

Ordinary Courage – an Earth Day Sermon  
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UCV

In the great Hindu *Ramayana*: After Sita tells her story to the people – how the demon had abducted her, and why her husband, king Rama, had banished her on the suspicion that she had been unfaithful – she knelt and spoke to the Earth.

"Let me prove my innocence. Mother Earth, if I have been faithful to Rama, take me home. Hide me."

The Earth rolled and moved. The ground broke with a great rumbling and a deep chasm opened, lit from below with lightning from the castles of the Naga serpent kings.

From underground rose four towering Nagas, guardians of Earth's riches, hissing and weaving like giant cobras. Their silver scales rippled like moonlight on the ocean waves. With red eyes, they glared at the people.

From below, between the four Nagas, rose a throne, carved from stone and roots, and set with diamonds. On that throne sat Mother Earth. She was not old, but eternally fair; not sad, but smiling. She wore flowers and the seas swirled about her.

Earth supports all life but is not burdened by this. She is patient. She was patient under the Sun and Moon and through the rainfalls of countless years.

She was patient with seasons, with kings, and with farmers.

She endured all things and bore no care from it.

But this was the end of her long patience with Rama. She stretched out her arms and took her only child Sita on her lap. She folded her exquisite arms around her daughter, laid Sita's head softly against her shoulder, and stroked her hair, as any mother would do. Sita closed her eyes like a little girl.

The throne sank back underground. The Nagas dove beneath the ground and the crevice closed gently over them, forever."

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In this story, written 2,500 years ago, Rama is an incarnation of Hindu God Indra, reborn on earth to do battle with evil. But he forgets his divine origin and falls victim to rumors about his wife Sita. When Rama realizes his mistake, he says: "I didn't know. I am king of the whole world, but the earth has taken my wife from me before my eyes." This is Mother Earth, Bhumi to the Hindus, Gaia to the Greeks. In this story we hear that she is patient, but she is not oblivious. She hears the cry of her daughters, or her son's for that matter.

This story, like all great stories, touches deep truths and so speaks to us still today. Earth shall not be mocked. Nature shall not be mocked. Now, we know. We look out at our tortured world, heating up at unprecedented rate, rivers polluted, forests turned to desert, and we witness the hubris of humanity. Our mistakes return like the Naga serpents to stare us down. Rachel Carson wrote a half century ago, "The

'control of nature' is a phrase conceived in arrogance, born of the Neanderthal age of biology." We do not control nature. We are nature.

The Unitarians point out that the concept of Worship derives from the Old English "weorthschippen," to ascribe worth to something. So, to what do we ascribe worth? To security, to money, to our career or to nation? Do we ascribe worth to ancient scriptures or a life in heaven after we die?

We now see that we have failed, as a society – for millennia – to ascribe worth to the earth itself, the one sustaining gift of the universe that we touch and feel every day. Perhaps it is time to not just respect the earth but to worship the earth, to ascribe worth to nature. Nature is the first teacher of humanity. Nature provoked our ancestors' first sense of awe, the first inspirations for human songs, stories, and for our sense of the divine.

Where do we go for a holiday? Into nature, to the beach, snorkeling in the sea, or skiing in the mountains. We find ourselves suddenly back home. Nature built us. Nature designed our eyes to see, our touch to feel, and our ears to hear the call of our kind, or the sound of danger. Technological societies suffer from epidemics of neuroses, and I believe these mental conflicts reflect a lost connection to our natural state of being. But our mother, the earth, is patient. She abides. She suffers our neglect. She waits.

I think she waits for us to ascribe worth to her.

### **Optimism and realism**

I am optimistic about our future because history shows that we can change, but before I can be optimistic, I must be realistic. Otherwise I am not optimistic, I am delusional. We cannot fear the truth, because that is what will save us.

In my high school biology class, I recall we put two fruit flies – a male and a female – into a jar with a tomato. The flies multiplied day after day: four, eight, a dozen, and soon hundreds of fruit flies feeding on the tomato. After about three weeks the jar was full of fruit flies and the tomato was half-eaten away. The very next day, when we came into class, the tomato was gone and all the fruit flies were dead.

This was an experiment about exponential growth in nature. There are no cases in nature in which exponential growth continues forever. None. The global economy cannot double every 24 years forever. The planet cannot absorb or feed 75-million more humans – eight New York cities – every year. None of this is remotely sustainable.

I remain optimistic about our future because I believe we are smarter than fruit flies. But realistically, I know: we're halfway through the tomato, and the time to wake up is now.

Forget quibbling about peak oil. We are way past peak everything. There is no natural resource available on the planet today that we are going to have more of in the future, except perhaps heat. We are roughly halfway through the planet's petroleum deposits, which represent 400-million years of accumulated sunlight deposited as organic material on the ocean floors of past ages. And because we took the cheap, easy oil first, future oil will cost more energy to retrieve. We are way past the peak of net energy from oil.

We are halfway through the world's forests. Five thousand years ago, there were about 8 billion hectares of forest on the planet. Today, there are four billion hectares left. The forests are half gone. The Syrian-Lebanese desert was once a cedar forest. We are losing about 12 million hectares per year. I've seen panzer divisions of bulldozers, dawn to dusk in Argentina, ripping up the forest in clouds of dust to create

industrial farmland. They don't even use the wood. They burn the forest like rubbish. The smoke and soil blow over the horizon.

More than half the world's fresh water resources are gone or polluted. We're more than halfway through the ocean's fish, ninety-percent through many commercial species. On top of this, the richest 15% of the people on the planet – those of us with hot showers, cars, and three meals per day – consume 85 percent of the wealth.

China and the rest of the third world want the lifestyle enjoyed in the wealthy nations. They want automobiles, computers, nightclubs, and movies. China already uses half the cement in the world. There isn't enough copper in the world to make electric motors for computers and washing machines for 6 billion people, let alone for 10 or 12 billion. Already, some 25,000 people die of starvation every day. This is comparable to fifty jumbo jets dropping from the sky killing everyone on board, every single day. Eight 9/11s every day, and most of the victims are children. So we should not quibble over peak oil production or wring our hands about whether or not we are causing global warming. We're halfway through the tomato. The question is, will we wake up and will we be able to adjust? Are we smarter than the fruit flies?

### **Nature's miracles**

I believe we are smart enough. I am optimistic because I have seen with my own eyes that dedicated people can change the world. In my lifetime I have witnessed the civil rights movement, the women's movement, the end of apartheid in South Africa, and the rise of the environmental movement. Private citizens initiated all of these changes, individuals willing to take a stand, people like Gandhi, Rosa Parks, and Nelson Mandela. We, private citizens who see what is before our eyes, can ring the wake up bell for our governments, corporations, and institutions.

As some of you know, thirty years ago, some of the first Greenpeace meetings were held here in Vancouver. Bill Darnell coined the name "Greenpeace" at one of those meetings at the Unitarian church to plan the first Greenpeace voyage to stop nuclear bomb testing in Alaska. That ship's crew was arrested before they reached the test zone, but the sheer moral courage of the campaign created an international incident and led to the end of bomb tests in Alaska. We learned at Greenpeace that ideas and actions can change society. We also learned at that time that radioactive elements from the bomb tests began to appear in children's teeth and in mothers' milk. Global war preparation had become a global environmental issue.

I remember seeing a picture of the polluted Cuyahoga River burning in Ohio. The rivers are burning? If that doesn't wake us up to ecology, we're hopeless. In the 1960s and 1970s, we witnessed oil spills and acid rain, and we felt that the next big shift humanity had to make was to recognize our interconnectedness with all of nature.

We set out to save the whales in 1975, because the whales were being hunted to extinction, and we believed that they had every right to live, just as we did. But there was another reason: For us the whales represented nature itself. They were magnificent, intelligent, and mysterious. They sang songs, protected their young, and lived in extended families. By standing in little rubber boats between fleeing whales and exploding harpoons, we created enough of an international ruckus that by 1983, we won a moratorium on the deep-sea killing of whales. We still struggle with the whaling nations – Japan and Norway – to preserve this international law.

Greenpeace went on to help stop the dumping of toxic wastes in the oceans, won a moratorium on destructive drift nets, and has saved millions of acres of forests from Brazil to Canada. However, as we can

see, this is still not nearly enough. Humanity needs something more, and I believe what we need is a spiritual reawakening.

At its roots, Greenpeace was a spiritual movement. We believed that nature was sacred. If we fail to ascribe worth to nature – to worship nature – I don't think we can make the changes fast enough. We live inside the miracle every day. We see the miracle bursting from the ground every spring. I believe humanity has looked in all the wrong places for miracles. All we have to do is open our eyes. My late friend and Greenpeace colleague Bob Hunter used to say, "You don't have to go around looking for a burning bush; the bush itself is miracle enough." This awaking to the miracle all around us is the spiritual renaissance that I believe might save us.

### Divine Kingdom, here and now

I grew up in a Catholic household. I lived through a few early years of terror, afraid that I might roast for all eternity. I think my curiosity saved me. I wanted to understand why god would set it up this way. Why would the one and only god of the universe consign innocent children who had never heard about Jesus to eternal damnation? I think I spent a year of my youth attempting to solve this puzzle, and my curiosity set me on a path to learn the history of religious beliefs.

Two Christian examples helped me see the larger truth. The first was my Grandmother, Elizabeth, and the second was Francis of Assisi. Both shared this absolute commitment to serve others in the here and now. My grandmother created heaven around her simply through example. I never heard her once instruct anyone how to behave, yet the sheer power of her compassion made everyone want to be at their best in her presence. I believe Francis of Assisi had the same effect on others and I believe Jesus did as well.

Today, scholars and archaeologists have added to the early literature regarding the authentic teachings of Jesus. We now have the Gospels of Mary, Thomas, Philip, and others. We have access to a much fuller and clearer picture of who this extraordinary human being was. The indigenous Canaanite and Jewish peasants of the first century, at the time of Jesus, are known as the *am ha-aretz*, the people of the land. They were not book learners. They learned from nature. They revered the earth. Their version of Bhumi, the great mother, they called Asherah. Carvings exist in Israel depicting the male god Yahweh with his female consort Asherah.

These peasants believed in what they called "*derech Eretz*," or "the Way of the People." We can translate this simply as good manners or courtesy. They believed we make the world right, not with ceremony or ritual, but with common decency. This is the tradition of the authentic Jesus, or Yeshua of Galilee. Scholars have recently compiled a tremendous amount of research shedding light on the authentic sayings of Jesus.

The overwhelming message of Jesus is this: Look within. Find the light inside. Share it with the world. Give to others. Love others. Heal the sick. This is the common decency practiced by the people of the land. In the gospels of Thomas and Luke, Jesus says "the divine Kingdom is spread out on earth before your eyes, but you don't see." The kingdom is available here and now before our eyes. Know yourself and serve others. That's the divine kingdom. Jesus keeps telling his followers to be like a child. Be the child in the kingdom, not the master of others.

Father Dominic Crossan, renowned scholar and historian, calls the compassionate mission of Jesus "unbrokered egalitarianism." He says "unbrokered" because Jesus did not ask the temple priests or wealthy patrons for permission to serve and heal. He just did it. This unbrokered compassion is not for sale. It cannot be blackmailed or intimidated. This is the compassion of pacifists such as Gandhi in India, Dorothy Day in America, or Mairead Corrigan, whose movement broke the cycle of violence in Ireland.

Is it not possible that the great miracle of feeding the multitudes is simply the miracle of sharing? If we give to others what we have, won't there be enough for everyone? This is the miracle available to us every day.

For the Buddhists, it is the vow of the Bodhisattva to serve all sentient beings. For the Taoists, the way of truth flows like water, following the path of least resistance. Jesus, Lao Tzu, and Buddha all understood: We only exist in relationship. Love your neighbour; love your enemy. These are divine truths that one might hear from one's mother, or grandmother whether in the first century or today.

### Ordinary courage

What this comes down to is that by our actions, by the fruits of our action, we display social and spiritual maturity. Not by pronouncements and slogans. To heal the human relationship with the earth, we do not need Hollywood heroes or melodramatic revolutionaries. We need ordinary heroes who practice common decency. A reporter once asked me: "What would I be willing to die for?" Hmm. My family comes to mind. But it's a short list. Dying for a cause might be okay, but the problem is, it only works once. I want to live for what I believe in.

Last October, a troubled young man in Pennsylvania, Charles Roberts, entered a rural schoolhouse and shot eleven Amish school girls, four of whom died. Do you recall the Amish response? The community met that evening with mental health counselors and devised a plan to support their traumatized children. Then, they organized a horse-and-buggy caravan and visited the Roberts family, whose son had committed the atrocious crime. They brought food and condolences. No histrionics about revenge. Rather: Love your neighbour. Forgive those who harm you.

According to the suicide note of Charles Roberts – like the video statement from the most recent school shooter in the US – he was driven by revenge for some injustice he believed he had suffered. But the Amish in Pennsylvania broke the cycle of revenge with compassion. And there is the lesson.

The writer May Sarton says, "One must think like a hero to behave like a merely decent human being." This is the ordinary courage to stand up for integrity.

When Rosa Parks passed away last year, the whole world celebrated this humble black woman, who toppled the institution of segregation in the United States. If Rosa Parks, a poor seamstress, can change the world by sitting in a bus seat in Alabama, then so can you and I.

Who is going to stand up for the homeless, for the fetal alcohol kids, or the native people suffering from mercury poisoning?

Frederick Douglass, a US slave who became a renowned author, once wrote: "Find out just what people will submit to and you have found out the exact amount of injustice and wrong that will be imposed upon them."

Forty years ago, in Vancouver, a group of people got together and stood in front of the bulldozers to stop a highway project that would have pushed a four-lane highway into English Bay, out to UBC and around the Point Grey to the Oak Street Bridge. People stopped it. Moms and dads. So today, we have Kitsilano Park, Jericho, and Spanish Banks. Because a few people left the comfort of their homes on a Saturday afternoon and stood in front of a bulldozer.

Today, our Provincial government wants to spend \$2 billion building more highways into the city. Given the oil crisis and global warming, this plan appears to be environmental insanity. We should be spending our public resources on convenient, electric public transportation. If you and I do not stand up and demand our

governments wake up, then short term political thinking will drive the world closer to ecological disaster. Our politicians are experts at talking as if they care. They are great at quibbling over irrelevancies. Without citizen action they will do nothing.

You've heard the expression: Whatever will be, will be. No. Whatever we *do*, will be. Whatever we create will be. History is not on autopilot. History is the result of what people choose to do. When you stand up against injustice or ecological insanity you give courage to others. A simple act of courage can start a movement and change the world. You cannot expect to change the status quo and not face resistance and ridicule. Ridicule is the weapon that the powerful use to bully the weak. Do not be intimidated by the consequences of having a conscience.

This is the example set by Jesus, by Gandhi, or by Aung San Suu Kyi in Burma.

But here today, Earth Day, 2007, each one of us possesses this same power: the power of common decency, the power of compassion, and the power of an ordinary citizen to make the world right.

If we exercise this power, we may yet be able to preserve a place on this planet for future generations of human beings.