

COMOX VALLEY CLIMATE CHANGE CHRONICLES (5)

About Our Relationship with Earth

The foundation for a community climate change culture begins with an awareness of our relationship with Earth. We must rediscover our “earthiness”—what it means to be earthlings.

When I first went to Baffin Island in the high Arctic to take up my job in the Northwest Territories Department of Social Services I knew it was essential for me to learn more about Inuit culture and how it differed from my culture. I was not totally clueless. I knew that when the Inuit talked about their relationship to the land they were not talking about real estate. But I wasn't sure how they understood their relationship. One day an elder told me a story.

A tourist was visiting a small Inuit community on Baffin Island. She was interested in carvings. So, on a beautiful summer day she went for a walk around town. She came across an Inuit carver sitting on the front step of his house working on a carving. On a small table beside him were several samples of his art—a mother and child, a seal, a walrus--all of them beautifully carved in soft, green soapstone. The tourist paused, watched the carver working on his new creation and asked, "What are you carving?"

"A polar bear," he replied

After watching him for a few more minutes and looking again at the carvings beside him, the tourist asked, "How do you manage to put such beauty, life and Spirit--the Spirit of a bear--into that cold stone?"

The carver thought for a moment, looked up at the tourist and said, "I don't put the Spirit of the bear into the stone. It's already in the stone. I just chip away everything that doesn't look like a bear."

The tourist thinks the carver is transferring a picture in his mind to the stone. But the carver sees himself, the bear and the stone as being in a relationship together—all part of the living land.

Hearing the story you might think—all very nice but we are not members of an indigenous culture. We believe in modern science. So perhaps a story about science will help.

There is a commercial on TV these days about ancestry. It invites you to send in your DNA to find out who your ancestors were. It shows a woman standing in front of a pie

chart that breaks down her DNA and saying “Goodness. I knew I was Italian but I had no idea that I was 27% Native American.”

In March 2012 John Seabrook wrote an article in the *New Yorker* entitled *The Tree of Me*. It was about the increasing use of DNA analysis to determine ancestry. He noted:

In our DNA is a history of genetic heritage which includes not only our human ancestors but also our chimpanzee ancestors, our fish ancestors, and our protozoan ancestors, going all the way back to LUCA (an acronym for “last universal common ancestor)—a thermophilic bacterium that lived some four billion years ago, whose DNA all living things share.”

It is highly unlikely that we will ever see an ad of a woman standing in front of an ancestry pie chart saying, “Goodness, I didn’t know I was 5 % chimpanzee and 2% fish”—but something like that is the reality for her and for the rest of us. Through the process of evolution we are “earthlings” and, in some respects, other species are our kin.

As we explore our relationship to Earth and our combined relationship with the Universe we begin to discover a different sense of who we are in this new context.

Some people grasp their relationship to Earth from childhood, often through the teachings of their parents. This is especially true of most indigenous peoples. Others come to an “Aha” experience from their study and reading. Still others come to their awareness the other way around—through their activities in the community. Erich Fromm the psychiatrist once noted: “*People never think their way into new ways of acting. They act their way into new ways of thinking.*” And Lao Tzu put it even more succinctly: “*If you know, but do not do, you do not know.*”

But however we come to this awareness manifesting itself within us we also come to the realization that Earth is our Greater Self. What is happening to Earth is also happening to us, to our children, grandchildren and to our future generations.

With this awareness we have entered the Inuit carver’s world. With it comes a strong sense of responsibility. We must care for Earth to sustain its spirit. How we do this will be the subject of our next chronicle.

Mike Bell,
Comox Valley Climate Change Network.

