

An Earth friendly charter for chaplains

Norman C. Habel¹

Flinders University

Key words

Aboriginal spirituality, chaplaincy, Earth, Earth being, ecology, hospitality, wisdom

INTRODUCTION

Why is ecology significant for chaplains? What are the implications of the ecological worldview of which we are now conscious?

In this study I explore these questions in the context of chaplains as hosts in their respective locations of Earth. As a vehicle for making the subject relevant, I have drafted an Earth Friendly Charter with four basic axioms or principles to which Earth calls us to respond in meaningful ways. This charter will, no doubt, remind chaplains in Australia of the Faith Friendly Charter that was developed so as to pursue a multi-faith chaplaincy. In this context, the call of Earth is another voice we are asked to respect.

For many years I simply viewed ecology as but another science like biology or geology. Then I heard the call of Pope John Paul, in 2006, for ecological conversion. I remained sceptical. I now realise that I have indeed been 'converted' and that my worldview has changed radically. My cosmology is ecological. My identity is that of an Earth being. My home (eco) is Earth.

What is ecology? According to the *Oxford Dictionary of Ecology*, "Ecology is the scientific study of the interrelationships among organisms and between them and all aspects, living and non-living, of their environment (Allaby, p. 136). This

¹ Norman C. Habel, BD STM PhD St Louis, is currently Professorial Fellow at Flinders University. He has long been involved in issues of biblical interpretation and social justice. His research includes *The Earth Bible* an international project with other scholars reading the Bible from the perspective of justice for Earth. He can be contacted by email at nhabel@bigpond.com

definition reflects a very limited perspective that locates ecology as but one scientific discipline among many. In reality, ecology has now become an integral part of our intellectual, social, political and personal worlds.

Strange to say, most of the scholars who explore eco-theology, eco-ethics and similar fields, rarely seem to begin by defining just what they mean by ecology. They often take the meaning of these terms for granted. How might we describe the essence of ecology that informs this worldview? One option is the formulation of Thomas Berry,

In reality there is a single integral community of the Earth that includes all its component members whether human or other than human. In this community every being has its own role to fulfil, its own dignity, its inner spontaneity. Every being has its own voice. Every being declares itself to the entire universe. Every being enters into communion with other beings. This capacity for relatedness, for presence to other beings, for spontaneity in action, is a capacity possessed by every mode of being throughout the entire universe. So too every being has rights to be recognised and revered. (Berry, 1999, p. 4)

Ecology, then, is an understanding of our world as a community of beings, forces, dimensions and realities that relate to each other, are dependent on each other and respond to each other. I believe that world Earth is the habitat, home and living domain of all Earth beings, including human beings. In the light of this understanding I shall discuss the four eco-axioms, or principles of the proposed Earth Friendly Charter for Chaplains [See Appendix A].

ECO-AXIOM A

Earth is a planet who originated in cosmic space and evolved into a living habitat of intrinsic worth.

First we need to pause and appreciate just how amazing this phenomenon called planet Earth really is. On the one hand, Earth may be simply defined as a piece of stardust, a residue from the days of the Big Bang. On the other hand we might well describe Earth as a magic moment in a massive schema of cosmic time. We may reduce Earth to an insignificant speck in a myriad of galaxies. Or we may recognise, that from our corner of the cosmos, Earth is a web of wondrous ecological mysteries and that we have evolved to a level of consciousness where we are led to explore these ancient mysteries.

In this cosmic context, Earth has evolved into a habitat for all forms of life, a home for all Earth beings. In the language of hospitality, used by Geoff Boyce (2010) and other chaplains, we might rightfully speak of Earth as a host who welcomes and nurtures all at her table.

Each of us has a place in this habitat, this home. Each of us has been formed as a living being, not only by virtue of our genetics, but also by means of the space or environment in which we have evolved and lived. The particular location where we are chaplains is like a sacred place, a table where we dine and communicate with the mystery of that place.

I believe it is time for us as chaplains to hear Earth calling us to be hosts on her behalf in our particular place, hosts who are sensitive to the sacred and spiritual dimensions of the place where we act as hosts for Earth. And every student or staff member whom we serve as hosts has come from a particular place that has helped form their identity. We welcome visitors from another place to our place; we are host to the guests of other ‘places.’

Do we then as hosts promote a sense of the sacred in our particular place? Do we foster, as custodians of our place, an experience of Presence or wonder? Do we function as mentors who lead our guests to acknowledge the mysteries vibrant in our place? Are we ready to welcome our guests with the words:

We meet today aware that a Presence permeates this place. We are conscious at this time of the mysteries that link us with the Life deep below. We are sensitive to the sacred that emanates from this site.

To strengthen our appreciation of the Presence permeating this place, we might return to the biblical tradition of the *kabod YHWH*, usually translated ‘the glory of the Lord,’ but which is really the ‘Presence of YHWH.’ This Presence appeared on Mt Sinai as a fire-cloud. Later it filled the holy of holies in the tabernacle and later still, the temple in Zion.

When we come to the call vision of Isaiah we hear the seraphim cry: ‘The whole Earth is filled with his Presence’ (Isa. 6.3). In other words, the visible presence of the divine is not confined to one specific shrine or place, but permeates our planet. And as hosts of Earth, we chaplains are enjoined to sense and celebrate that Presence wherever we happen to be.

Also significant is the Aboriginal tradition in Australia where elders are custodians of the sacred and know the spiritual life-forces emanating from a sacred place. As chaplains we are also enjoined to explore the Aboriginal traditions of the place

where we serve and understand the spiritual history of our particular place. If I am at Flinders University in Adelaide Australia, I will be aware of the sacred traditions along the Sturt river and a notice at the Aboriginal centre called Warriparinga: *The spirit of Tjilbruke lives here; the spirit of the wind visits here; the spirit of the river makes us alive.*

In Australia we now regularly recognise the original Aboriginal custodians of the location where we meet or hold a gathering. Is it time to go one step further and recognise the sacred and the spiritual in a given location? Shall we begin by declaring as follows?

We acknowledge the Kurna (a local Aboriginal people) as the traditional owners and custodians of this place. We acknowledge the sacred sites they respect in this location. And we acknowledge the spiritual forces they have experienced in this place.

Given these features of our planet and our role as hosts of Earth in our particular places, it is appropriate that we now hear Earth calling each of us to be:

a custodian of mystery, a host in this place who helps those who attend our table to discern presence, mystery and the sacred in our place.

And as we exercise this role, we are invited to pronounce the following blessing:

*May the Presence permeating this place stir your spirit,
may the mysteries rising from the soil,
the sand and the sea in this place
stir your mind,
and may the sacred life-forces in this place
stir your inner being.*

ECO-AXIOM B

Earth is a fragile web of interconnected and interdependent forces and domains of existence.

We have become acutely aware that Earth is not a collection of separate continents, bodies of land separated by waters, or discrete domains isolated by geographical or geological barriers. We now realise that Earth is one domain in which all its components are connected like a wondrous web. What happens in the ocean currents in one region influences life on a distant shore. What happens in a desert storm influences life in a rain forest.

The environmental crisis, however, has made us realise that this web of creation called planet Earth is also very fragile. And human beings, it seems, have the capacity to upset the balance of forces and impulses that govern the life of the planet. The vast removal of forest trees means wounding the lungs of the planet. Excessive use of fossil fuels has led to global warming across the entire globe. Planet Earth is suffering at the hands of human greed.

We have also come to realise that human beings are not separate or disconnected from the various forces and domain of nature. We are totally dependent on the various ecosystems of Earth for survival, ecosystems that have existed for millennia. The movement of oxygen in the atmosphere is necessary for us to breathe. The movement of moisture in the clouds and the seas is essential for us to enjoy a drink. The movement of worms in the soil is vital for us to receive our daily bread.

One of the biblical traditions that is relevant here, but which is rarely cited is this connection, is what might be designated the science dimension of the wisdom tradition. In the broadest sense of the term, the wise were like the scientists of the ancient world intent on discerning knowledge by intense observation of nature or society.

One of the mysteries that occupied the minds of certain wise individuals in the ancient world is the inner code that drives and characterises an entity or being in nature. The wise used a number of terms in reference to this inner code. The most explicit term is ‘the way’ (*derek* in Hebrew) of wisdom. Because the term ‘way’ has a wide range of meanings in English, the technical meaning of this term is easily overlooked in translation (Habel, 2003, p. 286). The way (*derek*) refers to the inner code of behaviour that characterizes a phenomenon of the natural world. The way of something reflects its essential character, its instinctual nature, its internal impulse. So the way of an eagle is to soar across the sky and with its eagle eye discerning prey far below. The way of a snake is to slither across rocks without any legs and to camouflage its presence in the grass. This concept of *derek* is crucial, I believe, for an understanding of a basic wisdom cosmology.

Wisdom, in this tradition, is not to be understood as an attribute of God or a capacity of humans. Rather, wisdom is a force imbedded in nature, a force that is apparent when it functions according to his inner way. In Job, God searches for wisdom across the face of Earth and discerns it in the forces of nature, namely, the

wind, the rain and the thunder—or in our language, the components of climate (see Habel, 2012, ch. 6).

Fundamental to the mystery of wisdom in nature is that every phenomenon and domain of nature has an innate code (derek) or law that governs its characteristic behaviour as an integral part of an ecosystem.

Part of the dilemma we face as human beings is that we assume that the various forces or laws of nature are fixed and final. We have ignored the fragile dimensions of nature, the delicate balance of forces and factors, the interconnection between the ways of wisdom in nature. As we have now become aware, the greed of humans has led to global warming and numerous other disruptions to the balance of nature. We have not been sensitive to the delicate balance of the ways of wisdom in nature.

As hosts we, as chaplains, are called to be sensitive to the wounds in nature and to hear her voice. We are called to represent the case of Earth when we dine at Earth's table. We remember the adage: 'consider the way of the ant and be wise' (Proverbs 6:6). Are we willing to become wise by considering the ways of our planet, the ways of wisdom imbedded in the domains of nature, and how they are being disturbed?

I would suggest that Earth is now calling each of us to be:

an advocate of wisdom, a host sensitive to the balance of nature and ready to be her voice at our table relating to the crisis of our wounded planet.

And as we exercise this role, we are invited to pronounce the following blessing:

*May you find the wisdom to discover
the wonders of wisdom in nature,
may you find the acumen to discern
the deep wounds in nature,
and may you find the courage to be
the voice of a wounded planet.*

ECO-AXIOM C

Earth is a living family in which humans and all other organisms are kin who live and move and have a common destiny.

We are all part of a living family called Earth. The recent research of biology, genetics and evolutionary science has reminded us that we are kin with all other living things in Earth. As human beings we are related to all living things; some creatures are close relatives and other are distant cousins. Some seem friendly and others fierce. But we are related to all, whether they are ants or elephants, sea horses or hidden organisms. Deep within, the genetic coding of humans is little different from that of most other animals. We all belong to the same Earth family, a community of kin.

This kinship with non-human living creatures and domains of nature is something that many indigenous peoples knew and experienced. The Australian Aborigines, for example, experienced a close bond with nature and knew a special kinship with their personal dreaming—a bird, animal or some other life form that was part of their world. They were conscious of a common spirit in themselves, their dreaming and the sacred site where the dreaming ancestor resided. Is a renewed sense of kinship with nature emerging again in our urban world?

We are Earth beings, dependent on all the various elements of Earth to survive, everything from the oxygen emerging from the plants to the moisture rising from the ocean to the worms preparing the soil for our daily bread. We are Earth beings, made of clay as the creation narrative of Genesis 2 reminds us. We are beings made of matter like all other life forms of Earth.

Matter is made of rock and soil. It too is pulled by the magma that circulates through our planet heart and roots such molecules into biology. Earth pours through us, replacing each cell in the body every 7 years...we ingest and excrete Earth, are made from Earth. I am that. You are that. (Macy, 1996, p. 501)

Ultimately then, we are Earth beings, born of Earth. We are Earth babies that evolved from the womb of mother Earth. We are not first and foremost God-imagined humans who are somehow superior to all other beings on Earth. We are born of Earth, nurtured by Earth and return to Earth.

In the past, many of us did not realise that being born of Earth is also a biblical tradition. Not only does Job confess: ‘Naked I came from my mother’s womb and

naked I shall return there (to Earth, Job 1:21), but one Psalmist also delights in an Earth birth as the following makes clear.

*Let me sing of my birth
my beginnings as an Earth being.
I have sensed deep within me a mystery,
how the fingers of God moulded all my inner parts
knitting together the web of my inner being
deep in my mother's womb.
God kept every feature of my frame in sight
deep in secret below.
God wove together my body
in the depths of Earth, mother Earth.
(Psalm 139:13-15; my translation)*

What does it mean for chaplains to be Earth beings? What does it mean that all who come to our table are also Earth beings? If we dare to follow in the tradition of St Francis, what role might we play in relation to all our kin in creation?

The time has come, I believe, to welcome those who come to our table not only as human beings but also as Earth beings. When we welcome them as such we are welcoming them home to Earth, to their mother in our place. When we dare to affirm and respect them as Earth beings we begin the process of reconciliation with their kin in nature. We are called to be hosts for the Earth beings in our place. We are also encouraged to celebrate with Earth and with our kin in creation. By celebrating *The Season of Creation*² in September we celebrate WITH creation and with our kin in creation.

I believe Earth is now calling each of us to be:

a companion of kin, a host who welcomes and celebrates all guests at our table as Earth beings who have been given life and nurtured by Earth as her own.

And as you exercise this role, you are invited to pronounce the following blessing:

*May the spirit of mother Earth stir a sense of family
in all who come to this place,
may all guests in this location celebrate
their identity as Earth beings,*

² see www.seasonofcreation.com.au

*and may all Earth beings at this table
be nourished by Earth in mind, body and spirit.*

ECO-AXIOM D

Earth is a vibrant planet with deep impulses that generate life, build community and enable healing.

The orientation that many of us adopted in the light of the ‘theory of evolution’ was one of nature raw, in tooth and claw. Survival of the fittest was the slogan for life as various species evolved and prospered at the expense of others. Ecology, however, has led us to re-think this orientation. As the various components of nature interact and communicate, are compassion, care and healing active forces and factors? Or are these traits only found in humans who represent a higher level of evolution? Or in even broader terms, does the cosmos have soul?

The ecosystems of nature are not like machines, which function in a rigid mechanical fashion. Adaptation, nurture and healing are dimensions of the life forces operating in all domains of Earth. The total life on Earth has been described as a super-organism in which the component parts are dependent on each other for growth and shared evolution.

According to David Suzuki,

When we observe the care with which a mud dauber [wasp] prepares a mud enclosure, inserts a paralysed victim as food and deposits an egg, can we be so anthropocentric as to deny this the name of love. How else can we interpret the male sea horse’s protective act of accepting babies into his pouch, the months-long incubation of an emperor penguin’s egg on the feet of its vigilant parent or the epic journey of Pacific salmon returning to their natal stream to mate and die in the creation of the next generation? If these are innate actions dictated by genetically encoded instructions, all the more reason to conclude that love in its many manifestations is fashioned into the very blueprint of life. (Suzuki & McConnell, 1997, p. 173)

An awareness of compassion as a component of the cosmos and healing as living force of Earth, moves us to ask what role we might play as chaplains who are hosts of Earth in a given place. Most religious traditions have tended not to view nature

as an agency of healing. And yet, we all recall the words of Psalm 23, even if we have not appreciated its description of nature as a medium of healing. Listen again to the words of the Psalmist:

*The Lord is my shepherd
I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in
green pastures;
He leads me beside still waters;
He restores my soul.*

The healing described in this psalm is described as ‘restoring the soul.’ In the Hebrew the word *nephesh* does not mean soul as distinct from body, but the total self as a living person. To restore the soul means to restore the life, health and purpose of a living being. And the medium God is portrayed as using in this psalm is not some dramatic act of direct divine intervention, but leading the sufferer to lie down in green pastures and beside still waters. In this psalm nature is viewed as an agent of healing.

Earth not only generates life in all her domains but it also heals wounds, restores lives and sustains the vulnerable. And we are invited as chaplains to be part of this process, agents of Earth in the healing of wounded Earth beings, by restoring the ‘soul’ of kin in our community. We are called to stretch out our hands to mediate blessing to those who come to our table. We have the opportunity to tap into the healing impulses in nature and be agents of healing.

Compassion in the context of everyday life on Earth is a role we can readily begin to understand as we are gradually converted to an ecological worldview and identify ourselves as Earth beings. To grasp the idea, however, that compassion reaches beyond our immediate Earth world and is a force in the cosmos is not as simple.

In many religions, the God of the cosmos or the Cosmic One is a compassionate being or force reaching out to support and sustain. Yet the linking of compassion with nature has not been a major thrust in the Christian tradition, in spite of the biblical message of the Cosmic Christ. In Colossians One we hear an extraordinary claim that the Cosmic Christ is not only an eternal force activating life and integrating all domains in the universe, but also a continuous force effecting the ‘reconciliation’ of ‘all things’ (1 Colossians 1:15-21).

‘All things’ (*ta panta*) refers to all domains of the cosmos. If the Cosmic One, whom Paul names as Christ, is a force for reconciliation and peace in the universe, by virtue of the cross of Christ, then healing and reconciliation are processes at work both on a cosmic scale and in our local contexts. And as chaplains for Earth in a given place, we are called to be partners of the Cosmic One in the work of healing and reconciliation in our corner of the cosmos. We are called to reach out and be part of the process of healing the wounds of Earth and of Earth beings. We are summoned to be mediators of blessing to ‘restore the soul’ of all who enjoy the green pastures of our place.

I believe Earth is now calling each of us to be:

a partner with compassion, a host whose outstretched hands not only welcome and affirm, but also become vehicles of healing and blessing.

And as we exercise this role, we are invited to pronounce the following blessing:

*May the compassion stirring in nature stir you
to empathise with Earth and the poor of Earth,
may the healing impulse of Earth
move you to stretch out your hands in healing
and may the song of the cosmic Spirit
restore your soul
so that you become reconciled
with Mother Earth.*

REFERENCES

- Allaby, M 1998, *A Dictionary of Ecology. Second Edition*, University Press, Oxford.
- Berry, T 1999, *The Great Work. Our Way into the Future*, Sheffield Phoenix press, Bell Tower, New York.
- Boyce, G 2010, *An Improbable Feast. The surprising dynamic of hospitality at the hearth of multifaith chaplaincy*. G. Boyce, Glandore, South Australia.
- Habel, N 2003, ‘The Implications of God Discovering Wisdom in Earth’ in *Job 28: Cognition in Context*, Ellen van Wolde (ed.), Brill, Leiden.

- Habel, N 2012, *Rainbow of Mysteries. Meeting the Sacred in Nature*. Kelowna, Woodlake, Canada.
- Macy, J & Seed, J 1996 'Gaia Meditations', in Roger S. Gottlieb (ed), 1996, *This Sacred Earth: Religion, Nature and Environment*. Routledge, New York, pp. 501-502.
- Suzuki, D & McConnell, A 1997, *The Sacred Balance: Rediscovering our Place in Nature*. Bantam, London.

APPENDIX A

EARTH FRIENDLY CHARTER FOR CHAPLAINS**ECO-AXIOM A**

Earth is a planet who originated in cosmic space and evolved into a living habitat of intrinsic worth.

Earth is now calling each of us to be:

a custodian of mystery, a host in this place who helps those who attend our table to discern presence, mystery and the sacred in our place.

ECO-AXIOM B

Earth is a fragile web of interconnected and interdependent forces and domains of existence.

Earth is now calling each of us to be:

an advocate of wisdom, a host sensitive to the balance of nature and ready to be her voice at our table relating to the crisis of our wounded planet.

ECO-AXIOM C

Earth is a living family in which humans and all other organisms are kin who live and move and have a common destiny,

Earth is now calling each of us to be:

a companion of kin, a host who welcomes and celebrates all guests at our table as earth beings who have been given life and nurtured by Earth as her own.

ECO-AXIOM D

Earth is a vibrant planet with deep impulses that generate life, build community and enable healing,

Earth is now calling each of us to be:

a partner with compassion, a host whose outstretched hands not only welcome and affirm, but also become vehicles of healing and blessing.

