

Spider Grandmother's Gift

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“This we know. The earth does not belong to us. We belong to the earth. This we know. All things are connected like the blood which unites one family. All things are connected. Whatever befalls the earth befalls the sons and daughters of the earth. We did not weave the web of life; we are merely a strand in it. Whatever we do to the web, we do to ourselves.” (*Chief Noah Sealth*)

This reading is a powerful declaration of the interdependence of all life. But what do we mean when we say we belong to the earth? For that matter, what does it mean to belong to anything? The word, “belong”, has at least three meanings in the dictionary. It can refer to ownership, as in, “This shirt belongs to me.” It can specify that something is a part of or is an adjunct to something else, as in “That cover belongs to this jar.” It can also refer to membership: “We belong to the country club.”

When we say, “The earth does not belong to us,” I think we are using the first definition, that of ownership. We acknowledge that the earth is not our possession, to do with as we please. This would be a major shift from our culture's historical relationship with the earth, which has been called “dominion.” It's based on the model of kings' relationships with their kingdoms. Whenever there is a public discussion of our responsibility to the earth, this concept of “dominion” is assumed. We have the idea of a bad king who doesn't consider the fate of his subjects, and the idea of a good king who is kind, merciful and considerate. When questions of policy arise, it's usually over whether we are good kings or bad kings. We may be willing to consider that we may need to change our behavior if it produces results we don't like, but we never really question our ownership of the earth.

It's interesting. I think that this kind of ownership is so ingrained in us that when we say, “the earth does not belong to us, we belong to the earth,” we shift definitions. It's easier to give up the idea of outright ownership of the planet

than it is to accept that the earth owns us, which is what I think our reading suggests. We don't like the idea of being owned, so we subtly negotiate a shift of meanings. When we say we belong to the earth, I think most of us scoot down to definition number three, the membership one. We belong to the earth like we would belong to a country club. We are proud of it, we may love it, we fulfill our responsibilities toward it, but we don't give it the right to make claims on us.

But what would it mean for the earth to own us? How would we belong to the earth? We're too enlightened and sophisticated to think of the earth as a living being that could have the right to make claims upon us, aren't we? We don't think that way. But the Hopi people do. Maybe their stories can speak to us about this in ways that we find difficult to speak to ourselves.

I invite you to shrink your imaginations with me. We've been looking at the big picture, and we will again, but for now just imagine that you are outdoors under a broad blue sky on a sunny day. There's just a light breeze and you're sitting comfortably on the ground. There's a spider's web in front of you. You haven't got much else to do, so you just sit and look. What do you see? You see the web, a complex, orderly structure of gossamer suspended in the space between two branches. At one edge sits a tiny spider, seemingly inert. The web is intricate, amazing. The sun comes out from behind a cloud and sends a golden beam of light that strikes the web. Suddenly its glistening strands look alive, aglow with the fire of the sun. It's beautiful. The intersecting lines give shape to the liquid sunlight. Suddenly, a fly is caught in the sticky web, buzzing its wings in a futile attempt to escape. The spider springs into action, putting the fly out of its distress and enjoying a nourishing meal.

Later, remembering the spider and its web, you see something else. You see signs of intelligence and a deep wisdom. The tiny spider knows how to weave an intricate web that provides it with abundant food. That spider knows things you don't know! In its own sphere, it's smarter than you are!

The Hopi people saw this and more in the spider. This is why they imagined that spiders were descendents of Spider Grandmother, a special being who played a major part in the creation of the world and its people. She guided creatures through the transformations by which they became people. Spider

Grandmother taught people how to weave blankets to keep warm, and how to make pottery out of clay. She taught the people how to sing songs of power that made things happen. She helped the people to make a silver disk and sing it into the sky, which became the moon, and a golden disk which became the sun. She taught them many things about living on the earth, and urged them to always be kind to each other and try to understand the meaning of things. Spider Grandmother taught them that all creatures were created for the earth and the earth was created for all creatures.

Spider Grandmother taught the Hopi people to live with a sense of the aliveness of all things. She taught that how we live makes a difference to the earth. With this sense of aliveness it is not difficult to appreciate the deep responsibility we owe to the earth, and that the earth itself can make claims on us. But we have lost that feeling of deep responsibility to the earth. We have replaced the organic oneness of life and nature with the logic of cause and effect.

The scientific method has made it possible for us to accomplish a great many things, but its success has burdened us with the conviction that causality is the most important thing in the world. When we can demonstrate that one thing leads to another, we feel that we understand their relationship, that we know something that is true. However powerful, though, the scientific method is a limited tool. Because it can reliably predict certain events, it gives us a great deal of confidence regarding its accuracy. But, because we regard demonstrations linking cause with effect as proof, we tend to be blind to things for which causes cannot be established.

This creates a major problem for public policy debate. Take rain forest preservation, for instance. Even a limited understanding of biology and ecology makes it clear that vegetation is like the earth's lungs, taking in carbon dioxide and releasing oxygen. This is a major source of free oxygen in the atmosphere. All animals great and small need oxygen to live, which they convert into the carbon dioxide that plants need. Therefore animals and trees are in an interdependent relationship. Unfortunately, our standard of truth is based on demonstrated cause and effect. This makes it possible to argue that we don't have enough data

on how our actions affect the atmosphere for us to assume that deforestation should be slowed or stopped.

This is like the argument that used to be made about cigarette smoking. Lung damage was considered to be a merely anecdotal phenomenon until enough people died to establish causality. By this standard, we need measurable outcomes to claim that human life is linked to our rainforests. By this standard, we can only make an accurate diagnosis after the death of the patient. Or the planet.

This standard of truth traps us in a world where the only reality is what can be proven. Unfortunately, this leaves out virtually everything on earth or off of it.

The Unitarian theologian Henry Nelson Wieman considered our reason woefully inadequate for the job we ask it to do. He said, “The tragedy of humanity and our generic sin is to try to put all existence into servitude of specifiable structures of truth.” He said that what we think of as truth is like a thin layer of oil over the ocean of the infinitely complex structure of our world. Our intellectual knowledge cannot even begin to approach the depth of the complex reality it tries to apprehend.

We can see and understand some of the web of relationships out of which life is made, but many others remain beneath, above, or beyond our view. The Buddhist teacher, Thich Nhat Hanh, has a word for. He calls it, “interbeing”. In his book, *The Heart of Understanding*, he explains that all things are made out of things that are not themselves, none of which can be excluded:

Look at a piece of paper. This morning’s order of service should do nicely. Thich Nhat Hanh said, “If you can look deeply you will see clearly that there is a cloud floating in this sheet of paper. Without a cloud there would be no rain; without rain, the trees cannot grow; and without trees, we cannot make paper. The cloud is essential for the paper to exist. If the cloud is not here, the sheet of paper cannot be here either. So we can say that the cloud and the paper “inter-are.”

“If we look into this sheet of paper even more deeply, we can see the sunshine in it. If the sunshine is not there, the forest cannot grow. In fact,

nothing can grow. Even we cannot grow without sunshine. And so, we know that the sunshine is also in this sheet of paper. The paper and the sunshine inter-are. And if we continue to look, we can see the logger who cut the tree and brought it to the mill to be transformed into paper. And we see the wheat. We know that the logger cannot exist without his daily bread, and therefore the wheat that became his bread is also in this sheet of paper. And the logger's father and mother are in it too. When we look in this way, we see that without all of these things, this sheet of paper cannot exist.

“Looking even more deeply, we can see we are in it too. This is not difficult to see, because when we look at the sheet of paper, the sheet of paper is part of our perception. Your mind is in here and mine also. So we can say that everything is in here with this sheet of paper. You cannot point out one thing that is not here – time, the earth, the rain, the minerals in the soil, the sunshine, the cloud, the river, the heat. Everything co-exists with this sheet of paper. To be is to inter-be. You cannot just be by yourself alone. You have to inter-be with every other thing. This sheet of paper is, because everything else is.

“Suppose we try to return one of the elements to its source. Suppose we return the sunshine to the sun. Do you think that this sheet of paper will be possible? No, without sunshine nothing can be. And if we return the logger to his mother, then we have no sheet of paper either. The fact is that this sheet of paper is made up only of “non-paper elements.” And if we return these non-paper elements to their sources, then there can be no paper at all. Without “non-paper elements,” like mind, logger, sunshine, and so on, there will be no paper. As thin as this sheet of paper is, it contains everything in the universe in it.”

This is the way Thich Nhat Hanh describes a type of relationship that's different from our conventional ideas of cause and effect. It reflects the kind of multi-dimensional interconnected systems that chaos theory is beginning to explore. Yet this wisdom is ancient. Claiming to own the earth would be like my elbow claiming to own my body. Without the body there wouldn't be an elbow. Or would it be like claiming that our minds are in charge of our bodies? Are we really smart enough to manage our organs and metabolism? Or are all our parts in this together? We can't own the earth because we are part of the earth.

For the Hopi, the spider is one of many things that represent this truth. It appears to possess non-spider knowledge. Although it lacks what we would call a mind, it emulates, enacts and proves a realm of knowledge forever beyond the grasp of our reason. The Hopi could see that the spider belonged to the earth, and was in touch with a wisdom greater than their own. She taught them her wisdom, and she taught them to belong to the earth as well.

Can Spider Grandmother teach us that there is a realm of living interaction beyond the reach of what we call truth? That this realm can make claims on us? If we grant the earth's ownership of us, how does that affect our precious sense of individuality and autonomy?

Could it be that we have purchased our autonomy at the expense of our ability to experience what Thich Nhat Hanh calls "interbeing?" What would it mean to us if we could feel ourselves as being made up of non-self elements, that we owe every aspect of our being to the interdependent web of existence of which we are a part? Are we ready to hear the claims the earth makes upon us? Spider Grandmother offers us these teachings. She is ready to give us the whole earth, if we can be humble enough to seek our place in it. Are we ready to accept her gift?