1

Has Environmentalism Forgotten the Earth?

We live, we are told, in "the decade of the environment." Recycling is up, rainforest beef is out, and every bookstore in America is eager to offer us advice about how to Save the Earth. The 1992 United Nations Conference on the Environment was apparently the largest gathering of world leaders ever, and in the fall of that year the United States even elected an environmentalist vice-president.

And yet . . . and yet. Many environmentalists themselves feel a certain reservation about these very successes—notwithstanding that twenty years ago these were the very things we were calling for. We have lived in other "decades" too, and have gone on to other things. The 1970s were labeled "The Decade of the Environment" by none other than Richard Nixon. Our ecological problems have changed but have not become easier; quite the contrary. Our rivers are less flammable but more persistently afflicted by minute toxins like dioxin. Roadside litter is down, global temperatures are up.

We are all environmentalists now. Yet we stand at no less a distance from the more-than-human world: from "nature," from other animals and natural places. We are no more inclined to acknowledge—certainly not really to *feel*—that we ourselves are at stake with "nature," with the rest of the world: entwined,

enveloped, submerged in it. Vanishing species, to take just one example, are only regretted in the way that we might regret the loss of a television series. This is often the same thing; we regret the loss of more interesting episodes on the Discovery Channel, there being no other way that we know or are ever likely to have known anything wild. Meanwhile, by making such a point of the Earth's dependence on us—of the necessity for us to act to "Save the Earth"—we accentuate that very dependency. "The Earth" becomes more like an object of pity, allowing us to hold stronger feelings and personal vulnerabilities at a distance, at bay.

Listen—actually *listen*—to the standard rhetoric about "Saving the Earth," the kind of talk that now surrounds us on all sides.

> No part of the world is free from our dangerous influence. The rainforests of Brazil and the Arctic ice all bear the scars of pollution, or of exploitation. . . . We must now care for all of the living world. Wilderness is a collection of fragile species that must be rescued, nourished, and protected. . . . Our growing interest in nourishing and caring for plants and pets in our private spaces is reflected in the growing knowledge that we must preserve and care for the life of the entire planet.[1]

We are adrift in this kind of rhetoric. But there reasons to be uneasy. For one thing, the image of nature that emerges is that of a virtually helpless ward. The planet is explicitly compared to a *pet;* thus imagined to be utterly dependent, unequal, "fragile," something whose capacities and needs *we* understand, though in fact even our own prior record with respect to our pets is not encouraging. Wilderness is explicitly labeled a *collection* of species, like a kind of unorganized open-air museum: not a living system with its own integrity and with its own dynamics, many of them unknown to us, and perhaps unknowable. Then we are told that "we" must care for "it." Again we move ourselves outside the

system entirely. We have been "dangerous"; now we must "care." We are still the chief actors in this play, only now we must take a bit more care for the scenery.

Not to be misunderstood: I do not mean that the world is not in a sense fragile. I do not mean that we can be careless with it. But what is missing is the sense that we are *part* of this system—that it is not somehow "ours," that it has a coherence of its own, depths of order and possibility that we may not even suspect. Most of the action has nothing to do with us. There are interchanges in which humans do not set the terms from the beginning. Nature conserves us, as the Naskapi Indians say, not we it.

Albert Gore, in his remarkable best seller, *Earth in the Balance*, does insist that "we are part of the Earth." If we dump massive amounts of toxic chemicals into the environment, he writes, we should not be surprised when they show up, probably more toxic, somewhere else. We should not be surprised when the climate starts to change and the oceans start to rise. *Earth in the Balance* goes on to propose policies that will ameliorate at least some of this destruction: new fuels, massive conservation initiatives, economic measures that account for ecological costs.

There is more. At points, Gore goes beneath the immediate crisis. A kind of "disconnection," he says, underlies the crisis:

> The cleavage in the modern world between mind and body, man and nature, has created a new kind of addiction: I believe that our civilization is, in effect, addicted to the consumption of the Earth itself. This addictive relationship distracts us from the pain of what we have lost: a direct experience of our connection to the vividness, vibrancy, and aliveness of the rest of the natural world. The froth and frenzy of industrialized civilization mask our deep loneliness for that communion with the world that can lift our spirits and fill our senses with the richness and immediacy of life itself.[2]

We have lost the direct experience of the world, says Gore. Hence our "loneliness" and our "addiction." This claim—elaborated, psychologized, historicized at the length of a hundred pages—is extraordinary coming from a contemporary politician. Let us honor Gore for his courage as well as his clarity. He takes an enormous further step, and a risky step for someone in his position, beyond the familiar kind of environmentalism just discussed.

But here too a certain uneasiness arises. Another extraordinary fact: nowhere in that hundred pages does Gore say anything about what that "vividness, vibrancy, and aliveness of the rest of the natural world" or "the richness and immediacy of life itself" *actually come to.* We have indeed lost the direct experience of the world—the "direct experience of real life,"[3] as he puts it elsewhere—but there is almost no direct experience of that world, of that life, in this book. In the end we still see only the fragile, battered, agglomerated, homogenized "environment" featured in the ordinary environmental rhetoric. Gore's book still insistently speaks from a human, urban, economic, and political perspective. Waste-disposal problems, just for one example, are discussed chiefly in terms of economic justice to humans. Costs to other creatures and to ecosystems are seldom and only fleetingly highlighted as harms in their own rights. Obligations to future (human) generations—not the call of other creatures or the future Earth—are invoked in order to justify changes in economic measures to take account of ecological harms.

In short, we still stand at a distance from larger living worlds. Maybe more self-critical, but still at a distance. The invoked possibilities of connection, "vibrancy," and "aliveness" are still hidden behind Gore's critique of incomplete economic measures and his outrage at our "fouling our own nests." He still speaks from the human world rather than from some place in the more-than-human.

Again: not that ecologically sane policies are not desperately needed, not that Gore's approach is not extraordinary even for someone less pressured by public conformity than he. Right now, Earth often *is* "in the balance." The point is that Gore, too, in a more subtle way, stands at a distance from more-than-human worlds. The astonishingly wild possibilities of other animals and natural places still are not even hinted at. The closest we come is, as it were, under the sponsorship of God. When it seems possible for a moment that we might glimpse "an infinite image of God" in them, then Gore allows himself to speak of "the myriad slight strands from the Earth's web of life." Even here, though, nothing specific is said. None of these strands is teased out for wondering eyes to see. Is the world too embarrassing to speak of, even when it turns out, so to speak, to be God's body? Where is the voice of the bowhead whale and the warm wetness of the rains, the stars blazing through the bat-thick, insect-twitching sky?

This is not a new complaint. "Here is this vast, savage, howling mother of ours, Nature, lying all around, with such beauty, and such affection for her children, as the leopard; and yet we are so early weaned from her breast to society, to that culture which is exclusively an interaction of man on man—a sort of breeding in and in."[4] That is Henry David Thoreau, writing in 1862. Philosopher Neil Evernden made a similar complaint a decade ago. Environmentalism, says Evernden, has thoroughly absorbed the prevailing tendency to justify all things by reference to their usefulness to us, and moreover to put these justifications in the most technical, "value-free," and typically abstract language.

> During much of the history of the environmental movement it has been apparent that the incentive to preservation was personal and emotional. . . . But the arrival of ecology and . . . resource management has made it possible to be that contradictory being, a dispassionate environmentalist. . . . This has made the environ-

> mental arguments much more presentable to government agencies and to a disinterested public . . . [but] the underlying assumptions have shifted significantly. In learning to use numbers to talk about the world, [the environmentalist] forgets that his initial revolt was partly precipitated by people using numbers to talk about the world.[5]

And again, the problem is not just the use of numbers but the use of an entire abstract vocabulary. Even the term *environment*—and correspondingly the label *environmentalism*—turns out to be a snare. "Environment" literally means "surrounding." The term implicitly refers to something or someone "environed." In this sense it is a relative notion; it supposes a point of reference, something or someone surrounded. And of course that point of reference is—us! "*Our* environment" indeed! Again we present ourselves—just a little more subtly this time—at center stage. Even the idea of "the Earth" in "Save the Earth!" is a massive abstraction. We don't experience "the Earth." What we know, if we're lucky, are the squirrels chasing each other up and down these oak trees, the rumbling of a distant thunderstorm in the dark, the great cycles of the seasons. But "Save the Earth!" is what goes on our bumper stickers. Do we know what we are saying?

We turn to religious imagery. A speech attributed to the Duwamish Indian Chief Seattle ("How can you sell the air . . .?") is widely labeled the "Fifth Gospel." Ecologist Barry Commoner's maxim "Nature knows best" has been called, without a trace of irony, "The Eleventh Commandment." But suppose that the finality and authority of "commandments" is just what the more-than-human does *not* offer? Suppose that here we need to travel light, to walk in, like Thoreau, with just a walking stick and an apple, unsure what we will find, not armed with maps that tell us in advance what we will and should see? Even the "Fifth

Gospel," it turns out, is not what it seems. Though something called "Chief Seattle's speech" has reached the best-seller lists in the form of an illustrated children's book, that version bears at best a distant and often opposite relation to what Seattle apparently actually said. The familiar and much more congenial version was actually written by a Southern Baptist screenwriter in 1971, based—but on some points only very loosely—on a much darker speech attributed, but uncertainly, to the real Seattle.[6]

Professional environmental philosophers try to systematize all environmental values into one unified formula or principle and to discover the "basis" for all such values, to establish them, once and for all, by argument. The conservationist Aldo Leopold is supposed to have given us the formula: "A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community." But suppose that values *evolve*, like everything else in the more-than-human. Leopold himself, the very patron saint of environmental ethics, in fact insisted on just this evolution, two pages before the formula now cited as final. Values develop, he writes; every summary is tentative. So is his—so is any philosopher's. Remember that even the most fundamental shape of what we take to be "the environmental crisis" has changed with the decades. In the 1960s the problem was pollution: litter on the roads, sewage in the rivers. Now we are worried about global effects, like ozone depletion and global warming. Tomorrow, who knows?

No final answer is possible. Not now, probably not ever, but certainly not now, not with so many new questions and so many new possibilities opening up all at once. We cannot think our way back to the Earth. We can only *work* our way more thoroughly into and around the Earth, from the particular place within it that we already find ourselves: practically, mindfully, open-mindfully. But then what we do *not* need are more commandments or Indian Gospels or calls to arms. We need a different kind of environmentalism.

Here is what this book proposes.

Let us take seriously what Gore says but does not follow up: that we have lost a sense of the "vividness, vibrancy, and aliveness of the rest of the natural world" and "the richness and immediacy of life itself"—that this disconnection, on the deepest level, *is* "the environmental crisis." Let us take seriously the overtones in Seattle's words (or rather, in the scriptwriter's words, appropriating Seattle to speak them—for it is the image of the Indian, however dark his conclusions, that makes those words compelling): that knowing this Earth—always hearing its voices, watching, listening, living without insulation—is a kind of induction into mystery, belonging, rootedness.

Let us take seriously the implicit suggestion that ultimately the answer to "environmental crisis" is some restored sense of that "vibrancy" and that "richness." Recycling, habitat protection, wilderness preservation—of course, yes, this is crucial. But *ultimately* what we require, if we are to understand why we should even care about this Earth, is what Gore calls "direct experience with real life." Let us take seriously Evernden's suggestion that "dispassionate environmentalism," however effective in congressional hearing rooms, ultimately undercuts the very sense of connection to and participation in the more-than-human that environmentalism was supposed to speak for. Let us take seriously the implicit suggestion that we must restore that sense of connection and participation. And restore it *now*—not somehow only as a product of the right policies or principles, as if this too were only a task for the professional philosopher or politician.

This book attempts to reopen that lost sense of possibility: to explore some more-than-human worlds with these concerns in mind. We remember, for one thing, the other animals right next to us: animals that remain with us even now, like cats, dogs, horses, as well as the vast range of other creatures, some quite alien and wild, that have lived and worked with humans histori-

cally: pigs, cormorants, bees, weasels, elephants, and many more. Even now, mostly, we live in "mixed communities." Even now, moreover, many social but still wild species, like crows, also live "next" to us.

There are wilder stories, too: children raised by gazelles, whales singing to each other across oceans, the earth singing on the same frequencies as the dreaming brain. Human sociability opens up the possibility not merely of human adoption of other social animals but other animals' "adoptions" of humans, and certainly of deeply shared social worlds. Likewise our senses offer immense, layered, vital worlds to us—again shared and deeply engaging worlds, refracted in a thousand forms all around us. Our music and our speech themselves partly originate in natural sounds and patterns. When we speak of murmuring streams and whispering pines, whippoorwills and chickadees, the winds and the land and the birds themselves speak through us. "The original poetry," writes Gary Snyder, "is the sound of running water and the wind in the trees."[7] He means this literally. The phrase for "it is a fine evening," in the language of the Koyukon Indians, is the phrase the hermit thrushes sing at dusk in their forests. The Earth sings through us.

"Vitality and vibrancy" lie in such details. It is the stories that persuade, and ignite. Behind them, around their edges, we can pose questions about how so profound a rootedness of the human within the nonhuman is possible. The reader need not believe that all of the wilder stories are true. Their truth, in a sense, is not even the main point, though I will suggest that our habit of dismissing the possibilities of the rest of our world is often backed by no experience at all. (Lack of experience, in fact, makes it *possible*.) The real point, the real necessity, is to bring into focus the underlying connections.

Right now we know the *moon* better than the rainforests.[8] Our astronomers are busy sacrificing Mount Graham's endangered

red squirrels for a University of Arizona telescope project. Our space explorers have already pushed the dusky seaside sparrow into extinction by the construction of Cape Canaveral.[9] Yet all of them would be staggered to find the very same creatures on the other end of their telescopes or space probes. *Bacteria* on Mars would have been a tremendous discovery. Imagine finding a mosquito. Imagine finding—a dusky seaside sparrow.

Maybe we can see better from a distance. For a moment, suppose that we imagine Earth an alien planet. Imagine arching down in a long glide or a burst of fire to our very own places, even to our own backyards, finally escaping the merely human claustrophobia of some unimaginable starship with unutterable relief, undertaking our own "Mission to Earth," as some astronauts have actually proposed.[10] Imagine encountering strange beings, enormous or tiny, amorous or ancient perhaps, intricately specialized or preternaturally adaptive, floating, flying, dancing. But then open your eyes: this is our own planet.

> When you listen over a pair of headphones to whales . . . in deep ocean, it's really as though you were listening from within the Horsehead Nebula, or some galactic space that is otherworldly, not part of anything you know, where the boat is floating. Once, on an early fall night, I was coming back from the Arctic, where I had been [studying] bowhead whales in a boat at sea. As we flew down across the Canadian Arctic, we were beneath an arc of northern lights, which were pure green and bell-shaped. We and the plane were the clapper of this bell, with the green light over us. And for the first time in my life I felt that I was in the position of the whale that is singing to you when you're in the boat and just listening to it. That's the kind of space that is somehow illuminated, depicted, made sensible by the hydrophones. It gives you a special impression of the sea. We all love the ocean's beautiful blue sparkle, but beneath it, down deeper, whales are moving with the slow drifting currents, whales that are great, gentle cloudlike beings.[11]

Great, gentle cloudlike beings; genuinely alien and yet co-inhabitants of our own world, once so crowding the seas that they were regularly reported as navigational hazards,[12] hunted worldwide to the brink of extinction for lamp oil and perfume; but still there, even if barely, in some places, at least. The oceans still sing. A cat hunches over this very desk as I write, bats hang under your eaves, one hundred million monarch butterflies migrate, every year, four thousand miles, from the northern United States and Canada to winter on the California coast, following what nature writer John Hay calls "nature's great headings," invisible to us.[13] Even now, with all our blazing cities, bioluminescent currents and eddies in the ocean are the last light departing astronauts see from earth.[14] A species of leaf-eating weevil, one inch long, camoflauges itself by carrying a forest of tiny ferns and mosses in crevasses on its back; still tinier insects live in that forest. Worlds within worlds. Bacteria live in rocks three miles below the surface of the Earth; the latest theory is that life on Earth may have originated in the interior and that subterranean bacteria and other forms of life feeding on the planet's chemical and thermal energy (and equally possible on, or rather *in*, other planets too, by the way) actually outweigh all life on the surface.[15] Our own bodies harbor billions of bacteria, while we ourselves may play a role like our bodies' bacteria in the larger living organism that is now supposed, by some scientists, to include all life on Earth.[16]

We live in a bizarre and wild place. We live in the midst of life so immense, so weirdly varied, so pervasive, that perhaps it is no surprise that we have had to tune some of it out in order to function at all. That humans evolved from apes is still controversial in some quarters, but the newspapers this week have been speaking of the latest theory: that humans and *fungi* share a relatively recent evolutionary ancestor.[17] We can't deal with it. But yet we must; and we must deal with it now, if we are not truly

to turn the whole world into the desolate and utterly humanized wasteland that too many of us already inhabit.

So this book has a second aim. To reopen a lost sense of possibility, first; but then to ask how—practically, concretely, *now*—we can live out some of those possibilities. Seeing ourselves once again as "part of this Earth"—another phrase of Gore's that this book aims to give a genuine, concrete, experienced meaning—still may sound very much like something that goes on only in a person's head. But more than attitudes are at stake. Snyder writes of the necessity of what he calls "wild etiquette": the sense that our comportment matters, in fact matters fundamentally, and as much toward larger living worlds and specific other nonhumans as toward other humans. The proposal in this book is that he is right in the most literal sense. My intention is to explore in the most literal sense—even in the most pedestrian sense, as Snyder does not—what this proposal might actually mean. How shall we now live?

There is no single answer. There are only a multiplicity of possibilities, springing up everywhere, like a genuine revolution, like weeds in the garden. Consider "quiet zones," for one example: new settings, deliberately protected areas, where cars, lawnmowers, stereos, and their kin do not define the soundscape, therefore a life shared with the more-than-human in the simplest ways: winds, birds, silence. Consider walking. Consider the actual reconstruction of neighborhoods, houses, bikeways, fields, gardens, and much more. New kinds of houses, new kinds of holidays. Attention to the intersections of human and nonhuman places, where encounters can occur. Attention to (re)constructing the day-to-day conditions of nonhuman as well as human spontaneity.

No doubt new kinds of houses and new kinds of holidays are not quite what one expects. It is easier to bemoan the lost wilderness than to try to teach your children the constellations in

Millions of official research dollars pour into "objective" academic research on captive animals—or dead animals, the perfect subjects—while Nollman just jury-rigs some floating drums and paddles out to visit his friends. Can we generalize such a practice? I think so.

Again: "vitality and vibrancy" lie in such details. *All* of the constructive argument lies in such details. It is only by recounting and connecting innumerable stories that the possibilities in front of us, and their perils and their promise, can be seen for what they are. And this, I want to suggest, is truly "deep ecology," whatever else some philosophers mean by that phrase. The "depth" we seek is not some sort of privileged metaphysical profundity. It lies in learning and then inhabiting the infinity of stories and possibilities and connections that open up once you actually find yourself anywhere in this dancing, piercing world. We look not down but *around*. We seek not some philosophical "grounding" but the actual ground: the Earth. We seek "depth" in, as it were, thickness. Let the librarians, when this book must be catalogued in relation to "deep ecological" works now in vogue, call it a work of "*thick* ecology." And so we come back to Earth. . . .