

Respect and Care for the Community of Life with Understanding, Compassion, and Love



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Rome. An “obsequious silence” was imposed on him and he was prohibited from writing and teaching. Later he was a Professor of Ethics and Philosophy of Religion at the State University of Rio de Janeiro. He is the author of more than sixty books in various areas of philosophy, theology, and ecology. These include among others: *Jesus Christ Liberator* (1972), *The Maternal Face of God* (1979), *Ecology: Earth’s Scream, the Poors’s Scream* (1995), *Learning How to Care: Human Ethics and Compassion for Earth* (2000), and *World Ethos: a Minimum Consensus among Human Beings* (2002). Currently, he follows grassroots organizations and speaks at conferences and courses on spirituality, ecology, ethics, and ecumenical theology in Brazil and abroad. He is a member of the Earth Charter Commission.

The Earth Charter represents an important contribution for a holistic and integrated vision of the social and environmental problems of humanity. Actually, it embodies the best and most established ecological intuitions, making them fertile in the elaboration of a new vision for the issues upon which spirituality and new ethics are based. However, it does not consider ecology as a technique to manage scarce natural resources but as a new paradigm to relate to nature, looking at “all interconnected beings” as forming an immense and complex system. The four great trends of the ecological discourse are assimilated in the following creative approaches: the environmental, the social, the profound, and the integral.

The *environmental* vision is enriched by inserting the environment in “the community of life.” Earth itself is presented as “alive with a unique community of life” (Preamble, paragraph two), espousing Gaia’s idea as a super, living organism. This idea gets more and more acceptance in the world scientific community.

The *social* ecology emerges in the themes: social and economic justice, democracy, non-violence, and peace.

The *profound* ecology appears when it refers to “the sense of universal responsibility,” to the “spirit of human solidarity,” to “the reverence for the mystery of being, gratitude for the gift of life, and humility regarding the human place in nature” (Preamble, paragraph 5).

Finally, the *integral* ecology is expressed defining human beings as a “part of a vast evolving universe” and that “Earth has provided the conditions essential to life’s evolution” (Preamble, paragraph two).

Only a holistic vision allows us to see that “our environmental, economic, political, social, and spiritual challenges are *interconnected*, and together we can forge inclusive solutions.” These solutions must be effectively inclusive, encompassing all aspects of the personal, social, and planetary human being, because the history of humankind is at a critical juncture, due to the fact that “the foundations of global security are threatened” (Preamble, paragraph three).

Humankind is forced to choose its future: “... form a global partnership to care for Earth and one another or risk the destruction of ourselves and the diversity of life” (Preamble, paragraph four).

Therefore, “fundamental changes are needed in our values, institutions, and ways of living” (Preamble, paragraph four) to guarantee our future. These changes derive from a new ethics, derived from a new point of view: the ethics of love, care, caution, solidarity, responsibility, and compassion.

If we had to summarize in one single phrase the great political, ethical, spiritual, and cultural proposition of the Earth Charter – a true liberating dream for humankind – I would say that this is “a sustainable life style” (Preamble, and passim). This sustainable lifestyle assumes the understanding that human beings and Earth have the same destiny, and they face the future together – not separately. They must either take care of one another and thus guarantee a common future, or both take the risk to perish.

A sustainable lifestyle is the one that allows Earth, with its beauty and integrity and its abundant but limited resources, to meet the current needs of all humankind in a way that will allow Earth to reproduce itself, to regenerate itself, and to continue its evolution as it has done for four and a half billion years, and thus also meet the needs of future generations. The current global lifestyle is absolutely unsustainable. If this lifestyle persists, it may take us to the same destiny as the dinosaurs.

Never in history has humankind confronted such a grave challenge. To respond to this challenge, we must change with urgency. Otherwise, we are running into disaster. Here lies the importance of the Earth Charter, which awakens all of us to this dramatic life or death situation. At the same time, it raises hope and trust since this is not a fatal situation. "Together in hope" (Preamble, paragraph six), we may be able to find liberating solutions, inspired by the four axes with its sixteen recommendations. As Mikhail Gorbachev expressed very well in his book *Perestroika* (1987): "This time there will be no Noah's Ark to save some few and allow all others to perish: ...we save ourselves together or together we all perish." If we turn the Earth Charter proposal into reality, we will have a future and will witness the birth of a new human civilization now unified in the same common house.

Wisely, the Earth Charter does not rest its central tenet on sustainable development, per se, as one would expect, because sustainable development dominates in the official documents of governments and international organizations. Rather, the Earth Charter places its central focus on the community of life, in all its splendid diversity, since it is the most threatened reality. And, together with the community of life, the Earth Charter raises another issue, which is essentially connected with it: respect and care. Its first part is thus worded: "*Respect and Care for the Community of Life*" (Part I).

Why does it say "community of life" and not simply "life"? Because in accordance with Earth sciences and modern biology, all living beings - beginning with the first most original bacteria, which appeared 3.8 billion years ago, then going through to plants, animals, and human beings - basically carry the same genetic alphabet. All living beings carry the same twenty amino acids and the same four phosphate bases. Therefore, we are all relatives and brothers and sisters of one another. What really exists is not the environment but the community of life, in which all beings are inter-dependent and entangled in inter-retro-relationships, which guarantee biodiversity and sustainability for all, including the weakest ones.

As life and the community of life do not exist without the physical and chemical infrastructure which feeds them, and on which they depend, these elements must also be included in the understanding of life. From the initial and ever-present chaos, the entire universe worked to create life, order, and increasingly complex structures. Life itself appeared when matter, in an

advanced stage of evolution, became more complex and organized itself from chaos. Thus, life was born as a cosmic imperative, as 1974 Nobel biology laureate, Christian de Duve, said. Life is thus a chapter in the history of the universe and of matter, which does not have anything to do with the "material," because it is an extremely condensed and stable energy and represents a field of innumerable interactions.

The human being is a sub-chapter in the chapter of life, a link in this vital chain and a unique member of the community of life. In the last centuries, he departed from it, placing himself above it, and many times against it, showing that he could play the role of Satan on Earth when he was actually called to be its guardian angel. As the Earth Charter says, the human being "has the right to own, manage, and use natural resources" but also has "the duty to prevent environmental harm" (Subprinciple 2.a).

Nowadays he feels the urge to return to the community of brothers and sisters and to assume his double role: on the one hand to feel part of the community of life, together with its other members; on the other hand, as the one who elevated himself above all and placed himself as a reference point of the community of life with the objective to creatively intervene in it, enabling the evolution process, and in a responsible way be the caretaker and guardian of all other living beings. This is his ethical mission, as worded in Genesis, which states that the human being was called to be "Eden's gardener" - the one who cares, protects, and completes, with his work and creativity, the Creator's work.

Like the community of life, the human being is similarly not defined individualistically, in the overwhelming way of a globalized dominant culture, but as a component of a community and a society. The type of community and society - the one most consistent with human nature and the one that derived from peoples' cultural experience and humankind's political thoughts - is democracy. The desire to participate and build together the common good, and to feel co-responsible for all that is of concern to all, is expressed in democracy. As such, the mandate to "build democratic societies that are just, participatory, sustainable, and peaceful" (Principle 3) is placed under Part I, Respect and Care for the Community of Life.

Let us now address two fundamental attitudes which are important to cultivate before the community of life: respect and care. First of all, respect means to recognize the other, and, secondly, to perceive its intrinsic value. Since the appearance of "Homo habilis," who invented tools about 2.3 million years ago, the human being began to intervene in nature. Following this intervention, lack of respect for nature, and denial of nature being altered, simply derived into the understanding of nature as something to be used.

This is the main weakness of anthropocentrism, which rules over all the world's cultures, except for indigenous cultures, which still live in a deep communion with the community of life.

Anthropocentrism wants us to believe that all beings only make sense as they bow to humans, who can dispose of them as they wish. Contrary to this point of view, there is the following argument: the great majority of living beings existed before the human being appeared. When 99.98% of Earth history was concluded, the human being appeared on the evolution stage. Thus, nature did not need human beings to organize its immense complexity and biodiversity. The correct approach would call for the human being to understand himself in communion with the community of life, as one link in the immense life network – a unique link because he is ethical and responsible.

Respect implies recognizing that other beings are older and, therefore, they deserve to exist and coexist together with us. By respecting them, we impose limits on our willpower and on our arrogance. Historically, this limit has always been disrespected. Edward O. Wilson, the well-known researcher of biodiversity, making an account of the relationship between human being's respect and disrespect of nature, concluded sadly:

The human being transformed the Eden into a slaughterhouse and the occupied Paradise into a lost paradise. To this date, he has been performing the role of a planetary assassin, only concerned with his own short-term survival; we have already sacrificed a large portion of the biosphere; from totemism or science, conservation ethics, in the form of taboos, has always arrived too late. (*The Future of Life* (2002), p. 121)

Today, we are at a point of no return. We must rescue an attitude of respect as a limit to our destructive capacity and as a condition to preserve nature and our survival.

Secondly, respect implies the recognition that other living beings have a value. From a religious point of view, each living being has a worth for itself, because it exists, and, therefore, it expresses something of the Being and comes from that original source of energy and virtues from which all beings originate and to which they will return (quantic vacuum), as expressed by the Creator. As a result, value belongs to the kingdom of excellencies. Each being, in particular the living ones, carries this excellence “regardless of its worth to human beings,” as the Charter clearly states (Subprinciple 1.a). Understanding that beings have value, we develop the feeling of reverence and veneration. In the East, Buddha and all Hinduism, and in the West, Saint Francis, A. Schopenhauer, and Albert Schweitzer developed an ethics founded on respect and reverence, affirming that all that exists deserves to exist, that all that lives deserves to live. The guiding principle of this ethic of respect and veneration (*ehrfurcht, verehrung*) was defined by Albert Schweitzer: “Good is all that preserves and considers all beings, in particular the living beings, and within them, the weakest ones; evil is all that damages, diminishes and eliminates beings.” And he added: “Ethics is the unlimited reverence and responsibility for all that exists and lives.”

Let us now reflect on the second attitude in approaching community of life: care with understanding, compassion, and love. It has a long tradition in the West, beginning with the well-known fable, number 220, of the philosopher-slave Hyginus (43 BC-17 AD) during the rule of Caesar Augustus that deserved a detailed philosophic comment by Martin Heidegger in *Being and Time* (pp. 39-44). From this fable, we learn that care is not only an attitude and a fundamental virtue among others, but it belongs to the real essence of the human being. Care is that *a priori* condition which allows a conscious, rational, and free being to exist. Only with care, in the act of living, can he shape his existence in the world together with others toward the future. Thinking in a cosmological manner, if there weren't careful synergy with all the Universe's energies, life and conscience would not have come into being and we would not be here to talk about all of this today.

Care is really the guiding principle, which forestalls all behaviors. All that we do with care is well done. What we do carelessly may be destructive. The debased state of Earth and the perverse quality of life around the world are essentially due to human beings' lack of care. As the psychoanalyst Rollo May said:

In the currently confusing events between rationalists and technicians, we are forgetting the human being [we lose sight of the human being]. We must humbly return to simple care. It is the myth of care, and only care, which will allow us to resist cynicism and apathy which are the psychological malaises of our times. (*Love and Will*, (1969), p. 338)

The same idea was vehemently presented by the World Conservation Union (IUCN), United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), and by the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), which in 1991 together published a book with practical recommendations on ecology that carried a programmatic title “Caring for Earth: A Strategy of Sustainable Living.” The issue of care has guided all recommendations for preservation, regeneration, and dealings with nature, having emphasized the fact that the ethics of care is the most universal of all; because it can be exercised and experienced at all levels, from the individual to the global.

Care is a loving and non-aggressive relationship with reality. Care is attentive to the vital processes and is concerned with all beings so that they can continue participating in the community of life in such a way that no one is excluded and left alone in his suffering. It is with care, as stated in the Charter, that we can “ensure that communities at all levels guarantee human rights and fundamental freedoms and provide everyone an opportunity to realize his or her full potential” (Subprinciple 3.a).

The Charter in Principle 2 states that we must “care for the community of life with understanding, compassion, and love.” Care should be exercised with *understanding*. Understanding is not an abstract process of acquiring the truth about things, but a

form of communion with them, i.e., a kind of love. In fact, we only truly know what we love.

Principle 2 also stresses that we should care for the community of life with *compassion*. This word “compassion” is better understood if we take the Buddhist perspective that encompasses two dimensions. The first is to respect each living being and to entirely renounce the desire to possess them (detachment). The second is to care for them, to be together with them in all moments, in happiness and sadness, and, in particular, to not allow them to suffer alone.

Finally, it is necessary to care for the community of life with *love*. Love is the most powerful energy that exists in the human being and in the universe. It is this indomitable and tireless attraction and union force, which looks for a fusion in the sense of a non-duality experience. If, objectively, we are brothers and sisters because of the same genetic code, because of love we, subjectively, want to be brothers and sisters; and we conscientiously propose to ourselves to live this reality. To care with love is to feel united with the most distant star, to the brother bird and to the sister ant, and to be interested in the fate of each person on this planet. To care with love is to be able to declare with emotion: “You are infinitely important to me; you will not suffer unjustly; you will not disappear; you must live.”

As we conclude our brief thoughts, we can state: the final effect of this ethics of respect and care is peace on Earth and with Earth. After thousands of years of hostilities between human beings and nature, and the devastation laid to the gifts received from our Great Mother, we must now, if we want to have a future, make an alliance of peace. We must allow the words of the alliance that God made with the survivors of the deluge: “Never more devastation and death; on the contrary, I will make an eternal alliance between myself and all living beings and with all creatures that live on Earth” (Genesis 9:11,16). The rainbow is the symbol of this life alliance. We are all invited to be the rainbow’s sons and daughters. ●