

Practical Mysticism: Contemplation, Creativity, and the Ecozoic Age

BY ANGELA MANNO

“They’re destroying the Earth!” I cried. This lament welled up from the depths of my being nearly thirty years ago, during hypnosis, when I first began to explore my spirituality. Upon the discovery of this deep and hidden despair, I began to sob uncontrollably. Such love, such passion, such *empathy* had I unearthed from within me!

As an artist, I am a practical mystic. When something is experienced as deeply and powerfully as this, I am compelled to live it out, to express it both through my life as well as through my art. And as an artist, my work is to be engaged in the creative process. Desire, imagination, mental focus and skill in the use of my medium are all tools of my profession. Equally important is a well-developed tolerance for the discrepancy between what one envisions and one’s position at any given point in the creative process.

My life since that first revelation of great love and sorrow is the story of my journey into the Ecological Age. Many gifts were given to me during that time almost three decades ago: I was reintroduced to the work of Teilhard de Chardin and for the first time read about the Gaia Hypothesis. Over several consecutive years, I participated in frequent sweat lodge ceremonies at the Sundance on the Southern Ute reservation and underwent a number of transforming experiences—desert vision quests and an initiation into the shamanic traditions of Peru. These were the formative, chthonic experiences that nourished my continued growth into Ecozoic consciousness.

My artwork during this period (from 1984 to 1992) reflected these revelations about the living Earth, its beauty and fragility and humanity’s ability and obligation to take responsibility for the condition of the planet.¹ A subsequent

series entitled “All My Relations” reflected both my experiences of the Native American sensibility of all things being related to each other in a spatial mode, as well as my understanding of things being related within a time developmental cosmos. Later, after in depth studies in the Universe Story at Genesis Farm and years apprenticing with a master of Byzantine Russian iconography, I created “The Earthly Paradise: Icon of the Third Millennium,” to express the sacred nature of the Earth using the liturgical methods and materials I used in creating traditional icons.

Perhaps one of the most important gifts of the mid-eighties was learning to apply the principles of the creative process to daily life and to teach that skill to others. With this new skill and knowledge, my “canvas,” so to speak, became as wide as the world itself.²

As I continued to hone these skills, I eventually would articulate a “Great Work vision.” This Great Work vision expressed what most deeply mattered to me, it offered a powerful, uncompromising vision I came to *regardless of whether or not I thought it was possible*. This concept—not limiting what you want by what you think is possible and truly being in touch with what is highest in deepest in you—is key in powerful creating. Equally important in the creative process is holding that vision, once you have identified it as a *fait accompli*.

And so I asked myself, if anything were possible, what would I want to see? I did not hesitate: “The Earth is restored to her pristine beauty and full regenerative capacities.” Since an important part of this process is to have in your mind an image or a kinesthetic sense of when you would know that vision had become a reality, I pictured people bathing and drinking out of the Hudson River.

¹ “Conscious Evolution: The World at One”, a 13-piece mixed media series, traveled internationally for four years before being collected in its entirety in 2000 by the Smithsonian Institution’s National Air and Space Museum for its permanent fine art collection.

² For the invaluable knowledge, training and insights discussed here, I am indebted to Robert Fritz, creator of the system known then as DMA, Now Technologies for Creating™. I became a certified teacher of the DMA basic course in 1983.



All My Relations from Conscious Evolution Series by Angela Manno

³ I was delighted to learn nearly 30 years after I'd formulated this vision that the policy statement of Friends Committee on National Legislation, a Quaker lobbying group in Washington, DC includes: "We seek an Earth Restored."

⁴ Hawken, Paul, *Blessed Unrest* (New York: Viking Pres, 2007)

⁵ Mountaintop mining in Virginia and glacier drilling and destruction in Chile are two of the latest and most heinous that come to mind.

⁶ In *The Dream of the Earth*, Thomas Berry encourages the cultivation of "the highest state of tension that the organism can bear creatively." Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1988), 219.

⁷ Herman Greene "What Is Process Thought?" unpublished paper available from the Center for Ecozoic Studies, ecozoic@mind-spring.com.

Almost three decades later, I still hold that vision as a reality (and just learned, incidentally, that an organization has been formed to make the East River of Manhattan fit to swim in). Millions upon millions of people now share in this vision of "an Earth restored."³ In that time, I have watched ordinary people's consciousness, concern and actions intensify and proliferate across the globe on behalf of the Earth. It is now estimated that there are well over a million organizations worldwide working to restore ecological balance and social justice.⁴

At the same time, we have witnessed the disappearance of more and more species, increasingly devastating technologies for extracting the Earth's resources⁵ and the mounting impacts of global warming. This is actually a critical point in the creative process: when things seem the most distant from your vision, that is the time to recommit and strengthen your vision. It is exactly now that one must continue to hold the vision of an Ecological Age, while at the same time remaining in touch with current reality. This generates the all-important creative tension that Thomas Berry speaks about in his writings.⁶

Since those grace-filled years of the 1980's, I have come to realize that the New Story of the universe is the cosmological framework, the explanation for why those creative techniques I had been teaching and applying to my daily life were effective: The universe itself is one ongoing creative enterprise, and humans are endowed with a special ability to participate consciously in the unfolding of creation.

With this missing cosmological piece, the picture was almost complete. I say almost, because although my image of the universe was one of wonder, fecundity and beauty, I did not quite feel an integral sense of belonging to that picture. There was an inexplicable sense of distance between me and this grand and beautiful cosmic story, a sense of separation that I had tried in many ways to heal. This is despite a unitive experience I had in 1994, when I was engaged in conversation with a fellow student of the Earth Literacy certificate program at Genesis Farm. As we spoke, I had a stunning and overwhelming feeling of oneness, that I and this other person were nothing but the universe in conversation with itself.

In Herman Greene's essay *What is Process Thought?*,⁷ he states "Each individual in the universe is unique, ultimately significant and of intrinsic value, and the health of the universe and every society rests on the health of the individual." I believe this to be true, and as such it is crucial that we strive to heal a very deep wound within the Western psyche, an aspect of one of the "afflictions" in Buddhism—that of aversion. Buddhist psychologist Tara Brach identifies this wound as "self-aversion," also known as shame in other psychological circles.

How can we embrace this new revelation of Immanence, of "seamlessness" to use Brian Swimme's terminology, when so many individuals suffer from such profound alienation? I believe this intra-psychic rift—some would call it a war—is the inward aspect and source of that "deep, hidden rage" Thomas Berry talks about that Western civilization bears towards the conditions upon which life has been granted us. We are averse to life itself, as long as suffering and imperfection are part of

life. If we are the universe in its self-reflexive mode and carry this split, this enmity within us, how can we feel at one with all there is, and by extension care for and nurture it (love our neighbor as oneself)?

My own journey of healing this wound took on renewed urgency in 2003, when I began to experience what I can only describe as a dark night of the soul. This period was marked by a pervasive feeling of emptiness and lack of energy for the old ways of living.⁸ I quickly realized, fortunately, that I needed to establish deeper roots—in a community and in a spirituality that spoke to my condition. My search soon led me to the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), where some of my needs for belonging and a context within which to heal and grow began to be fulfilled. I also discovered among the Quakers a promising and exciting milieu in which to continue to advance the vision and realization of an Ecozoic Era.

Quakers, too, are practical mystics. With a belief in continuing revelation, each age, each day and each moment presents a fresh opportunity for listening. As such, their basic view of the human/divine relationship is very compatible with the insights of a creative universe in the New Cosmic Story. They practice a “listening spirituality” and strive to embody the Light that is given them. The gifts of each individual are then encouraged through what is called the “stewardship of gifts.”⁹

Among Quakers, I have found myself deeply listened to and nurtured, and over time, I have been able to contribute back to the whole. Last winter, for example, at the prompting of fellow members of Friends in Unity with Nature,¹⁰ I developed and taught an 8-week course at Friends Seminary in Manhattan to young people and adults entitled *Eco-spirituality & Action*, which I based on the outline of my book in progress *Planetary Perspectives*. This course quickly led to New York State Quakers writing a declaration of “Peace with the Earth,” an elegant, further explication of the long-standing Quaker Peace Testimony.¹¹ As a result, 91 gatherings throughout the State and parts of New Jersey and Connecticut are currently considering what their response will be to the plight of the Earth.

This listening spirituality is the antidote to what Thomas Berry calls the autism of our time. “What is needed on our part,” writes Thomas, “is the capacity for listening to what the earth is telling us.”¹² The contemplative aspect of Quakerism has now sensitized many Friends to the suffering of Earth. Through this deep listening, Quakers have begun to “rediscover fire,” a love that in early Friends was poured out onto the human community.

Today, that love is being extended to the whole of the natural world. It has given rise to movements within Quakerism to simplify lifestyle, to create a permanent department on environmental concerns within the Quaker lobbying group Friends Committee on National Legislation (FCNL), and to embrace the Earth within their long-standing testimonies for simplicity, peace, integrity, community and equality. Meeting houses are greening themselves, and more and more Friends are embracing eating locally and examining every aspect of their lives and how it impacts the Earth. These changes are recognized as a spiritual necessity and are part of that upwelling of individuals and groups all over the planet that are forming networks like synapses in the brain, like an immune system awakening. Friends are now considering what can be done outside the faith community to make an impact.¹³

I have no doubt that this trend will continue and intensify in the years to come, that the “Earthcare” movement within Quakerism will take on a life of its own. And this, to me, is the most encouraging thing of all, because when Quakers get behind an issue, they themselves become a force of nature (think abolition, women’s suffrage and civil rights).

A parallel course for me now is the path of what some Buddhist psychologists are calling radical acceptance—compassionate attention to the disowned parts of oneself and all that is. As I acknowledge this little piece of Earth—me—I realize that along with cherishing and preserving the Earth, my most urgent task is to mend my life, to embrace the disowned parts of myself. Though it seems like a contradiction, striving to be free from anxiety about imperfection while striving to bring forth the Ecological Age are both essential. I

⁸ May, Gerald, MD, *The Dark Night of the Soul: A Psychologist Explores the Connection Between Darkness and Spiritual Growth*, (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 2005), 136.

⁹ For a wonderful discussion of the Quaker notion of the Stewardship of Gifts and other basic tenets of Quakerism, see Lloyd Lee Wilson, *Essays on a Quaker Vision of Gospel Order* (Philadelphia, PA: Quaker Press of FGC, 2002).

¹⁰ Friends in Unity with Nature (known internationally as Quaker Earthcare Witness) is one of many committees Quakers have formed to address specific concerns. Two of the best known are FCNL (Friends Committee on National Legislation) and AFSC (the American Friends Service Committee).

¹¹ The full Peace with Earth declaration of New York Yearly Meeting is available at <http://www.nyym.org/nurture/ewg/peacewith-earth.html>; Internet; accessed May 18, 2008.

¹² Thomas Berry, *Dream of the Earth*, xiv.

¹³ Marshall Massey led a ground-breaking workshop for Quakers and non-Quakers entitled “Earth In The Headlines: How are we called to respond?” in March, 2008 at Powell House, a Quaker retreat and conference center in upstate New York.

feel this practice is key in mending relationships at all levels: the intrapersonal, interpersonal and human-Earth. If we hold that we are the conscious phase of the Earth, then self-care and Earth-care are one and the same. This is not a narcissistic pursuit; it's restoration of the individual upon which the health of society and that of the universe rests. Thus the centerpiece of my daily practice today is a compassion practice.

On a more outward level, I continue to search for ways to "let my life speak" (a favorite Quaker expression), to embody in the fullest way possible my most cherished values and vision. Living off the grid, animal husbandry, organizing and lobbying, advocating renewable energy, opposing nuclear power, and developing teaching materials to empower others to realize their role in the emerging Ecological Age are all things I am pursuing now. My artwork is undergoing a deep transformation, having much to do with the suffering in the world—both personal and planetary—and the ultimate form it takes remains to be seen. My consolation during this transition is that I regard all aspects of my life as my "art," not just my formal works.

As we strive to embody the Ecological Age, Thomas reminds us that we need "a type of discipline that we call the four virtues: justice,

prudence, temperance, and fortitude. A person has to have judgment, a person has to have discipline, restraint, a person has to have the power of courageous action in times of difficulty and endurance."¹⁴ We may well recognize this time period as a dark night experience for the entire Earth Community. If we are able to bear this planetary "night" with restraint, with faith, with courage and with great love for all beings, the gift of this painful and devastating impasse will surely emerge.¹⁵ As I continue on this path, I feel my best hope in cultivating these virtues, so essential for Ecological humankind, is within the context of a wise and loving community that holds these virtues in high esteem.

As an artist and activist, I will continue to hold and work for the vision of the Earth restored to her pristine beauty and full regenerative capacities, or in other, more eloquent words: "a luxuriant earth community, mutually-enhancing in all its layers and levels of life and being, where the minds of the universe are safeguarded and nurtured; where the creativity of each nation of every species is energized for the total vibrancy and joy of the whole community of beings."¹⁶

¹⁴ Thomas Berry, "Every being Has Rights," ed. Hildegarde Hannum, Twenty-Third Annual E. F. Schumacher Lecture, 2003; available at http://www.smallisbeautiful.org/publications/berry_03.html; Internet; accessed May 18, 2008.

¹⁵ "... impasse becomes the place for the reconstitution of the intuitive self. . . While nothing seems to be moving forward, one is, in fact on a homeward exile." Fitzgerald, Constance "Impasse and Dark Night," *Women's Spirituality: Resources for Christian Development*, ed. Joann Wolski Conn (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), 289.

¹⁶ Thomas Berry, *Dream of the Earth*