## Interlude: Planetary consciousness

Life has always been mutually interlinked and instrumental in formatting our planet, making any sharp distinction between the biosphere and its inorganic geography— the atmosphere, bodies of water, formations of underlying rock— murky at best. We’re still coming to terms with this murkiness. In the Western scientific tradition, geologist and naturalist Alexander von Humboldt (1769-1859) was an early advocate of a more holistic view. This led him to sound alarms about ecological destruction and human-induced climate change as early as 1800.

Humboldt’s observation, based on phenomena like the desiccation of the landscape following clearcutting in Venezuela’s Aragua Valley, was at once obvious and visionary. He was rowing not only against prevailing scientific currents, but also against millennia of religious dogma. Scientific progress had been in rapid advance largely through controlled experiment, analysis, and classification, all of which worked by progressively isolating and simplifying phenomena rather than observing them in context, as parts of larger systems. Biblical doctrine, too, discouraged systems thinking, instead insisting on the static hierarchy of a Great Chain of Being that began with God above, then descended through angels, humans, animals, plants, and minerals.[[1]](#footnote-21) According to *Genesis*, the Earth was only a few thousand years old (though contrary evidence was mounting), and God had separately created everything on it to serve a specific purpose: us. Man was both distinct from Nature and rightly held dominion over her. The lower orders served the higher— like a military chain of command or a corporate org chart. Hierarchies are certainly far easier to reason about than the reality of mutually interdependent networks with no center, top, or bottom.

The traditional genders here— Man as male, Nature as female— are not accidental. In 1603, laying the foundations for the coming knowledge revolution, Francis Bacon had explicitly twined these religious and scientific doctrines together in a Latin essay whose title can be translated as *The Masculine Birth of Time, Or the Great Instauration of the Dominion of Man over the Universe*. Writing from the vantage of a future scientist with godlike power exhorting his young apprentice, Bacon thundered,[[2]](#footnote-22)

I am come in very truth leading Nature to you, with all her children, to bind her to your service and to make her your slave […]. So may I succeed in my only earthly wish, namely to stretch the deplorably narrow limits of man’s dominion over the universe to their promised bounds.

This chilling passage frames science and technology as the rape of a femininized, subordinate Nature by Man, righteous in his lust for knowledge and power. Much is implied: that science and technology, as active arts, are the enterprises of men, not women; that Nature and the feminine are passive resources for male usufruct; that Man’s manifest destiny won’t be fulfilled until he has dominated literally everything in the observable universe.

Although the posthumously published *Masculine Birth of Time* is among the more obscure writings in Bacon’s storied career, it’s also a moment of rare candor, an unobstructed glimpse of the black hole whose gravitational well we’re still struggling to escape: patriarchy.

But this isn’t the only way to do science. Humboldt, obsessively measuring temperature and barometric pressure on every shore and mountain slope, gathering samples and drawing connections, perceived the entanglement of nature, the way it resists simplification, the way it must be danced with, not plundered. He came to understand the suicidal consequences of ecological colonialism and unfettered resource extraction through lengthy travel in the New World, far from home. It’s unlikely that he would have developed these insights had he stayed at home in Germany, among the long-cultivated fields of Saxony or in the coffeehouses of Jena. Understanding required distance and perspective. And time.

Astronaut William Anders attained such a planetary perspective on Christmas Eve of 1968, in orbit around the moon, when he exclaimed, “Oh my God! Look at that picture over there! There’s the Earth coming up. Wow, that’s pretty.” The photo he took with his boxy modified Hasselblad, now known as Earthrise, galvanized the environmental movement. As the world shrank, Humboldt’s vision had become more accessible. Dawning popular awareness of the finite nature of our world, its fragility, and the interconnectedness of all its systems inspired James Lovelock and Lynn Margulis to develop the Gaia Hypothesis, first articulated by Lovelock in a famous 1972 paper, *Gaia as Seen Through the Atmosphere*:

[T]he sum total of species is more than just a catalogue, “The Biosphere,” and like other associations in biology is an entity with properties greater than the simple sum of its parts. Such a large creature, even if hypothetical, with the powerful capacity to homeostat [regulate] the planetary environment needs a name; I am indebted to Mr. William Golding for suggesting the use of the Greek personification of mother Earth, “Gaia.”

Though initially Lovelock made his case hesitantly, couching it in qualifiers like “hypothetical,” this was a stronger statement than Humboldt’s. Beyond pointing out interrelations between lifeforms and the mutual shaping of biology and geology, he was proposing that we view Earth as a single great organism, that we call her *Gaia*, and that we are ourselves part of that organism.

The thing is, Gaia had already been given a name— *Terrabia*— by Timothy Zell, founder and Primate of the Neopagan Church of All Worlds. Though Lovelock was almost certainly unaware of it, he had been scooped by Zell’s 1971 article, *TheaGenesis: The Birth of the Goddess*, in the Church’s (decidedly non-peer-reviewed) journal *Green Egg*:

We now know that our planet, Mother Earth, is inhabited not by myriad separate and distinct organisms, each going its own way independent of all the others, but rather that the aggregate total of all the livings beings of Earth comprises the vast body of a single organism—the planetary Biosphere itself. Literally, we are all One. Further, we now realize that the being we have intuitively referred to as Mother Earth, The Goddess, Mother Nature, The Lady, is not merely a mythical projection of our own limited visions, but an actual living entity, Terrabia, the very biosphere of Earth, in whose body we are mere cells. Forced by this discovery to re-examine our religious language and conceptualizations, we have arrived at the following definition of Divinity (which, incidentally, includes within it the essential nature of the Divine as expressed by all other religions): “Divinity is the highest level of aware consciousness accessible to each living being, manifesting itself in the self-actualization of that being.” Thus the living Biosphere is Goddess in Her evolving self-actualization. As in the corporate body of the great planetary organism we are all One, so are we all God! (More correctly, we are all Goddess, since Mother Earth is of feminine gender.) This concept has been recognized, though not heretofore fully understood, in the basic aphorism of Neo-Pagan religion; the phrase “Thou art God.”

So, the hippies beat the scientists to the punch.

They also both committed a seemingly obvious category error by persisting in assigning Earth a feminine gender. After all, sexual differentiation is just a reproductive trick particular to certain branches of Earth-life. These include *Homo sapiens*, most other animals, and many plants, but this is only a fraction of Earth’s biomass. Our planet also contains vast numbers of cells and larger constituent organisms that are unsexed, hermaphroditic, or built on schemes so profoundly queer that our concept of gender doesn’t apply. (According to biologist Merlin Sheldrake,[[3]](#footnote-23) the split gill fungus, *Schizophyllum commune*, “has more than twenty-three thousand mating types, each of which is sexually compatible with nearly every one of the others.”) It makes little sense, then, to talk about Earth as a whole in gendered terms. Perhaps we can call it progress, though, for a syncretic Neopagan mythology about an all-encompassing Earth-mother to supplant an Iron Age mythology featuring a domineering and vindictive male God.

Lovelock, still alive at 102 years of age as I write in 2022, would become a Fellow of the Royal Society, a Companion of Honor, and a member of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire for his contributions. Zell, now 79 years old and styling himself Oberon Zell-Ravenheart, is no mere honorific knight, but “a true Wizard in the traditional sense,” according to his website.[[4]](#footnote-24) He’s also the Headmaster of the Grey School of Wizardry, open to “all seekers, young and old,” and offering “more than 500 classes in 16 Departments,” from “Alchemy, Healing, and Divination to Ceremonial Magick and Defense against the Dark Arts.”[[5]](#footnote-25)

Throughout the 70s, Timothy Zell continued to write and speak in public about his TheaGenesis epiphany. With a nod to Lovelock, he had replaced *Terrabia* with *Gaia* by the time he delivered the keynote address at the 1973 Gnosticon Aquarian festival. Witches, pagans, druids, shamans, astrologers, and seekers of every other stripe had converged on the unlikely midwestern city of St. Paul, Minnesota for this happening.

Morning Glory, a young witch in the audience, was smitten. Although already in an open marriage, she immediately resolved to leave her husband and join her life to the charismatic Zell’s. They were married the following year in a handfasting ceremony at the Spring Witchmeet in 1974, presided over by High Priestess Carolyn Clark and the Archdruid Isaac Bonewits, a skinny pagan activist who had recently graduated from UC Berkeley with a degree in Magic (sadly, the last they would ever grant).

Soon afterward, Morning Glory Zell-Ravenheart became the Assistant Editor of *Green Egg*, hosting collating parties in St. Louis at which a mostly naked crew of volunteers would meet to staple together and mail out the quarterly journal. Following a period of study lasting the customary year and a day, Morning Glory was ordained High Priestess of the Church of All Worlds. This period proved short, though; the Zells felt the call of the West. In 1975, they outfitted a schoolbus, christened the Scarlet Succubus, for a one-way road trip to California. They eventually settled on a ranch in Mendocino County, opening a magic shop in a nearby town and developing a technique for creating “unicorns” by performing horn surgery on baby goats. These were kept as pets, exhibited at Renaissance Faires, and licensed for a time to the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus.

The Zell-Ravenhearts were never a conventional Nuclear Family. They lived communally with a slowly evolving cast of additional partners and occasional children, all of whom were involved in the commune’s upkeep and collective enterprises. This mingling of communal, religious, sexual, reproductive, and commercial concerns in an intentional lifestyle has a rich, if fringe, history in the United States. The term “free love,” for instance, was coined by John Humphrey Noyes, founder of the Oneida Perfectionist community in upstate New York in 1848.[[6]](#footnote-26) The Perfectionists practiced group marriage and birth control, lived in the collectively owned Mansion House, and earned income from a variety of cottage industries, including Oneida silverware, which is still in production today.

Thomas Low Nichols, whom we have already encountered, also advocated free love, in addition to universal suffrage, opposition to capital punishment, vegetarianism, and many other then-radical ideas. As well as being an unusually reliable source of information in print about birth control, Nichols’s 1854 book *Esoteric Anthropology* found much to critique in the patriarchal and monogamous norms of the time— though, as with many utopian thinkers, his idealism tended to deny inconvenient social and psychological realities. In describing sexual jealousy, he wrote:

I believe it to he a morbid, mean, bad feeling, caused by poverty, lack of self-esteem, distrust, suspicion, and a craving for more than we fear we have an honest right to. It is a feeling every one is ashamed of and disclaims, which is proof enough of its badness. It is everywhere a subject of ridicule, because men are conscious that it is a shabby feeling. It grows, in most cases, out of the idea of property in each other. As long as a man thinks he owns a woman, he will guard her like any other piece of property, and consider any intercourse with her a trespass, only so far as he permits: and the same of women. As some persons are born with morbid acquisitiveness, so others are born jealous. But when the doctrine of the sovereignty of the individual is recognized, and the man abandons the idea that he owns some woman, or the woman some man there will be no more jealousy. Nor can it exist, in any case, with a full and generous confidence. “Perfect love casteth out fear.” The highest love, trusting in itself, and trusting with an entire faith in its object, does not admit of jealousy. The world will be rich enough sometime, so that none will need to steal, and none fear theft. In the full riches of love, there can be no cause for jealousy. Men will make their lives much happier, when they can free themselves from all such meannesses. […]

I have seen women who assured me that they had no power to love but one man at a time, though capable of a succession of amours. Others believe that one love is enough for a lifetime. There are others who seem to love two, three, or even more, with various degrees of passion, but all amatively. I knew one woman who slept with two men on alternate nights, and she declared that she loved them both, and could not endure the thought of parting with either. They were two respectable business men in New York, satisfied with her, and not jealous of each other. She had a child, and each believed it his, and loved it accordingly. But, then, a man generally loves the child of a woman he loves, whether he believes it his or not. I think men are, at least, equal to women in this respect. I doubt not that Abraham loved Sarah, his half-sister, as well as his mistress Hagar, and the twelve wives he married afterward. Over three quarters of the world polygamy is tolerated, and more or less practiced. It is absurd to suppose that no man ever loves more than one wife; as absurd as to suppose that European and American women, as long as they love their husbands, can love nobody else. A belief in this doctrine is the basis of much jealousy and domestic tyranny. If a man believes that his wife, by loving another, must cease to love him— if he values her love, he will guard her carefully from all such risk. The fact is so far from this, that I believe liberty to be the truest bond, and best security for love. A man who believes that a woman can love but one, will be very careful to prevent his wife from being interested in any other man, and consequently alienated from him. So of a woman. The monogamic idea is therefore the parent of jealousy and all its tyrannies.

These were remarkably modern ideas, of which the Zell-Ravenhearts would doubtless have approved.

*Green Egg* underwent a long hiatus after the move to California. Eventually, with the aid of the newfangled personal computer and desktop publishing software, it was revived under the editorship of Diane Darling, a member of the Ravenheart commune from 1984 to 1994. The topics covered ranged from the cosmic to the very personal, as described by Darling in a retrospective anthology:[[7]](#footnote-27)

Why did we [publish *Green Egg*]? What were we thinking? I thought we were saving the world by reviving human consciousness of the sacred living Earth and of our true ancestral roots. […] By displaying and discussing our own, then-radical lifestyle experiments, we hoped to turn the wheel of social evolution for the benefit of our Mother. […] We were surfing the bleeding edge of cultural shift […].

This conflation of cosmology with lifestyle is characteristic of many intentional communities. It can whiff of grandiosity, which doubtless contributes to the marginalization of such movements, even when their mythologies and practices are, given a bit of perspective, no stranger than those of the prevailing majority.

The rise of intentional communities may be a characteristically modern and Western phenomenon, owing to WEIRD propensities for individualism, disregard for the authority of elders, and “rational” behavior, meaning a through-line whereby external actions are anchored by internally consistent beliefs about the way the world works, as opposed to received wisdom.[[8]](#footnote-28) So, in questioning and reimagining the principles that govern the universe, intentional communities also reimagine the social norms governing daily life, and vice versa. To the WEIRD way of thinking, the cosmic *is* personal. And, perhaps especially to the American way of thinking, good ideas are “ideas worth spreading.”[[9]](#footnote-29) Ours has always been an evangelistic society— whether the ideas are temperance or free love, spiritualism or the gospel of prosperity, Mormonism or TED talks.

So, at Diane’s suggestion, Morning Glory contributed an article to *Green Egg* in 1990 about the norms underpinning the Ravenhearts’ lifestyle. As Morning Glory put it,

Having been involved all my adult life in one or the other Open Marriages (the current Primary being 16 years long), I have seen a lot of ideas come and go and experimented with plans and rules to make these relationships work for everyone involved. […] [T]here are some sure-fire elements that must be present for the system to function at all and there are other elements that are strongly recommended on the basis that they have a very good track record.

This essay, *A Bouquet of Lovers*, became an instant (if very cult) classic. In it, Morning Glory coined an odd, half-Greek, half-Latin word: *polyamorous*.

She prophesied thusly:

I feel that this whole polyamorous lifestyle is the avant garde of the 21st Century. Expanded families will become a pattern with wider acceptance as the monogamous nuclear family system breaks apart […]. In many ways, polyamorous extended relationships mimic the old multigenerational families before the Industrial Revolution, but they are better because the ties are voluntary and are, by necessity, rooted in honesty, fairness, friendship and mutual interests. Eros is, after all, the primary force that binds the universe together; so we must be creative in the ways we use that force to evolve new and appropriate ways to solve our problems and to make each other and ourselves happy.

1. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea*, 1964; Wikipedia, “Great Chain of Being,” 2022, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Great\_chain\_of\_being&oldid=1093238660. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
2. Francis Bacon, *Temporis Partus Masculus*; translation Anthony Wilden, 1972; see also Bacon 1964. Bacon, “Temporis Partus Masculus,” 1964. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
3. Sheldrake, *Entangled Life: How Fungi Make Our Worlds, Change Our Minds & Shape Our Futures*, 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
4. Zell, “Oberon Zell – Master Wizard,” 2018, https://oberonzell.com/. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
5. “The Grey School of Wizardry,” https://www.greyschool.net/. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
6. Wayland-Smith, *Oneida: From Free Love Utopia to the Well-Set Table*, 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
7. Zell-Ravenheart, *Green Egg Omelette: An Anthology of Art and Articles from the Legendary Pagan Journal*, 2008. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
8. Henrich, Heine, and Norenzayan, “The Weirdest People in the World?,” 2010; Henrich, Heine, and Norenzayan, “Most People Are Not WEIRD,” 2010; Henrich, Heine, and Norenzayan, “Beyond WEIRD: Towards a Broad-Based Behavioral Science,” 2010; Apicella, Norenzayan, and Henrich, “Beyond WEIRD: A Review of the Last Decade and a Look Ahead to the Global Laboratory of the Future,” 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
9. A phrase trademarked by TED Conferences, LLC, in 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)