Gaian Animism

Ritual Innovation and Nature Spirituality in Radical Environmentalism and the Global Environmental Milieu

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Abstract

The radical environmental movement that erupted in America after the founding of *Earth First!* in 1980 advanced an innovative spiritual worldview that includes animistic and organicist dimensions, that I contend can be aptly labeled Gaian Animism. By examining the Council of All Beings, a ritual process that has been influential within that subculture, and a mythic speech attributed to the Native American leader who has become known as Chief Seattle, which radical environmentalists and many others have found compelling, we can view one influential way Gaian Animism has a spread through the global environmental milieu. By exploring the host of other ways such spirituality has been spreading since Earth Day in 1970, it is possible to discern how Gaian Animism is far from a mere countercultural phenomenon, but rather, it is becoming a major contender for the hearts and minds of people in many regions around the world. All this well complements the research Graham Harvey has conducted and orchestrated that also documents the rise of Animism and other religious and religion-resembling social forms that reflect perceptions that the world's interconnected and diverse agencies and forces are sacred and worthy of reverent care.

Introduction

Professor Graham Harvey, whom we honor with this volume, has played a major role in illuminating social phenomena that he has termed Neo-Animism. He has not, of course, advanced such study alone but he has been drawing on and engaging with a growing chorus of scholars who are also looking at such phenomena, in different times and places, and with increasingly diverse interpretive lenses. Like Harvey, most of those analyzing such phenomena have had personal experiences that have led to their scholarly interest and feelings of affinity with such spiritualties, and concomitant values and practices.

Harvey is aware, of course, that E.B. Tylor's use of the term 'Animism' was entangled with colonial and racist assumptions, and corresponding arguments that scholars should, therefore, eschew the term's usage, apart from critiquing its putatively pernicious origins (Chidester 2014, 2005a, 2011).

But for Harvey, Animism has become a useful term that need not be understood pejoratively (Harvey 2005). This is clear in part because increasing numbers of people use the term selfreferentially. This is also the case, he avers, because Animism need not involve nor refer to supernatural or invisible spirits. Rather, for Harvey, contemporary Animism is best understood to refer to perceptions that the world is replete with diverse life forms and forces with whom humans are related and to whom they have moral obligations that enjoin respect, and even reverence, when these beings are perceived as divine or holy (Harvey 2006).

In ways similar to Harvey due in part to my own idiosyncratic experiences (Taylor 2019a, 2019b), I have been drawn to study the natural dimension of religion, including social phenomena that Harvey and increasing numbers of others now call Animism. What I have found through my wanderings is that within the global environmental milieu (by which I mean the wildly diverse cultural spaces around the world where individuals and groups wrestle with, and over, their environment-related perceptions, values, and behaviors) many people have had experiences that lead them to express what, at least from an etic perspective, we can aptly call Animism.

Like Harvey, I also recognize that many forms of Animism have nothing to do with perceptions of nonmaterial beings or forces, but instead they are rooted in personal experiences with non-human organisms, within environmental systems, and derived from scientific understandings. In *Dark Green Religion* (Taylor 2008, 2010a) I called those whose perceptions included invisible spiritual beings or forces Spiritual Animists.[1] Naturalistic Animists, in contrast, I construed as those who base their perceptions either on their relationships with and observations of animals, or on ethology, the science of animal consciousness and behavior, a science that, in its own ways, makes it possible to surmise many things about what non-human animals think, feel, and communicate.

I have not only analyzed Animism's diverse, contemporary forms, but also the ways it combines with an ancient perception commonly known as Organicism, which more recently has been dubbed Gaia, after the Greek Mother Earth goddess.[2] And while Organicism involved beliefs that the universe is animated by one or more superordinate divine intelligence, a phenomena I call Gaian Spirituality, Gaian Naturalism, as I construed the term, stands for those who base their views on scientific understandings about interactions and mutual dependence of diverse organisms within the biosphere. During the 1970s, for example, James Lovelock and Lynn Margulis advanced the Gaia Hypothesis, which spread quickly and has become the most prominent example of such a worldview (Primavesi 2003; Harding 2006; Ruse 2013, Tyrrell, 2013; Latour 2017; Jabr 2019; Harding 2022). They argued that Earth's biota functions in ways that maintain the conditions necessary for complex, multi-cellular life to exist and flourish (Lovelock 1972, 1979; Margulis 1981; Margulis and Sagan 1986; Lovelock 2005). I have also noted that in the belief systems of many, there is an unclear and permeable line between the more spiritual and naturalistic forms of both animistic and organicist spiritualities.

[1] Most of the material presented here is new, but since my analysis includes some reflection on earlier work that is relevant to Professor Harvey's work, I have reused some words and phrases from previous summaries of previous analyses, as e.g., in Taylor 2013, 2017. For simplicity's sake, I have not put such words and phrases within quotation marks.

[2] James Lovelock, of course, through his Gaia Hypothesis, has been the one most responsible for the increasing popularity of Gaia as a shorthand way to express the ultimately Organicist notion that the living things and processes within the biosphere function like an organism to create and maintain the conditions necessary for the continuance of life on Earth (Lovelock 1972, 1979).

Herein, I will use the neologism Gaian Animism as shorthand for these entangled spiritual and naturalistic spiritualities.

To illuminate the complexities and ambiguities involved in the spread of Gaian Animism, in the following analysis I will explore examples of it within the North American radical environmental movement, before briefly reviewing some of the evidence of the growing cultural traction of such spirituality.

Discovering Gaian Animism

During the summer of 1991, more than 100 Earth First! activists gathered in a clearing of a National Forest in the State of Vermont in the Northeastern United States. It was the first full day of the gathering they called the "Round River Rendezvous," which was named for a beloved essay penned generations earlier by the wildlands ecologist, and philosopher, Aldo Leopold. The encircled activists listened to organizers explaining camp rules and workshop organizers describing their plans. Toward the end of the announcements, Jim O'Connor, a bearded man who appeared to be in his 40s, indicated that he would lead a day long Council of All Beings, and after a brief explanation of what it involved, invited those interested to listen for and follow the sound of a drum, which will begin soon after the end of the morning meeting.

Earth First!, which was then the most high-profile manifestation of a wider radical environmental movement, had been founded in 1980 by a group of wildlands advocates who, in various ways, considered ecological systems and non-human organisms to have intrinsic value. They also believed that humans were precipitating a massive and accelerating extinction episode, and that governments, corporations, and Western, capitalist-friendly legal systems were most responsible for it, and mainstream environmental groups were often complicit – far too willing to compromise, sometimes for self-interested, careerist reasons.

These perceptions led to their conclusion that reform-focused politics (electoral politics and grassroots lobbing), had not and would not halt anthropogenic extinctions and consequently, illegal resistance was both morally permissible and strategically necessary. Despite considerable diversity, the moral sentiment these activists shared – that all life has value apart from its usefulness to human beings – was typically rooted in nature-based perceptions and experiences that most of them, in some way, considered to be religious or, for those uncomfortable with that term, spiritual. This was the case as well for those among them who drew foremost on the sciences for their understandings of the human place in the universe and biosphere. Some of these were avowed atheists.

Like most of those drawn to this gathering, by reading *Earth First!*, the movement's nationally distributed tabloid, I had been learning about the movement and its spiritual, ecological, and political perceptions. I had seen how, from its very beginning, its writers and activists considered Western, monotheistic religions and philosophies to

undergird a pernicious anthropocentrism and even an ideology of human supremacy. In contrast, Earth First!ers typically considered indigenous and Pagan traditions, and religions originating in Asia (especially Buddhism and Daoism), to be more naturally eco-friendly. These spiritualities were also typically lauded as a way to connect to other species; they were also, often, understood to be forms of Animism.

Some movement writers argued that shamanic practices indebted to indigenous societies were especially effective in awakening participants to the value, agency, and personhood of nonhuman organisms and the possibility of communication and communion with them. Meanwhile, other writers drew on scientific understandings, especially physics and ecology, to advance notions of the interconnections and interdependencies within Earth's living systems. The Gaia Hypothesis, especially, precipitated a wave of spiritual enthusiasm, a development that bemused Lovelock, who commented that he appreciates and shares the impulse to have respect and reverence for the Gaian system (Lovelock 2005). And influenced by Lovelock and Margulis, as well as his studies of indigenous sorcerers, philosopher David Abram fused shamanism and Animism with the Gaia Hypothesis, arguing in *Earth First!* that such spiritualities are "no supernatural thing" but rather, they simply involve cultivating an ability to hear "the myriad voices of Earth" (Abram 1988; cf. Abram 1989).

The contributors to *Earth First!* were thus advancing an innovative spiritual worldview, which can indeed be called Gaian Animism. Through its journal the movement drew activists to it who shared its typical ecological, political, and spiritual perceptions, as well as its moral sentiments, thereby setting the stage for the day's Council of all Beings ritual.

Gaian Animism and the *Council of All Beings*

John Seed, an Australian Buddhist, Deep Ecologist, and activist who had founded the Rainforest Information Centre, and Johanna Macy, an American scholar of Buddhism and prominent antinuclear activist who had developed "despair and empowerment workshops" to help activists stay with the struggle, invented the Council. They sought to fuse deep ecology's ecocentric spirituality with Macy's efforts to overcome despair among activists. Their stated intention expressed Gaian Animism; they quoted the Vietnamese Zen Buddhist Thich Nhat Hanh when explaining that they designed the Council to help people "hear within themselves the sounds of the earth crying" (Seed et al. 1988, 7) and to enable them to "let other life forms speak" through them.[3]

By following Jim O'Connor and those he led into the Council during that 1991 Earth First! rendezvous, we can see how this ritual evokes and reinforces animistic perceptions.

[3] For more information about the religious sources Macy and Seed drew upon for the ritual, see Taylor 1994, 190–92.

Soon after the conclusion of the morning announcements that morning in Vermont, O'Connor began beating a drum in a slow, solemn, cadence. As he wove through the camp, activists fell in behind him. Eventually, well away from the hubbub of the camp, O'Connor arrived at a meadow and asked his followers to form a circle. Several who were unsure whether they wanted to participate, or who arrived late, remained on the periphery as observers.

When the Council is conducted over a three-day weekend, which is common, it typically begins with trust exercises to build community with the assembly. This may involve participants being asked to close their eyes, after which their partner leads them around, positioning them in various ways, then tapping the partner with closed eyes, who then, only for a moment, blinks their eyes open and closes them again. This exercise not only requires trust that one's sighted partner will not cause them injury as they lead them, but it is designed to draw attention to the wonders of nature that people, in their everyday lives, tend to ignore. Animistic perception typically involves cultivating alertness to the liveliness of the world, and this simple ritual seems designed to awaken or reinforce such alertness.

On this occasion, O'Connor began by explaining the intentions behind the ritual: to help us work through our despair over the destruction of the world we love; to more deeply understand that the evolutionary process is a sacred one to which we belong; and to listen to other-than-human voices. He added that their common goal was to empower their resistance to the forces of destruction. Then, drawing on an invocation written by John Seed (Seed et al. 1988, 2–3), he asked for "the spirit of the presence of Gaia" to guide the process so the denizens of the Earth would come and speak freely.

After that, O'Conner took a meter-long fallen branch from a tree and placed it in the center of the circle, which he called a "cairn of mourning." In a way that drew on Macy's despair and empowerment workshops, he explained that the pain we feel in our personal and activist lives can lead us to become paralyzed by grief, and it is important to express such feelings. Handing out a pebble, he invited whoever wished to, to come forward, place a stone on the cairn, and express those feelings.

One young woman described her pain at the recent death of her mother, but given the framing, most of the others mourned the loss of a forested childhood playground that had been destroyed by loggers for some human development, or expressed pain about some newly extinct species. One young man wept when describing a time when as a child he killed a bird with a slingshot, immediately and deeply regretting what he had done when he observed its beautiful but lifeless body. This experience led directly to his life of radical vegan activism; he would eventually spend several years in prison after he participated with a small group of Earth Liberation Front activists in the arson of a facility used to corral and slaughter wild horses.

After the mourning ritual, O'Connor led the group in a guided "Gaia Meditation" and a process of "evolutionary remembering" (Seed et al. 198: 41–51; 57–65). Beginning with the big bang, followed by the eventual formation of the Earth, the emergence and diversification of life, the emphasis was on how all life emerged from a common ancestor.

This demonstrated that all living things arrived here in exactly the same way, and they are kin, they are, quite literally, biologically related. As part of this process, O'Conner asked the participants to view with one another features of their own bodies, and to contemplate their own profound connections as members of the same species. The emphasis was on the wonder of the unfolding universe and how all living things *are* Gaia.

To set up the main event, the Council of All Beings, O'Connor instructed participants to go into the forest with an open heart, alert and sensitive to an entity in nature who wished to speak through them. He emphasized that the participants should not choose those for whom they would speak but to wait until some non-human entity or life form chose them. This emphasis seemed designed to acknowledge the agency and personhood of non-human organisms and entities, and thus, to break through enculturated anthropocentrism.

After participants spent more than an hour in the forest, O'Conner used his drum to call them back. They returned to find materials were ready for them to craft a mask representative of the entity they would soon represent. Then, assembled in a circle, the Council of All Beings began.

Representing diverse organisms, as well as entities and natural forces such as swamp, mountain, wind and ocean, voices spoke of their anger, pain, and frustration, at the way humans were harming them, and their diverse beloved relations, and Gaia as a whole. One of the participants rose to speak, and after a few moments, closed his eyes, and for a few moments, his entire body shook. Then, partially re-opening his eyes and gazing upward, he began to speak words supposedly from his spirit animal, in a voice entirely unlike his own. His demeanor in this was akin to those in the New Age movement who purport to provide a "channel" for the spirits of ancestors or other, earlier, human beings, or less commonly, of non-human spirits. Afterward, he told me he did not remember anything he had said, thus suggesting that a spirit of a non-human other had indeed used his body as a channel for its voice.

On this occasion participants were well acquainted with a host of environmental issues and threats to ecosystems and species. From what they spoke, it seemed to me that few if any of the others thought they were actually channeling the spirit of some natural being, force, or entity. Rather, they seemed to be engaged in a kind of animistic performance art. There is, of course, typically a performative dimension to ritual. The Council of All Beings is no exception.

After this, the first part of the council during which these entities spoke to one another, was over, O'Connor asked three of those gathered to re-assume their human identities and come to the center of the circle and sit back-to-back, facing those encircling them. Then, he asked those still in their other-than-human identities to speak directly to the humans at the center of the circle. As they did, the emotional intensity grew, as for example, when non-human animals expressed rage toward the humans for destroying their homes and killing their relatives, even for driving them toward extinction. But there were also expressions of fondness and a corresponding confusion

toward the human representatives, about how their species could be so callous and indifferent to their sufferings.

After this part of the process, O'Connor noted that all of the humans there were working to protect life on Earth and that they faced long odds, and he invited the non-human members of the assembly to consider giving to the assembled humans their special gifts, to empower them for the ongoing struggle for life on Earth.

Once again, with creative imagination, in response, nature's voices gave their special powers to the humans: water and ice's ability to break through concrete; eagle's ability to see clearly from great heights; owl's night vision and penguin's sense of direction; mushroom's ability to turn death and decay into new life, including by awakening in humankind proper perceptions of the beauty and kinship of all life.

The intention of the ritual was in plain view: to help participants overcome their psychic pain, deepen their sympathies for the nonhuman world, and empower them in the struggle to defend earthly life. For many of the participants, the council also functioned as rituals typically do, to bind a spiritual community together in its sacred mission. Indeed, the vulnerability these activists shared with one another created a kind of empathetic intimacy that, in some cases, led to enduring friendships.

The ritual varies significantly in different times and places, and it has taken place on nearly every continent since its invention during the late 1980s. Council facilitators often weave in evocative prose and poetry from animistic writers, including indigenous ones. Indeed, the original book explaining the ritual and how to conduct a council suggested having participants listen to and reflect on words from a speech attributed to Chief Sealth, a 19th century leader of the Salish people of the Puget Sound region of what is now Washington State with the city of Seattle as its cultural center, in the Northwestern United States. The Salish nation has come to refer to Sealth as Chief Seattle and holds "Chief Seattle Days" celebrations annually, which is how I will refer to him here.[4]

Gaian Animism and the mythic Chief Seattle speech

According to an 1887 newspaper account, Chief Seattle's 1854 oration took place at a time when the U.S. government was pushing him and his people, under the threat of continued violent suppression, to agree to the sale of their traditional lands, in order to relocate them to a reservation, in exchange for a promise of protection from settlers and retention of certain livelihood rights. Seattle's oration provided inspiration for the speech that has come to bear his name. The versions that became well known, however,

[4] The Salish nation uses his better-known name. Notwithstanding this annual celebration, according to Salish anthropologist Crisca Bierwert, some Northwestern Indians considered Sealth to be a traitor who converted to Christianity and too easily accepted white hegemony (Bierwert 1998).

which was the one that the Council of All Beings inventors printed in their primer, bore little resemblance to the original oration by the Salish chief. Complicating the record further, what the chief originally said is uncertain because Henry Smith, the white physician who wrote the newspaper account, based his account upon notes (now lost to history) that he had taken during the speech more than three decades earlier.

Nevertheless, the 1887 newspaper account likely reflects the chief's 1854 sentiments (Bierwert 1998; Kaiser 1987; Furtwangler 1997), which included bitterness about the deracination of his people from their lands, efforts to explain why young warriors had so long and violently resisted the white invaders (presumably in part to excuse them), and his hopes "that the hostilities between us may never return."[5]

This part of the speech did not appear in what became the "Chief Seattle Speech," the most widely disseminated version of which Edward "Ted" Perry, a screenwriter, crafted in 1970 for an Earth Day event.6 Quite obviously, Perry drew on and was promoting contemporary environmental concerns and themes (Kaiser 1987; Gifford 2015). Although he was inspired by Seattle's speech, Perry knew, since the originally-recorded speech was really little more than a muse for his own creative prose, that what he had written ought not be called Chief Seattle's speech, and he objected to this labeling (Kaiser 1987; Bierwert 1998; Gifford 2015).

There were several passages from the 1854 speech that Smith recalled, however, that likely did inspire Perry's pro-environmental version as, for example, when the chief asserted, "We are two distinct races with separate origins and separate destinies. There is little in common between us"; and, unlike the white settlers, he reportedly claimed, his people and their ancestors had a more intimate connection and love for "this beautiful world" and its "verdant valleys, its murmuring rivers, its magnificent mountains, sequestered vales and verdant lined lakes and bays" (Smith 1887). According to Smith, Seattle also proclaimed,

> Every part of this soil is sacred in the estimation of my people. Every hillside, every valley, every plain and grove, has been hallowed by some sad or happy event in days long vanished. Even the rocks, which seem to be dumb and dead as they swelter in the sun along the silent shore, thrill with memories of stirring events connected with the lives of my people, and the very dust upon which you now stand responds more lovingly to their footsteps than yours, because it is rich with the blood of our ancestors, and our bare feet are conscious of the sympathetic touch. Our departed braves, fond mothers, glad, happy hearted maidens, and even the little children

[5] The 1887 newspaper version is available at the Salish Nation website at https:// suquamish.nsn.us/home/about-us/chief-seattle-speech/. Henry Smith's account was published as "The Speech of Chief Seattle" in Seattle's *Sunday Star* newspaper on 29 October 1887. 6 In his history of the various versions of the speech, Rudolf Kaiser also provided the versions in appendices (Kaiser 1987; cf. Gifford 2015).

> who lived here and rejoiced here for a brief season, will love these somber solitudes and at eventide they greet shadowy returning spirits (Smith 1887).

Despite the stark contrast Seattle apparently drew between his own people and ever more numerous white settlers, Smith also recorded him as saying that someday they might realize a "common destiny" and perhaps, "We may be brothers after all."

Although what Seattle said will remain uncertain—Salish anthropologist Crisca Bierwert concluded that the statement about the sacredness of the soil is probably authentic (Bierwert 1998)—what is clear is that Perry's 1970 version has proven evocative and influential within the global environmental milieu. Among the most commonly cited passages from this version, for example, which appeared in the Council of All Beings primer, are those that express kinship between humans and the entire living world, and a spirituality of belonging and connection to nature, which is an affective underpinning of much contemporary environmentalism (Taylor 2001b, 2001a, 2010a):

> The perfumed flowers
> are our sisters;
> the deer, the horse, the great eagle,
> these are our brothers.
> The rocky crests,
> the juices in the meadows,
> the body heat of the pony, and man—
> all belong to the same family...
> The Rivers are our Brothers ...
> The air is precious...
>
> What is man without the beasts? If all the beasts were gone, man would die from a great loneliness of the spirit. For whatever happens to the beasts, soon happens to man. All things are connected ...
>
> Whatever befalls the Earth befalls the sons of the Earth. Man did not weave the web of life; he is merely a strand in it. Whatever he does to the web he does to himself ... The Earth does not belong to man — man belongs to the Earth. All things are connected. Even the white man cannot be exempt from the common destiny. We may be brothers after all. We shall see.

Rudolf Kaiser (1987) provided diverse examples of how, between 1970 and 1986, many religious texts and environmentally oriented journals reprinted such passages from Seattle's supposed speech in America and Europe, striking fertile cultural ground as environmental concerns quickened. A version that was "exhibited in the U.S. pavilion at the 1974 World Fair in Spokane, Washington," deleted the passages in which Seattle criticized white hegemony and worldviews, thereby making the tone of the speech more universal, and as Kaiser noted, "wholly ecological and nature-related in its outlook" (Kaiser 1987, 511).

The more evocative and poetic passages, especially, continued to be cited as the speech spread and became internationally influential. In 1988, for example, a year after the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development issued its now famous study defining and promoting sustainable development, *Our Common Future* (Development) (1987), UNESCO published *Man Belongs to the Earth* (UNESCO and MAB 1988). It took its title and its lead epigraph from the 1970 Chief Seattle speech. It thereby exemplified the sense of belonging and connection to nature so common in contemporary nature spiritualities.

Not to be outdone, the Bagels and Beans coffeeshop chain in The Netherlands printed excerpts from the World Fair version of the speech on its napkins. It included statements that "we are part of the earth" and that expressed kinship with the flowers, bear, deer, eagle, and the pony (along with images of them), because "all belong to the same family." I first noticed this text in 2005 and it was still on those napkins when I returned to the Netherlands in 2020.

Although the speech from 1970, as well as subsequent versions, cannot be attributed to the Salish chief, as Kaiser concluded, the versions that were passed down did represent an authentic expression of "the mind of a sensitive Euro-American, worried about our ecological situation and the general dualism in our culture" (Kaiser 1987, 517), who was keen to convey the idea that the entire living world is sacred.

In the decades after its invention, the Chief Seattle speech spread as rapidly as communicative technologies allowed at those times. It provides another example of Gaian Animism and how such spirituality has spread, especially since Western countercultures grew rapidly during the 1960s.[6]

The Council of All Beings was one ritual that helped to spread its influence. Rituals that survive well past their invention work for enough people who participate in them that those who value them decide to repeat and spread them. This was the case with the Council of All Beings. Seed, Macy, and many others spread the ritual to many areas around the world.

The Council itself continues to be held, but from what I can tell by searching Google Trends and otherwise searching online for evidence of such events, it does not seem to be a ritual that is growing significantly in the 21st century. Although there are trained facilitators, those who elect to participate in the ritual must set aside considerable time to do it. In short, it is difficult to scale up. Moreover, it is not like a sacrament in some traditions, which demands repetition and that devotees are obligated to support financially. Although it is a powerful and even transformative ritual for some people, for these reasons, it does not seem to have great growth potential.

Even within a spiritual community, of course, rituals do not work for everyone. During the 1990s I attended the ritual several times and there were usually some

[6] When considered authentic the speech exemplifies what David Chidester has called "authentic fakes", religious inventions involving false claims to authentic and authoritative sources, but that nevertheless function in the ways that religions typically do, such as providing meaning, values, and assuaging existential anxieties (Chidester 2005b).

individuals who confided to me afterward that they could not get into it, found it contrived, or said it reminded them of the religions of their upbringing from which they had fled.

Woo Woo and Ambivalence in Animistic Ritualizing

Although some people invited into such processes do not find collective rituals comfortable or compelling, and few who participate in the Council end up facilitating or participating regularly in it, that does not mean, however, that those who have participated do not have affinities with an animistic worldview. During a wide-ranging conversation in 1993 with several of those who had just participated in a Wildlands Project board meeting in Tucson, Arizona, which included discussion of Animism, for example, Dave Foreman, the most charismatic of Earth First!'s founders, exclaimed, "I would rather die than go to a Council of All Beings."[7]

Foreman was not alone. Many in the movement have been critical of, and even ridiculed some forms of explicit "woo woo," movement parlance for nature ritualizing orchestrated by hippies and Pagans who had been drawn to the movement. Foreman's distaste for such ritualizing, however, was more due to his personality as a private person than because he was dismissive of animistic or Gaian spirituality.

Indeed, as the Editor of *Earth First!* during the 1980s, Foreman decided to publish the journal according to a pagan calendar and to discuss Paganism in its pages, defending these decisions and even calling himself "an out-and-out-howling-at-the-moon pantheist" (Foreman 1982, 2). And he fervently believed that for humans to slow and halt the extinction crisis they must "resacralize" their perceptions of the Earth (Foreman 1987, 22).

This perspective helps to explain why, before he withdrew from Earth First! and relinquished control of the movement's journal, he published many articles promoting animistic, Gaian, indigenous, shamanic, pagan, Daoist, and Buddhist worldviews. While critical of aspects of them, he valued them to the extent that he thought they promoted the idea that nature is sacred and in need of reverent defense (Devall 1987; Drengson 1988; Faulstich 1989; Frisk 1993; Haenke 1986; Hawkins 1984; LaChapelle 1986, 1989a, 1989b; LaRue 1982; Lewis 1989).

Foreman even praised the Wiccan author and activist Starhawk for writing, in The Spiral Dance (1979), what he declared was "the best religious book since the burning times" (Foreman 1988, 35). Most of the movement's prominent leaders have expressed

[7] This conversation took place at Dave Foreman's home in Tucson, Arizona, on 24 February 1993, after a Wildlands Project board meeting that took place near there. Foreman died during his 75th year on 19 September 2022. For my reflections on his life, which were published in a book focusing on his influences on individuals, the environment, and culture generally, see Taylor 2023b.

affinity with American Indian peoples, based on an understanding that Amerindian worldviews value the natural world more deeply than do people rooted in Western worldviews. For more than two years, for example, Foreman lived at a Zuni Pueblo in New Mexico. He later reported, "at Zuni ceremonials I learned more than I had in all the Sundays I spent in church as a kid" (Foreman 1991, 174). During my 1990 interview with him, Forman made a similar statement, "You know, I agree with Edward Abbey when asked what his religion and politics are. He said, "Paiute," referring to scores of Native American communities that before the arrival of Europeans were widely scattered around what is now the western United States.

After this, Foreman explained that his views had been shaped by scholars including Paul Shepard, who lauded foraging societies and their animistic worldviews as the ones in which people and the rest of the living world can flourish.[8]

Foreman revealed his animistic sensibilities on other occasions, such as when in 1986, after he and others were arrested in Yellowstone National Park for illegally protesting the destruction of Grizzley Bear habitat for a new campground, he and his fellow prisoners, while being transported in a law enforcement van, saw what they all took to be a positive omen from nature herself: a rare sighting of a "Mama Griz and two cubs." Despite feeling "silly" for considering what many could consider to be a coincidence, he wrote, "rationality be dammed. The ecstatic pagans in that bus had just received a sign from the wild!" (Foreman 1986, 2).

It is easy to understand why Foreman, who was a well-read environmental historian who took science seriously, might have felt silly when considering the possibility of natural entities speaking to alert and sympathetic humans. Nevertheless, he had uncanny experiences that made him reject the idea that science was the only path to knowledge. During the aforementioned group conversation in 1993, for example, after acknowledging that he was critical of and prone to ridicule much of the "woo woo" in the movement, he confided, "I do talk to trees. I think they're telling me that it's all connected." He added that he has also had "auditory hallucinations, now and then. Several times, when camping, I felt a place was telling me not to camp here. Several times that happened."[9]

During this conversation others spoke about how everything in nature has energy, and discussion followed about how the sciences are providing evidence about plant sentience and their communicative abilities. After first making clear that she is not at all woo woo, Nancy Morton, Foreman's wife and fellow activist, said that she thinks trees experience fear as the loggers approach. Then she mentioned a book by Peter Tompkins and Christopher Bird, *The Secret Life of Plants* (Tompkins and Bird 1973), which argued that plants are sentient organisms who can communicate with other

[8] Foreman specifically mentioned an influential early book by Shepard (1973), but the best starting point for Shepard's perspective is his last and posthumously published book (Shepard 1998).

[9] Conversation with Dave Foreman, Tucson, Arizona, on 24 February 1993.

species.[10] Others then present indicated that this made sense to them because of similar experiences they have had. In that conversation, one could hear these intellectual-activists working to reconcile their scientific understandings and sensory experiences, especially those they had while in wildland ecosystems.

The day before this conversation, I had asked Foreman about his claim that to reharmonize life on earth we need to resacralize our perception of it. He answered,

> It is very difficult in our society to discuss the notion of sacred apart from the supernatural. I think that's something that we need to work on, a non-supernatural concept of sacred. A non-theistic basis of sacred. When I say I'm a non-theistic pantheist it is a recognition that what's really important is the flow of life, the process of life... [So] the idea is not to protect ecosystems frozen in time ... but [rather] the grand process... of evolution... We're just blips in this vast energy field... just temporary manifestations of this life force, which is blind and non-teleological. And so, I guess what is sacred is what's in harmony with that flow.[11]

During the 1980s, Foreman periodically wrote as Chim Blea, a pseudonym that he used to express some of his more controversial and personal thoughts. In 1983 he confessed, "I go alone into the wilderness in quest of visions. I sit in high windy places and listen to the powers of the earth" (Blea 1983). In 1987, he wrote an essay titled "Spirituality" explaining that when he was younger he had "flirted briefly with eastern religions before rejecting them for their anti-Earthly metaphysic." This led him to become an atheist, he explained,

> until I sensed something out there. Out there in the wilderness. So, I became a pagan, a pantheist, a witch, if you will. I offered prayers to the moon, performed secret rituals in the wildwood, did spells. I placated the spirits of that which I ate or used (remember, your firewood is alive, too.) For almost ten years, I've followed my individualistic shamanism (Blea 1987).

After this, he made it clear that he does not enjoy group ritualizing, which reminds him of the organized religion that he had rejected. He also expressed ambivalence about the pagan ritualizing that had become prominent at movement gatherings because of his doubts that people need these to be connected to the Earth. (Presumably he felt that he, at least, did not need them to feel a part of nature). Spirituality might even be "a fatal flaw" that leads people to abstract thinking and to feel disconnected from nature, he further speculated. But then he conceded, "Nonetheless, we do seem to have a spiritual sense and... ritual is that which attempts, albeit imperfectly, to reconnect us." He concluded, musing, "Maybe I'll talk to the moon tonight" (Blea 1987).

[10] By all accounts of those who knew them, Morton was an exceptionally strong woman who contributed significantly to the movement Foreman once led. Later in life, Morton learned she had ALS.

[11] Interview with Dave Foreman, Tucson Arizona, 23 February 1993.

As a nurse, she knew what the final stages of this disease entails, so she took her own life on January 16, 2021.

That Foreman wrote these words under his pseudonym suggests not only that he was uncomfortable with communal ritualizing, but that he was reluctant to discuss his animistic perceptions and experiences beyond of a small group of confidants. This passage also suggests that he recognized that, for some people, ritual facilitates felt connections to nature. And likely in part due to his experiences of having been brought up in a conservative evangelical church, Foreman's own speeches, which he regularly gave to large audiences, had some resemblance to the preachers he heard in his youth, but in his case, they promoted a very different spirituality.[12]

Foreman's typical speech involved a mix of alarming ecological facts and humorous stories, but the one he gave most often concluded with a recitation of ecologist Aldo Leopold's famous story about when, as a young forest service timber surveyor in 1909, Leopold and a friend shot and killed a female wolf, only to see the "green fire" die in her eyes.[13] Leopold wrote evocatively about this experience, depicting it as an epiphany that taught him an important lesson, that the mountain (a metaphor for the entire natural world, or in today's parlance, Gaia), did not share his anthropocentric view that the entire natural world was made only for human beings.

At the end of the speech, Foreman would urge the assembly to recognize their own wild nature and the value of wilderness. Then, little doubt inspired by the altar calls he experienced growing up, he asked the audience to howl with him, like a wolf, in symbolic identification with all things wild. Typically, majorities of those drawn to the speeches would raucously join in the chorus of howls.

For many environmentalists, Leopold's moral fable is a sacred story, and its written form is tantamount to a sacred text (Meine 1988; Van Horn 2011). And through it, the wolf lives on, preaching about the value and kinship of all life. Indeed, for example, a well-received documentary, a collection of essays, and a popular radio and podcast series expressing and promoting felt kinship between humans and other living things, have all prominently featured the

story (Van Horn, Kimmerer, and Hausdoerffer 2021; Paulson and Strainchamps 2020; Strainchamps 2020).15

[12] During the 1980s Forman became increasingly well-known through his writings, speeches, and the growing infamy of the movement he co-founded. His own infamy and crowd sizes increased after, in 1990, the Federal Bureau of Investigation arrested and accused him of inspiring and funding several high-profile acts of sabotage, that had been designed to halt what movement activists considered to be environmentally destructive, desecrating acts, in the Southwestern United States (Taylor 1995).

[13] Susan Flader (2012, 28–30) documented the detective work that led her and fellow historian Curt Meine to find compelling evidence that dated the now famous green fire killing to September 19, 1909. 15 Leopold biographer Curt Meine co-wrote and narrated a documentary about Leopold that exemplifies how the story has become sacred to many environmentalists; see Dunsky, Dunsky, and Steinke 2011.

From Radical Environmentalism to the Global Environmental Milieu

After encountering the complicated spiritual terrain within radical environmental subcultures, I began to notice that, within the global environmental milieu, there has been increasing attention to, sympathy for, and expressed affinity with, the kind of animistic and organicist understandings I am calling Gaian Animism.

Over time, within this milieu, there has been increasing respect for indigenous peoples and their worldviews, which are typically understood to involve kinship feelings toward non-human organisms and processes, and understandings that when it comes to the flourishing of life on earth, everything is connected. This is especially true among radical environmentalists and other civil society actors (such as in the anti-globalization movement, the World Social Forum, and more recently, Extinction Rebellion). Many within these subcultures have affinity with organicist and animistic worldviews, and in their advocacy, they have contributed to the spread of such worldviews beyond their own green, leftist, and anarchist subcultures.

Over the years I have documented the diverse forms that these sorts of spiritualities take and the ways they spread. In *Dark Green Religion* (2010), for example, I showed that those involved with such spiritualities include environmentalists and scientists, politicians and diplomats, artists, writers, musicians, filmmakers, businesspeople, teachers and museum curators, as well as mountaineers, surfers, gardeners, and many others. I noted that some of these actors believe in the existence of non-material divine beings while others do not. But regardless of their metaphysical beliefs, I argued, such spiritualities typically stress ecological interdependence and mutual dependence, involve deep feelings of belonging and connection to nature, and express beliefs that the biosphere is a sacred, Gaia-like superorganism. I also contended that such spiritualities were exercising increasing social and political influence.

After the book's publication I have continued to illuminate culturally important phenomena where cultural creatives are promoting dark green, Gaian Animism, as for example, in the blockbuster Film *Avatar* (Taylor 2013), under the United Nation's umbrella (Taylor 2016, 2017); in Walt Disney's cinematic productions and theme parks (Taylor 2019c), in Art and Science museums around the world (Taylor 2021, 2023a), and elsewhere (Taylor 2020).

What this work demonstrates is that if we broaden our understanding of Animism to include the forms that are naturalistic, as Graham Harvey has also spotlighted, and recognize that Animism is also typically connected to some form of ecological holism along the lines of Gaian spirituality or Gaian Naturalism, then it becomes clear that this sort of religious phenomena is growing more rapidly, and is more prevalent and culturally significant, than is commonly recognized. A growing body of research has been documenting such trends (Taylor, Van Wieren, and Zaleha 2016; Taylor, LeVasseur, and Wright 2020).

Although we do not yet have a firm grasp on what proportion of human populations in different regions have affinity with Gaian Animism, what does seem to be clear is that these proportions are increasing, and they will likely continue to grow in adherents, cultural expressions, and political influence. They might even prove that the possibility of an emerging, global civil earth religion, or Terrapolitan Earth Civilization, is no mere ecotopian fantasy (Deudney 1995, 1998; Deudney and Mendenhall 2016; Taylor 2010a, 2010b).

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