



# THE STAIRWAY TO RECOVERY

*In the beginning was the Word;  
the Word was with God  
and the Word was God.  
He was with God in the beginning.  
Through him all things came to be,  
not one thing had its being but through him.  
All that came to be had life in him  
and that life was the light of men,  
a light that shines in the dark,  
a light that darkness could not overpower.*

—Jn 1:1-5

**W**hat will it take to heal the environment? The changes in human behavior that must occur to reverse our calamitous course will require a solidarity of will and sustained commitment that the prevailing worldview makes impossible. But, as Jesus said, "For God everything is possible" (Mt 19:26).

In the signs of our times we can read not just the bad news, but the good news that the Word which was in the beginning, 15 billion years ago, is at work in our world today, too. That news which gives hope to Mother Earth and her family has been confirmed by three disparate sources: science, our own biblical and spiritual tradition, and countless numbers of our contemporaries whose thinking and attitudes are being transformed by a new consciousness that energizes



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*An  
Emerging  
Worldview  
Uncovers  
God's  
Wisdom in  
Nature*

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them to follow a spiritual way of life that is responsible and creative.

## BEYOND MORAL EXHORTATION

In his book, *Global Responsibility*, the Swiss theologian Hans Küng rattles off a litany of catastrophic danger signals in a challenge to the world religions to agree on a global ethic for the nations.<sup>1</sup> In the same vein, the U.S.

**Summary** What is lacking for the renewal of the earth is not so much ethical consensus as political will. The myth of "man" as the self-sufficient and autonomous master of "inanimate" nature has been ingrained for centuries, and it will take a powerful force to dislodge it.

However, we are in a unique period of convergence—a time when we might be transformed by the truth if we only seek it. This new spiritual awakening represents a conscious commitment to a common cause that lies beyond individual self-interest. The commitment has been kindled by a perception that we are creatures intimately connected with the rest of creation and to the power that has called us into being. And it is a commitment carried out in action through a disciplined way of life.

If we want to heal the earth, we have to get better ourselves, because it is the way we think and live and act that is harming the earth. We have much to learn from participants in Alcoholics Anonymous, who have learned the secret of proclaiming the good news by *doing* it, one step at a time, by living it, day by day.

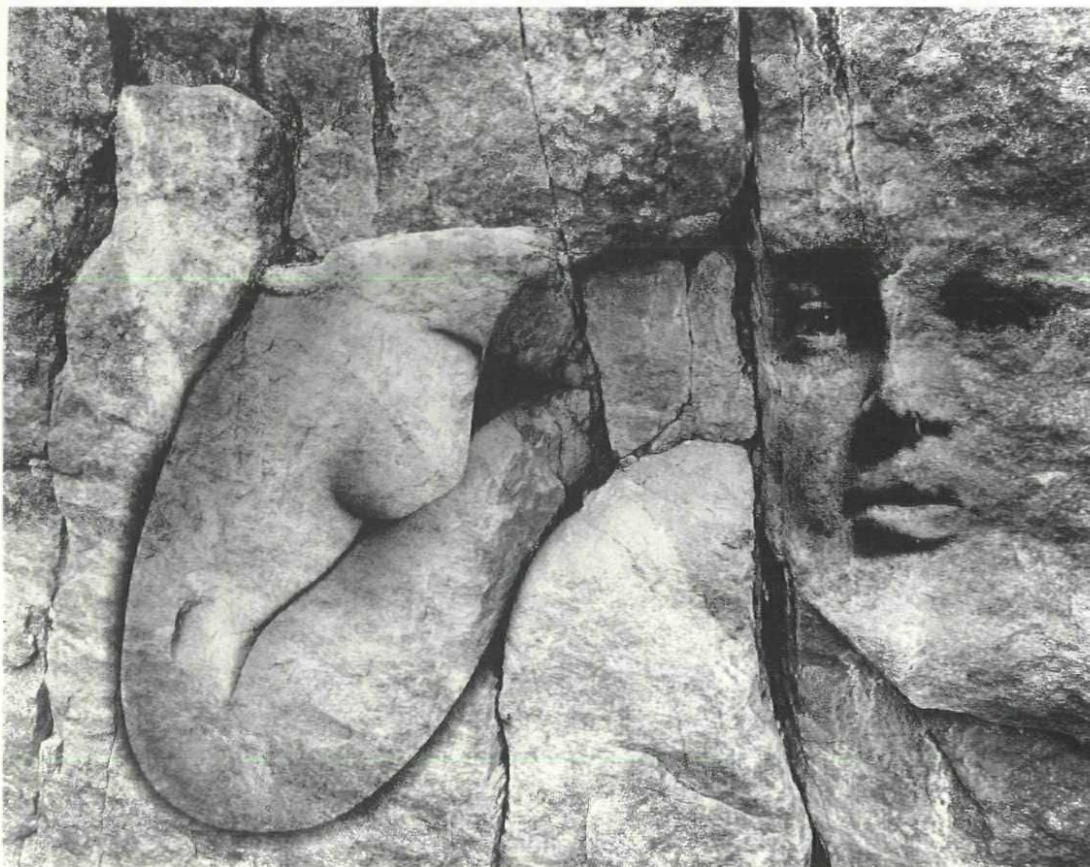
The first step is acknowledgment that, as a society—indeed, as the human race—we are at the bottom and cannot get back up. Once we admit we have hit the bottom, there is hope for the environment because we have taken the first step to recovery.



bishops recently issued a pastoral statement on the environment, *Renewing the Earth*.<sup>2</sup> This statement makes the breakthrough of seeing ecology as a social justice issue, and it states the bishops' willingness to accept the common responsibility of people of faith to develop a

universal ethic of care for the earth.

But in his essay, "Nature Is a Heraclitean Fire": Reflections on Cosmology in an Ecological Age,"<sup>3</sup> Rev. David S. Toolan argues with considerable insight that what is lacking in the movement for the renewal of the earth is not



Jerry N. Uelsmann

*The*  
*web of life is one. Our mistreatment of the natural world diminishes our own*  
*dignity and sacredness, not only because we are destroying resources that future generations of humans*  
*need, but because we are engaging in actions that contradict what it means to be human.*

—U.S. Catholic Conference, *Renewing the Earth*, 1992



so much ethical consensus as political will.

That which drives our race to the mayhem it inflicts on its own members and on the earth has been deeply ingrained for centuries, not only in our economic and political paradigms, but also in our psyches and wills. And it will take a powerful force to dislodge it. It is the myth of "man" as the self-sufficient and autonomous master of "inanimate" nature.

So long as that worldview prevails, moral exhortations to care for the earth may win applause for political correctness, but they will not move us to reverse our course. What it will take, to use Fr. Toolan's words, is "something big and moving, the kind of vision that impelled our ancestors: a new covenant, a city built on a hill, the taming of a new wilderness, a new frontier."<sup>4</sup>

The makings of just such a compelling new worldview are being presented to the religious imagination by modern science. It is not within the scope of this article to explain the details of this emerging new cosmology. Suffice it to say that the "geologist" Thomas Berry has given us a metaphorical description that more and more people are using. He calls the current understanding of the cosmos, as something developing and interconnected by origin, the "new story."<sup>5</sup>

Two profound insights can be gleaned from the "new story" and can contribute significantly to the healing of the environment:

1. The universe was created by God and is sacred with the presence and action of the Spirit of the Word that was in the beginning and that became flesh for the life of the world.

2. "Man," whether humankind or the male of the species, is not God nor the master of the land community. We humans are children of the earth, intimately bound to one another and to the whole of creation.<sup>6</sup> Apart from the whole, we wreak havoc. But in communion and solidarity with creation, we live in the Spirit and participate in the healing, nurturing, and life-giving power of God.

To the extent that we do not know these things, we will continue to rush around bumping one another off and blowing the ground out from under our children. The question is how we can learn the truth about ourselves and the world that depends on us.

### A PERIOD OF CONVERGENCE

I am encouraged by Rupert Sheldrake's observation that "doubts about the mechanistic

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approach to agriculture and medicine are growing; the vision of conquering nature is losing its glamour; and the climate is changing, both literally and metaphorically."<sup>7</sup> My own experience confirms again and again what Fritz Schumacher suggested 19 years ago: "We live, it seems, in a unique period of convergence"<sup>8</sup>—a time when we might be transformed by the truth if only we seek it.

Last autumn I spent three days with a group of people who were alive with vision and totally committed to healing the land. The place was Sunrise Ranch near Loveland, CO. Thirty-eight farmers and others interested in ecologically sustainable agriculture had traveled there from throughout the United States and Canada for a conference on "Spirituality and Agriculture." The approach to life and to farming of each of the participants, as well as of the Emissary community of 150 persons who provided the conference facilities, was animated by what each called "spirituality." Ten spiritual traditions were represented, all except one or two identifiable as religious traditions.

The assembly was remarkable, as much for its communion of minds and hearts as for its diversity of personalities and spiritual traditions. Only a few used the language of cosmology, or the "new story," but all agreed that the old worldview represented by large-scale, highly industrialized agribusiness has to be replaced by a new values-based paradigm of ecologically sustainable agriculture. And all agreed that the land they cultivate is sacred and that farming puts them in contact with the realm of spirit.

What was so evident and powerful at Sunrise Ranch is going on all over the land. I have witnessed it at the quarterly retreats of the West Coast Catholic AIDS Coalition, in the behavior and stories of recovering alcoholics, in parish RENEW groups, in base Christian communities and Christian Life Communities, at a demonstration at San Quentin led by Death Penalty Focus, and in the homes of many former students and parishioners, as well as those of my own family members. I see a mighty spark of it in the youth gangs who find hope at Dolores Mission Church in East Los Angeles and in the refugees who participate in shaping their own destinies through the Eastside Project of Santa Clara University.

Some are talking specifically about what it will take to heal the environment. All obviously think differently from their contemporaries who are



caught up in our consumerist, individualistic, male-dominated culture. What is it that has captured the imaginations of these and countless other vibrant, loving, creative people?

This new spiritual awakening was called variously, "thanksgiving," by an Onondaga elder; "the compassion of citizenship," by a divinity school professor; "the revelation of God's wisdom in nature," by an Islamic scholar; and "good heart," by the Dalai Lama. They were among the distinguished representatives of religion speaking at a conference in Vermont that Bill Moyers turned into a moving PBS video presentation last year.<sup>9</sup> Mother Teresa sums it up in one word: "faithfulness." And Jesus used the shortest word of all: "Your *faith* has healed you."

Each of these beautifully diverse perspectives represents a conscious commitment to a common cause that lies beyond individual self-interest. The commitment has been kindled by a perception that we are creatures intimately connected with the rest of creation and to the power that has called us into being. And, in each case, it is a commitment carried out in action through a disciplined way of life.

### LOVE AND ATTENTION

In brief, this is the process we older Catholics were taught as children: getting to heaven by knowing, loving, and serving God, who is everywhere. The treatises of the spiritual giants describe it as a love affair. In *Spiritual Exercises*, for example, St. Ignatius leads the retreatant to enthusiastically follow Jesus on the way of the cross simply by getting to know Jesus Christ so intimately that he or she falls madly in love with him. "*Ama, et fac quod vis*," pronounced Augustine—and the Dalai Lama might have been quoting from him: "Whatever you do will be good if it is grounded in love." Jesus said it metaphorically by washing the feet of those he loved and telling them that that is what they should do to enter eternal life.

This kind of world-shaking wisdom is available to anyone who pays attention. I remember hearing Joseph Campbell say in an interview with Bill Moyers that not paying attention is the sin of the contemporary world. And Jesus groaned from the cross, "Father, forgive them. *They don't know what they're doing!*"

Wendell Berry talks about the need to pay attention to what *is* before we try to improve on nature. In a letter to the participants of a Theology of Land Conference, he charged that,

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in our compulsive industrialization of agriculture, we never knew what we were doing because we never knew what we were undoing. In a later article, Berry warned us to beware of global thinking because it keeps us from paying attention to the reality that is right under our noses. It is, at best, ineffective and, at worst, dangerous because it is so abstracted from reality that it becomes simplistic and presumptuous. He concludes, "If you want to *see* where you are, you will have to get out of your space vehicle, out of your car, off your horse and walk over the ground."<sup>10</sup>

The point, of course, is that we will not love the earth and take care of it until we get to know

## THE TWELVE STEPS OF ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS

1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable.
2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.
4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
5. Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
7. Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.
8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.
9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
10. Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.
11. Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.
12. Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

From *Alcoholics Anonymous*, 3d ed., 1976, pp. 59-60. The Twelve Steps are reprinted with permission of Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, Inc. Permission to reprint this material does not mean that AA has reviewed or approved the content of this publication, nor that AA agrees with the views expressed herein. AA is a program of recovery from alcoholism—use of the Twelve Steps in connection with programs and activities which are patterned after AA, but which address other problems, does not imply otherwise.



it. Both West and East have been roaring along like drunk drivers, wiping out lives they never knew were there. In the Gospels, especially in John, Jesus dubs this kind of vicious lack of attention *blindness*. Vaclav Havel declares it the "fiction of objectivity," that has wrenched both East and West from the grounding of concrete experience. This has led to "the devastation of nature and the denaturing of the human."<sup>11</sup>

### FIRST, DO NO HARM

Where do we start? If we want to heal the earth, we have to get better ourselves, because it is the way we think and live and act that is harming the earth. Like doctors, we have to commit ourselves first and foremost to not doing any harm. As alcoholics start recovering by not taking a drink today, so we start healing the earth by not doing

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her any harm today. That might mean no styro-foam cups today, no driving when I can walk today, and today asking someone who has been concerned about the earth for awhile to help me see what other harm I may be doing.

Since the consumerism and individualism that permeates our culture is a kind of addiction, we have much to learn from the wisdom of Alcoholics Anonymous. "Rarely have we seen a person fail who has thoroughly followed our path," wrote the AA pioneers after decades of success. The path has three pertinent ideas that constitute the "A, B, Cs" of knowledge essential for the process of healing:

A. That we were alcoholic and could not manage our own lives

B. That probably no human power could have relieved our alcoholism

C. That God could and would if he were sought<sup>12</sup>

Once alcoholics are convinced of these simple truths, then and only then are they ready to move on to the next step, which is to turn their will and their life over to God as they understand God. After taking that third step, the formerly hopeless alcoholic follows a rigorous spiritual program that has led millions not only to sobriety, but to sanctity. Some of the holiest people I have ever met belong to the fellowship of AA. And please note that "rugged individual recovering alcoholic" is an oxymoron. The *fellowship* is the wire through which God's power flows.

The fascinating aspect is that these people are simply doing what all the religions teach. What makes AA participants worth paying attention to is that they have learned the secret of proclaiming the good news by *doing* it, one step at a time, by living it, day by day. Even the nonreligious among them know exactly the meaning and implications of the first public words of Jesus, "The time has come" he said "and the kingdom of God is close at hand. Repent, and believe the Good News" (Mk 1:15).

Repentance (the Greek *metanoia*) means being turned upside-down and inside-out with regard to the way we think. For it is ignorant, wrong-headed thinking that pollutes attitudes and makes behavior destructive. AA refers to this as "stinking thinking."

To see the results of our "stinking thinking," all we have to do is turn off the television, take a deep breath—if we can—and attend to what is all around us. When I try to wipe off the mucky dust that shrouds my car each day, for example, I

## ABOUT TWELVE-STEP SPIRITUALITY

"I believe the 12-Step program of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) . . . will go down in history as the significant authentic American contribution to the history of spirituality." That is the testimony of Franciscan Friar Richard Rohr, founder of the Center for Action and Contemplation in Albuquerque, NM.\* This remarkably successful program is unabashedly spiritual, not psychological. It gets to the heart of the human dilemma, the lust for power, the craving for control, the will to be God. Since it is ultimately willfulness that has put our planet at peril, AA's spirituality is worth looking into as a way of healing the environment.

The genius of the AA system can be detected in three of its features:

1. It is not a psychological self-help program, but a spirituality based on faith.
2. It is a spiritual discipline practiced by individuals of every religious persuasion and level of sophistication, as well as by atheists, agnostics, and those who are hostile to religion.
3. It offers a rigorous but simple program within a fellowship of mutual support and living examples of how it works—all without dues or fees.

By surrendering their willfulness and humbly seeking God's help as they take one step at a time in this program, countless millions of women and men have succeeded, not only in staying sober, but in developing virtue and growing in strength of character. Is it any wonder that Fr. Rohr and others feel that the 12-step spirituality of Alcoholics Anonymous promises hope for our addictive society and the healing of the environment?

\*"Breathing under Water: A Spirituality of the 12 Steps," *Catholic Update* (a publication of St. Anthony Messenger Press, Cincinnati), September 1990. This *Update* is an adapted, condensed version of Fr. Rohr's audiocassette set of the same title, also available from St. Anthony Messenger Press.

grasp the connection between pollution and the bronchial cold that has me hacking even as I write. And I do not have to be a genius to look a bit further and spot the economic and political connections between the healthcare crisis and the environmental crisis.

I contend that we can apply that which works on the individual, personal level to our public lives as citizens and in the marketplace. From Alcoholics Anonymous we learn that the stairway to recovery begins at the bottom. The first step is acknowledgment that, as a society—indeed, as the human race—we are at the bottom and cannot get back up. We are powerless to stop harming the earth that is our lifeline.

Once we admit that we have hit the bottom, there is hope for the environment because we have taken the first step to recovery.

### THE GOOD NEWS

The second step gives us the “something big” to send us soaring with hope on eagles’ wings. When we fall into silence, allow ourselves to be empty, enter into the darkness, sell all we have and give it to the poor—when we listen, with eyes and toes and hearts and noses, as well as with ears—we hear not just the bad news that “all is seared with trade, bleared, smeared with toil.”<sup>13</sup> We also hear the sounds of a world still charged with the grandeur of a power greater than ourselves that can restore us to sanity.

But for those who hear it, the good news is also sobering news because to live according to it takes work and discipline. That is why it takes something big to move us. The authors of *Alcoholics Anonymous* testify that they balked at some of the Twelve Steps. “We thought we could find an easier, softer way. But we could not. With all the earnestness at our command,” they continue, “we beg of you to be fearless and thorough from the very start. Some of us have tried to hold on to our old ideas and the result was nil until we let go absolutely.”<sup>14</sup>

Isolated, individualistic efforts will avail us nothing in terms of saving the earth or connecting with the living Word which was in the beginning. Only when our citizenship in the community of creation is reflected in our institutions and embodied in our social structures will God’s will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

### A SACRAMENTAL SIGN

Recently I have learned that many people let their garbage mingle with all sorts of creatures such as

leaves, bacteria, and worms in the hot and furious love-making of the compost heap. This seems like a sign of hope to me, even a sacramental sign. A liturgist friend has concluded that no other gesture can adequately substitute for the foot washing that Jesus did at the Last Supper. That makes sense to me, yet I wonder if composting might not come close. And, especially in an ecological age, could it not serve as a metaphor for what a Catholic institution strives to be: a vibrant community whose service generates life? □

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### NOTES

1. Hans Küng, *Global Responsibility: In Search of a New World Ethic*, Crossroad, New York City, 1991.
2. U.S. Catholic Conference, *Renewing the Earth: An Invitation to Reflection and Action on Environment in Light of Catholic Social Teaching*, Washington, DC, 1992.
3. David S. Toolan, “Nature Is a Heraclitean Fire”: Reflections on Cosmology in an Ecological Age,” *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits*, November 1991. (Published by the American Assistancy Seminar, Fusz Memorial, St. Louis University, 3700 W. Pine Blvd., St. Louis, MO 63108.)
4. Toolan, p. 8.
5. Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth*, Sierra Club Books, San Francisco, 1988.
6. The community as a whole is what Teilhard de Chardin was referring to in the following paragraph, which David Toolan quoted on the frontispiece of his monograph: “Nobody, I think, can fail to see that the vital question for Christianity today is to decide what attitude believers will adopt towards this recognition of the value of the *Whole*, this preoccupation with the *Whole*.”
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9. “*Spirit and Nature*” with Bill Moyers, Mystic Fire Video, PO Box 1092, Cooper Station, New York, NY 10276. Transcript: Journal Graphics, 267 Broadway, New York, NY 10019.
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