

CLIMATE CHANGE CHRONICLE 36

Reframing Our Role as Earthlings

In my last chronicle I mentioned that frames are the physical and psychological way we see the world and give it meaning. In this chronicle I want to reframe the word I've often used in these chronicles—"earthlings".

I suspect that when many folks hear the term "earthlings" they think of science fiction. I have a favourite movie I watch every time it comes on TV: "*Close Encounters of the Third Kind*." Superior beings in a space ship scoop up "earthlings" into their ship and at the end we see the skinny space creatures walking down a ramp letting the "earthlings" go.

That's not what I mean by "earthlings".

As the science of evolution has taught us, we have evolved as a species from the living energy forces at the time of the Big Bang 14 billion years ago, down through the creation of our planet 4 billion years ago and the eventual development of many species and finally our own species two hundred thousand years ago. Quantum physics has taught us that Earth is part of a conscious universe. So earthlings are the products of a living Earth and a conscious universe.

So why do we have to reframe? Because we do not see ourselves as part of a living Earth and conscious universe. They are something "out there", separate from us. We see ourselves more or less as the end of the evolutionary process—the zenith of evolution and the top of the consciousness pyramid. So we don't see ourselves as living within a living Earth and part of an evolving system. Nor do we realize that, if we are living within a living Earth and conscious universe, the living Earth and conscious universe are living within us.

I know that this is a lot to reframe about but it is critical for our understanding of ourselves as earthlings. And this is not a brand new concept. In the fourth century B.C Plato in his *Timaeus* wrote:

Therefore, we may consequently state that: this world is indeed a living being endowed with a soul and intelligence ... a single visible living entity containing all other living entities, which by their nature are all related.

So how do we reframe? Different people do it in different ways but as Plato has noted, we are endowed with 'souls and intelligence'. The concept of intelligence suggests that we have to think about our relationship to Earth and the Universe in a different way. The

concept of “soul” suggests that we have to relate to this Earth and Universe within us as a spiritual, motivating and energizing force. In a word we have to “spiritualize” our lives.

If we look up the word “spiritual” in the dictionary we see it comes from the concept of “holy”. And the word “holy” comes from the word “whole” and is used to mean “uninjured, sound, healthy, entire, complete”. In a word, the spiritual component means we have to help make Earth and its parts we are destroying “whole again”. But we must do it in a way that reflects our spiritual awareness of being within a living and conscious universe. Here an analogy may prove helpful.

When we get sick we go to a doctor with our problem because we do not feel “whole”. The systems in our body are not operating properly. The doctor diagnoses our problem and may suggest various treatments to help make us whole again—medication, surgery, lifestyle changes or whatever is needed. But it is important to note that the doctor does not heal us. He helps our body heal itself. And so it is with our spiritual mission. We are not healing Earth. We are helping Earth heal itself. It has been “stewarding us” for centuries.

At the community level focusing on helping Earth heal itself often seems useless. There seem to be many more pressing political, economic and social problems we have to deal with. But all of these problems are being radically affected in some way or another by the new context—a climate changing world.

A final reframing story.

Some years ago Thomas Berry, a cultural historian and Roman Catholic priest, helped his audience reframe. He gave a talk on our relationship to Earth and the universe. After the talk a man got up and said. “Father Berry, your whole talk was about our relationship to Earth and the universe. But you did not say a single word about those who are sick, suffering or very poor. How can you as a priest not say something about them?”

Thomas Berry responded, “When we are all together in a lifeboat we must do all we can to care for those who are sick, suffering and in need of help. But we must also care for the lifeboat.”

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