

Humanity is Part of a Vast Evolving Universe



Mary Evelyn Tucker is a Professor of Religion at Bucknell University in Pennsylvania where she teaches courses in Asian religions and religion and ecology. With John Grim, she organized a series of conferences on World Religions and Ecology at Harvard University; they are series editors for the ten volumes from the conferences

(Harvard University Press). She is the author of *Worldly Wonder: Religions Enter Their Ecological Phase* (Open Court Press, 2003) and *Moral and Spiritual Cultivation in Japanese Neo-Confucianism* (SUNY 1989). She co-edited *Worldviews and Ecology* (Orbis, 1994), *Buddhism and Ecology* (Harvard, 1997), *Confucianism and Ecology* (Harvard, 1998), and *Hinduism and Ecology* (Harvard, 2000) and *When Worlds Converge* (Open Court, 2002). Mary Evelyn is a member of the Interfaith Partnership for the Environment at the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and served as a member of the International Earth Charter Drafting Committee from 1997-2000.

The twentieth century will be chiefly remembered by future generations not as an era of political conflicts or technical innovations but as an age in which human society dared to think of the welfare of the whole human race as a practical objective.

Arnold Toynbee

This is a powerful statement from one of the leading historians of world history. Indeed, the Earth Charter, completed at the end of the twentieth century, represents a fulfillment of this prediction by Toynbee. However, the Charter expands Toynbee's statement to suggest that the twenty-first century will be remembered by this extension of our moral concerns not only to humans, but to other species and ecosystems as well. From social justice to ecojustice, the movement of human care is part of ever widening concentric circles. This is what the Earth Charter embodies as an aspiration and as a movement. Indeed, the twenty-first century may be remembered as the century in which humans laid the foundations for the well-being of the planet as a whole by embracing the Earth community. The

future of life may depend on the largeness of our embrace, for we are now challenged as never before to build a multi-form, planetary civilization inclusive of both cultural and biological diversity.

In this context, the particular challenge of the Earth Charter is for us to identify the kind of vision, values, and ethics that will help spark the transformation toward creating such a planetary civilization. A sustainable future requires not just managerial or legislative approaches, as important as these may be, but also a sustaining vision of that future. This vision needs to evoke depths of empathy, compassion, and sacrifice that have the welfare of future generations in mind. We are called, for the first time in history, to a new intergenerational consciousness and conscience – and this extends to the entire Earth community.

As the Preamble to the Charter notes, this is a task of considerable urgency. As the world becomes warmer, as hurricanes increase, as species go extinct, as air and water pollution spreads, and as resource wars heat up, there is a disturbing sense among many environmentalists and ordinary citizens that the clock is ticking towards major disasters ahead. The looming environmental crisis, with its massive scale and increasing complexity, clearly defies easy solutions. Moreover, the heightened frenzy of the global war on terrorism creates blindness toward the widespread terror humans have unleashed on the planet – on its ecosystems on land and in the oceans and on all the species they contain. Blindness is combined with enormous apathy or denial from various quarters regarding the scale of the problems we are facing. This is especially true of those living within the confines of high consumer societies.

In this context of the global environmental crisis, the critical nature of our historical moment is described by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi in his book *The Evolving Self* (HarperCollins, 1993). He highlights the enormous responsibility of our species that describes the impetus behind the Preamble of the Earth Charter:

The time of innocence...is now past. It is no longer possible for mankind to blunder about self-indulgently. Our species has become too powerful to be led by

instincts alone. Birds and lemmings cannot do much damage except to themselves, whereas we can destroy the entire matrix of life on the planet. The awesome powers we have stumbled into require a commensurate responsibility. As we become aware of the motives that shape our actions, as our place in the chain of evolution becomes clearer, we must find a meaningful and binding plan that will protect us and the rest of life from the consequences of what we have wrought. (p. 18)

He goes on to acknowledge, as does the Preamble, that the emerging consciousness of ourselves as a planetary species sharing in life's future is vital:

The only value that all human beings can readily share is the continuation of life on earth. In this one goal all individual self-interests are united. Unless such a species identity takes precedence over the more particular identities of faith, nation, family, or person, it will be difficult to agree on the course that must be taken to guarantee our future..... (p. 19)

To create such a species identity is precisely the challenge of ourselves as individuals as well as ourselves as an Earth community. As the Preamble states: "To move forward we must recognize that in the midst of a magnificent diversity of cultures and life forms we are one human family and one Earth community with a common destiny" (paragraph one).

The Preamble notes that we can risk "the destruction of ourselves and the diversity of life" (paragraph four), if we don't embrace this larger species identity. Csikszentmihalyi recognizes that the future of evolution is at stake if we should fail. He writes:

It is for this reason that the fate of humanity in the next millennium depends so closely on the kind of selves we will succeed in creating. Evolution is by no means guaranteed. We have a chance of being part of it only as long as we understand our place in that gigantic field of force we call nature. (p.25)

As Csikszentmihalyi suggests, one of the crucial areas we need to explore is the depth of our evolving selves that are part of the larger matrix of life. We can have a certain measure of confidence that we will find the next season of our evolution as humans as we come to "understand our place within that vast field of force we call nature."

The Preamble of the Earth Charter points toward finding our way forward as citizens of Earth dependent on the forces of nature. It suggests that we need to rediscover the intertwined coding of ourselves as bio-cultural beings – filled with the mixed heritage of biological survival and cultural creativity. Such is the imperative of our evolution as a species that calls for a new "cultural coding" resonant with, but distinguished from,

the genetic coding of evolution itself. We can see ourselves now as imprinted with nature's complex coding and entwined within nature's rhythms. At the same time, our cultural coding needs to be brought into alignment with the forces and limits of nature. This calls for new forms of education, religion, politics, and economics for a sustainable future.

There are many indications that these forms are emerging and that we are evolving into our next phase as humans. With sustainable technologies and design, with ecological economics and politics, with environmental education and ethics, we are learning how to assist evolution and to participate in the myriad processes of universe powers. If human decisions have swamped natural selection because of our planetary power as a species, we can learn how to become aligned again with evolutionary flourishing. In what we protect, in what we build, in what we eat, in what we cherish, we will find the animating principles of universe evolution that also ground culture and guide humans in our creation of communities. We will become partners with evolutionary processes. This is what the Preamble calls for – the choice to "form a global partnership to care for Earth and one another" (paragraph four).

To form such a partnership we will have to draw on the comprehensive framework of evolution of the universe, of Earth, and of the human. This evolutionary perspective provides an expansive context to articulate empowering frameworks of values and virtues for individuals and communities. The enlarged worldview of evolution affords a means of activating a comprehensive set of values and ethics that will point the way toward partnering with evolution.

Such is the large-scale context that the Preamble offers. It states: "Humanity is part of a vast evolving universe. Earth, our home, is alive with a unique community of life. The forces of nature make existence a demanding and uncertain adventure, but Earth has provided the conditions essential to life's evolution" (paragraph two). The Preamble thus affirms that the physical, chemical, and biological conditions for life are in delicate interaction over time to bring forth and sustain life. Our response to this awesome process is responsibility for its continuity and thus to become a life-enhancing species.

The significance of this evolutionary perspective in the Preamble should be underscored as it marks a watershed in our rethinking ethics within such a vast framework. The implications of the story of evolution that we are beginning to absorb are manifold. They include a new sense of *orientation*, *belonging*, and *vitality*. The universe story gives us an orientation toward the vastness of time and space that evokes wonder and awe. We begin to see into the macrophase of our own being as we embrace 13.7 billion years of universe unfolding through stars, galaxies, planets, and life forms. We recognize that the chemical components of our bodies came out of the formation of stars. We are stardust come to light in human form.

Along with such expansive orientation, we are given a deepened sense of belonging to the universe and to the Earth. We are grounded and connected to the planet as we share in our dependence on the elements of air, water, and soil for our survival. The universe story thus decenters humans amidst the vastness of the universe and recenters humans as part of, not apart from, the great community of life. In particular, it highlights our role as a species among other species, all radically dependent on the Earth for our well-being. We are recognizing anew that we belong to the Earth community.

This perspective gives us a reinvigorated vitality for caring for and participating in Earth processes. Our partnering with evolution becomes an expression of our comprehensive compassion for all life – human and “more than human.”¹ To encourage the future flourishing of life is the destiny of humans as they participate in what the Chinese Confucians have called, “the transforming and nourishing powers of Heaven and Earth.”² The zest for life is what will carry us forward as we align ourselves with these cosmological powers. With such alignment we are able to create new forms of human-Earth relations that have expression in diverse fields of education, religion, government, economics, medicine, law, technology, and design.

Within the framework of the universe story, we are beginning to acknowledge that our common ground is the common ground of the Earth itself. Survival of species and the planet depends on this. Adaptation for survival is necessary for all species and thus is especially crucial now for humans. This adaptation will be less biological than cultural. It involves a shift in vision and values from a western Enlightenment mentality emphasizing radical individualism to an Earth community mentality of a shared future.

This shift will require an expansion of ethics such as the Charter embodies and the Preamble outlines. The Enlightenment values of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” are reframed in the Preamble, not just to suit the human person and individual property rights, but to include the larger Earth community. Moving from anthropocentric values to bio-centered values is the challenge that the Preamble sets forth.

Thus, in designating “life” as an important value, the Preamble uses the term to include all life - other species and ecosystems, as well as people at a distance, and future generations. Up to now, as Thomas Berry has observed, we have developed ethics in the human community regarding life to address the problems of homicide and suicide and even genocide, but not biocide, ecocide, or geocide. This is what the Preamble represents – a comprehensive ethical response to avert potential geocide. It shifts us from viewing nature simply as a resource for human use to nature as source of life. In short, the Preamble moves us from viewing Earth as commodity to Earth as a “community of life.”

“Liberty” is seen in the Preamble as not simply a matter of individual rights, but as including human responsibilities to the larger whole. It urges the peoples of the Earth to “declare our responsibility to one another, to the greater community of life, and to future generations” (paragraph one). Thus, the Preamble calls us from personal freedom to communitarian care. From celebrating radical individualism, we move toward “kinship with all life.” The Preamble highlights this in the call for “Universal Responsibility” that ranges from local issues to global concerns.

With regard to the “pursuit of happiness,” the Preamble moves us from individual acquisition and consumption to the great work of contributing to transforming human-Earth relations. It highlights the notion that “when basic needs have been met, human development is primarily about being more, not having more” (paragraph four). It calls us from private property as an exclusive right to embracing the public trust of land and water and air for future generations. The Preamble states: “The protection of Earth’s vitality, diversity, and beauty is a sacred trust” (paragraph two).

Such an expanded framework beyond Enlightenment values provides a context for humans to see inter-linked problems along with interconnected solutions. This is what the Preamble of the Earth Charter aims to do as it delineates a simple, but viable, blueprint for a sustainable future. It highlights the inter-related issues of environment, justice, and peace as at the heart of our global challenges. Against the comprehensive background of evolution in the Preamble, the main body of the Charter outlines an integrated set of ethics and practices to address these three interrelated issues. It aims to address the sometimes competing areas of environment and development.

The Charter recognizes that the future of life is impossible without ecological integrity. Life and all economic development depend on the health of the biosphere. Thus, the preservation of ecosystems and biodiversity are essential along with the careful use of nonrenewable resources and the exploration of renewable sources of energy.

To do this effectively demands social and economic equity and empowerment. The widening gaps between the rich and the poor in the developed and developing world are a cause for social unrest and can breed resentment and terrorism. How to close these gaps is of utmost importance. Poverty and environmental issues are closely linked in this framework. How to manage economic development for the improvement of standards of living without permanently degrading the environment is the challenge.

A third point in the main body of the Charter is democracy, non-violence, and peace. It is almost impossible to achieve the goals of a healthy environment and equitable societies without democratic institutions and legal structures that encourage participa-

tion and transparency. The aspirations of millions to live in democratic societies without human rights abuses is demonstrable throughout the world. Moreover, it is becoming increasingly clear that peace among nations will not be achievable without addressing both environmental and social issues. Thus, the Charter sees the importance of an empowering framework that identifies an integrated set of ethics linking healthy environment, principles of justice, and institutions of democracy.

The empowering spirit of the Earth Charter is linked to its sense of historic challenge, in the Preamble, namely that: “The foundations of global security are threatened” (paragraph three). However, it observes: “These trends are perilous but not inevitable” (paragraph three) and goes on to suggest that: “The choice is ours: form a global partnership to care for Earth and one another or risk the destruction of ourselves and the diversity of life” (paragraph four).

The Charter concludes with a similarly cautiously optimistic tone saying, “As never before in history, common destiny beckons us to seek a new beginning” (The Way Forward, paragraph one). It notes that “This requires a change of mind and heart” – of vision and values (The Way Forward, paragraph two). The Charter, then, exemplifies an important trend toward an integrative global ethics. It highlights the importance of our moment in human history. It provides an empowering context of values and practices that will steer the human community forward toward the enhancement, not the diminishment, of life. Further reflection of the Earth Charter in political gatherings, religious groups, academic settings, and environmental organizations is already beginning to foster a more unified basis for thought and action.

The Earth Charter, then, embodies the hope for expanded vision and inspiring values for the larger Earth community as it seeks to build common ground for a sustainable future. The comprehensive framework of the story of evolution in the Preamble provides animating principles of orientation to the universe, belonging to the Earth community, and vitality in relation to life processes. These principles forge the bonds of human-Earth relations, thus sustaining the demands of relationality and restoring the wellsprings of zest. Within this comprehensive vision of interconnections set forth in the Preamble, a new set of global ethics emerges in the principles of the Charter. This Charter becomes an empowering framework to inspire engagement in and participation with mutually enhancing human-Earth relations. For humans to imagine and activate these relations is to bring into being the emerging contours of the future of the evolutionary process itself. ●

Notes

- 1 To use David Abram’s phrase
- 2 *The Doctrine of the Mean*, Confucius