

Plenary Session: May 31, 2002

Current State of Environmental Ethics in Western Society

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"Let the heavens rejoice and let the earth be glad; let the sea roar and the fullness thereof. Let the fields be joyful and all that is therein; then shall all the trees of the wood rejoice," so says Psalm 96:11,12.

Unfortunately, the trees and bees, birds and seas have little to celebrate at the moment. Due to one species, as the saying goes, fowling our nest. What is positive is that governments and scientists worldwide and the public have acknowledged that human activities have been instrumental in adversely affecting the environment; the air, water, soil and biodiversity of this planet. Even the Pope (in a landmark message given in 1990) recognized the environmental crisis that stems from a "lack of due respect for nature ... plundering of natural resources and ... a progressive decline of the quality of life and is a seed bed of collective selfishness, disregard for others and dishonesty."

One of the purposes of this conference is to find ways to rejuvenate the music of the spheres, so that nature, including humanity may again sing praises and to bring practical, implementable and I hope passionate solutions to bear.

What is needed to combat this environmental crisis? A new environmental ethic? If so, what should it look like? Who's values should it embrace? What changes are required and how should they be implemented? I hope to explore some options with you and leave you to digest them today, this year and perhaps for the rest of your life.

A quick outline of what I hope to cover:

- Criteria defining views on environmental issues and ethics
- Approaches to environmental ethics
- Frameworks of values and applications
- Inspiring people to take action.

While we have a greater awareness of environmental issues today than we have in the past (an upswing 40 years or so with other waves of interest and activity since), in general, however, the majority of humanity goes about their daily business without much thought to environmental degradation and their role in it. Humans often trivialize nature, relegating it to a pleasant weekend excursion. We need to learn how to embrace nature daily, hourly, by the second. This is possible no matter where you live. It's a matter of choice and perspective.

How did we get to this place of complacency about the world around us? It is, as they say, a long story which started about 10,000 years ago when humanity discovered agriculture, that most important and needed tool for our continued existence.

Humans have and always will modify our environments. It's in our nature. Of course, we are not alone in this; birds and insects bore holes in plants or build nests, beavers dam streams, rodents dig holes and tunnels and so on. Agriculture is by its very nature, invasive and destructive, it's how it works. Just a note, I am not criticizing farmers or farming. I worked for some years with farm groups and respect their desire, commitment and role to care for the environment. But it is a fact that agriculture is disruptive.

From agriculture blossomed civilization. We became sedentary (in the sense of staying in one place) – the original couch potatoes—because of exactly that, potatoes, and the other staffs of life, wheat, rice, corn and so on. Society developed specialists supported by the farmers; potters, weavers, workers of metal, artists, shopkeepers and so on. And of course, politicians (kings, rulers) and spiritual leaders. The latter two groups

dealt with relationships and making rules on how people should treat each other, about what is right or wrong, morality – ethics. As time went on our connections, in an ethical and real sense with the environment, became tenuous, fragile and indirect, except for those species we tamed or domesticated.

Religions and belief systems play a large role in people's lives and in many cases define our morals. Religion is based on relationships and describes how we are to treat others around us (check out the Ten Commandments, most of them are relational in some way). BUT primarily human to human, especially Judeo-Christian traditions.

Over 50 years ago, Walter C. Loudermilk proposed an 11th commandment, which read in part, "Thou shalt inherit the holy earth as a faithful steward, conserving its resources and productivity from generation to generation." He also proposed a curse if this was not followed. His actions were one more or less abortive foray into raising awareness of the need for an environmental ethic in religious circles. About ten years later, Aldo Leopold (1949) proposed his land ethic, which expanded the Ten Commandments and the Golden Rule to how humans should deal with land (nature).

I have been asked to address Western Society. That gives me a lot of leeway, as Western Society now is an incredible mosaic of traditions and concepts from all over the world. This diversity provides some exciting challenges and solutions.

Back for a second to 2000 years ago, the advent of Christianity. Some argue that the Christian faith has led us down the garden path, no pun intended, toward disdain for or at least ignoring environmental issues, treating nature as an adversary, a slave, something to be raped and pillaged. Some say this comes from the interpretation of the Genesis account of creation and the words "dominion" and "subdue" to mean a rightful domination. Many other Christians interpret this in a non-violent and non-destructive way as stewardship.

In a benchmark paper published in the widely read and popular journal Science, (1967), Lynn White proposed that Christianity had a lot to answer for exploitation of the environment. Christians, he explained, in their zealous role to fulfill the Great Commission to stamp out paganism (which often included a strong tie to nature and the concept that natural things shared in the spirit of the Ultimate) changed our relationship with nature. Whereas previously trees, streams and creatures had a bit of the spirit in them, they were stripped of their share in the divine order. This also knocked out a lot of knowledge about herbs (which we likely would have benefitted from today). The concept of the cyclical nature of time was replaced by the linear taskmaster, ever marching onward time. Pressing endlessly forward demanding an accounting of progress. This also set up a concept of dominance, which in contrast to Asian and other religions "establishes a dualism of humans and nature" and led to the belief "that it is God's will that man exploit nature for his proper ends ... no item in creation had any purpose save to serve man's purpose."

How we treat nature "depends on what we think about ourselves in relation to the things around us." Our ethical concepts of what is right or wrong, what is the virtuous thing to do are based on how we perceive the position of the other. The bible says that an understanding of ethics should be innate and can be learned from nature. As Job says, "ask the animals and they will teach you, the birds of the air and they will tell you. Ask the plants and they will teach you. And the fish of the sea and they will declare to you."

Another aspect of Christianity related to our treatment of the environment is "otherworldliness." Why do churches, in particular evangelical denominations, not take a stronger interest in environmental issues (of course there are plenty of church groups who do make an effort to be cognizant and active on environmental issues)? In part, because of the focus on a salvation that promises eternal life in heaven. Christians can be destination oriented, not much interested in the journey or the world. In fact, Lynn White writes that some believe that since the bible teaches that this is all to be destroyed, why should we concern ourselves with caring for the creation. The world is a testing ground, a place of suffering, to prove ourselves worthy for the afterlife, a battlefield, a no man's land with the promise of the reward of heaven. Popular songs and choruses point this

out all too clearly, "this world is not my home" and "turn your eyes upon Jesus ... and the things of earth will grow strangely dim."

Also, wilderness was viewed as cursed and humankind's enemy. In the Jewish tradition of the scapegoat, the animal was released into the wilderness to die carrying the sins of the people for atonement. Noah's send off not only included the favourite children's story about the rainbow and the covenant, but also "all the animals will fear you ... I give you everything." The concept of "fallen" implies a less than perfect world that we are in our rights to "tame".

Lynn White summarizes: "the realization of the Christian dogma of man's transcendence and rightful mastery over nature" has led to powers and ecological effects that are out of control, that science and technology have emerged in a world that saw nature as exploitable, expendable and existing to serve humanity.

While many in the religious community did not agree with Lynn White, citing stewardship as a defense and an interpretation of dominion and con-servng (conservancy), much of society still treated the environment as the passage in the ancient Tao Te Ching says:

Those who would take over the earth
and manage it see they cannot grasp it;
for the Earth is a spiritual vessel and cannot be forced.
Whoever forces it, spoils it.
Whoever grasps it, loses it.

Criteria for Defining Views on Environmental Issues and Ethics

Drawing from the pluralism of Western Society in a limited fashion, several (and sometimes opposite end of the spectrum) concepts can define the ways we perceive nature. (Refer to Table 1.)

Table 1. Criteria for environmental ethics

Separation from nature (dualism)	Connectivity and part of nature
Treat "other" as an object or as an it	Treat "other" as a subject (I-thou)
Arrogant eye	Loving eye
Extrinsic value	Intrinsic value
Rights for humans	Rights for others
World as a machine	World as an organism

Humans often see nature as subordinate with only service to humans as their destiny. About this Lynn White suggests that, "We shall continue to have a worsening crisis until we reject the axiom that nature has no purpose (reason for existence) save to serve man."

On the other side of the spectrum, Chief Seattle said once that everything is connected to everything else. Meaning of course that if we hurt one part of the universe, it affects the rest. The concept of a butterfly flapping its wings affecting events on the other side of the world.

Humanity likes to view itself as special, as the apex of God's creation. The last thing made before God needed a rest. Actually in one scheme of hierarchy, humans are rated one level down from predators such as bears and lions. After all, humans have been had for dinner (as opposed to dinner). As a biologist, you see all creatures as special in their own way. No two things are alike, snowflakes, water droplets, rocks, dogs, cows, even cloned animals are phenotypically different (e.g., different markings on their skin). And some of nature's creatures are so fascinating and marvelous; fungi that have little nooses to catch nematodes, plants that move and so much more. But most people tend to hold to this specialness, not wanting to disappear into the nothingness or Oneness.

The Golden Rule says we are to love our neighbours, to treat others as ourselves, as we would like to be treated. How we define neighbour or other determines how we treat others. Others in religious circles see

other as meaning humans only. And even treating other humans well is something we don't do very well at the best of times. Or it may be a whole series of cascading tiers of how we perceive others, including:

- sentient animals only (Peter Singer concepts)
- all organic life
- all of nature (both animate and inanimate).

In a later work (1978), Lynn White wrote, "we can sense our comradeship with a glacier, a subatomic particle, or a spiral nebular". We need to cultivate "cosmic manners and spiritual courtesy."

Francis of Assisi treated other beings as his brothers and sisters. Brother sun, sister moon, brother wind, sister water, mother earth was how he viewed things, in a sort of democracy of all components of the universe, as an interdependent community.

Other concepts related to an interpretation of "others" include treating other as an object versus as a subject. Buber expounds on treating others as subjects with his I–Thou concept.

Sallie McFague also describes two ways of seeing the world, either with an arrogant eye or with a loving eye. She says that the arrogant eye organizes itself in relationship to the world by simplifying to control it, by denying complexity and mystery and by perceiving nature as existing solely for human benefit. The loving eye on the other hand acknowledges the mystery and differences, respects the other as a subject not an object and that nature is not against us, but doing its thing.

This relates to placing a value on species. There is a lot of effort in the Biological Diversity Convention world to value nature, a difficult concept. The two ends of the spectrum are that things have extrinsic value (because they have some direct use for us) or intrinsic value that means that they have value, regardless of what they can do for us, that they are valuable just because they exist.

The concepts of attributing rights to humans versus to other parts of creation are another kettle of fish. In Buddhist tradition, the concept of rights is not considered at all, because everything is imbued with divinity.

Finally viewing the world as a machine (from Newton) versus seeing it as organic, alive, a web of life also affects how we treat the world around us.

Thay, short for Thich Nhat Hanh and others believe that, "One thing contains the whole cosmos ... when we hold a piece of bread ... if mindfulness is there, if the Holy Spirit is there ... we can touch the whole cosmos. A piece of bread contains the sunshine ... a cloud, minerals, time, space, everything."

This whole spectrum of criteria exists in Western Society. How does it inform the approaches and values taken for environmental ethics? A sampling of concepts is given below.

Approaches to Environmental Ethics

Anthropocentrism has several branches and concepts. The key relates to worth because ultimately it benefits or is for the well being of humans, as Aldo Leopold puts it, "enlightened self-interest". He also notes (I have modified a couple of words to update the concepts) that, "When the ecosystem (land) does well by its owner and the owner does well by the ecosystem (land), then we have stewardship (conservation)."

Most Christians will stop here, thinking this is enough. Governments and others also often stop here. The Canadian government needed a persuasion to develop a parallel system to the legal basis of a *Species at Risk Act* as a stewardship program. I often quoted to the government and others, the words and challenge of Douglas John Hall "to serve responsibly and as those committed to creation ... as belonging to the essence of things ... with the power to love and change the world."

Other related concepts, all centering on humans as central include: libertarian extensionism (Peter Singer) where the rights of humans are extended in some way to sentient beings. Other labels include instrumental, conservation ethics.

But the theories do not stop here. Whether defined as axiological, ecological extension or biocentric, several concepts define ethical treatment of others as independent of their usefulness to humans, based on their intrinsic value and the interrelatedness of all things; a paradigm where our treatment of others is based on existence, not service to humankind.

A further step in the continuum of approaches has been variously called anthropological, deep ecology, eco-holistic and sees humans as relating to the world very much as part of it and not master of it. This includes a realization that the world has value in and of itself in a more psychological, psychic connection that goes to the soul. It leads to a sense of equality and equity, a coming together in a oneness that differs greatly from the other approaches.

Before I move on, I wanted also to show a list of concepts proposed by John Haught that also challenge and expand ideas on how we should relate to the world. These include:

- apologetic. Where stewardship would be most commonly situated. This includes a reinterpretation of the scriptures of the concept of dominion from domination to stewardship and caring for the environment.
- sacramental. Included here would be deep ecology, cosmic spirituality that suggest that humans belong to the earth much more than it belongs to us.
- eschatological. This concept indicates that nature should be cared for because it holds the promise of future fulfillment. Present nature is an installment in the future that deserves not respect or worship, but care resonating from being a treasure. Nature is the incarnation of promise of what is to come, pregnant with a mysterious future.

I'll leave this quick survey of approaches for you to consider. The message is there are levels of perception and relatedness existing in the Western Ethic that differs from and are challenging to stewardship and the land ethic of Leopold.

Frameworks of Values and their Practical Application

This leaves us with a dilemma. Which of these frames of reference do we chose to implement policy? Myself, I suggest the most radical we can manage. As they say, if we aim at the stars, we may hit at least something more progressive than we have now, hoping not to hit ourselves in the foot. These differing frames of reference are all too clearly juxtapositioned on policy formation around the world on critical environmental issues. Newspapers are full of this dichotomy and disagreement:

- Climate change. What is the basis for the arguments? Greed? A desire to do the best thing?
- Ozone depletion. What are the drivers to finding or not finding alternatives to ozone depleting substances?
- Persistent organic pollutants. What are the issues for identifying and banning substances harmful to the environment?
- Biodiversity. What progress has really been made since the Rio convention?
- Biosafety. What are the agendas behind the positions of the negotiators?

All of these agreements and actions are the products of compromises between cultures and groups that subscribe to different approaches to environmental ethics, even different interpretations of what is right.

How do we know what is right? What to do?

Aldo Leopold says that "a thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise." But it is one thing to know what is right, but another

to do what is right. We often do know what is right, but we also often do not do it, in the words of Paul, "the good that I would do, I don't do." Daniel Quinn (author of *Ishmael* and *Providence*) puts it this way, "The world doesn't belong to us, we belong to it. Always have, always will. We got confused about that ... we've got to find our way back into the community, we've got to stop living like outlaws." Aldo Leopold also knew the difficulties and recognized the problems with incentive programs "no important change in ethics can occur without an internal change in our intellectual emphasis, loyalties, affections and convictions." It is the challenge to change people's attitudes and behaviour. It can be done, but it is not easy (we do have some interesting examples in the last twenty years or so—smoking in public places, recycling, actions on some toxic substances in the environment) that could be tapped for ideas and process on why and how they worked.

Another discussion during the development of *Species at Risk Act* in Canada around the complementary stewardship program was about how it should be implemented. The purists saw stewardship as something voluntary, as something that should be from the heart, a habit of the heart, to be done without selfish ideals or need for compensation—a gift to nature. Others argued that in our economic situation, it is difficult to be generous. What do you think? What was it Jesus said? Seek you first the kingdom of god and all these things will be added to you?

How do we instill environmental ethics into people's everyday lives? To convince them to do their part to solve environmental problems? Again, it's not easy. To get people, for example, to stop buying SUVs? How do we tap into that part of us that responds lovingly to the world around us, supposedly a condition that should stem from the Christian concept of conversion or salvation, an uncontrollable outpouring of love for others, a heart so full, you cannot respond in any other way but to love, not able to choose to do wrong, to only do the right thing because to do otherwise would cause us pain. The same concept exists in other traditions (e.g., mindfulness in Buddhism).

Every country has an abundance of laws that tell us how to treat each other and the world around us. And enforcement programs that are often not effective. But in the end it is a personal choice whether we obey the laws or not, suffer the consequences or not. Daniel Quinn says that "you can't change things with laws, you must change people's minds."

Inspiring People to Take Action

I want to turn to one last list of items, based on the concepts taught or given as a way to live by a man who did not keep his mouth shut some 2000 years ago, was considered a radical, a man who wanted to turn the world upside down. Jesus. I think his true message is considered even today too radical for most and we have honed it, rubbed off the sharpness of his two-edged sword so that it can barely cut butter, have adjusted and played with it so it doesn't expect too much of us, perverted it to our own satisfaction. But if we strip off the trappings we have wrapped around his message, the radical truth includes the following.

Sacrifice. The symbolism of giving your life for another (in the words of Dickens from *A tale of two cities*—it is a far better thing I do today) or at least to give ourselves away and not necessarily be compensated for what we give or do or be congratulated or lauded for sacrificial giving. Sacrifice is not a popular concept. Christians seem to have relegated the concept to one sacrificial lamb, but I don't think that was what Jesus would have wanted. Didn't he say we were to take up a cross and follow him? What about his parables about giving the coat and the cloak? Those seem to fall on deaf ears these days.

Selflessness. When Arthur Hiller, Canadian born film director accepted the 2002 Gene Herschel Humanitarian Award at the Oscars, he said that it seemed odd to him to be rewarded for something we should do naturally. We are so selfish in Western Society. We need to be more selfless. We are so consumer oriented, always chasing after the new shiny thing, only wanting the biggest and the best. The SUV mentality in a day of climate change somehow flies in the face of reason. We have huge ecological footprints, weighing heavy on the earth. If we were more selfless, this would not be the case.

Loving others recklessly. We tend to give love when given. If Jesus had subscribed to this, he would have packed up and quit long before he was caught and crucified. John Shelby Spong says among principles to live fully, dare to be all we can be that we need to love wastefully and live for others. That sounds like something Jesus would agree to. As John Douglas Hall says, in relation to the environment, " we have it in our power to love and to change the world."

Simplicity. One of the grounding principles of Francis of Assisi was simplicity. A humbleness, a fitting in. This may be the most radical thing I will say today. I think we need to so humble ourselves, become nothing in other parlance, so that our wants and needs become part of those of the universe, one of the strands of the web, not the controller, not with a special role, just one of many, then we will be better able to understand what the right thing to do is. Jesus lived and taught from nature. His stories and lessons show this clearly. Consider the lily ... the foxes have their holes, but I have no place to lay my head.

Service. A word viewed with disdain and even hate these days in some circles. When we serve others, we see their needs and we understand better how we can meet those needs. Jesus was likened to the Old Testament suffering servant. We tend to forget this side of his ministry, focusing instead on the miracles and deeds, and on salvation and eternal life. Jesus and other spiritual visionaries urged people of conscience to live in the world, to be saved on a daily basis to be able to better serve others, to be the salt and the light, to see the beauty in "what is" and not in the "what will be."

Self-control or restraint. We can control what we do if we put some effort into it. We do not need a larger whatever or more of something necessarily all the time. A bit of graffiti on the side of a delivery van, neatly summarizes this, " Protect me from what I want."

Salvation/conversion/redemption. Stewardship, commitments to international agreements will limp along until we have a change of heart, a change in people's attitudes so fundamental, so profound and deep down that it is life changing. No temptation, no hardship, will be able to shake them from their commitment.

Renewal and responsibility. Decisions of a spiritual nature result in, we hope, renewal and taking up responsibilities. Unfortunately those who shoulder burdens are often in the minority (the 20/80 rule). Jesus urged us to make a difference, to be agents for positive change. Who will take up his challenge, his cross? Who will be leaders in this environmental challenge?

I am an optimist. When Pandora opened her box and released the plagues of humanity, shivering in the corner was one last little creature, Hope. I join Jane Goodall in her optimistic hope for the future, which she bases on: our power of thought; the resilience of nature; the next generation and their energy and optimism and determination; and the indomitable nature of the human spirit.

I believe that we can find our way through sacrifice, selflessness, mindfulness, simplicity and so on, so that as Rainer Maria Rilke said:

All will come again into strength
 The fields undivided, the waters undimmed
 The trees towering and the walls built low.
 And in the valleys, people as strong
 And varied as the land. ...
 No yearning for an afterlife, no looking beyond
 No belittling of death,
 But only longing for what belongs to us
 And serving earth, lest we remain unused.

Help us to be used and of use.