

## THE RIGHTS OF MOTHER EARTH

Inspired by watching daily reports on the World's People Climate Conference, taking place in Cochabamba, Bolivia, this whole week (April 19-23, 2010), I add my plea for the "rights" of Mother Earth. This is a conference of people, indigenous people, not heads of state. In a way it is a continuation of the sad event in Copenhagen late last year, when the people were kept outside while Heads of State were basically agreeing not to do anything about the reality of climate change; maybe at the next meeting in Mexico this year. The President of Bolivia, the first Indigenous person to be president of any country, spoke at the opening of this conference: "*Mother Earth lives, capitalism dies; but if capitalism lives, Mother Earth dies.*"

What do we think about when we say "the earth" nowadays? Many people think of the earth as a horn of plenty, a resource to be plundered by all who "own" a piece of the earth. Most of us, it seems, think that the earth belongs to us, humans.

Does anyone ever wonder why we think that? To indigenous peoples everywhere the earth was Mother Earth, the *source* of our being. We belong to the earth, we come from the earth and to the earth we return. All our molecules are earth molecules, the same molecules that make plants and animals and rocks and water and air. We are completely, utterly, part of all that is on this planet. We are *of* the planet.

It was always the EARTH and I and all of us. Until one day, for some people, it became I and the Earth. And then I *own* the earth.

*Owning* is a very peculiar concept. I've known tribes where owning was unknown. Unthinkable. They did not wear much clothing, but I imagine that a neighbor would not think of grabbing my loin cloth — no more than a scrap of what at one time may have been a recognizable something. Some groups had a cast iron pot or pan, but that was never private property, not even thought of as property, something owned. And when (only once) I asked about owning land, there were first only questioning faces, uncertainty, until someone broke out in a laugh, and then they all roared, rolling on the ground. Never had they heard a crazier joke.

Early agriculture was a relationship between a place and a group of people. Not personal property, that came much later. A relationship is based on **reciprocity**: the land grows what nurtures us, and in return we take care to give back something to the earth. Our love, our gratitude, our work, and excrements that helps to make it possible for the earth to grow more for our sustenance. A relationship that was not only to the benefit of all, but above all sustainable.

In the west the reciprocity seems to have entirely disappeared. We take from the earth, and not only don't give much back, but we destroy the earth, biodiversity, the very life of the earth, while we plunder. We think we can own a piece of land and do with it what we damn well please. No requirements, no feeling of owing something to that land. As Ursula K. LeGuin wrote, "**owning is owing, having is hoarding.**" We think — we are taught — that the money we paid someone for that piece of land is all the obligation I have. Or, in other words, my only obligation is to another person, or a bank — never to the land.

We have not only divorced from Nature, but our so-called civilization has made all of us so alienated from the planet, from Nature, that we don't understand any more the first principle of being, of life. We have chosen to forget that owning anything means we owe for that privilege. Not just once when we pay a few dollars, but we owe what we own maintenance, nurture, protection, and most of all we must care for "our" land, as we care for our body. We must see to it that the land is healthy and sustainable, as we see to it that we ourselves are healthy. Buying land is not the same as buying a car, or a pair of jeans. Land is alive, it is what we come of. If we choose to pay for a piece of land we enter into a relationship with that land. And relationships are always two ways. We take, we must give; we give, we can take.

Many people are convinced that the house they bought and the land it sits on can be owned without any obligation. We can no longer understand that "land" is alive, it has a life, it is part of a larger ecology. Growing up we are not reminded that we cannot live without the land and the plants and animals of the earth. Growing up we see us build roads, houses, we plant endless rows of metal structures to carry the cables that bring our electricity and telephone, the internet. And all that without once considering that we are causing immense destruction all over the planet. We don't even think any more about what it means to own plants, or animals, or other people. Not just slavery, "working for" a person or a company, has become close to "being owned." The employer, the company, has the power to make us work, for an amount of money, some benefits perhaps, but our life is very literally in their hands. Isn't it more than clear that today the big corporations own our government, own the Congress. I cannot believe that the Founding Fathers had that in mind when they thought to make a country that was run for and by the people.

One of the several people who was interviewed on Democracy Now, in Cochabamba, professor Boaventura de Sousa Santos, Univ of Coimbra, Portugal, and Univ,of Wisconsin, Madison. made comments close to my heart. I've written about that for many years. He emphasized that **"the life style of indigenous peoples we think something of the past on the contrary is the future."** They have always known how to survive in their unique environment sustainably, without taking more than they could put back, without destroying, without stealing from Mother Earth. He also stressed the importance of biodiversity, which is what makes indigenous cultures thrive, and which all too often is what is destroyed first by our immense interference in sometimes fragile local ecologies.

By now everybody knows what we are doing to our environments. At least, everyone could know — there are hundreds, thousands, millions of reports on the sad state of our planet<sup>1</sup>. Think of what we do to animals, the billions of chickens, cows, pigs, we raise in boxes so small that they cannot move. That makes them fatter. We feed them hormones to speed growth, and antibiotics to protect them from the inevitable diseases that would spread like wild fires in such tightly packed populations. A so-called chicken farm is a building that houses a million chickens in a few thousand square feet. Imagine the chicken shit produced by a million chickens. That has to be washed away of course, constantly, 24/7. More than likely flushed into the nearest river. The river severely polluted not only by the chicken manure but by the many chemicals that are mixed in the feed. And add to that,

chicken manure (any manure) gives off tons of methane, a gas that is at least twenty times more effective in causing global warming than the carbon dioxide we usually talk about. Growing animals for the fast food we have become addicted to is not only an unbelievable cruelty to animals, but yet another element of the destruction of the atmosphere of our planet. I'm sure the people who own those so-called farms make money, pay taxes, are mostly legal, but the only obligations they can imagine are in our man-made world. There is no thought of owing anything to the planet, Mother Nature. Animals have become meat, plants have become food, we manipulate their very genes, add and subtract pieces, and so, changing what Nature evolved.

The People's Conference going on now demands that we begin to think again of the "Rights" of Mother Nature.

Because there is no reciprocity the artificial world we have made of steel and plastic on top of the Earth, is utterly unsustainable. By removing Nature and the planetary ecology from our awareness we have stepped out of the circle of life. By making everything into objects that we can own, without further obligation, we have killed what nurtures us. And that, in the end, is going to be our fate.

How utterly stupid can we be.

I grew up among what my parents called Natives. Certainly not any different from us. They spoke another language, had different customs, a different religion. Most importantly, they had not lost the relationship with the Earth. I remember once when the gardener allowed me to "help" him. I must have been five or six years old. My mother had told the gardener to make a flower bed more flat on the top, cut off flowers that wanted to grow taller. I noticed that the gardener was very slow, very careful. He looked at every plant before cutting a certain branch. I knew I would not be allowed to use a machete, but I had found some garden shears that I could handle, so I offered to help him. It looked like an easy job, just cut everything the same length. After clicking away for a few minutes, the gardener stopped me, had me look at the last plant I had just cut. He asked me, "Can that plant grow another flower?" I looked at him surprised. Well, of course, don't all plants grow. "Yes," he said, "but plants need to make leaves to grow, the flowers are just to make other plants. Where are the leaves on that plant you just cut?" I looked, saw that that I had cut that plant so that there were no leaves left. "That plant is now dead," he said. He showed me why he had been so careful when he trimmed the plants. "It's quite possible to trim and thin plants, but you must always see to it that the growing tip, the last few leaves, remain to regrow the plant so that it can make more flowers." Later, much later, I learned that all people who know nature have always been careful to cut and prune so that a growing point, usually the top few leaves, are left. Indigenous people all over the world have always known that if you find a plant that has fruit that you like, or you can eat the leaves, or there is a root that is edible, you are careful not to destroy the whole plant. Or certainly be careful never to harvest all the plants where they grow. There was always an exchange, giving and taking. Yes, life eats life, we eat plants and animals. But indigenous people give thanks, respect the plants and animals we eat, and know to give something back to the soil that grows the plants, the plants that grow animals. The most common giving back is excrements.

We, western civilized people have really moved ourselves far, far away from the world of nature. To us, excrements are something dirty, smelling bad, full of bacteria and other bad things; must be hygienically flushed away out of sight. We don't think of it as fertilizer. Forever, for as long as there has been life on this planet, excrements are what life gives back to nature so that more life can grow. There is a reciprocity, a circle, something taken requires giving something back.

That idea is nothing new, but we don't seem to apply it to Nature. If I work for you, you pay me. If you work for me, I pay you. Why would that reciprocity not hold between me and the vegetables I am growing? I put a lot of nurturing into the plants. Plants that caterpillars like to devour I spray with neem oil in water. That keeps the caterpillars mostly away. I have to plant in pots or large containers here because there is no soil, so I see to it that what I put in those containers has lots of mulch (wood chips, dead plants, with an occasional dead animal in it) and some manure. I see to it that they have enough water, even when it does not rain, that they are put where they get the kind of sunshine they like. In other words I invest my energy and my thinking in making the plants happy. And I honor the plants when I eat them. They taste much better than any I could buy in a super market because I know them, I have seen them grow, I have nurtured them, cared for them. I know they have nothing artificial (that means man-made) in them. I make them healthy, they keep me healthy.

Here I cherish the wildness even in a place where there is not much soil, no ground water. The wildness comes from the mix of trees and plants of all kinds growing very close to each other. No flower beds of all the same flowers. Even in pots I usually put a garlic plant next to a vegetable: insects don't like scent, and garlic, peppers, tomatoes, seem to like being close to other plants, and most other plants don't mind (or even like) being close to garlic, pepper and tomatoes.

There are areas even here where the vegetation is now so dense that it is always fairly dark inside these mini forests. An astounding variety of ferns and mosses, a few orchids, like that dark, damp environment. Underneath those trees there is a carpet of fallen leaves. Here in the Tropics trees lose leaves all the time, not only in the Fall. The soil under those trees is soft, spongy, springy, with the most wonderful smell. I'm very careful not to disturb those places. Well, I'm careful everywhere. I don't like to interfere. I am deeply convinced that I do NOT know better than nature.

While in Bolivia the people of the world are talking, there are scientists who are talking to the monster corporations and some of the wealthy countries of the world about "geo-engineering," a new science. There are five or six different ways that some scientists have reasoned may prevent the world from warming much more by "manipulating the planet." Some say we can spray tiny (nano-) reflective particles (sulfur, aluminum, plastic) into the high stratosphere and so reflect some of the sunlight back into space, making the earth cooler. All we know is that some volcanoes have caused such temporary cooling when the ashes were so voluminous and light that they traveled into the stratosphere. Of course the few times that happened it was always for a short time only, because even very small particles without much weight at all nevertheless eventually come down. So this kind of geo-engineering would have to be done every other year or so. What's worse is that

nobody has ever done this before, and we have no way of knowing whether it will work, how long it would work, and what the possible side effects might be. One of the people interviewed on Democracy Now, 20 april 2010, was Pat Mooney, who explained what geo-engineering is, that it is being talked about in the UK, the US, Germany, other countries. Summing up: "the very same people who caused the warming now say they will stop it? ... I have no trust in untested science." I would add, *who gave a few dozen people the authority to mess with **our** planet?*

Global warming, manifesting as climate change, is a consequence of our industrial civilization, a civilization that is more and more based on an idea that we, humans, are different from all other beings, that we own the planet, and that we are so powerful that we can use whatever resources we can find, anywhere on earth, to acquire more wealth. Also a civilization where it is assumed (we rarely talk about it) that I is more important than we. It is accepted without much question that the purpose of an individual life is to get rich, and power. Today's America is becoming all too aware that the gap between the rich and the poor, the gap between extreme wealth and extreme poverty is growing exponentially. The same is true on the next level. The difference between rich countries and poor is also getting extreme. The meeting in Copenhagen, last December, soon was dominated by a very few very rich countries, who did not want to know that climate change is already a reality in many parts of the world. The more than a hundred small countries that were represented in Copenhagen were excluded, were kept outside. The conference this week was organized by the smaller, poorer countries — literally by We the People of Mother Earth.

Nature, an ecology, cannot tolerate for long the domination of one species. And then imagine that a very small minority within one species tries to control and ravish the entire planet. Boggles the mind, right? All ecologies, Nature, are a close interactive web of relationships between not only individuals but between species. If hawks kill too many rabbits in an alpine meadow, the hawks will starve next year because there are not enough rabbits. If grazers overgraze grassland, they will starve the next year. If the very rich steal too much from the poor, they will starve next year because there are not enough poor. These laws of Nature are really quite simple. We, humans, have always known them until we imagined ourselves above and apart from those laws. We think we are so smart we can make our own laws, and our laws say that whatever you can get away with is not to be questioned. If we had not cast off from the earth, we would have known that the extreme kind of wealth distribution our system created is not sustainable. The greater the gap between rich and poor, the more unstable the society. The greater the gap between rich corporations and impoverished indigenous people, the greater the chance of an eruption from below.

We, my fellow western humans, think we each have an I somewhere in our body. Probably we think in the brain, or the heart, hormones? And we also think that that I rules her/his body. That's an illusion, right? We I's have very little control over what happens to us, what our body is or does, what we feel, what we like or hate. In fact we know very well of course that we have very little control. And that's a

good thing, because if all of us could act out whatever mood or idea came into our heads, this world would be a madhouse. It might just be that already.

But maybe it is not too late. We, the People of the world, the children of Mother Earth, are demanding to be heard. We are the ones who must defend the Rights of Mother Earth, that represent the survival of our species on this planet.

Not hard to understand; and very important to understand.

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<sup>1</sup> Al Gore, recommends a new book. Link: <<http://www.amazon.com/Straight-Up-Americas-Politicians-Solutions/dp/1597267163>>

Amazon is in the business of selling, so underneath the new book there are 64 other books listed about various aspects of climate change. Of the 65 books two are so new they have not been rated yet. Of the other 63 books, three had three stars, none fewer than three. All the rest had at least four and most had five star ratings. Of the 65 books two were over \$20 (one of them \$77, a 2007 scientific "compendium")\_ all the rest were under \$20, many of them in the \$10-12 range. There is indeed a great deal of information available, in addition to the million blogs of people all over the world writing about climate change *as it is happening this minute*.

robert wolff, 21 april 2010