

Oregon State Bar
Sustainable Future Section

Photo: J. Michael Mattingly

The Long View

Beside the Blue River: An Ethic of, and for, the Earth



By Kathleen Dean Moore

This much seems clear: The old ethic – the ethic that allowed us to ransack the world – has been a failed experiment. To be-

lieve that humans are separate from and superior to the rest of the world, to believe that the Earth and all its lives have value only for their usefulness to human ends, to believe that any act is permissible if it maximizes human benefit – this worldview has led us to life-destroying and ultimately self-destructive lives. Based on a now outdated scientific view of a mechanistic Earth, the worldview is inconsistent with emerging ecological and evolutionary understandings of a wildly creative planet.

Contemporary science (and almost all the religions of the world) tell us that humans are members of complex communities of interdependent parts and achieve their full humanity in relation to others. Because the well-being of the whole depends on the thriving of the parts, all parts have value. We are dependent on the Earth, and the Universe is dependent on us, we creatures of consciousness and conscience, through whom the universe reflects on its own meaning and celebrates its beauty.

Can we imagine a new ethic based on our expanded understanding of the Earth? That's the challenge that the Spring Creek Project took on this year, when we called together twenty-five visionaries from the worlds of ecology, philosophy, fiction, social science, forestry, theology, indigenous wisdom and literature. Under ancient cedars along the Blue River in Oregon, we set about our work: From all the ideas emerging in our various fields, we sought to find a common vision of who we are, we human beings, and how we ought to live in a world that is interconnected, interdependent, finite, resilient, and heart-breakingly beautiful.

Here is an excerpt from The Blue River Declaration. The full document can be found at:

www.springcreek.oregonstate.edu/documents/BlueRiverDeclaration.2012.pdf.d

The Blue River Declaration: An Ethic of the Earth

A truly adaptive civilization will align its ethics with the ways of the Earth. A civilization that ignores the deep constraints of its world will find itself exactly where humanity is now, on the threshold of making the planet inhospitable to humankind and other species. The question for our time is, How might we create a concordance between ecological and moral principles, and thus imagine an ethic that is of, rather than against, the Earth

Given that life on Earth is interconnected, an ethic of the Earth affirms the need to foster the mutual flourishing of all life and honor our obligations to present and future generations of all beings.

Given that humanity is inescapably dependent on the Earth for gifts both material and spiritual, we humans are called to be grateful and humble. A new ethic calls us to defend and nurture the regenerative potential of the Earth, to return Earth's generosity with our own healing gifts of mind, body, emotion, and spirit.

Given that the Earth's resources and resilience are finite, human flourishing depends on embracing a new ethic of self-restraint to replace a destructive ethos of excess. Limitless economic growth as a measure of human well-being is inconsistent with the continuity of life on Earth. It should be replaced by an economics of regeneration.

Given that life on Earth is resilient, humanity can take courage in Earth's power to heal. We can find guidance in the richness of diverse cultures and ecosystems. Respect

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and justice are necessary conditions for civilizations that endure. To damage the natural sources of resilience — oceans, atmosphere, soil, biodiversity, cultural diversity — is both foolhardy and an offense against the future.

An ethic of the Earth thus calls into question current capitalist economic systems, educational systems, food production methods, and systems of land use and ownership. It calls for a re-examination of what it means to be happy, and what it means to be smart. This questioning will release the power and beauty of the human imagination to create more collaborative economies, more mindful ways of living, more deeply felt arts, and more inclusive processes that respect the ways of life of all beings. In this sheltering home, humanity can begin to restore both the natural world and the human spirit.



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