

Reaffirming a Sacred Ecology in the Post-modern World (Part One)

A Quick Overview by Himayat Inayati

Humanity is at the most significant crossroad we ever faced as a species. The fate of all of planetary life hangs in the balance. For quite some time, the road we have been on appears to promise our extinction; in fact, it has already extinguished up to 90,000 other species. But is there another road and is there still time to traverse it in a manner that will care for us as well as for the rest of life? Today, we have more than global warming to consider. We also have to consider how we will feed our vast, ever-growing populations in a sustainable manner. In fact, we need to restructure our whole economy from one that is constantly extracting from the planet to one that is truly sustainable for all life. It is pure illusion to think that the planet is inexhaustible in its resources. This is not news. Scientific, political, and public forums have been discussing this ever since Rachel Carson wrote "Silent Spring" in 1962, a book that many feel, launched the 20th century environmental movement.

Father Thomas Berry earmarked three remarkable planetary needs: a "sustainable economy" to replace our present "extractive economy"; a Bill of Rights for all forms of life on the planet, and a world related to as a community of subjects rather than as a community of objects. These needs are logical extensions of his emergent cosmological paradigm which has been furthered by Brian Swimme, who noted: "The universe, which once was nothing but light and fire, now sings arias." This billion year evolutionary thrust from nuclear light, to galaxies and planets, and to modes of consciousness and life is a process that staggers our minds and sensibilities. It is a perspective that demands an immediate and fresh perspective on humanity's role in life, as one of many inter-active relationships configuring that which we call the cosmos.

In 1979 chemist and earth scientist James Lovelock published "Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth." Lovelock who was working for NASA, became intrigued by the ability of the Earth to maintain its atmospheric temperature in a relative state of homeostasis, over an immense period of time, despite the Sun's radiant heat significantly growing during the same period. His research led him to perceive the Earth as a self-regulating system. His friend, novelist William Golding, suggested he name his theory 'Gaia' after the Greek goddess of the Earth. The mythic personification of this self-regulation process turned off the scientific community, at least as strongly as the New Age community enthusiastically embraced it. In the preface to his 2009 reprint of the original 1979 "Gaia", Lovelock evolved his thought and added: "Gaia is the super organism composed of all life tightly coupled with the air, the oceans, and the surface rocks." Lovelock developed this line of research but he never proclaimed the Earth a living, sentient presence. However, in his book "Animate Earth", Lovelock's student Stephen Harding, of Shumacher College in England, takes this line of research one very big step further by bringing presence into the discussion. Harding very clearly experiences presence from other modes of life as well as from the Earth and even describes various meditations throughout his book to enable readers to have such experiences themselves. Harding offers us a cosmology and a world teeming with allurements and presence.

A Souless World

In his work, Harding brings us once again to reconsider the road we are presently on. How did we get to the place where we live in an ever-more objectified world? How did we arrive at a place where we perceive Reality as a commodity? Some lay the blame on Descartes, Newton, and others of similar scientific or industrial ilk. Some say Descartes only hammered the last nail in the coffin: the perspective of a split reality reaches back to Aristotle and Plato. Whatever the truth, it appears that Aristotelian logic has dominated human – life relationships for several centuries. In the Arab world, this discussion reached a place of extreme disjunction between heaven and earth with the final triumph of Aristotelian cosmology championed by Averroes over Platonic and neo-Platonic cosmology championed by Avicenna. According to Henry Corbin, the French philosopher and translator of the Sufi masters Suhrawardi and Ibn al Arabi, with this cosmological defeat came the loss of the anima mundi, the Soul of the Earth. This loss culminated in the nineteenth century proclamation "Gott ist tot" by Friedrich Nietzsche. Modernity became an age of great scientific understanding and technology, an age of ever-greater human convenience, as well as an age of ever-greater isolation, alienation, and objectification. It offered us a planet of tremendous human consumption along with a soulless world and a cosmos without God. Modernity was an age with no truly living presence.

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Healing the Great Split – from the Personal to the Global

Transpersonal psychology orients us to a process called splitting. This is a natural process necessary for personal individualization as well as for the protection of the ego. In splitting, our personal and collective history of defending the self relegates into the unconscious realm psychic aspects that may cause us fear of loss, or concern for survival. It also strives to keep that material in darkness. However, it can be kept in the unconscious over time only through strong psychic blocking; this process depletes the individual and collectivity of life. It feeds neurotic perception and behavior, and blocks natural transformative evolutionary processes. To reverse this process, the psychic material must be allowed to penetrate our consciousness in a safe, digestible, and illuminating manner. It is the nature of life to move and to disturb persisting form. Life moves! For over four centuries, with the dominance of Descartes' dualistic paradigm, humanity and the rest of life has suffered a great split in our cosmological perception and consequent egoist defensive posture. Transferring the transpersonal model to a global level, this four century perception and behavior has only been possible through humanity's persistent, albeit mostly unconscious, refusal to acknowledge, be illumined, and transformed, by deeper levels of reality. Post-modern cosmology, psychology, biology, and deep ecology, challenge the validity of modern thinking and behavior. They underscore the cost of modernity to cultural and planetary environment, evolution and sustainability, as well as quality of human culture. In this challenge, we sense a turning of orientation. This fresh orientation is brought forth by the inclusion of presence. Henry Corbin, drawing upon the work of Heidegger, underscores that it is presence that establishes our sense of orientation. He extends Heidegger's work by including the earlier perspectives of Najmoddin Kobra, Shihabuddin Suhrawardi, and Ibn al Arabi, Sufis of the twelfth century. Heidegger understood that presence creates our orientation to space, time, and form. Through twelfth century Sufi mysticism, we are offered a spatiality and form that enters the timeless. We are also offered a seamless, not a split cosmos. Suhrawardi, Kobra, Ibn al Arabi offer us several levels of realities that connect with our normative sense of the cosmos by a bridging nexus called Alami Mithal. In this great "meeting place", information from all realms of reality find each other, and through presence and intimate relating are mutually in-formed into new creation. This realm of creative imagining offers possible simultaneous evolutionary process to all levels of reality. It also refutes the Descartes' great wounding cosmological split, being the bridge between subtle and denser realms of reality, while offering new life and evolutionary motion.

Presence and Adab

Earlier, it was noted that Harding made the very significant jump from Lovelock's "self-organizing" Gaia to a self-organizing world teeming with presence. Harding's sensitivity to presence actualized the world

that Father Berry invoked, a world of subjects rather than the world of objects created by modernity. Harding's world is a world of relationships created through presence.

In the twelfth century, knowing through presence was introduced to the Arabic world by Shihabbuddin Suhrawardi, as a response to the Aristotelian cosmology championed in Suhrawardi's time by Averroes. Suhrawardi also introduced a cosmology of depth, as well as expansion, drawing upon angelology in the legacy of Zarathustrianism. When we consider the expansion of the cosmos, as it is normally defined, we have to struggle mightily to orient ourselves to a staggering 78 billion light year Hubble Deep Field cosmos (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mcBV-cXVWFw>). To grasp an ever expanding phenomena of 78 billion light years is a mind bending experience to say the least! It might call to mind the response of Mohammad to the question of why the Creator created the cosmos in the first place: *"We were a hidden treasure and longed to be known."* We might also remember the Quranic injunction to know Him through His "ayat, the signs and relationships that shape the cosmos. As an additional sidebar, when we gaze at the 78 billion light year articulation of glory, we might ask: "How loudly does He/She need to speak for us to hear?" However, from the perspective of Suhrawardi, and later Ibn al Arabi, this 78 billion light year cosmos, available to our normal senses and accessible through our finest instruments of perception, is only a sliver of the infinite and multi-dimensional "haqq", a cosmos that embraces several levels (not just one) of reality. And although a 78 billion light year reality is accessible through our brain and the instruments of refined perception, the deeper levels of reality can only be grasped through Suhrawardi's knowledge through presence activated by the eye of heart, and even more deeply through the imaging of the soul.

For Ibn al Arabi, it is very clear that if all is God, and God created us "through a sigh of compassion" then the cosmos, in its infinite modes of manifestation, in its totality and in all its various particularities is a divine articulation (a song of glorification with no end). For breath and its motion is an articulation. As such, every aspect of Ibn al Arabi's cosmos is alive and sentient and is a manifestation of "Haqq", of Divine Reality. As he noted: ***"Even a worm, as it moves across the surface of the Earth, is proclaiming the Divine Message for those who have ears to hear."*** Being given Ibn al Arabi's perspective, and remembering that the cosmology of Ibn al Arabi is infinitely vaster and deeper than our normative sense of a 78 billion light year cosmos, we are asked to reorient our relationship and purpose within life's processes. Ibn al Arabi beckons us to relate to the cosmos as a sacred ecology of being. Because every aspect of creation is a living and sentient representative of its Creator, Ibn al Arabi insists that we must orient our perception of it and our behavior toward it with "adab", appropriate consideration. As he said: ***"every haqq demands a haqq"***.