**Great Mother: A Re-Emerging Nature Reverence Tradition**

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Ad blurb: If we were to try and craft a religion for the modern world, how would we go about it? Maybe we could start by blending scientific knowledge with the passion of the eco-justice movement. Though re-evaluating our relationship with Mother Earth might provide us with the will-to-change, it will not be enough unless we also possess a sincere reverence for nature. Is it possible for us to still have gratitude for our Mother while we live so far removed from her?

(3rd slide) Suppose for a moment that you had never had exposure to a faith tradition. That’s right, no exposure, none. Supposing you had heard somewhere that religious people tend to lead happier lives.1 Being of a critical frame of mind, you look into this a bit deeper and you find that it is not the simple affiliation with a religious institution that makes you happier, but rather it seems to be the sustained level of participation and engagement with a religious community that makes you happier.1 Maybe you decide that you want more community in your life that you can be engaged with. That’s it! What if you wanted to create your own religion?

What is a religion? When you dive in, you’ll find that while we aren’t quite sure what a religion is, religions in general seem to be composed of a sort of an interlocking set of building blocks, including:

1. Rituals performed together

2. Taboo restrictions

3. Authorities with specialized knowledge

4. Myths or explanatory narratives

5. Sacred things, set apart from the mundane

6. Supernatural agents, not reality, but affecting it

7. Moral obligations, to lead an ethical lifestyle

8. Meaning and purpose, to organize our lives

These essential building blocks of religion, which when they are all present together, seem to be able to flexibly respond to change in a successful way. It seems that it is possible that religion itself had arisen as a complex adaptive system for helping humans cooperate to “overcome ever-present ecological challenges”.2

Wow! This is exciting. Haven’t you been hearing about scientists warning humanity about looming environmental and climate crises not once, but twice, that “great change in our stewardship of the Earth and the life on it is required, if vast human misery is to be avoided”.3 Could a new religion be a way for you to build a community, to find ways to collectively engage and adapt to the challenges we face?

(4th) Where to start? It seems like we need a story, a way to visualize how all those building blocks of religion fit together. Maybe we’ll start with a creation myth. We could look to the best theory we have of the Big Bang 13.7 billion years ago that created the universe, and of the accelerating expansion of the universe.4,5 Next we’ll have to add the story of how the Earth formed 4.5 billion years ago.6 Then we’ll need to breathe some life into this cosmic tale: we’ll need to tell the story of the Epic of Evolution.7

Now we’ve got a story, what’s next? We need a storyteller. Our scientists have the specialized knowledge of the new mythology, but now we need them to be conduits, bringing their nuanced understandings of the tale to our universal need for meaning. Though representing some level of authority, these storytellers are there to help guide us through complexities of the narrative, so that we can form emotional bonds with the characters and glean the moral implications of the larger story.8,9

(5th) Science cannot be used to directly and simplistically define what is moral behaviour, in part because the facts of what is, do not necessarily define what a specific group of humans think ought to be. In fact, when it has been tried in the past to derive morals out of current scientific theory, the result has been pseudoscience at best and outright horrific and oppressive at worst. Nevertheless, as science is revealing deeper and richer details about the universe every single day maybe our scientists do have something to tell us, both about the ways we live in tension with each other and about our evolutionary fit with the Earth.10,11

If we as humans have a will towards meaning, as Viktor Frankl suggests, we have a need to connect with, and to serve, something greater than ourselves, we have a need to use the work of our lives for a greater good, and we have a need to build loving relationships with others. If being a living, conscious creature has meaning, and that meaning is founded on connection, then we need an interconnected web of life to connect to.12 Isn’t this exactly what we name in our 7th principle, “Respect for the Interdependent Web of All Existence of Which We Are a Part”?13 Every single method of deriving meaning out of the universe, comes from the existence and interactions of living beings.

Morals are hard to derive from science, but meaning is easy to derive while within communities of living beings. Hmmm, what other situation brings together scientific facts with progressive morals to discuss the protection of communities of living beings? The new environmental movement, of course, or more specifically, the global climate rallies in 2019.14 The rallies represented millions of people, in 185 countries, joining together again and again, to collectively protest the anthropogenic climate change and environmental degradation threatening the stability of our biosphere.14 Wait, wasn’t collective ritual another of the building blocks of a religion?

And taboos? To reduce our carbon footprint, we need to drive less, fly less, eat less meat, buy less, waste less, and use less energy.15 Less, the key word is less. Has carbon become a taboo? Has the idea of “more” become a taboo? Millions of people are rallying around the world to tell us what we need to do less of, it seems like they have a moral consensus on the restrictions we should be placing on ourselves.14,15

(6th) What is sacred? Let us start with what is important for life. Life needs the right combination of matter and energy, in a location with just enough of each, held together by gravity, under specific conditions of pressure and temperature.16 Then, life needs the presence of liquid water, abundant carbon, and the additional elements of hydrogen, nitrogen, oxygen, phosphorus and sulfur.16 But that is just the barest minimum of the physio-chemical conditions needed for life, what about the vast array of ecosystem services provided to life, by other life?16,17 Life provides other life with clean water, nutrients and the removal of wastes. Populations of organisms interacting in community are maintained or migrate, or go extinct.17 Additional ecosystem services result in processes whereby climate and other extreme events are mitigated, cultural and physical acts of pollination occur, and fun and beauty happen alongside medicine and genetics.17 In short, life needs other life. Therefore, we must consider life to be sacred.

If you were wanting to create such a new religion, what would you call it? Maybe on a technical level, you could name it something like what Paul Bramadat has named it, “reverential naturalism”; that would be an apt description of what you might be feeling being a part of the natural universe.18 Supernatural agents aren’t considered to exist inside an entirely naturalistic framework.18

Or maybe, you could call it Gaia 2.0.19 Lovelock and Margulis proposed a Gaia hypothesis back in the 1970’s that the entire Earth is colonized by a self-regulating super-organism that is 3.8 billion years old, and that the chemical composition of the atmosphere and ocean is a direct result of Gaia’s life processes over that time.20 While bracketing this claim of a planetary super-organism itself, it is true that life has blanketed the Earth in a network of organisms, all of whom spontaneously use energy to live, and all of whom reciprocally grow and check each others growth.19,20 Assuming an ultra-stable planet Earth is just what we can’t do in the face of climate catastrophe, but the sensitive, joyful feedback from our scientists into our collective story about the resilience and the diversity of natural ecosystems, is what we need right now.14,19,20

(7th) Or you could take a different tack, and call it listening to Mother Earth, as did indigenous youth Rose Whipple at the climate change COP25 conference.21 Or you could call it protecting Pachamama, as they did in Bolivia during a conference to pass the law of the Rights of Mother Nature.22

I found a reference to an idea by Vine Deloria Jr. who said that we should have connection and responsibility for seven generations, starting with our own generation, looking both backwards and forwards in time to our great-great grandparents and our great-great grandchildren.23 In developed countries, our generation time is about 30 years.24 Therefore, we should be considering the rolling 210 year period bounding our own lifespan.24

Here we run into a bit of a problem of scale, from the personal understanding of mother in your own life, to the global understanding of the archetype of a Great Mother, or a Mother goddess, that has been present in many cultures around the world since pre-history.25 But it doesn’t have to be a problem; it can be a solution. If Mother’s Day, on the second Sunday in May as we practice it, is only a little over 110 years old and Earth Day was only established 50 years ago in 1970, our western Earth/Mother traditions only extend back 110 years.26,27 How will we look to the next 100 years?

(8th) We could in all seriousness look to the future with trepidation, as the worst-case scenarios for climate change by 2100 are unprecedentedly stark in their negative aspects.28 But what if we wanted that religion, the one of collective climate rallies and carbon taboos, the one of scientist storytellers and the one where meaning is derived from interconnections? Then you have to do the hard work of having hope, of earning hope for ourselves, personally and collectively by having climate goals and reaching them.29 We need the despair we feel so that we can have the courage to construct hope for ourselves.29 Hope is despair learning to cope with uncertainty and learning to keep going towards what is meaningful.29

Between passivity and burnout, there is a mediating factor, community.29 Didn’t we start this journey to a new religion because we wanted a community to engage with? I found a quote by the people who run Earth Day that their event is the “largest secular observance in the world, marked by more than a billion people”.27

(9th) Didn’t we start all this new religion stuff because we wanted to be happier? Research in positive psychology shows us that consistently engaging in gratitude is known to increase long-term happiness.30 We can be grateful for our own Mothers and for our Great Mother at the same time. Our happiness can be built up by that gratitude and by those relationships we build in community, in our climate rally rituals and in our sacred ecosystem services. In that new religious community, we not only partake of the meaning of being part of the grand unfolding of the Epic of Evolution but we also partake of the collective despair, despair which drives our courage into action towards hope.7,12,29 We need a spiritual story for our age, told by master storytellers who can merge our evolutionary fit to the new morality tale we need: the Re-Emerging Nature Reverence Tradition.

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