

ECOLITERACY AND THE FACTS OF LIFE

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A few weeks ago I had the opportunity to hear a lecture by Professor P. Z. Myers, a developmental biologist from the U of MN, Morris. He began his talk on “evolutionary cooperativity” by reminding us how life began from single cells, evolved through sustained elaboration into ever greater complexity to produce a world teeming with richly diverse and thriving life forms. What a picture he painted of the amazing world we know today! And we humans are part of that very same Life process—begun eons ago. We are that Life becoming conscious of itself.

Now certainly, I’ve accepted the theory of evolution since my youth, but like so many people, the creation story that is stuck in my head is the one from popular religious culture. You know the one... the earth, lush and inviting--once an absolute paradise—is in decline, being spoiled by human depravity and devolving into a cesspool. And I too, as Humanist UU, tend to focus on everything that’s wrong with the world and the imminent dangers facing human civilization. But Prof. Myers left me that day pondering the absolutely magnificently complex and mind-expanding possibilities of Life—which—he reminded us--is still a work in progress.

Yes, people are hurting, bad things are happening and our long-term survival is tenuous. There *are* no guarantees for the future. But we need a change of consciousness if life on the planet is to improve and flourish. The Scientific Revolution

and the Enlightenment radically changed the notion of god in Western thought, but not so much the view of Homo-sapiens. Still today, the human species is primarily seen as the crown jewel of creation—separate from the natural world—worthy of dominion over it. And while evolutionary biology has made some strides in putting us in our proper place, most people maintain a delusional worldview. As Einstein once said: “A human being is part of the whole... called by us, universe...We experience ourselves, our thoughts and feelings as something separate from the rest. A kind of optical delusion of consciousness...Our task must be to free ourselves from [this delusion] by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty.”

There can be no separation in our thinking between the natural world and what we deem as the human world. What happens “in nature” happens to us—as we have been so painfully reminded of by recent events in Japan. And what we ourselves create *from* nature has consequences for ourselves and the whole planet. Our self-conscious decisions, our species-conscious decisions will either enable Life on earth to thrive through our partnership with each other and the entire natural world or we will hasten its destruction by our hubris.

The good news is: the “optical delusion” that Einstein spoke of has begun to be corrected with the emergence of the field of ecology in the 20th century. Through the study of ecosystems, biologists have been teaching us about the interconnectedness of

all life. And this systems approach to understanding the natural world has moved into the study of social organizations as well. The late social theorist, Murray Bookchin coined the phrase “social ecology” to describe a worldview that looks to evolution and the biosphere to understand how natural and social phenomena are intertwined. Whether we’re dealing with the most basic cellular functions in biology or the intricacies of earth’s diverse ecosystems or the complexity of the social, economic and political systems of human civilization, we need to understand their symbiotic relationships.

But a scientific understanding of these living systems—the interconnectedness of absolutely everything and everyone--has yet to become the prevailing worldview of our time. For instance, our transportation systems are part of larger social and ecological systems. Our energy systems, likewise. Our food systems. Our economic systems. But we treat these as autonomous entities— without regard for their relationship to the wider world. Take the economy: Why are we so impatient to have it revert to excessive and unsound patterns of consumption? Or, have our energy needs met through environmentally destructive means? Have we no imagination—or will--to see the bigger picture—to see the interplay between social systems and ecosystems to create a more sustainable future?

We have evolved to be a thinking species. And what we think matters. Almost every day this legislative session, we hear of legislators who are attempting to dismantle environmental protections, gut mass transit projects, or revitalize unsustainable energy

sources and technologies. It's "dominion" mentality—of other people and the rest of the natural world.

That worldview has got to go and we have to help re-frame popular discourse. We need to be eco-literate as the physicist and systems theorist Fritjof Capra teaches at his Center for Ecoliteracy in Berkeley, CA. Check him out. His passion is to teach the facts of life—that from its beginning, life did not succeed at taking over the planet by combat but by networking--by creating and nurturing communities. And we need to look to the work of biologists such as P.Z. Myers who are identifying strategies from evolution that show how life proliferated -- through cooperative interaction, partnership, innovation, flexibility, diversity--even altruism among organisms. It's not a "doom and gloom" message. Life is becoming more complex—yes--but through a web of "cooperativity" and creativity. We need to tout that worldview and embrace its survival strategies as the self-conscious and purposeful creatures we have become. We need to help frame public policy issues based on these facts of life.

So this spring-- as you work in your garden or take note of one of your favorite haunts, think about the "optical delusion of consciousness" posited by Einstein. Find your place in the natural world and visualize yourself as part of a much larger picture, an organic whole composed of all existence, "the interdependent web of which we are a part" as our Principles say. Study these facts of life--being attentive to the web--always changing, still evolving and amply rewarding our cooperation.

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