

The Great Mother

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Ah, sweet month of May! You bring fair buds and blossoms with each new day and make us glad! It's easy to feel connected to nature at this time of year, when its powers of renewal are in full display everywhere we look. Of course, there are plenty of places where spring's glory is less easy to behold: factory assembly lines, deep underground mines, inner city squalor, prisons, and, some might suggest, the halls of congress.

But there was a time when the powers of nature were was obvious to everyone. This was a time of knowing that all life came from mothers – a time when the great goddess was in charge and people lived in gratitude for the abundant gifts of life.

This was long ago before civilization, when people lived more simply, in harmony with the earth. Every living thing came into existence by being born. Food grew from the earth. Birds hatched from eggs. Animals began as babies when they were born.

Life depended on food, and all food grew, either from the earth, or from animals that ate plants that grew from the earth. Mothers gave birth to life, which is why everyone believed that the earth was the mother of life. They thought of the earth as a different kind of woman – a goddess. It was obvious that the earth was vast in size. The earth didn't seem to ever have been born, and it seemed like she never could die. So the mother earth was a goddess: powerful, generous, and immortal.

All of the earliest cultures left behind symbols of goddess worship, some very simple, others more complex. Drawings, statues, and temples can be found in every corner of the world.

Think of a child's dependence on a life-giving caregiver, usually her mother. Helpless, she survives and thrives because of the generous loving nurture

she receives. She is hungry and she is fed. She is in pain and she is comforted. When she is anxious, she is held, loved, cared for, clothed and taught about the world.

The ancient goddesses were like that. Last week I spoke of the Egyptian goddess, Isis, who was mother to life on earth. She taught women the skills of survival: how to grind grain into flour, spin thread, and weave cloth. She taught them how to treat illness, promote health, have children, and to be good mothers.

Among the first peoples of America, the Hopi revered a goddess called "Spider Grandmother." From their point of view, people and animals were not so different, so their goddess could take non-human form, like a spider, and still be able to teach people and care for them.

Spider grandmother existed long ago in a place where only she was. There was no light or dark, no warm wind, no rain or thunder. She was a great wise woman, whose powers are beyond imagining.

In this place where she was alone and complete with her power, she sang to her power and her first song was a song of great age with wrinkles that moved and changed and became the world filled with wrinkled bundles of potential. She sang in her power to each of the bundles. She sang and sang. She sang, and the bundles began to move and to echo her song. They sang their heart's song that was the same as Spider Grandmother's heart song of great mystery, the power that moves. And each bundle of the life of the universe rested, waiting until it was sung into life.

The song moved in a new way: way-a-hiyo, way-a-hiyo, way-a way-a-o. Then there was an answering song: Aam-i-humm, humm, humm, aam-i-hum, humm, humm, aami-i-o, o, o, o, aam-i-o, o, o, o, aam-i-o. The songs changed as they wove together, carrying the spin of the song into new places, more solid. And the song continued and grew until it filled the void with places and things and creatures of all kinds lived with the power of Spider Grandmother's heart song, each creature with its own heart song, singing life along with the songs of all other creatures.

In the Hopi world, all creatures were related to one another and intimately connected with the earth. They knew that the earth truly was their mother and all

creatures their brothers and sisters. They knew that to live meant to live in harmony with all. When they went hunting they prayed to Spider Grandmother to share the life of her song with them in a new way, and when they killed an animal, they said a prayer of thanks to the animal that had died so that they might live, and promised to honor the heart-song and spirit of the animal by the way they lived and shared the earth with its brothers and sisters.

I invite you to share in a song of the earth derived from this tradition, called “Mother I Feel You.” You can find it on the insert in your order of service: “Mother I feel you under my feet, Mother I feel your heart beating. Mother I hear you in the river song, eternal waters flowing on and on.” The choir will start and I’ll invite you to join in.



But this was long ago, before civilization. There came a time when people began to live together in larger and larger groups, becoming cities, states, and nations. The reliance on mother earth became less immediate, less obvious, as the demands of group survival changed from enjoying the fruits of nature to managing the workforce. Authority became increasingly important in controlling behavior and punishing disobedience.

Male gods of violence, dominance and punishment emerged to embody this way of being on the earth and the goddess was pushed aside. The earth became a thing to be used and controlled instead of a goddess to be loved and respected.

Today there are many people who behave as though the earth was a thing, a place, rather than the wonderful, divine, living being we once saw. And the earth is so generous and peaceful that she lets us do this to her. And we are so focused on our belief that she is not alive that our needs prevent us from hearing her cries.

The author, Shel Silverstein, wrote a book about this, called *The Giving Tree*.

“Once there was a tree. . . and she loved a little boy. And every day the boy would come and he would gather her leaves and make them into crowns and play king of the forest. He would climb up her trunk and swing from her branches and eat apples. And they would play hide-and-go-seek. And when he was tired, he would sleep in her shade.

“And the boy loved the tree very much. And the tree was happy.

“But time went by and the boy grew older and the tree was often alone.

“Then one day the boy came to the tree and the tree said, ‘Come, Boy, come and climb up my trunk and swing from my branches and eat apples and play in my shade and be happy.’

“ ‘I am too big to climb and play,’ said the boy. ‘I want to buy things and have fun. I want some money. Can you give me some money?’

“ ‘I’m sorry,’ said the tree, ‘but I have no money. I have only leaves and apples. Take my apples, Boy, and sell them in the city. Then you will have money and you will be happy.’

“And so the boy climbed up the tree and gathered her apples and carried them away. And the tree was happy.

“But the boy stayed away for a long time and the tree was sad. And then one day the boy came back and the tree shook with joy and she said, ‘Come, Boy, climb up my trunk and swing from my branches and be happy.’

“ ‘I am too busy to climb trees,’ said the boy. ‘I want a house to keep me warm,’ he said. ‘I want a wife and I want children, and so I need a house. Can you give me a house?’

“ ‘I have no house,’ said the tree. ‘The forest is my house, but you may cut off my branches and build a house. Then you will be happy.’

“And so the boy cut off her branches and carried them away to build his house. And the tree was happy.

“But the boy stayed away for a long time. And when he came back the tree was so happy she could hardly speak. ‘Come, Boy,’ she whispered, ‘come and play.’

“ ‘I am too old and sad to play,’ said the boy. ‘I want a boat that will take me far away from here. Can you give me a boat?’

“ ‘Cut down my trunk and make a boat,’ said the tree. ‘Then you can sail away . . . and be happy.’

“And so the boy cut down her trunk and made a boat and sailed away. And the tree was happy . . . but not really.

“And after a long time the boy came back again. ‘I am sorry, Boy,’ said the tree, ‘but I have nothing left to give you – my apples are gone.’

“ ‘My teeth are too weak for apples,’ said the boy.

“ ‘My branches are gone,’ said the tree. ‘You cannot swing on them –’

“ ‘I am too old to swing on the branches,’ said the boy.

“ ‘My trunk is gone,’ said the tree. ‘You cannot climb –’

“ ‘I am too tired to climb,’ said the boy.

“ ‘I am sorry,’ sighed the tree. I wish that I could give you something . . . but I have nothing left. I am just an old stump. I am sorry. . . .’

“ ‘I don’t need very much now,’ said the boy, ‘just a quiet place to sit and rest. I am very tired.’

“ ‘Well,’ said the tree, straightening herself up as much as she could, ‘Well, an old stump is good for sitting and resting. Come, Boy, sit down. Sit down and rest.’

“And the boy did. And the tree was happy.”



We can treat the earth the way the boy did the tree, like a thing that exists only to give us whatever we want. But we don’t notice that there is a cost, that the tree loses what it gives away. It will give and give and give until it has no more to give. And this is what we are demanding of the earth in our time. More and more people want more and more from the earth, digging, plowing, gouging, burning, and devising new ways even more devastating than those of old.

You can tell that we humans have lost our sense of the sacredness of life and nature, because we never would behave the way we do if we truly loved our mother earth. Now let’s sing of our love for the earth, our mother: “The earth is our mother, we must take care of her. Her sacred ground we walk upon with

every step we take. The earth is our mother; she will take care of us.” And, again, the choir will show us how.



The earth is our mother. Our rational intellect can create the scientific fiction that the earth is a thing that has an ecosystem of living creatures that follow certain rules of behavior, but we know better, don't we? The Greeks had a name for her: Gaia. Gaia was the primordial goddess of the Earth. She was the mother of all other gods.

Gaia as goddess passed away with the ancient Greek gods as humans turned to more authoritarian and violent male gods. But the earth didn't go away, and the idea reappeared in 1965 when James Lovelock introduced what he called, “the Gaia hypothesis.” As Stephen Miller wrote in a review of Lovelock's book, *The Ages of Gaia*, “What is the hypothesis of Gaia ? Stated simply, the idea is that we may have discovered a living being bigger, more ancient, and more complex than anything from our wildest dreams. That being, called Gaia, is the Earth.

“More precisely: that about one billion years after its formation, our planet was occupied by a meta-life form which began an ongoing process of transforming this planet into its own substance. All the life forms of the planet are part of Gaia. In a way analogous to the myriad different cell colonies which make up our organs and bodies, the life forms of earth in their diversity co-evolve and contribute interactively to produce and sustain the optimal conditions for the growth and prosperity not of themselves, but of the larger whole, Gaia. That the very makeup of the atmosphere, seas, and terrestrial crust is the result of radical interventions carried out by Gaia through the evolving diversity of living creatures.”

Simply put, we are not creatures that live on the earth; we are creatures that are part of a living earth. This earth is vastly more complex than we are and, could we but understand, possibly infinitely more intelligent and wise. Gaia is the great being, mother of all, and every thing on the Earth is part of that being and is

brother, sister, aunt or uncle to us. Earth cares for us because the Earth is us. We should care for the Earth, too, because we are her.

This is not deep, abstract, theology. This is truth that lives in our bones, in our blood, and in our genetic code, our DNA. The Earth is our mother; we must take care of her before there is nothing left but a stump to sit on. We are called to honor the Earth and all the forms of life in which we live and move and have our beings just as surely as we are called to honor any other kind of diversity.

We are part of Gaia's body and we need to remain mindful of this truth, lest we think we exist only for ourselves. We, too, can sing our heart-song of connection with one another, the earth, and the universe. From you I receive, to you I give. Together we share and from this we live.