

Techno-Earth and the Rainbow Covenant

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Howard Nemerov has described the place we stand today on Earth Day 1989:

Earth's wrath at our assaults is slow to come
But relentless when it does. It has to do
With catastrophic change, and with the limit
At which one order more of magnitude
Will bring us to a qualitative change
And disasters drastically different
-From "Magnitudes"

Senator Albert Gore put it in another way:

Was it an appropriate technology when God gave human beings dominion over the earth? The jury is still out. And the answer has to come in our lifetime from the political system.

You read both Nemerov and Gore if you looked at the January 2, 1989, issue of *Time* magazine. That they appeared in *Time* is itself an indication of where our consciousness is this Earth Day.

My intention this afternoon is to move somewhat impressionistically over two themes that are instructive for me as I reflect on what Earth Day means. The first of these emerges directly from the Nemerov and Gore pieces—the issue of survival.

I. Survival: The Challenge of Our Symbols

Religious people and intellectuals ordinarily prefer to make their moves on the upper floors of society's edifice. If given a choice, they stay out of the basement where the talk is always about nothing but survival, because both saints and intellectuals like to think that their ideas and theories are motivated by higher ideals and purer values than mere survival. Nemerov's is a basement poem, however, and Senator Gore shares with the cleanup crews in Prince William Sound a sense that survival is the issue.

Why is the religious community so embarrassed by serving survival? Of course, critical observers would call this our hypocrisy, since we are frequently serving our survival, often in quite crass and direct ways. Critics would say that our problem lies with our symbols; we cannot admit that we are interested in survival, because our symbols tell us that there are more important things for us.

I learned this point about survival the hard way. At an international conference at Christ Church, Oxford, in 1979, I suggested, "Theology has no alternative today but to speak its truth about what is and what ought to be in terms relevant to survival." A noted philosopher, who also happens to be a devoted Christian, took sharp issue with me. Let me quote her response, since it states the matter eloquently:

The conclusion that survival . . . is the most urgent value may itself be regarded as morally repugnant. This value judgment conflicts directly with the traditional Christian judgment that the chief end of man is to glorify God. God in his wisdom may have ordained values that are consistent with earthly extinction; to suppose otherwise is to embrace some form of materialism. (Peacocke, *The Sciences and Theology in the 20th Century*, p. 284)

My point here is that our responsibility for the earth today receives its definition and its elaboration within an ambiance of plain and crass survival-survival of the physical and biological systems of the planet and survival of those phases of the earth systems that we call *Homo sapiens* and its culture. If the religious communities cannot sincerely and openly and honestly work with survival as a value and goal, then they cannot stand in solidarity with either the human community or with the planetary creation in this moment.

Is it clear that we can serve survival as our mission? I leave that for you to answer in your own ways. For my part, I would say that we face here a dilemma of symbols. As persons of religious faith, we live and move by symbols and rituals. These symbols and rituals are the powerful motors of belief and action. Unfortunately, they are not infrequently instruments of self-deception and confusion. On Earth Day it is appropriate to point out that we do not ordinarily rehearse our symbols so as to position ourselves in solidarity with survival movements, including those that serve the earth. Since symbols and rituals are central to our lives, we must give prime attention to the symbolic issues that may illumine our role in solidarity for survival. The challenge of our symbols is urgent.

A major example of retrieval of symbols that may alter our philosopher's views on survival takes place in what is perhaps the pivotal ritual of the Christian faith, the Easter Vigil, when we find ourselves ritually placed before the tomb, awaiting the resurrection of Jesus Christ, a placement that took place just three weeks ago. First, we listened to the account of Creation:

God called the dry land Earth and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good The earth brought forth vegetation, plants . . . and trees And God saw that it was good. And God made the two great lights . . . to rule the day . . . and to rule the night And God saw that it was good And God created . . . every living creature And God saw that it was good and God made the beasts of the earth And God saw that it was good. (Genesis 1:10-25)

Having recalled the Creation by God, we proceeded ritually to the covenant with Noah after the Flood, wherein God pledged fidelity to the entire created order along with *Homo sapiens*.

Then Noah built an altar to the Lord, And when the Lord smelled the pleasing odor, the Lord said, " I will never again curse the ground because of human beings, for the imagination of the human heart is evil from their youth; neither will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done." . . . Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, " Behold, I establish my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the cattle, and every beast of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth."

And God said, "This is the sign of the covenant which I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth." (Genesis 8:20-9:13)

Occurring as it does, for Christians, within the ritual of the Easter Vigil, the Rainbow Covenant with Noah is connected to the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The meaning is unavoidable: the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth is an event within a continuum of events in which God has been active. The resurrection is a ratification and intensification of the covenants that Yahweh has made through the centuries. The covenants made with the earth, with every living thing, and with the descendants of Noah and Abraham are all linked together, with Jesus Christ. This is surely a major symbolic and ritual ground for Christians to take survival seriously as an issue for faith and mission. When removed from its associations with Jesus Christ, could the symbols of creation and rainbow not speak to others, as well?

A most interesting point here is that rainbow covenant is made in the awareness that humans often work against it. Humans notwithstanding, God has made a commitment to the earth and its living things. What might this mean? Can we step outside ourselves and our anthropocentric perspective for a moment to imagine what this might mean? It is not, first of all, that God will punish us if we work against the earth and its inhabitants. Rather, it is that when we do so, God is on the other side, working in behalf of the earth. Can we in any sense picture what the work of God against us, in behalf of the earth, might look like?

There are other symbols that may redirect our perceptions of the significance of survival. We can only sketch them here. Some theologians, like Sallie McFague and the process theologians, are exploring the usefulness of the image of the world as the body of God. Such a symbol may have problems, of which its proponents are well aware, but it does heighten our sense that God's cosmic reality and involvement could sustain a mandate for survival of the earth.

Symbols of Christ also point in this direction. Here in Hyde Park, theologian Joseph Sittler spoke strongly in favor of the Cosmic Christ symbol, based on Colossians. ". . . all things were created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together." For those who hold to other religious faiths, this set of symbols is not so moving, perhaps even offensive, but for Christians they are a reminder, as Sittler said in his 1962 World Council of Churches address in New Delhi, that " unless the reference and the power of the redemptive act includes the whole of human experience and environment, straight out to its farthest horizon, then the redemption is incomplete. (*Currents*, 2/89, p. 7)

The symbol of crucified Jesus as the act of the God who cares and suffers with the suffering of humankind has been proposed by Liberation theologians, particularly those from Latin America, but also by process theologians and others. In a different form, it is a motif in the work of those who are seeking to rejuvenate the theology of the Trinity. Could the co-suffering of God not also be construed as suffering with earth that groans with special travail under the weight of human beings?

The Holy Spirit has also served as a symbol of God's care for the earth. I cite only the sonnet of Jesuit Gerard Manley Hopkins, "God's Grandeur." He describes the assaults of humans upon the earth:

Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell.
In the conclusion, he turns his vision around:
And for all this, nature is never spent;
there lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
And though the last lights off the black West went
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs-
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

If God has indeed made a covenant with the earth and its living things, quite apart from human intentions; if the earth can in some sense be associated with God's body; if the Christ of the Christians includes earth both in his sufferings and his cosmic redemption; if the living power of God's Spirit can never be exorcised from the earth-then, surely, Christians and other religious folk who share some of these symbols, can put their efforts behind survival of earth and its people.

We have spoken of symbols and rituals, because they are central. But survival cannot avoid politics. Senator Gore says, " The answer has to come in our lifetime from the political system." Religious people have always had difficulty moving from religious symbols and rituals to politics. I come from a tradition that is significantly, although not exclusively, quietist. Consequently, I gladly listen to other communities, particularly to Jews, Catholics, and Calvinists, who have moved more adroitly into the political realm, especially the American political realm. The politics of survival for earth, the politics of the Rainbow Covenant are very much the order of the day.

II. Earth is Techno-Earth

My second emphasis this afternoon purposely focuses upon a symbol that is jarring: earth as techno-earth. The time for romanticism in these matters is long past. The earth that is caught up in the survival struggle today is a different earth from what many picture it to be. We are not talking about an earth that is untouched by human hands, a pristine earth. The earth, the nature, with which God has made a rainbow covenant has taken on a strikingly different character. Let me read to you a fantasy which makes my point:

We imagine ourselves to be looking down upon planet Earth in the days before there was a human species. There are not cities of men and women, no campfires or their traces, none of the signs that Homo Sapiens is about. If you are able, transport yourself into this scene, draw very close to the Earth, walk upon it, and try to place yourself within the ecosystem of planet Earth before human beings appeared. As you become a part of this ecosystem without humans, note carefully that there are two things about this ecosystem that are so radically different from our

present Earth that they make it almost impossible for us to imagine pre-human affairs. I am not talking about the difficulty of imagining a planet unspoiled by human garbage, pollution, highways, electric light poles, and the like. No, I am referring to something so strange that we can scarcely imagine a world without it.

In an ecosystem without human beings, nothing has a name and virtually nothing has a use, at least not a use in the sense that we think of. What is that tall brown barked pole with green pieces in its limbs? What is that long, winding silvery trail of water that meanders here and there? No one has yet appeared to call them trees and rivers. And what are they for? The birds have certainly not decided to use the trees for nests in the same way that we use them for firewood and newsprint manufacture. And consider that considerable amount of brown mineral that runs in veins underneath the Earth's crust. No one has yet appeared to call it iron ore or to mine it and use it.

Can you imagine what the ecosystem and its members might have thought and said as they watched Homo Sapiens come upon the scene? If we could impute a consciousness and conversation to the pre-human citizens of planet Earth, what sort of conversation might we hear as they watched humans come and develop? For example, might that brown mineral stuff say, " I always thought of myself as comfortable hard stuff here in the cool earth. Can you imagine my surprise when I found out that I was iron ore, and that I could rise out of this loamy bed and become railroad tracks and skyscrapers and bridges. These brothers and sisters who call themselves human beings are really marvelous creatures. Look what they've done, they've given me a name and made me into more than I ever dreamed possible. They told me who I was!"

And suppose that silvery, watery ribbon would respond: " You mean they told you who they think you are and then they made you into that. I agree with you, that it is a proud thing to move out of the earth and up into the air as a tall building. And being a rail in a track is not bad either. But were you just as happy when they told you you were a bullet and an intercontinental ballistic missile silo? Or a military tank? What was so great about that? They did the same to me. They name me a river, and I didn't mind that. And then they called me an artery of traffic and industry, carrying their boats. I didn't mind that, either-I carried you to the steel mills, by the way, and I rather got to like you. After all, we scarcely knew each other before THEY brought us together. But one day they came up with another name for me-garbage disposal system! And they made me into one of the best."

" They did the same to me"-the atmosphere is talking now. " And you know, it's so infernally difficult to talk back to those two-legged brothers and sisters. In fact, I can't. It's only by indirect signals that I can get a message through to them. I don't want to eat out their lungs when they breathe me in, but I can't help it, if they're going to pour ozone and hydrocarbons into me. I just can't dispose of that garbage, but I can hope that they'll get the point and give me a new name and a new use. The problem is, those brothers and sisters are the only ones who can really discover what my name is, and the only ones who can really extend my usefulness. But when they make a mistake in their naming and using-man, it's really hell . . ."

This conversation among the pre-human inhabitants of our ecosystem is fanciful and, if taken literally, misleading at some points. But it nevertheless highlights a fundamental truth about human beings and about our own time in history.

Today we find that the human community has covered the earth not only in a quantitative manner, but in a qualitative sense. We have humanified the ecosystem of the globe. There is no significant portion of the terrestrial ecosystem that does not, as Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote a century ago, "wear man's smudge and share man's smell."

We have placed a technological overlay upon the natural systems of such a sort that no segment of the globe of any substantial size is free from the smell or the smudge. Furthermore, all of the significant earth systems are now operating with technological enhancement. The natural systems of temperature and climate, the waterways, the atmosphere, the agricultural fertility of the soil, the products of farming and livestock raising, the gathering and processing of foodstuffs—these and many more are all still operating, but they are intensified and manipulated by technological enhancements.

If nature refers to the world as it was before humans came on the scene, then there is very little that is natural any longer. Scarcely anyone in the room this evening has ever eaten a natural orange or a natural steak or drunk a glass of natural milk or cream. In Chicago, we cannot even get a natural catfish. They're farm grown nowadays! But we are mistaken to define nature in this manner. Nature is real today, but it is not nature untouched by human hands; it is humanified nature, technologized nature. This nature also includes the social systems that interact with the ecosystem: the way society is organized, distribution systems, definitions of poverty and wealth and social policies toward both, what activities of technological enhancement are most prized, best rewarded, how persons are chosen for training to fill the best or the least rewarded positions.

We may call our natural situation today by the term it deserves: Technological Civilization. It is defined as the condition of life in which the quantity and the quality of our existence are thoroughly and inescapably dependent upon the support base of human cultural products, which in turn means that they are dependent upon human decision and the products of human decision. It is no longer possible anywhere for anyone, except on rare occasions, to live life as it comes naturally without the overlay of human decision and culture. If we were to attempt to return to such a state, we would in that very act consign half of the world's present population to death, because we simply cannot sustain our population without technological enhancement of the geosphere and the biosphere.

The earth that is now so thoroughly technologically enhanced by our Technological Civilization is what I call techno-earth or techno-nature. These terms are awkward and initially ugly. I retain them purposely, because the challenge is to render them beautiful, to work with the earth so that they do not violate the Rainbow Covenant of God.

Our first reaction may be to lament this situation. Such a lament may have a good point behind it—to warn us that technological enhancement of the ecosystem is risky and difficult. Indeed, the

situation in which earth has become techno-earth is perhaps the most dangerous, risky, and vulnerable situation earth and its humans have ever found themselves in. As such it is a symbol of the precariousness of human existence itself. This lament may also contain within it a misguided sentimentalism. Technological Civilization is not just our imposition on the evolutionary process, it is the evolutionary process. Intrinsically, a burger that has been technological produced, from the artificial insemination of the cow to the preparation of the meat in a fast-food emporium is no better or worse than honey produced by the bees.

What is at issue in the technologically enhanced burger, or in any other aspect of the Technological Civilization is the human decision factor. It seems that evolution and its natural processes have generated a creature who can act intentionally, on the basis of decisions made. This constitutes a measure of freedom and self-defining, co-creating capacity. Technological Civilization is the work of the human created co-creator just as surely and just as naturally as the honey is the work of the honey bee or the milk is the work of the cow.

The question facing us today is, if nature now cannot proceed adequately without enhancement by human decision, how should those decisions be guided? by what values? We can all share with Senator Albert Gore the worry about whether when God created Homo Sapiens that act provided earth an appropriate technology or a destructive technology. We do not need to rehearse once again the threatening situation which the human co-creator has brought us to through the marvels of technological civilization. We do need to reflect upon the values that may guide the CO-creator.

Let me read another Gerard Manley Hopkins sonnet, " Ribblesdale":

Earth, sweet Earth, sweet landscape, with leaves throng
and loughed low grass, heaven that dost appeal
To, with no tongue to plead, no heart to feel;
That canst but only be, but dost that long-
Thou canst but be, but that thou well dost; strong
Thy plea with him who dealt, nay does now deal,
Thy lovely dale down thus and thus bids reel
Thy river, and o'er gives all to rack or wrong.
And what is Earth's eye, tongue, or heart else, where
Else, but in dear and dogged man? Ah, the heir
To his own self bent so bound, so tied to his turn,
To thriftless reave both our rich round world bare
And none reck of world after, this bids wear
Earth brows of such care, care and dear concern.

"And what is Earth's eye, tongue, or heart else, where / Else, but in dear and dogged man?"
Earth's eye, tongue, and heart can be nothing else than the human community in the age of techno-earth. And if we are to be realistic about being earth's representative, under the rainbow covenant, in the age of techno-nature, then we must renew ourselves to the gravity and scope of the calling. It is religious, first of all, and it requires symbolic and ritual renewal. It is also technological and political. I was asked to speak about "the inherent connection between politics and religion." I have not done that. I have devoted myself to symbols and rituals. I hope that you

see, however, that I have spoken of symbols that are intrinsically non-sentimental and which are inherently political-survival; and techno-earth. Moreover, symbols and rituals lead directly to praxis. Without praxis the symbols and the rituals will be empty, abortive, futile and hypocritical. With more time, we could talk about how and why this is so. Let us bend ourselves to the symbols and to the politics of the symbols, so that we can carry on the proper praxis for the support of the earth.