

Business Frontiers:

Social Responsibility, Sustainable Development and Economic Justice

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Remarkable Stories

*"For the beauty of the earth,
this spinning blue-green ball, yes!
Gaia, mother of everything
we walk gently across your back
to come together again
in this place
to remember how we can live
to remember who we are
to create how we will be.
Gaia, our home,
the lap in which we live -
welcome us."*

(Barbara J Pescan)

I wonder what you thought of when you saw this title - Connecting Earth and Sky? Well, for me, there are three ideas or questions which come to mind:

Firstly, it is the story of creation - how did the earth and sky come to exist in the first place, and how do they fit into the grander scheme of things? Secondly, there are the environmental issues surrounding our earth and sky - what impact are we having on our planet, for better or for worse? Thirdly, how does Nature influence and inspire us? What are the deeper connections which exist between the living creation which surrounds us and of which we are a part, and our spiritual experience of life?

So really, in this article, I am going to be looking at our relationship as human beings with Life. And it is at a time in history when environmental consciousness is reaching a peak.

Let me begin, therefore, by recalling how the earth and sky came into being. This is the creation myth, as told in the African tradition by Credo Mutwa, Zulu *sangoma* (healer) and *sanusi* (keeper of the legends)¹.

Creation Story

"In the beginning nothing existed but the Fertile Darkness, floating on the invisible River of Time. But there was a stirring in the darkness - a desire arose in the River of Time, for the Fertile Darkness to give birth to something out of nothing. And as a result of this strangest mating of Time and Nothingness, a most tiny nigh invisible spark of living Fire was born.

And the Living Fire was consciousness and it exclaimed: 'I exist - I am what I am'. But the Spark became aware that it was alone in the darkness - this was the first Great Loneliness, a loneliness which all creatures since then have been destined to share a little from time to time. So the Spark began to feed on itself and to grow, into a flame and a blazing fire, eventually consuming the Nothingness with the most awful flash of light.

The River Time was very cross with what the Spark had done and quickly sent the Spirit Cold to fight the spark outright. A mighty battle soon ensued, in which the Spark, now a universal roaring flame which filled the sky with many soaring tongues, tried to melt Cold's spirit and devour it complete. While Cold blew its icy, cold, wet breath into the Flame. And this ferocious battle, which started so long ago, today still rages unabated. The Wise elders of the tribes say that if the Flame one day wins, then the world will perish in an all-consuming fire, while if the Cold wins, all living things shall freeze to death.

Meanwhile, the Great Spirit from far beyond, uNkulunkulu, became displeased with the wasteful and senseless war between the Flame and the Cold, and wished order into the Universe. And born of this desire, there arose the Great Mother, Ninhavanhu-Ma, or simply Ma as she is called by a thousand tongues all over the Earth. And Ma began to execute the wishes of uNkulunkulu - From the sparks that the original Flame shot out, she created the stars, the sun and the Earth body on which we stand today.

And when the Great Mother had finished with her creation, she seated herself on the Mountain of Iron, Tabazimbi, and rested and waited. Soon, a strange feeling of loneliness overcame her and she began to weep most bitterly and vent her frustration most angrily. The heavens and the earth shook - stars fell from the sky and fiery volcanoes exploded from the crusty earth. Her tears formed a great lake at her feet, and flowing out across the land, these became the murmuring streams, the mighty rivers and the salty ocean we know today.

¹ Synthesised and paraphrased from his books *Indaba, My Children* and *Song of the Stars*.

At last, the voice of the Great Spirit came roaring from beyond the borders of Eternity - like a great tempest howling down the canyons, shaking the mountains; a sound so vast it would dwarf the desert thunder, a sound that indeed caused the very first earthquake: 'Imperfect Being, I alone understand the purpose for this universe I bade you create. Do not destroy it. Bear your loneliness a little longer and you shall set an example to all creatures. None shall spend eternity in loneliness, and all shall find companions. Hear my words and cease your lamentations.'

The Great Goddess became suddenly calm. The tidal waves ceased devouring the continents and the volcanoes grew sleepy. The thunderclouds released quiet rains and their underbellies became tinted red as the Sun descended behind the distant mountains.

Ma replied, 'Thou hast spoken, oh Great Spirit, and I have heard. But, pray tell, who shall my companion be?' And the universal voice, now growing fainter, replied, 'For now, you may only dream of him. He shall bring contentment to you and you shall bring forth children to fill a world.' And Ma, entering the mountain, dreamed of her beautiful but unknown companion, and waited impatiently for the first dawn.'

The Tree of Life

"When the first rays of light burst over the many-fanged range to the east and the mountains cast sharp shadows over the plains, Ma heard a voice she did not recognise, a coarse voice calling out: 'Come, oh my mate, I await thee here'. The silvery Goddess arose, shimmering in her splendour, and burst through the side of the mountain, so great was her eagerness. Boulders crashed down the mountain and a cloud of blinding dust arose. She held out her arms to her mysterious mate.

But the arms that reached for her own - how strange they were - gnarled and twisted, draped with creeping vines. His skin was rough, like the bark of trees, with chunks of granite embedded - a horrible, wonderful display of minerals: iron ore, diamonds, jewels of all kinds. His body was thick like a great Boabab tree, and the Goddess beheld with horror eyes on many stalks, bloodshot and filled with a lecherous glee. His mouth seemed wicked and filled with pointed teeth, and he had a long green tongue which licked his granite lips. His legs were living roots on which this being scrambled quickly towards her, crablike.

'Come to me, my beloved, come to me!' said the strange, repulsive being. 'I am Simakade, the Tree of Life, and I desire thee.' Ma let out a panic-stricken scream and fled desperately, over mountains and valleys, through plains and deserts. But the tree pursued her relentlessly, for years it seemed, until they came to the shores of Lake Makarikari, where Ma seemed to make her escape while Simakade got his roots bogged down in the muddy lake's bottom.

Fearing that he would lose her forever, Simakade grabbed a great wad of mud and clay and rock from the bottom of the lake, bigger than Mount Kilimanjaro, and hurled it at his fleeing love. His aim was true and the Goddess dropped from the sky into his waiting branch-like arms. But the muddy missile had been thrown with such force that it flew onward into the night sky and began to circle the Earth as the moon of today. Thus, to this day, the Moon is the Guardian of all Lovers.

After what seemed like many ages in each other's awkward embrace, Ma began to feel strange movements within her. The Tree kept helpless watch as his mate writhed and agonised through her birth pains. Then, at long last, the Great Goddess gave birth to the first mighty nation of human beings, who populated the barren Kalahari.

Meanwhile, the strangest change came over the Tree of Life. Green buds burst forth from his writhing limbs and clouds of seeds emerged and fell upon the rocky plains. Soon, all manner of plants and mighty forests grew forth - a creeping carpet of lush living green. From Simakade's roots came reptiles, crawling and slithering, and insects, humming and whining upwards in continuous streams. From his branches dropped snarling, howling, animal fruit, which fell to the ground with a thump and scampered off into the forests in their millions. From great cracks in the trunk of the Tree, birds of all kinds came flying and waddling forth, filling the air with all their love calls.

The earth which had hitherto been lifeless and dead, began to live, and sounds of all kinds resounded from the forests and valleys, as beast fought beast, beast called beast, and birds sang their happiness loudly towards the smiling sun. The Song of Life had begun on earth - the Song which is still being sung."

The Human Footprint

Yes, indeed, the Song of Life continues around us even today. But over the past 100 years, there has been an increasing dissonance in that Song, as our human society has caused serious degradation to the environment. This deals with my second question, namely how we impact on the Earth and Sky.

We have become like the legendary monkeys who, according to one African story, were placed by the great Earth Mother goddess on a sacred fig tree to guard it. They developed such appetites that they not only ate all the figs but also devoured the bark and the wood of the tree. When the great Earth Mother returned, she found the tree reduced to a rotting stump and the skeletons of all the monkeys who had died of starvation after eating their own tree.

So this is the bad news which we ignore at our peril. Deforestation, global warming, desertification, the ozone hole, resource depletion, the collapse of fishing stocks, water wars, pollution-related disease. These are all critical issues which threaten life as we know

it and the very survival of our species and many others. If this sounds overly dramatic, I venture to say that ignorance is bliss. I could shock you with countless frightening statistics, but instead, I would like to cite a short quote, taken from *Time Magazine*, about a day in the life of a Child of the Future, assuming we do not change our behaviour towards the environment.

"The young boy awoke on a hot, oppressive morning. It wasn't a school day, so he could afford to lie back for a while with his favourite storybook. That was the one with drawings of the great forests - the woodlands filled with tall trees, wild animals and clear-running streams. The scenes seemed so magical that the boy could hardly believe in them, though his parents assured him that such wonders once existed.

Closing his book, he saw no joy in the day ahead. He wished the air conditioner weren't broken. He wished there were more food in the refrigerator. He wished he could see the great forests. But there was no use in thinking about that now. It was enough of a struggle just to be alive, especially for a child."

Even today, this is not as far-fetched as it may seem, if one considers the life of the average American, European or Japanese child born and growing up in New York, London or Tokyo. But this is a future we want to avoid, so what are the positive signs - the stories of hope? Well, I draw my hope from the testimony of four people. They are Edgar Mitchell, James Lovelock, Victor Frankl and George Washington Carver. And this is why.

Edgar Mitchell

Edgar Mitchell, as many of you will recall, was one of the world's first astronauts to orbit the earth and walk on the moon. The power of this achievement to change our thinking lay not in his physical journey into space, as incredible as that feat was. Rather, it was the images of our beautiful, fragile, blue-green planet Earth from space which those first astronauts beamed back to us and captured in countless breathtaking photographs which brought a new consciousness to humanity.

For the first time, perhaps, we became aware of the Earth as a single, unified, living whole, rather than a politically divided patchwork of countries and societies fighting over resources and money. Edgar Mitchell's account of the affect of these images on him are truly moving. He describes the experience as one equivalent to enlightenment or a revelation, a shift in his being which touched him on a deeply spiritual level. I think this powerful image of the living, unified earth is our first true cause for hope - it is a symbol of both a current physical reality and a future social and spiritual reality for which to aspire.

James Lovelock

Then there is James Lovelock, an astronomical scientist who brought the science to back up our intuitive understanding of the earth as a living whole. Lovelock had, since 1965,

been working for NASA on a model to determine whether life could exist on Mars or not. In order to do this, he had to ask the question: What are the conditions which sustain life on Earth? But in the course of this investigation, an unexpected conclusion was reached. Namely, that the Earth, previously accepted by science to be an inert, physical object, appears to demonstrate the capacity to self-regulate innumerable conditions (for example, gas concentrations, climate, bacteria growth, etc.) in order to create a suitable environment for life to flourish. And yet this is the very same characteristic which defines living organisms.

His rationale, backed by a rigorous scientific model, was launched to the world in the 1970s as the "Gaia Hypothesis", named after the Greek goddess of the Earth. Essentially, the scientific community now had to face up to the challenging fact that the Earth system as a whole may be a living, self-regulating, self-sustaining organism. And yet this is exactly the understanding implied for thousands of years through the mythological images of indigenous cultures, such as the Tree of Life and the Mother Earth Goddess.

Victor Frankl

I am now moving on to discuss my third question, namely how we are influenced or inspired by Nature. And this is where my third source of hope comes in - Victor Frankl. Most of you know that Frankl was a survivor of the Nazi concentration camps and the creator of the psychiatric technique known as Logotherapy, which deals with the way in which people find meaning or purpose in their lives. Frankl, in his book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, gives me great hope about the innate quality in humans to appreciate and be inspired by Nature, even in the direst of circumstances such as those in which he found himself during the Second World War. I wish to quote from his book to illustrate my point:

"As the inner life of the prisoner tended to become more intense, he also experienced the beauty of art and nature as never before. Under their influence he sometimes even forgot his own frightful circumstances. If someone had seen our faces on the [train] journey from Auschwitz to a Bavarian camp as we beheld the mountains of Salzburg with their summits glowing in the sunset, through the little barred windows of the prison carriage, he would never have believed that those were the faces of men who had given up hope on all life and liberty. Despite that factor - or maybe because of it - we were carried away by nature's beauty, which we had missed for so long.

"In camp too, a man might draw the attention of a comrade working next to him to a nice view of the setting sun shining through the tall trees of the Bavarian woods, the same woods in which we had built an enormous, hidden munitions plant. One evening, when we were already resting on the floor of our hut, dead tired, soup bowls in hand, a fellow prisoner rushed in and asked us to run out to the assembly grounds and see the wonderful sunset. Standing outside we saw sinister clouds glowing in the west and the whole sky alive with clouds of ever-changing shapes and colours, from steel blue to blood red. The

desolate grey mud huts provided a sharp contrast, while the puddles on the muddy ground reflected the glowing sky. Then, after minutes of moving silence, one prisoner said to another, "How beautiful the world could be!"

Frankl also gives us a clue to why we may be in the collective state of abusing our planet, much in the same way as they were abused as prisoners in the concentration camps. He talks about how, on their day of release from the camp, they all went walking in a meadow close-by filled with flowers. But to their surprise, they felt almost incapable of appreciating its beauty. They had become numb to beauty and experiencing pleasure.

Could this not be the same mental state in which our city-bound, rat-race-stressed population of today finds themselves? Many people have become so isolated and detached from Nature that they feel numb - incapable of sensing its beauty and wonder, and insensitive to any damage they may be causing it.

George Washington Carver

Another clue comes from the last, perhaps least known, person I mentioned earlier, namely George Washington Carver, an American slave descendant who became known as the "Black Leonardo". Were it not for his achievements, Carver would probably have been written off by history as one of those crazy, uneducated, superstitious, but harmless, mumbo-jumbo types. Why? Because he talked, listened to, sang to and healed plants. But the world could not ignore him, for Carver was an agricultural chemist with a Masters degree who discovered the commercial benefits of the peanut (used only for hog food at the time around the Civil War) and the sweet potato. In his long career which stretched into his eighties, Carver invented hundreds of new products - including cosmetics, axle grease, printers ink, petroleum substitutes, shampoos, creosote, vinegar and wood-stains to mention but a few. All from nature's bounty. And all because he took the time to listen to nature's wisdom.

When asked about his prolific knowledge and inventions, he had this to say:

"Nature is the greatest teacher and I learn from her best when others are asleep. In the still dark hours before sunrise, God tells me of the plans I am to fulfill ... The secrets are in the plants. To elicit them you have to love them enough ... Everyone can, if only they believe it."

And indeed, perhaps the world is beginning to learn from Carver. For most of the world's newest and fastest developing technologies do nothing more than attempt to mimic the ingenuity of nature, from artificial intelligence and bio-technologies, to solar energy and phototronics.

The Personal Journey

But what about each of us in our own daily lives. Are we listening? I believe that, for Creation to be healed, each of us needs to be that Connection between Earth and Sky. We each need to find our own sense of meaning and inspiration from nature.

Whether it be by growing things, by walking in the mountains and forests, by actively campaigning for environmental issues, by consciously buying environmentally-friendly products, or by allowing ourselves to relate more intimately with the creatures which share our planet.

There is a useful little way to maintain a focus on this process of listening and learning from nature. Most ancient indigenous cultures have a strong tradition of animal, plant or landscape totems. We should not treat these as superstitious nonsense, for we create our own meaning, and most meaning can be found in symbols. Ask yourself: Which of nature's creations most inspires, teaches or challenges you? Adopt a particular animal or tree or mountain, and learn as much as you can from it, before looking for a new totem.

In my own life, I stumbled across the fairly unlikely influence and wonder of geese, after a close encounter with two who flew closely past me when I was at Zoo Lake in Johannesburg about two years ago. And to illustrate how meaning can emerge from such a relationship with another creature, this is what I learned about geese:

The goose was the sacred bird in Rome's temple of Juna, was associated with Boreas, the North Wind in Greek Mythology and is also the totem for the winter solstice in the Native American medicine wheel. The goose is also symbolic of writing and storytelling, with its quill having been used as a pen for many generations. In more practical terms, by flying together in V-formation, geese get where they are going almost twice as quickly with half the effort. When the lead goose gets tired, it simply drops to the back of the formation and another takes the lead. Those near the back continually honk encouragement to the ones upfront. And when one of the geese is injured or becomes ill and drops out of the formation, two other geese always drop out and stay with it until it recovers.

So what is your messenger from Nature? Are you ready to listen? I want to end by referring again to some words from Carver. He says:

"When I touch that flower, I am touching infinity. It existed long before there were human beings on earth and will to continue to exist for millions of years to come. Through the flower, I talk to the Infinite, which is only a silent force. This is not a physical contact. It is not an earthquake, wind or fire. It is in the invisible world. It is that still small voice that calls up the fairies. Many people know this instinctively and none better than Tennyson when he wrote:

Flower in the crannied wall,
I pluck you out of the crannies,
I hold you here, root and all, in my hand,
Little flower - but if I could understand
What you are, root and all, and all in all,
I should know what God and man is."

So perhaps, if we listen to our hearts and our souls, if we tune in to the Earth Spirit, we can help to ensure that the Child of the Future, quoted in *Time Magazine*, has a different ending:

"The young girl awoke on a cool, inviting morning. It wasn't a school day, so she could look forward to doing what she liked best. Her family was going just outside the city into the great forest, where they would stroll under the tall trees, spot wild animals and wade in the clear-running streams.

Every time they went, she felt lucky. After all, her parents had told her stories about the old days - before people learned to protect the land and water and harness the power of wind and sunlight. It was a dark time when the forests died, rivers ran dry and millions went hungry. The girl was amazed and frightened that such a thing could ever have happened. But there was no need to think about that now - not with a glorious day ahead. It was so good to be alive, especially for a child."

Prayer for the Earth and Sky

*"O our Mother the Earth
O our Father the sky
Your children are we
and with tired backs we bring you the gifts you love
Then weave for us a garment of brightness
May the warp be the bright light of morning
May the weft be the red light of evening
May the fringes be the falling rain
May the border be the standing rainbow
Thus weave for us a garment of brightness
that we may walk fittingly where grass is green
O our mother the earth
O our father the sky."*

Source:

Based on a service conducted at the Cape Town Unitarian Fellowship, partially published as an article entitled "Connecting Earth and Sky" in *Namaste*, Volume 14, November / December 2001.