathy is really fear of suffering. But the *bodhisattva* knows that if you're afraid to get close to the pain of our world you'll be banished from its joy as well.

One thing I love about the ecological self is that it makes moral exhortation irrelevant. Sermonizing is both boring and ineffective. This is pointed out by Arne Naess, the Norwegian philosopher, who coined the terms "deep ecology" and "ecological self."

Naess explains that we change the way we experience our self through an ever-widening process of identification. Borrowing from the Hindu tradition, he calls this process *self-realization*: a progression "where the self to be realized extends further and further beyond the separate ego and includes more and more of the phenomenal world." And he says:

> In this process, notions such as altruism and moral duty are left behind. It is tacitly based on the Latin term "ego" which has as its opposite the "alter." Altruism implies that the ego sacrifices its interests in favor of the other, the *alter*. The motivation is primarily that of duty. It is said we *ought* to love others as strongly as we love our self. There are, however, very limited numbers among humanity capable of loving from mere duty or from moral exhortation.
>
> Unfortunately, the extensive moralizing within the ecological movement has given the public the false impression that they are being asked to make a sacrifice—to show more responsibility, more concern, and a nicer moral standard. But all of that would flow naturally and easily if the self were widened

and deepened so that the protection of nature was felt and perceived as protection of our very selves.

Note that virtue is *not* required. The emergence of the ecological self, at this point in our history, is required precisely *because* moral exhortation does not work. Sermons seldom hinder us from following our self-interest as we conceive it.

The obvious choice, then, is to extend our notions of self-interest. For example, it would not occur to me to plead with you, "Don't saw off your leg. That would be an act of violence." It wouldn't occur to me (or to you), because your leg is part of your body. Well, so are the trees in the Amazon rain basin. They are our external lungs. We are beginning to realize that the world is our body.

The ecological self, like any notion of selfhood, is a metaphoric construct, useful for what it allows us to perceive and how it helps us to behave. It is dynamic and situational, a perspective we can choose to adopt according to context and need. Note the words: we can choose. Because it's a metaphor and not a rigid category, choices can be made to identify at different moments, with different dimensions or aspects of our systemically interrelated existence—be they dying rivers or stranded refugees or the planet itself. In doing this, the extended self brings into play wider resources—like a nerve cell in a neural net opening to the charge of the other neurons. With this extension comes a sense of buoyancy and resilience. From the wider web in which we take life, inner resources—courage, endurance, ingenuity—flow through us if we let them. They come like an unexpected blessing.

By expanding our self-interest to include other beings in the body of Earth, the ecological self also widens our window on time. It enlarges our temporal context, freeing us from identifying our goals and rewards solely in terms of our present lifetime. The life pouring through us, pumping

our heart and breathing through our lungs, did not begin at our birth or conception. Like every particle in every atom and molecule of our bodies, it goes back through time to the first splitting and spinning of the stars.

Thus the greening of the self helps us to reinhabit time and own our story as life on Earth. We were present in the primal flaring forth, and in the rains that streamed down on this still-molten planet, and in the primordial seas. In our mother's womb we remembered that journey, wearing vestigial gills and tail and fins for hands. Beneath the outer layers of our neocortex and what we learned in school, that story is in us—the story of a deep kinship with all life, bringing strengths that we never imagined. When we claim this story as our innermost sense of who we are, a gladness comes that will help us to survive.

"Nature, psyche, and life appear to me like divinity unfolded—what more could I ask for?"

C.G. Jung, *The Earth Has a Soul*

"Imagination is the living power and prime agent of all human perception, and is a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I am."

Samuel Taylor Coleridge