

CHILDREN AND THE EARTH CHARTER

By Herman F. Greene

Children, and those who love children, to what shall we compare the Earth Charter? Is it a “Declaration of Interdependence,” a teaching tool, a survival kit, a source of inspiration and meaning? Or is it just another list of Utopian ideals too confusing and long to be helpful? What can we make of a document that among other things asks us to restore the integrity of Earth’s ecological systems, and to eradicate poverty?

All of these questions are closely related to the question “What is possible?”, to which we shall return.

Let us become like little children. Jesus said, “You cannot enter the Kingdom of God unless you become like a little child.” Perhaps this is so for the “Eco-” (house) “zoic” (of life) as well.

In his poem, “It Takes a Universe” Thomas Berry tells us, “The mind of the child [awakens] to a world of wonder. Imagination to a world of beauty. Emotions to a world of intimacy.” This, taken as one, is the most basic thing we know isn’t it? We awaken to a world of wonder, a world of sound and light and colors and smells. We know this even if we awaken and live in a windowless room, but how much richer we are and how much more human we become with the sun by day, the stars by night, the wind rustling in the trees, the flowers aglow in the morning dew, . . . critters everywhere. Can anyone imagine a human being without such a world of wonder?

“It takes a universe to educate a child.”

So it is that the Earth Charter begins, “Respect Earth and life in all its diversity.” This is something that every child knows, . . . and wants to hear.

What else do we know when we come into this world? We awaken into a caring community. Without a caring community, one would not even be fed, or covered in bed, or changed. Yet, suppose these basic needs were met, what would a child un-love-ed be? Someone is present to talk to the child and play. A bird sings at the window . . . does the bird sing for the child?

So the Earth Charter continues, “Care for the community of life with understanding, compassion, and love.” This is something that every child knows, . . . and wants to hear.

Yet, not all is warm and fuzzy in the life of the child. As the children’s book begins, “There’s a nightmare in my closet,” . . . and there is falling down, and crying in hunger, for some children real and prolonged hunger. Sometimes there is no parent for the child, and sometimes the child is raised in a society of oppression. In all societies there is violence. Sometimes the child sees violence or is violated.

We all face the dark side of life, and for this we need a dream . . . something that gives meaning to the struggle, hope for living, a purpose for being.

The Earth Charter continues, let us “Build democratic societies that are just participatory, sustainable and peaceful,” let us “Secure Earth’s bounty and beauty for present and future generations.”

And then the Earth Charter gets into the nitty gritty. Here’s how—adopt at all levels sustainable development plans; promote the active participation of women in all aspect of life as full and equal partners; empower every human being with the education and resources to secure a sustainable livelihood; recognize and preserve the traditional knowledge and spiritual wisdom of all cultures; . . . recognize that peace is the wholeness created by right relationships with oneself, other persons, other cultures, other life, Earth, and the larger whole of which all are a part.

April Ambrose, a recent college graduate wrote in the Fall 2001 edition of *The Ecozoic Reader* on “Teaching the Earth Charter to Children.” She talks about how education has failed young people. “School,” she said,

did not teach them how to enter into the rat race and yet still maintain a sense of what is right. Most of all school did not teach them how to make things better. Most of these youth have become disillusioned. They have accepted pain and suffering and lies as what they must be. Some of these people, however, are trying to drop out of the race. Some of these people are working to make their corner of the universe better. . . . These are the people who are trying to reclaim truth by acting out their visions. But it is hard, for society allows them few resources. By the time most of them gain these resources, they have forgotten their dreams or deemed them impossible. They become realistic like society instead of idealistic like the Earth Charter.

Society is only as healthy as its young people. Our society is very unhealthy and our youth are crying for help. They don’t want to shoot each other. They don’t want to feel pain. They are not ready for war. We need to help them by listening to their cries. We cannot ignore them anymore. They are our future—literally. They will choose what from their lives and our present age to take into the future with them and what they will create.

Can we give our children a dream, a set of ethical principles to live by, a guide to a sustainable future, and, if it would be so, a reason for being even in the face of death?

This is a hard document, the Earth Charter. True, it is hard to read and comprehend because it is so broad in scope. This, however, is not the real reason it is hard. The real reason is because, in April Ambrose’s words, it tells the truth. It tells the

truth about what we must do to have a viable future in this Earth-house of life, about what we must do to realize the Ecozoic.

Too often people focus on the preamble of the Earth Charter and the epilogue, because these are in narrative form. These are important, but as inspirational and informative as they are, they are not what children most need to hear. What children most need to hear are the “Principles,” those eighty-six nitty gritty details that help them understand what is worthwhile, how to go forward, and how to dream a dream that is real.

Which brings us back to the question, “What is possible?” Is the Earth Charter possible, or is it just another list of Utopian ideals?

No other possibility is possible—conditions have changed, the human impact on Earth and on other humans has become so great that we must do now what in the past would have been impossible.

We can . . . because we must.

For these same reasons, adults need this Earth Charter too.

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