



Our Vocation to Care for Earth

A Personal Reflection

By Dave Rhoads

Growing up in the forties and fifties, I had no awareness of the impact we humans were having on the environment. I just went on the assumption that nature was a constant. It was a backdrop that one could always count on. It had always been there just the way it is now. And it will be there in the future just the way it is now. One could take it for granted. I had little direct contact with natural settings. I played in the woods near our home. I went camping with friends in the nearby mountains, never far from houses and roads. I went to the New Jersey shore in the summer, frolicked in the Atlantic Ocean at the beach, and mostly played basketball. Nature was recreation.

The fifties saw none of the interest in caring for creation that has come to the fore in our time. I grew up in a small town in Pennsylvania named, of all things, Hollidaysburg. It was about 10,000 people, quite conservative and presuming to live out the family values of Ozzie and Harriet. We were occupied with economic and social recovery from World War II (I was born in 1941 about three weeks before the bombing of Pearl Harbor), and our fears about global destruction centered on the nuclear bomb. During the cold war with the USSR in the fifties, I volunteered as a high school student for the local civil defense group. On numerous weekend evenings, a friend and I would stand guard at the highest point in town, the civil defense hut on top of our junior high school. We had binoculars and we were watching to spot small Soviet aircraft coming in below the radar screen to bomb our nation and take away our freedom.

How insanely absurd that seems now. The idea that the Soviet Union would attack the US, the idea that the USSR would do so with small planes, and that their target would be Hollidaysburg are absolutely ridiculous. Besides, Hollidaysburg was surrounded by mountains on all sides. What were we going to see? And if we did see a plane of any kind, what would we do? As I later realized, the point was not ever meant to be realistic. Rather it was designed to keep before us the ever-present threat of the Soviet Union and to keep the values and plans of the Cold War alive. After all, in the McCarthy era, there was a communist under every bed. So, if we did not spot any Soviet planes, perhaps we would at least be alert to a red commie at school or at the barber shop or in the neighborhood.

The threat of nuclear holocaust from the Soviet Union has long since faded, if it ever existed at all. Now it is kept alive by the threats of terrorists groups and rogue nations who would go after nuclear technology and other weapons of mass destruction—and by our own US nuclear arsenal. We are putting even more resources into this threat than we ever did during the cold war. The conflicts in Iraq, the tensions with Iran and Korea, and the threats of Al Qaeda after 9/11 keep this fear alive. The so-called three nations in the “axis of evil” represent the threat to us of mass destruction, while for much of the rest of Third World, it is the United States and its economic system that are their daily experiences of weapons of mass destruction. .

Meanwhile, we are all being threatened with global destruction of a more insidious nature, the erosion of the very ecosystems that sustain human life on Earth. In this threat, similar apocalyptic visions are lifted up. They are not visions of a single nuclear destruction but of a slow deterioration of the conditions that have made human life possible on Earth. And the US cannot point to an enemy out there. This destruction is, for the most part, of our own making! And if there was ever the potential for weapons of mass destruction, certainly nature gone amok will present them.

The sixties and seventies occupied us with so many issues of peace and justice. I and my wife were caught up in all these movements. The Vietnam War led us to call into question the authority of our government to make moral decisions and fostered our right to call them into question. I joined in protests and sit-ins and teach-ins about the war. The civil rights movement called into question the interior moral fiber of the nation and led to massive changes in our laws and structures. Again, I joined the local marches and rallies that attempted to change the structures of institutional racism. The women’s movement challenged the patriarchal structures and cultural patterns of male domination. My wife was active in the women’s liberation and participated for years in a consciousness-raising group. Together we were formulating the early “marriage contracts” that changed the male dominated dynamics of the marital relationships. In these various movements, the

domination and exploitation of the poor was a constant theme and concern. All these issues remain with us today, sometimes in blatant but mostly in de facto ways that continue to threaten the moral fabric of the nation. I was first a student and then a young pastor during these early times—a Yankee graduate student from Duke University in a parish in the small town of Asheboro, NC, in the heart of the South. Not easy—for me or for the parishioners!

After completing graduate school in the early seventies, I took up a position as teacher at Carthage College, a Lutheran liberal arts college in Kenosha, WI. In this context, there were many fewer repercussions for speaking one's mind. Unfortunately, what one had to say often fell on deaf ears, because the late seventies and the eighties brought the generation of greed and self-absorption. My challenge was to stimulate college students to care about moral and spiritual issues when their main concern was, for the most part, to get a job that brought in as much money as they could possibly make. It was hard to teach New Testament in circumstances where students wonder how that course will help their career, enable them to advance economically, or get them up the ladder of success. Fortunately there were also students who carried a strong moral compass and social conscience. I taught New Testament as a liberal arts course and raised as many issues as I could out of the radical writings of the early Christian movement.

Then a quite ordinary thing happened that eventually opened up some pathways I never expected. Funny how a small thing can change your life forever and set you on a path you did not even imagine would be there. I recall it vividly. It was in the late eighties. I was living in Racine, WI. It was summer. I responded to a knock on the door and went out to speak to the young man on the front porch. He was a college student volunteering for the summer to solicit contributions for the Wisconsin Coalition on the Environment. Would I be willing to contribute? I still recall the license he wore dangling from a neck band that showed his legal authorization to do this work. His conversation had no pressure, but it was passionate and appealing. I had never contributed to an environmental organization, but I was inclined to do so now. I gave him a check for \$30.00. He thanked me, handed me a newsletter from their organization, and moved on toward the next house.

I walked inside and stood in the living room as I looked through the little four-page newsletter in my hand. I turned to the back of the newsletter, where there was a story shared, almost like a postscript. Since I kept the newsletter through these years, I can quote it exactly. Here it is:

We have an uncle who is the family environmentalist. At our gatherings and reunions, he was always talking about saving the old stands of redwoods out in California, those immense and beautiful trees that must be preserved.

That is, he talked about them until one summer when it was imperative that he replace a dilapidated pier at a summer house he owned in northern Wisconsin. He asked around at many places about the best wood to use for this project. Everywhere he got the same answer. And it wasn't cedar.

We no longer hear from our uncle about the redwoods. Now he talks about saving the whales. Our response: Look out, whales!

Now that is a pretty ordinary story, with a measure of interest and some humor. But somehow, on that day, it touched a raw nerve in my life, and it raised a possibility. The nerve it touched was hypocrisy—such that the story turned out to be a means of self-disclosure. I have always been profoundly aware of hypocrisy in my life over other issues, and I do not like it. Not that my hypocrisy is somehow crass and blatantly intentional. Rather it lurks there unacknowledged at the edge of consciousness and leaves me with a sense of unease. I was like that uncle. I talked a lot about moral issues and cared a lot about them, but there were things in my life that did not (and do not) measure up to these stated commitments. I always feared this scenario: Take away all my capacity to say what I believe, what my values are, and let someone observe my *behavior* 24-7 and try to determine what my values are based only on my actions. Would I look any different from any other person in my culture?

Here was a story about a man who loved to talk the talk, but when it came to a decision that affected his life in a significant way, his convictions went by the wayside. He decided to act in a way that made it virtually impossible to tout the same cause after that—too incongruous! So he tried to retrieve his integrity by taking up a cause that would likely not require such a personal decision on his part. It's easy to have commitments about things that affect us so little, but not so easy to have commitments that affect us/ require something of us close to home. So I was caught in the trap of the story. In my reflections, I thought mainly about commitment to the environment. I think I had had some vague realization by that point in my life that we all ought to be caring about this issue, but I had not gone further than that. This leads to the possibility that this story raised for me.

I recall formulating this thought: "I am going to care about this issue of the environment, and I am

going to seek to do it with integrity.” That was it. That was the commitment. As simple as that. I cannot believe it has taken me so far. That was the seed that was planted that day. I made a promise and a commitment within myself, and I was ready to see where this might lead me. At the time, I was thinking purely of my own personal commitment at home and my personal life. It never occurred to me that I would spend on average ten or more hours a week over the next two decades on faith and the environment. It never dawned on me that it would become a significant part of my career and public life as well. It never rose to my consciousness that I would be giving lectures or writing essays or teaching classes or directing programs around issues of the environment.

As I look back on that moment of self-reflection in my living room, I do indeed think of it as a seed that has come to bear fruit. It is no accident that the early Christians turned to the seed analogy as a way to talk about how the word of the Gospel bore fruit among early Christians. The earliest itinerant Christians went from place to place and planted communities. Each community seemed to take its own shape and bear its own fruit. The good news spoken to them would take root and germinate in them as a seed and eventually produce fruit. The seed/word seemed to have a power of its own to spread through the human psyche, to overcome evil, to generate goodness, and to lead to the creation of humane communities. It feels as if this simple story in an organizational newsletter about redwoods and whales has done that in me. To be sure, I watered the seed and weeded it and gave it space to grow, but it is as if that initial seed has grown into an orchard inside me, producing and reproducing acts and ideas and relationships and effects that I could never have anticipated or imagined.

And it is probably appropriate that the seed analogy in early Christianity has much to do with the issue of integrity. As James says so cogently, “Just as a tree without fruit is dead, so faith without works is dead.” Or as Matthew writes: Every tree not bearing good fruit is cut down and thrown into fire.” What good is a tree if it does not bear fruit? What good is a human being if she or he does not do good works? Trees were created to produce fruit. Humans were created to do good deeds. It is as simple as that. If the seed does not result in a mature tree that gives fruit—grain or fruits or grapes or whatever—then it is considered barren, no good, without point. So with humans. This theology of the word is a theology of character, designed to bring human beings to their full maturity, to live out their end or goal, to fulfill what they were meant to be—a source of goodness.

In the New Testament, this goodness is oriented toward solidarity with the vulnerable in society. James says that true religion is caring for the widows and the orphans, giving a preferential option for the poor, and overcoming every form of discrimination. For Matthew, goodness is a matter of attending to the needs of the least—the hungry, the naked, and the prisoners. Now, in our time, there is a broadening understanding of the least of these to include animal species that are endangered or exploited, plant species that are becoming extinct, eco-systems that are threatened, indeed the whole planet under stress—whales and redwoods included! We are called to stand in solidarity with the weak and to give voice to the vulnerable. When God knows the flight and fall of every bird, who will speak for the sparrow? This is our challenge.

This, then, is the fundamental message of the New Testament: How can human beings be re-created so that they come to maturity and fulfill their God-given purpose in being created in the first place. This is true integrity. This is wholeness. This is being true to oneself. This is salvation. The opposite is hypocrisy, being other than what one was meant to be, living contrary to the creator, arriving at less than what one is called to become.

Now, thank God there is forgiveness. Thank God there is justification by grace. Thank God there is the presence and guidance of the Holy Spirit to empower us in our weaknesses. Thank God there is love. I have given myself to *try* to live this path of caring for the environment with integrity and without hypocrisy. That does not mean I have done it. In fact, the more I do, the more I see layers in myself of the failure to walk the walk. The interesting thing is that these revelations have come to me not as a burden or a condemnation, but as a hopeful realization of what more I can do.

A person does not decide at one shot to have integrity—as if one could muster enough determination and insight to be able to say, “From now on I will have integrity about this matter.” It does not work that way. It is rather a commitment to a process of discovery and transformation. And there has to be grace and forgiveness; otherwise we would give up. For the most part, hypocrisy is blind. Although there is such a thing as willful blindness, few of us intentionally choose to be hypocritical. We do not want to be crassly hypocritical. If asked, few of us would probably think we were hypocrites. We usually rationalize our inconsistencies so that we do not see them! But the point is this: Even when we have every desire to see our hypocrisies and overcome them, we are not easily able to do so. It often requires other people to point them out to us, because we are so good at deceiving ourselves. Or we need a story, like that of the uncle, to hold up a mirror to us so we can

see ourselves more clearly. When we do that on a regular basis, we find one thing after another about which we are hypocritical.

For example, when I became committed to women's liberation, I made a commitment to look at all the things I was doing as a male to contribute to women's domination and to consider all the things I might do positively to contribute to women's liberation. I kept thinking over the years that I would peel away one layer after another and finally come down to some pristine center where there would no longer any male assumptions and behavior patterns that were not sexist. Wrong! It is sexism all the way down! That is why some of us white folks talk about being a recovering racist—because there is no end to the dynamics we can uncover in ourselves that may contribute to personal and systemic racism. Just as an alcoholic will always be an alcoholic, so we will always be racist. We should not ever forget it, because awareness keeps us vigilant.

My problem is that I am liable in so many areas. I am a quintessential WASP—white, Anglo-Saxon, heterosexual, male, from an upper middle class family in the United States, able-bodied and healthy. The things I take for granted and the systems of domination in which I participate are pervasive. Based on my social location, I need to repent to virtually every group in the world! Let me be clear. I do not apologize for myself or despise my own flesh. I am who I am. My social location is a fact of life and if I want to be morally responsible, I need to address my relationships with others. However, because I am acutely aware of this, I sometimes get repentance fatigue! I do not berate myself. Rather, my realization of my culpability for injustice in relation to other groups is like a diagnosis from a doctor. I am relieved to find out what is wrong with my attitudes and behavior so that I can do something about it!

The same is true of my relationship with the rest of nature. It has been a slow process to realize all that I do as an individual human being and as part of many systems of domination to degrade and despoil Earth. The realizations have been slow coming, even when I have been eager and determined to unearth my homocentrism and my Earthism. Over the years, I have come to more and more realizations and revelations I about how my behavior, my thinking, my relationships, my part in the economic, social and political systems that have contributed to the destruction of the eco-systems of Earth. At its most basic, the journey has been a spiritual journey—a life-long effort to “see” what we are doing to God's creation and how we can change our relationship to God so that we stop this insanity.

In that regard, the commitment I made in my living room that day has turned out to be a vocation. From the outside, you might simply say that I took up a *cause*. I think that is true. It *is* a “cause”—a concept that emphasizes outward circumstances that I hope to change in some way. On the other hand, this cause has also been a *vocation*, and I do not mean a career. Joe Sittler used to say that the only important vocation was the human vocation, the calling to be a human being in this world. Vocation is a response to Wendell Berry's question: “What are human beings for anyway?” In a sense, a calling is both internal and external. It is the interior response to an outward circumstance. Vocation is the call of the heart in relation to the call of the situation for something to be done. So, this work for Earth has been a vocation, a walk, a journey. It has been done with a wonderful sense of freedom from anxiety about adequacy or outcome. It has been done with a sense that there is grace for mistakes and failures. It has felt “right” to engage in this work.

My personal sense of vocation has been confirmed by the biblical creation stories. In the biblical creation stories, human beings were created last and told “to serve and to preserve” Earth. In some fundamental sense, that is the root human vocation to which God calls all human beings! We have focused almost exclusively on the commands to “Love God” and to “Love your neighbor as yourself.” These are absolutely essential to life as human beings. Yet we have pursued them to the exclusion of the mandate—the calling as humans—to care for Earth. We should be saying: Love God, Love others, care for Creation. Just as we are called to be “keepers” of our brothers and sisters, so we are also called to serve and “keep” the earth. This means that the care of Earth is a calling from God for everyone. We have eclipsed this calling in our modern world. The challenge we have now is: How can we recover our calling to be Earth-keepers, as individuals and as a society?

God is calling us in our hearts to embrace this vocation. But we are also being called by the outward circumstances. Father Thomas Berry has referred to the care of the Earth as the Great Work of our time. He argues that we are entering an ecozoic age in the history of evolution, an age in which issues of the environment will dominate our life together on this planet. Evolution continues, and human beings have choices to make that will shape and influence the direction of evolution in this new age. We can continue to contribute to its deterioration or we can engage in rescue and restoration operations that preserve Earth for future generations. This latter option, Berry argues, is the Great Work of our time. It is the vocation we are called to by the circumstances of our world.

And we can all participate in this vocation in various ways given our resources and our commitments.

Leonardo Boff, the liberation theologian, has pointed out that we as Christians have sought to listen to the cry of the poor and respond to the suffering, the exploitation, and the domination human beings endure. Now he argues we must also listen to the cry of Earth—both for the sake of Earth and for the sake of the poor—to liberate suffering humans as well as suffering Earth from exploitation and domination. The two are absolutely interrelated. In the time of my youth, nature was a backdrop. No longer can it be so. We know that humans are inextricably a part of nature. We *are* nature, and the fate of humans is tied up with the fate of all Earth. We cannot go back. We must go forward—called to care for all Earth-community as a seamless web of life.

I happen to recall vividly the moment when I came to grips with this reality some twenty year ago. I suppose many others could recall a similar moment of realization and the seeds of a commitment that has grown through the years. Or perhaps childhood experiences or the influence of a teacher led you to be aware of the environment and our responsibility for it. I encourage you to take this opportunity to get in touch with your own history, your own story, that has shaped you and that leads you to say: "I must do my part in this Great Work of our time."