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Towards A Culture of Openness: Living with the Earth Charter in Times of Uncertainty



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I am still struggling to remember how I came across the Earth Charter, and which came first, the organization or the document. What I do remember was the world that existed at the time and my own anxieties in relation to the changes happening around me. It was the early 2000s, and the world was only beginning to experience the immense and accelerated pace of social media and its propensity to bring vast distances together. I had dropped out of school, where I was training to become an accountant, and in my state of curiosity and worry I found a measure of balance in my volunteer efforts around the country. I put myself forward for all sorts of activities, from organizing youth entrepreneurship conferences on university campuses to facilitating sustainability initiatives on different platforms. While these activities were beneficial and grounding, they were experiments in humanistic endeavour, uncoordinated and unconnected to my inner sense of balance. I longed for an anchor, perhaps a holding narrative that I would always reference for direction.

Around the same time, I applied for, and was accepted to attend, the first Jane Goodall Global Youth Summit in Florida. It was an experience that transformed the way I saw the world, particularly how we relate to our shared humanity and the environment. I met like-minded people from all walks of life, and in my interactions with them I realized they too were, in spite of their cultural differences, drawn to the possibility of a better future.



It was around this time, perhaps a few months after the summit in Florida, that the Earth Charter floated into my life. It might have started with an invitation to apply for the post of Youth Representative for Africa and the Middle East, and one of the requirements was a familiarity with the Earth Charter itself. The opportunity to serve intrigued me and stimulated my sense of adventure, but it was the document itself that changed my life. I read the Earth Charter Preamble slowly, with intent and an open mind:

We stand at a critical moment in Earth's history, a time when humanity must choose its future. As the world becomes increasingly interdependent and fragile, the future at once holds great peril and great promise. 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. We must join together to bring forth a sustainable global society founded on respect for nature, universal human rights, economic justice, and a culture of peace. Towards this end, it is imperative that we, the peoples of Earth, declare our responsibility to one another, to the greater community of life, and to future generations.

I am reading those words again here in Maine, thousands of miles (and years) away from my tiny room in an obscure town in Nigeria, and I feel that my response today echoes what I must have felt in the past. I can sense a light switching on as I re-read those words, and I think it was that glow of conviction that led me to embrace the principles of the Charter.

Years later, as I moved on to other pursuits, the exact wordings of the Charter faded from my memory. I would occasionally see posts on social media and would momentarily re-live those days of active engagement in my early twenties. But life itself was marching in a different direction. I had returned to university to complete my undergraduate studies and carried on to graduate school. I branched out to pursue my writing and academic career, and I was lucky enough to secure a teaching position at Harvard.

From a distance, my path as a novelist and scholar of African literary and cultural studies seemed very far from the world of the Earth Charter and its principles of sustainability. And there were times that I questioned the value of my own work in relation to our shared humanity.

My personal anxieties about my work are not unfounded. As a creative writer and scholar of modern Africa, I am aware of the wider debates about the value of the humanities.



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What, indeed, are the humanities for? How useful is the study of literature, for instance, to our global efforts to raise awareness about climate change? In more practical terms, how do we translate the humanities, literature in particular, into measurable transformations that advance our collective good? The rise of subfields like public humanities and environmental humanities are reflective of that need to justify the study of the humanities. Some scholars have argued that the humanities are more valuable when they go beyond the classroom, an approach that has gained momentum in recent years. The debates are often driven by value in terms of tangibles and quantifiables, not by the “softer” and sometimes invisible ideas and principles that shape the way we engage the world.

On my part, I realized that I had unconsciously incorporated a sense of continuity and connectedness in my creative and critical work over the years. My reading of literature and history, and engagement with society itself, is driven

by the idea that cultures are linked beyond their material manifestations. Our experiences are shaped by events that are sometimes outside our immediate surroundings. This awareness of connectedness, which permeates my work, gives me a holding narrative that is beyond the mere facts of research. My students have also come to appreciate this approach.

In the last two years, I have taught courses that consider the place of modern African cultures in the world. While I emphasize the local realities of history and culture in the making of modern African experiences, I also remind my students that the continent, like every other place on earth, is a product of a long process of encounter, affinities and entanglements. I encourage them to imagine a world beyond the present, to consider the crossroads of time, and to reconstruct an image of our shared humanity that is profoundly entangled, complicated and unyielding to any single narrative. The goal, I often say, is to explore the lines of



connection that are not readily visible, and in the process cultivate and advance a way of being in the world that is rooted in empathy and care.

It is only recently, and especially since I began thinking about this piece, that I started to see the link between the approach described above and the Earth Charter. I do not recall making a conscious effort to integrate the Earth Charter into my work and teaching, neither did I announce to myself that I was going to reference its principles in my daily life.

So the question is: in what ways have the principles of the Charter contributed to my journey so far? There are no direct or simple answers. I think the principles stuck with me like the habits that we learn as we move through life, habits that become second nature, so “natural” that we begin to lose track of how we acquired them in the first place.

If considered a “habit” to learn or cultivate, the Charter becomes less of an abstraction. It becomes a gradual process of reorganizing our priorities with the ultimate aim of attaining a more balanced life. This, in turn, invites us to consider the long-term consequences of our choices. By integrating a sense of global connection and broadmindedness to my personal life and teaching, I am investing in a world that celebrates what we all share in common: our humanity and how it relates to history and culture and nature itself.

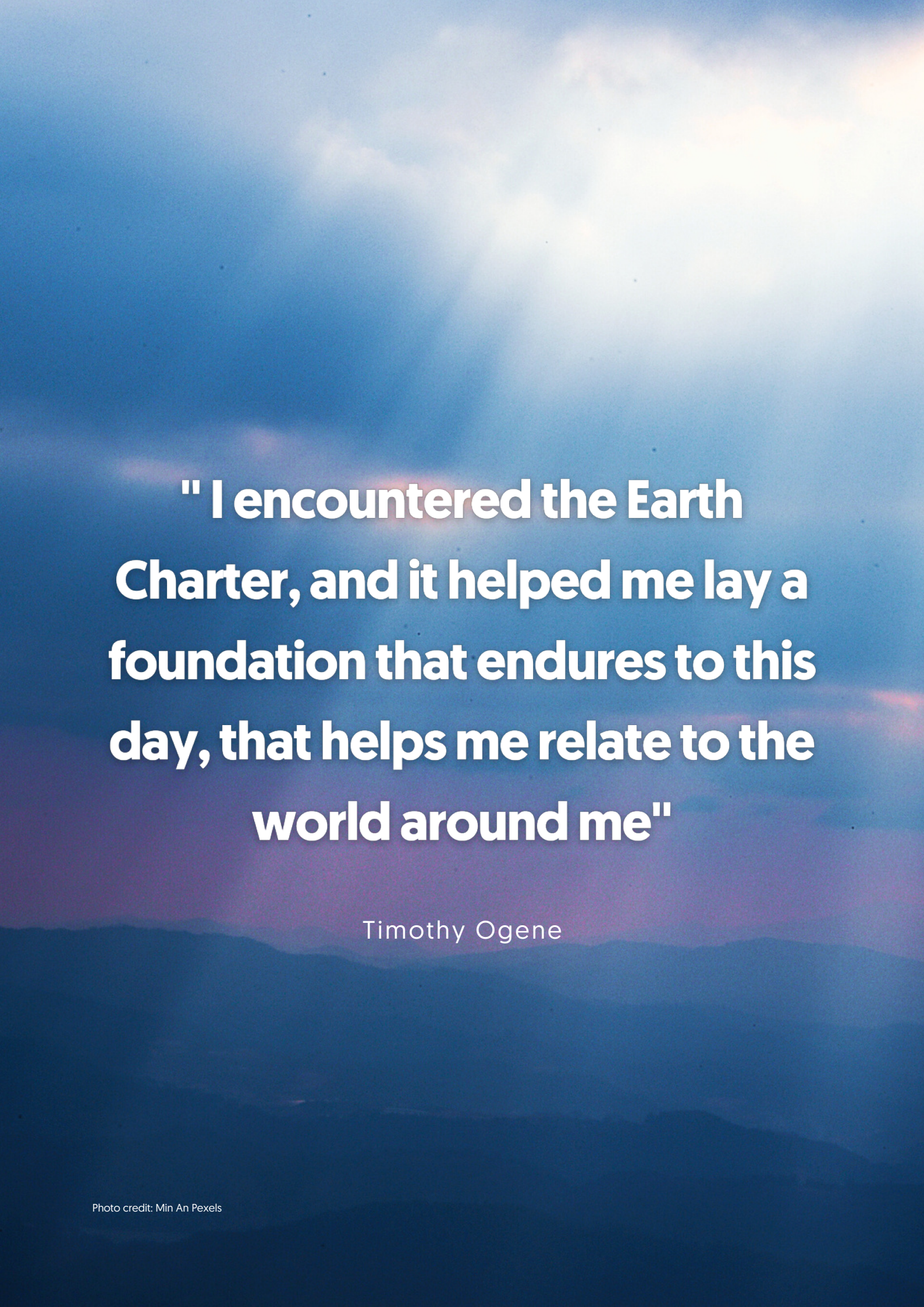
A few days ago, I took my four-year-old to the Maine Maritime Museum in Bath

and we saw an exhibition that I am still thinking about. A quote on the wall by Rachel Carson caught my attention: “The human race is challenged more than ever before to demonstrate our mastery not over nature but of ourselves.” I pondered the word “mastery” and how, in our collective history, it has meant two broad things: domination and/or control. And it is always directed outwards, not inwards. I felt Carson was inviting us to turn that same energy inwards; not to only “know” ourselves, but to fully understand the planetary roots of our tendencies in relation to one another and the environment.

More than a decade ago, I encountered the Earth Charter, and it helped me lay a foundation that endures to this day, that helps me relate to the world around me. Maybe this is a step towards the type of mastery that Carson writes about, a quiet journey towards a life that is more aware and connected to other lives. Perhaps the first step in this process is to place the self on the edge of things, to watch and learn, to see oneself as part of a larger picture, and to stay open to new ways of seeing the world. As the Charter reminds us, “Life often involves tensions between important values. This can mean difficult choices. However, we must find ways to harmonize diversity with unity, the exercise of freedom with the common good, short-term objectives with long-term goals.”

References

Earth Charter Commission. (2000). *The Earth Charter*.



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