

## ***The Call for Earth Literacy***

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We stand at a turning point in human history where the choices we make today will reverberate through the centuries and very likely define the future of humanity. Consequently, this is a time of crisis, when some are calling the viability of our species into question.<sup>i</sup> At its heart, this crisis is a crisis of perception<sup>ii</sup> necessitating that we transcend obsolete modes of thought and being and learn to see ourselves as well as our place on Earth and the Universe in a new way.

Our senses—our modes of perception—tell us that we are separate from the world around us; that we exist in our bodies as isolated beings for only a short time, and then we are gone. This is the root of all fear, of greed, of violence—this idea that we are separate from and in competition with everyone and everything around us. However, now science is coming to understand what the ancient traditions have known all along: that we are in fact intricately interconnected with Earth and the biosphere in which we are embedded.<sup>iii</sup> From this perspective, it might be said that Earth and even the Universe itself are all really just one thing; this is non-duality.<sup>iv</sup>

Our current, dualistic, mechanistic, reductionist paradigm is responsible for the massive environmental devastation and Earth changes that we currently face. We are in the midst of what is being called the 6<sup>th</sup> Great Extinction,<sup>v</sup> but this time the extinction event is not caused by some cataclysmic natural phenomenon, it is caused by human activity. Climate change, exponential human population growth, and unsustainable consumption-based lifestyles are altering the biosphere in ways that we are only beginning to understand. Nevertheless, as we sluggishly struggle to comprehend the changes before us, we are in danger of reaching a tipping point where it will be too late to turn back. We are in desperate need of a holistic, ecological perspective recognizing that the old environmentalist adage is true: what we do to the planet, we do to ourselves.

McGregor Smith, the founder of Earth Ethics Institute at Miami Dade College, saw the need for a new type of literacy. He recognized that the current education paradigm is part of the crisis we have been discussing, that this “...crisis is most severe in prestigious universities and colleges. The best-educated people are most imprisoned... Education gives students great power to manipulate and control the natural world. But it does not give them an ethic for wisely using that power.”<sup>vi</sup> McGregor Smith, working with such people as Bill Nickle, founder of the Narrow Ridge Earth Literacy Center<sup>vii</sup> in Washburn, TN, and Sr. Miriam MacGillis, co-founder of Genesis Farm<sup>viii</sup> in Blairstown, NJ, coined the term “Earth Literacy.” This was a new type of literacy, one that “...expands the meaning of literacy and measures our ability to participate constructively in Earth’s evolutionary process. It teaches us to become conscious members of the wonderful society of all living and non-living beings.”<sup>ix</sup>

Earth Ethics Institute at Miami Dade College, working with participating college faculty and staff, developed this definition for Earth Literacy:

*“Earth Literacy offers ever-greater understanding of the evolution of the Universe and the interconnectedness of all being. Rooted in evidence-based knowledge, this cosmological context informs a worldview, guides all fields of study, and inspires social change. Earth Literacy recognizes Earth as educator and honors the wisdom found in Earth systems as well as the mystery and numinous beauty within the Universe. Earth Literacy allows us to discover our role*

*within the story of Earth and the Universe, transforming our beliefs and actions so as to create mutually-enhancing, sustainable, resilient relationships with Earth's community of life.”<sup>x</sup>*

There was a struggle to develop a sufficient definition of Earth Literacy, for it speaks of an ongoing process with no real endpoint. It speaks of subjective experience perhaps best left nebulous. However, after much effort, the above Earth Literacy definition was adopted by Earth Ethics Institute and now serves as a guiding light in the organization's efforts.

Each word and phrase of the definition was carefully chosen, offering much when further “unpacked” for closer examination.

The first sentence recognizes that Earth Literacy is a journey, that we are always truly “beginners” with more to learn. The first sentence also alludes to The Universe Story, where current scientific understanding of the universe is seen as a new cosmology, and awe and reverence are given their place in the mystery of the “primordial flaring forth.”<sup>xi</sup> Finally, the first sentence references non-duality, as discussed earlier.

The second sentence, in emphasizing evidence-based knowledge, acknowledges that Earth Literacy is grounded in science, even as it aspires to eco-spirituality. The second sentence of the definition asserts that Earth Literacy shapes a new, ecological worldview. Not only this, but Earth Literacy—in the guise of Environmental Studies—illuminates all fields of study.<sup>xii</sup> It is believed that once our paradigm is shifted to ecological perception, this undoubtedly will lead to positive social change.<sup>xiii</sup>

The third sentence of the Earth Literacy definition acknowledges that we must learn from Earth and her systems, for example, as is done in the use of biomimicry.<sup>xiv</sup> The third sentence additionally speaks of the numinous; that, as Shakespeare wrote, “There are more things in heaven and Earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.”<sup>xv</sup> Again, there is room for awe and reverence—spirituality, if you will—within Earth Literacy. But this is a spirituality without dogma, one based on subjective experience. Anyone—regardless of religion, or even atheists—can be earth literate.

Finally, the last sentence of the definition expounds on the transformative aspects of Earth Literacy. In being earth literate, we will change our ways of living on this planet and come to understand that we are defined by our relationships not only with all living things, but with the planet herself. We will come to understand that as Earth nourishes and sustains us, so must we sustain Earth and the natural systems of which she is comprised.<sup>xvi</sup>

Earth Ethics Institute strives to integrate Earth Literacy into all aspects of Miami Dade College. The Global Sustainability and Earth Literacy Studies (GSELS) learning network offers faculty and students the opportunity to explore Earth Literacy through the lenses of the various disciplines taught at the college.<sup>xvii</sup> Still, there is much to be done before Miami Dade College can truly be called an earth literate institution. There is much to be done before human society and culture can be said to be truly sustainable. There is much to be done if we are to avoid moving past the point of no return, if the viability of the human species as an integral component of the Earth's systems is to be maintained. This is why Earth Literacy is so desperately needed.

## End Notes

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- <sup>i</sup> Berry, Thomas, "The Viable Human," in *The Great Work*, Bell Tower, 1999
- <sup>ii</sup> Capra, Fritjof, "The Crisis of Perception" [www.questia.com/magazine/1G1-8296137/the-crisis-of-perception](http://www.questia.com/magazine/1G1-8296137/the-crisis-of-perception)
- <sup>iii</sup> Swimme, Brian and Berry, Thomas, *The Universe Story*, HarperSanFrancisco, 1992
- <sup>iv</sup> Watts, Alan, *The Book: On the Taboo Against Knowing Who You Are*, Random House, 1966
- <sup>v</sup> Carrington, Damian, "Earth's sixth mass extinction event under way, scientists warn," The Guardian [www.theguardian.com/environment/2017/jul/10/earths-sixth-mass-extinction-event-already-underway-scientists-warn](http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2017/jul/10/earths-sixth-mass-extinction-event-already-underway-scientists-warn)
- <sup>vi</sup> Smith, McGregor, "What is Earth Literacy?" [www.earthethicsinstitute.org/WhatisEarthLitSmith.asp](http://www.earthethicsinstitute.org/WhatisEarthLitSmith.asp)
- <sup>vii</sup> Narrow Ridge website: <https://narrowridge.org/>
- <sup>viii</sup> Genesis Farm website: <http://www.genesisfarm.org/>
- <sup>ix</sup> Smith, McGregor, "What is Earth Literacy?" <http://www.earthethicsinstitute.org/WhatisEarthLitSmith.asp>
- <sup>x</sup> Earth Ethics Institute website: [www.earthethicsinstitute.org/index.asp](http://www.earthethicsinstitute.org/index.asp)
- <sup>xi</sup> Swimme, Brian and Berry, Thomas, *The Universe Story*, HarperSanFrancisco, 1992
- <sup>xii</sup> Soulé, Michael E, and Press, Daniel, "What is environmental Studies?" *BioScience*, Vol. 48, No. 5. May, 1998 [http://www.michaelsoule.com/resource\\_files/73/73\\_resource\\_file1.pdf](http://www.michaelsoule.com/resource_files/73/73_resource_file1.pdf)
- <sup>xiii</sup> Changemaking at Miami Dade College: [www.mdc.edu/changemaking/](http://www.mdc.edu/changemaking/)
- <sup>xiv</sup> Biomimicry Institute website: <https://biomimicry.org/what-is-biomimicry/>
- <sup>xv</sup> Shakespeare, William, *Hamlet*
- <sup>xvi</sup> "Biogeochemical Cycles." *World of Earth Science*, edited by K. Lee Lerner and Brenda Wilmoth Lerner, vol. 1, Gale, 2003, p. 72. Gale Virtual Reference Library, [https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CX3437800080/GVRL?u=29081\\_mdpls&sid=GVRL&xid=d24d4c94](https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CX3437800080/GVRL?u=29081_mdpls&sid=GVRL&xid=d24d4c94)
- <sup>xvii</sup> Earth Ethics Institute website, Global Sustainability and Earth Literacy Studies (GSELS) Learning Network: [www.earthethicsinstitute.org/GSELHome.asp](http://www.earthethicsinstitute.org/GSELHome.asp)