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PRACTICING PARTNERSHIP WITH THE EARTH: NURTURING THE EVOLUTION OF A CARING ALLIANCE BASED ON RECIPROCITY AND RESPECT

Ann Amberg, M.C.S.

Abstract

This article highlights the value and importance of partnership practices focused on deepening our personal relationship with nature. In a context of the movement from domination to partnership systems, the author suggests the possibility of identifying ourselves in a larger context, as planetary humans, and offers insight into the perceptive shifts required to cultivate reciprocal and respectful relationships with the natural world. Through the suggestion of accessible earth-focused partnership practices aligned with primal biodynamic earth patterns, the reader will gain a deeper understanding of how an embodied partnership with nature's life forces can help restore wholeness at the personal, collective, and planetary level.

Keywords: Earth; nature; partnership; domination; relationship with nature; mindfulness; everyday practice; consciousness; climate change; grief; action on behalf of the earth; mutually enhancing relationships; biodynamic patterns; complexity; resilience

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INTRODUCTION

In the early 1990s, I heard cultural historian and evolutionary philosopher Thomas Berry speak at St. James Cathedral in Seattle. He posed a question as metaphor: “If humanity is stranded on a lifeboat that has a hole and is sinking, what is the higher priority—patching the boat, or saving the people in the boat?” (1990). He was clear that both humanity and the boat (the earth) are in peril, but that we must address the integrity of the earth first; it is our foundation, our home, and our primary economy. This image has stayed with me and informed much of my work as an educator in cultural transformation and spiritual ecology. Since 2002, I've facilitated study groups and

designed courses for adult leaders that bring together holistic science, evolutionary philosophy, ecoliteracy, and feminine values. My central focus and passion is discovering, through reciprocal learning and experiential, nature-based inquiry, how people in modern Western cultures connect with the imagination of the earth itself to embrace a living relationship with the natural world—to explore and embody an evolving sacred ecology. In my experience working with people, and in solitary wanderings in the natural world, I’ve learned that people in modern societies can learn to work in partnership with biological and cosmological life systems to release outmoded domination structures and nurture our birthright as planetary humans.

PRACTICES FOR HEALTHY EARTH PARTNERSHIPS

“The awareness that we are all part of an exquisitely interwoven web of life is part of a resurging partnership consciousness. I think that deep inside we all carry this consciousness, that it lies behind the profound connection many of us feel with nature.”

Riane Eisler, *The Power of Partnership*, p. 174

This month, I’m presenting a new online leadership program for The Center for Partnership Studies called “Practicing Partnership with the Earth”. This webinar series presents simple, personalized, everyday, earth-centered practices that encourage participants to develop a sense of how both humans and nature can benefit from mutually enhancing partnerships, and how we can connect in a conscious way with other-than-humans. My hope for this learning series is to support the co-creation of an emerging partnership culture by answering a personal call to action from the natural world as advocates for our own and our planet’s journey to self-actualization.

Drawing from the work of evolutionary systems scientists, cultural historians, educators, nature writers, and ecopsychologists, and my own personal experience with holistic science and experiential, soul-based nature inquiry, this learning process invites a reciprocal dialogue with nature. It offers a new way of speaking about the unfolding

evolutionary map of the human/earth community based on a science of qualities, not quantities; it is an experiential inquiry into what the earth does.

In this program, I present a basic context that incorporates Riane Eisler's theory of a long-term cultural shift from a domination to a partnership worldview (Eisler, 2003). Additionally, to provide a framework for exploring the primary life patterns of the earth and the universe, I utilize a cosmology and consciousness lens originally presented by evolutionary philosopher Dr. Brian Swimme in his 2005 video series *The Powers of the Universe* (Swimme, 2005). To enter into informed partnerships with nature, I have been exploring the possibility that it might be useful to learn about the tendencies, or the essential working patterns, of the universe. This approach – weaving social systems change with what I call “applied transformational ecology” – promotes an awareness of nature's ancient biodynamic patterns and how we can partner consciously with them.

The in-depth learning process in the Practicing Partnership with the Earth workshop builds upon the leadership program I founded in 2012 called “What Does the Universe Do?”. It integrates feminine values and an ‘eco-centric’ inner exploration into a dynamic learning inquiry that reveals and celebrates our embeddedness in an evolving sacred ecology and asks: How can we learn to work and evolve in partnership with core life systems to release outmoded domination patterns and nurture our birthright as planetary humans?

In the spirit of cultivating mutually enhancing relationships guided by nature's ancient patterns, this program offers ten simple everyday practices that can help to shift our perceptive lens, realign us with the big picture, reconnect with the other-than-human, and plant our feet firmly as equal partners with the earth.

One of the practices involves walking on the earth barefoot, as regularly as possible. The intention in this practice is to connect with the grounding energy of the earth as a way of restoring our body's natural energy balance. In the context of understanding how the earth values and protects its own homeostatic balance, aligning our inner

metabolism with that of the land helps to bring an understanding of the complex mechanisms of climate change home to our own felt experience in our bodies. Likewise, the practice of relational eating, or “Taste Your Place”—gathering and eating native foods from one’s own bioregion—helps us appreciate the complexity and diversity of a healthy ecosystem. This practice invites us to come back into natural relationship with limited local resources and the energy cost of living in harmony with the land. Creative collaboration leading to complexity and resilience is an earth dynamic that naturally expresses partnership. Another powerful eco-centric practice is that of taking time out and resting (rest = restoration), with the intention of opening a spaciousness within our psyche to allow us to grieve and release what is being lost in this time of intense change and cataclysm in human and earth systems.

In my experience, with time and consistency, earth partnership practices such as those offered above can bring personal benefits of:

- a grounded sense of belonging
- a felt sense of how we inhabit and integrate images
- trust in our own experience
- an ability to listen and act within a shared field of knowing
- creativity and a knack for earth-timing
- agility with change

My suggestions for earth-centered practices here are intended to be a starting point for creative exploration—to open a channel of inquiry into an embodied sense of knowing; to develop a gravitas that sinks us into the soul so as to better listen; to inhabit with trust and vitality a new shared sphere of conversation with our local place. The gifts of these practices are both personal and collective; science and indigenous ways of knowing have shown that our hearts, bodies and minds are co-extensive with the earth. The domination worldview does not recognize this interrelatedness or our accountability to the earth’s continuity. If we are challenged to connect the dots between caring and economic prosperity, we will also be challenged to make the links between our own self-interest and an extended form of care to the health of earth’s

climate and ecosystems. How do we develop partnership systems to attend to future generations—people, plants, rivers, animals, fish, oceans, and forests—to the future of the earth?

PARTNERSHIP VALUES EXTEND BEYOND THE SOCIAL SPHERE

To help replenish irreplaceable planetary life systems, partnership values based on the partnership systems model introduced by Dr. Riane Eisler in *The Chalice & the Blade* (1988) must extend beyond the social sphere. These values include:

- Larger collective identification as an eco-centric human species on earth (it's about 'we', not about 'me').
- Recognition of the living presence and intelligence of the earth and all its expressions and inhabitants.
- Mutually beneficial relationships that nurture the actualization of healthy, self-regulating planetary cycles.
- An equitable, respectful, caring, non-violent human-earth relationship that promotes care, reciprocity, diversity, and resilience.
- Re-valuing of the earth as our primary economy.
- A working ecoliteracy and protection of our local bioregions.
- Narratives that validate our primary source and context as an unfolding, evolving universe—that cultivate wonder, awe, and reverence for all beings as sacred subjects (not as resources only) with an inherent right to be.

In our time, we are seeing regressive aspects of a domination system that is decidedly not working for all. Humanity is inching its way to the discovery that our human-centered identity may be too limited for the power we have taken in relationship to the planet; the magnitude of our human influence on earth systems is truly a geological force. Our old systems are breaking down; we are in between cultural stories. New narratives that reflect partnership values—that enable the entire earth community to be self-sustaining and to flourish— will empower us to step up to a working partnership with the earth in which all its qualities are deeply valued. Earth partnership practices

such as those I mentioned previously may give us a glimpse of how the earth is communicating with us, what it needs from us and how we can take responsible action on its behalf.

THE EARTH IS CALLING US TO ACTION

My sense is that the earth is asking for our greatness. The global issues we are confronting are so large, it's natural that we may feel overwhelmed. The words of Thomas Berry (2000) in *The Great Work* speak to our power to invoke a sacred working relationship in partnership with the earth: "We are not lacking in the dynamic forces needed to create the future. We live immersed in a sea of energy beyond all comprehension. But this energy, in an ultimate sense, is ours not by domination but by invocation" (p. 175).

Practicing partnership with the earth is a powerful call to action. My belief is that responding to this call requires that we work alongside the earth on its own terms. It asks us for humility and curiosity, and to enter into relational practices of deep listening to how the land lives and breathes, and how we can engage in caring relationships to enable nature to replenish itself. Responding to this call requires courage to step off the edge of the perceptual map of what is safe and known—such as familiar cultural values of domination and individualism—and enter into unknown territory: that of "power with" rather than "power over". In this new way of being human, we may no longer identify only as individuals, or as citizens of one nation or another, but as full-fledged interdependent members of the earth community. Acting as a collective for the well-being of the whole, we are empowered to seed new visions for mutual well-being and nurture the evolution of a caring human-earth alliance based on reciprocity and respect.

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Ann Amberg, M.C.S., is the Assistant Director of the Leadership & Learning Programs for the Center for Partnership Studies. Since 2002, she has guided adult leaders and K-12 teachers in a program of applied transformational and contemplative ecology. She founded the online program “What Does the Universe Do?” in 2012 to integrate partnership, feminine and indigenous ways of knowing with deep imagery to illuminate simple daily practices that serve to align us with the biodynamic patterns of life. Ann has completed her undergraduate degree in Environmental Studies: Integral Ecology and her Masters in Contemporary Spirituality. She is an artist and lives on beautiful Whidbey Island, Washington where gardens, hummingbirds, and creative people thrive.

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