

TURNING CONSCIENCE INTO ACTION IN AN INTERDEPENDENT WORLD
A WEBINAR FOR THE TWENTIETH ANNIVERSARY OF THE EARTH CHARTER

CARING IN A TIME OF CORONAVIRUS: THE INSPIRATION OF THE EARTH
CHARTER

A TALK BY PETER BLAZE CORCORAN

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May I offer abounding gratitude to you, Mirian, for keeping the light of the Earth Charter shining! No one has labored longer or more effectively on behalf of this historic document about which so many people at this event care deeply. From the earliest days of the promise of the Earth Charter, you have been there and working for twenty-eight years since the Rio conference! We do not know how to thank you enough, but we do know that when the story of the Earth Charter is told, you will always be a hero! Thank you, Mirian Vilela...

And ni-oh, Oren! And now our minds are as one... When I heard that Oren Lyons would bring blessings to today's program, I was deeply honored and I was reminded of Tekaronianeken, Chief Jake Swamp of the Wolf Clan of the Mohawk Nation.

Jake taught us that even as the people of the longhouse are connected to all Native Americans, so, too, do all peoples have shared memories that link us to our ancestors... Jake taught us that we are walking on the same path as they did, that they laid out as a path for us to follow, the Original Instructions. These Instructions provide a frame of reference for our relationship with the sacred universe. "The celestial beings are our relatives," Jake wrote. "The Earth Charter...can provide a larger framework within which we can give future generations not only hope but also a way to fulfill that hope."

It is important to note that these concepts of care of which I speak today are rooted in indigenous traditions that are the oldest human heritage of spirituality. They are central to the Original Instructions. These concepts are also drawn from all religions and faith traditions. It has always been a source of profound mystery to me that these wisdoms are so deeply embedded in the Earth Charter without being stated.

I acknowledge that I am on indigenous land, the land of the Penobscots—a nation of the Wabanaki. These are the people of the dawn who welcome the first light here on the eastern coast of the North American continent.

Today I want to acknowledge, in the spirit of remembering the path of those who have gone before, the originators of the Earth Charter—we are walking on the same path as they did. There are too many to mention... I was thinking this morning of Kamala Chowdry, Wangari Maathai, Henriette Rasmussen, Ruud Lubbers—remembering all who have now passed. I was thinking of two who are still with us, Mikhail Gorbachev and Rick Clugston. We offer gratitude for this gift to humankind...

I want to thank my copresenters for their distinguished work on behalf of the Earth Charter. And thanks to so many of you participating in this webinar for your important work in “bringing conscience into action.”

Returning in a time of coronavirus to Albert Camus’ great novel, *The Plague*, I was reminded of philosopher Maxine Greene’s analysis of the text; she writes, “Tarrou recognizes that the plague can be understood as a metaphor for people’s indifference...He finds the imagination to organize people into sanitary squads to fight the plague and, critically, make it the moral concern of all, because everyone carries the microbe for the plague of the body, the potential for the plague of indifference” (2007). I believe it is this indifference that we must take action against. The time of coronavirus dramatically shows our indifference to inequality, our indifference to an ongoing unsustainable economy, our indifference to the vulnerability of those who live in extreme poverty. Indeed, we see our indifference to the agony of the social world. We see our indifference to massive species extinction, our indifference to the dramatic impacts of climate change, and our indifference to the increasing of zoonotic viruses as burgeoning populations push into the wild. And, indeed, we see our indifference to the agony of the natural world.

Greene uses a metaphor for the reification that must be achieved. In *The Plague*, she writes, “Dr. Rieux fights the plague for the most abstract of reasons at first, because that is his job. Only later, when the unspeakable tragedies he witnesses make him think about what he is doing, does he reconceive his practice and realize that the most important thing he can do is not to be accepting of the pestilence because that is to be complicitous with it” (2007). If we accept the destructive impacts of the current political and economic system on the ecological systems that support life on Earth, we are complicitous. If we accept the devastating impacts on the poor and on future generations, we are complicitous.

How can we overcome indifference?! How can we overcome complicity?! What will motivate us to action? What values and attitudes and ethics will lead us to change our behavior? We can only hope that our most deeply held beliefs, and our conscience, will move us to action.

To me the Earth Charter is an inspiration to action because it embodies those deep values and ethics as principles that can move us and guide us to a future that is just, humane, peaceful, and sustainable...

One of the great insights of the Earth Charter is the concept of a broadening sense of identity and caring. The Earth Charter calls upon us to expand our sense of identity and moral responsibility to include all living things, indeed, to include the larger living universe. The coronavirus crisis dramatically demonstrates our profound connection to others and to other forms of life.

Pope Francis in *Laudato Si’* states, “The Earth Charter asks us to leave behind a period of self-destruction and make a new start. But we have not as yet developed a universal awareness needed to achieve this” (Paragraph 207, 2015). Perhaps the coronavirus will help us to develop such an awareness as we see how mutually dependent and interconnected we truly are. There is also evidence that the global health and economic crisis is making us a better people as we care for one another and that the crisis is helping us to appreciate medical workers, servers, caregivers and all those who labor in the day-to-day economy.

Leonardo Boff, in a brilliant essay on “The Ethic of Care,” writes, “humanity and Earth stand together facing the future. This future is not guaranteed by the forces leading the universe. We have to want it. Hence the Earth Charter goes on to say realistically ‘we must decide to live with a sense of universal responsibility.’ Accordingly, the principle of self-destruction must be counteracted with the principle of care and of universal co-responsibility...It will either be oriented by care or it will not be sustainable” (2008).

This is the context in which the Earth Charter gains relevance twenty years on. It can help inspire us to a sustainable way of life and it is a vision of universal responsibility...

These larger circles of identity and right relationship are an inspiration to care—indeed care is the most often mentioned concept in the Earth Charter. It is highlighted four times. As never before we need to overcome indifference and complicity with the way of the world—and to replace them with caring for ourselves, for others, and the larger living world.

Is it not the concern of all people of faith, and conscience, and compassion to care for each other and for creation? At this twentieth anniversary, may the Earth Charter inspire us to caring in a time of coronavirus. And may the Earth Charter continue to inspire us to turn conscience into action—as it has for a generation.

Thank you.

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