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[Looking Back: Looking Forward](#)

The Earth Charter's Mission in the Anthropocene: A Reflective Response

"...will history view the Earth Charter's grand vision as just a wistful expression of a passing optimistic moment in human history?" (Brendan Mackey, 2017)

When I first encountered the Earth Charter Project in 1999 I was thrilled to find this global endeavour which articulated, through widespread "grass roots" consultation, a manifesto for a more just, participatory and sustainable world. This emerging statement of a comprehensive global ethic spoke to the themes which had been at the core of my vocation: social justice, peace, environmental activism and public advocacy aligned with my role as an educator in social ethics and political ethics. Since then, in various roles, I have continued to promote the Earth Charter and its challenges (Preston 2014a, ch.12). Always I emphasise how the Charter comprehensively presents its four sections (Respect and Care for the Community of Life; Ecological Integrity; Social and Economic Justice; Democracy, Nonviolence and Peace) not as separate domains, but as connected dimensions of human responsibility.

As an inspirational rallying point for civil society in numerous settings, it has been most effective. Moreover, Mackey (2017) cites "evidence that there is a global base of support...." As of December 2016 there are 7,270 organisations and 34,971 individuals who have formally endorsed the Earth Charter since its launch in 2000. Indeed the Charter is such an excellent and comprehensive document that it warrants the status of similar Global Ethical statements like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. However, I share the disappointment that the Earth Charter Project has achieved little traction as a soft law international instrument.

As Mackey (2017) observes, the geo-political context has deteriorated in the new millennium. Humanity faces a refugee crisis without precedence, climate change and the threats to biodiversity, all competing with other priorities: combating terrorism, nuclear threats which threaten so much, and reaction against economic globalism which threatens jobs in the developed nations. It is therefore incumbent on those who advocate a global ethic to re-examine what their message is and how, amid the complexities of social media, that message may be heard and enacted. As Mackey (2017) concludes, it is **timely to review and update the Earth Charter Project**.

That review should address the feedback that the Charter can be difficult to apply, not just to legislation and governmental policy, but also in local programs of non-government organisations. Ways must be explored for the Earth Charter to generate a conversation in the world of *real politik*. I argue that this process may be overcome in any review of the Charter's clauses if they are presented explicitly as *middle axioms*. By this term I mean *an action-guiding proposal/principle/precept which is derived from a more ultimate ideal on the one hand, while pointing to implementation in the morally ambiguous, real world of politics on the other*. Rather than being overwhelmed by the Charter's 61 sub-clauses, the notion of middle axiom, linked to the sixteen principles, might encourage dialogue around strategic goals in the public forum and the halls of political power. Such a focus would affirm the relevance and credibility of the Charter, addressing the complaint that it is a series of wordy resolutions. The 'user manual' which Mackey (2017) suggests as part of a review could develop a methodology of implementation making

explicit use of the *middle axiom* idea, pointing beyond the Charter as a code and more toward it being a political credo.

I make a further suggestion for updating the Earth Charter, both in its content and processes for its use. I am proposing a clearer emphasis on **spirituality** in any revised Charter and User Manual. In saying this, I am mindful that such language may appear strange in a document which, as I have already said, needs to be capable of engaging the *real politik*. That assumption is a dissonance to be challenged not avoided.

Let's call this project within the project **"A SPIRITUALITY FOR ECO-JUSTICE"** - eco-justice being the goal to which the whole Charter points – action for social justice in the community of life in harmony with ecological sustainability.

Like so many I have learnt that the struggle for eco-justice never ends. Similarly, I can identify with those who have learnt that commitment to social change around the fourfold pillars of the Charter becomes a journey of hope mingled with despair, shadowed by periods of "burn-out" (for want of a better term). We experience seasons of a "spiritual poverty" along with the inner call to renew our strength with integrity despite the disappointments. At the same time I have discovered that naming the practice of spirituality strikes a chord with others who are fellow travellers in civil society groups but whose mission may not name that concern. For instance in November 2017 the Australian organisation Earth Laws, with the assistance of the Earth Charter and other groups, is conducting a conference whose theme is "Earth Ethics and Eco-spirituality". The organisers of this conference recognise that the global cultural shift which the Earth Charter foreshadows will not be guaranteed by global governance reform alone but, more profoundly by a change of heart and mind. They recognise that this fragile possibility needs careful spiritual nurturing.

To be clear. Spirituality draws on a range of human experience, such as the capacities to wonder, empathise, imagine and enhance consciousness. It is interdisciplinary, for instance, drawing on the arts, philosophy, psychology, and religion. I do not necessarily equate "spirituality" with religious faith. Nor do I equate it with belief in a (theistic) God. Spirituality refers to the human quest to live life with a meaning and purpose that is linked to a sense of transcendence but also to a sense of life's interconnectedness ; that is, spirituality bespeaks a consciousness that we are part of a reality beyond ourselves. The practice of spirituality, as Buddhists and other contemplatives would remind us, not only revives our energy but clarifies our discernment. For many, spirituality must be ritualised (in ways I have called "celebrations of being"). Grace at the family meal table is a simple practice of thankfulness and focus on the interdependence of all life forms. Different pathways will suit different people at different stages of their lives. Inspirational music, the arts and engaging with wilderness may cultivate eco-spirituality (Preston, 2014b, 53-4, 98-106). Some find practices built around communal activity more suitable while others are nurtured by solitude; some are awakened to a sense of connectedness to nature by getting down and dirty in the garden, while others are awakened by illness, which helps them discover how they are embodied and connected to all bodies.

The current version of the Charter does have a place for spirituality, not only reading between the lines, but more explicitly than that. The Preamble includes the following: *The protection of earth's vitality, diversity and beauty is a sacred trust*. Further references to this theme are named in clauses 1b, 8b, 12b, 14d and 16f. An update might extend such references. One of the early Earth Charter Commissioners, Kamla Chowdhry of India proposed that the Earth Charter may be meditated upon like scripture, adding: "We need to weave the Earth Charter around our own living traditions, our values, and our concepts of sacredness and spirituality". In my files I have a booklet for reflection with readings for each day between International Earth Day and World Environment. Titled "Taking Time: Being present to our Planet Earth", it was prepared by a religious Order in Australia. This booklet is one small piece of evidence how people of progressive religious faith have been responsive to the Earth Charter Project around the world.

Finally, there is no intent in this paper's plea to downgrade the importance of science and reason. I affirm a scientifically and rationally informed Earth Charter Project as essential. Indeed science has given us in-sights and real sights of life on our common home, the Earth, which foster the awe and wonder at the heart of spirituality for eco-justice.

Philosopher Holmes Rolston III observes:

Perhaps the noumenal world lies beyond our ken, but the world of phenomena, revealed by science and seen at hand, is phenomenal enough to ennoble our spirits.....So the secular – this present, empirical epoch, this phenomenal world studied by science – does not eliminate the sacred after all, to the contrary, it urges a spiritual quest. If there is any holy ground, any land of promise, this promising earth is it. (Holmes Rolston 1997, 63-4)

In the age of the Anthropocene, *homo sapiens* is the planet altering species, as science unambiguously informs us. Regardless of the violent and destructive forces unleashed by our species and documented daily – albeit sometimes misusing science and technology - we have also evolved as the species who are capable of compassion and justice, truth and reconciliation as well as being stewards of the future. We have a sacred responsibility to preserve and cherish that legacy by the way we live. (Preston 2014c, ch. 10)

References:

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