

“That Person” on Whom Earth Depends

Jaime Vergara

Jaime Vergara recently completed five years of teaching Social Studies to 6th graders in one of the public schools in the Commonwealth of Northern Mariana Islands in the west Pacific. A regular contributor to the Opinion section of *The Saipan Tribune*, Vergara cuts a wide swath with a broad Indo-Sino-Malay ethnic tradition rooted in his Pinoy upbringing, along with the spirit pilgrimage of the Judeo-Christian secular monk, in a world about to be glocalized.



Thomas Berry, an American monk of the Passionist monastic tradition, wrote an essay under an oak tree by the Hudson titled, “The Dream of the Earth,” which would evolve into a book by that name published by the Sierra Club in 1988. A paperback edition was published two years later to broaden the readership of this seminal work, and it remains in print.

In the book, Berry invites 21st century *homo sapiens* to reconsider the image of the planet Earth as a programmed, machine-like, calibrated clock emerging from the physics of Bacon and hypothesized by Newton and Descartes, to the emergent view of an awesome and enchanting organism portrayed by contemporary particle physics—a universe that is dynamically alive: a whole system, fluid and interconnected.

An avid cultural historian who takes current technological civilization seriously, Berry calls for us to experience creation with awe like our forebears did before we made Earth simply as a quarry and a pit for our extractive industries; to see the Earth as a living organism upon which the survival and sustenance of the human race and the Earth community depend, as a source of wonder and delight rather than as a commodity for our personal and corporate use.

Author Peter Russell in 1983 wrote a book titled *The Global Brain Awakens* where he notes that the Earth as a superorganism has humanity for its brain. Unfortunately, he says, the brain has become cancerous.

In 1972, the first comprehensive survey of the Earth, its resources, and its rate of use by humans, resulted in the publication of *The Limits to Growth: A Report for the Club of Rome’s Project on the Predicament of Humankind*. The book was vilified for its perceived pessimistic forecast, which, however, has proven to be not too far from the truth.

Now even the oil companies acknowledge that we have the situation called “peak oil,” the point at which we consume half of the known oil supply, and any extraction thereafter would only be to lessen the remaining 50 percent of the supply. We have now reached that peak point and the remaining supply not only has to feed into existing economies that are geared for growth, it will also have to feed the requirements of emerging industrial giants like China and India. The price of oil is not coming down ever again.

My students ask why the turmoil around the world? Simple. Oil and who will control the supply. Name any oil producing region (even Timor has natural gas that is now a bone of contention between the new nation and its known backer, Australia) and it is the battleground of greed and terror.

Thomas Berry is not one to despair, nor is he wishy-washy about measures to undertake. In a culmination of a lifetime of clear-headed, clear-hearted reflections, he boldly calls on everyone to participate in *The Great*

Work: Our Way into the Future (published by Bell Tower in 1999). That work has two strokes for humanity: cease being a disruptive force in the natural world, and be a benign presence to the planet.

Even a local livestock farm owner in a remote area of Northern Leyte, Philippines, understands that the ethical challenge of the day demands of him to turn his 333-acre farm, which had supported and sustained his family, back into forest stand to regain the ecological integrity of his region.

I read with bewilderment John Gourley's opposition to the Northern Mariana Islands Marine National Monument (PEW Monument) being proposed by the PEW Foundation. To be sure, his opposition is based on his long-term involvement in the marine science and environmental regulatory fields and his personal belief in supporting sustainable fisheries programs. But that might precisely be the point: sustainable fisheries understood simply as profit, bottom-line economics and coupled by a mistaken notion of stewardship based on paper sovereignty, and one can understand where he is coming from. Who cares about the transmigration patterns of fish life and the depleted ocean stock now prevailing? How do we audit the debit inflicted on Mother Nature's processes now that we have overfished the seas?

Cinta Kaipat suffered virulent criticism for her efforts to rationalize the extractive industry associated with the pozzolan deposit in Pagan. But when the rationale for a possible source of revenue is simply determined by opportunistic market forces, then we have a formula for future debacle.

Beautify Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI) would not hold the imagination of the many were it simply a recycling and neighborhood cleanup program. Without a transcendent vision of the ethics and aesthetics of the planet, the movement would only be another short-lived spurt in the tableau of tree hugging idealists. Happily it isn't, and there is evidence that what the ancients would call "Earth spirit" abounds in the fellowship.

Recently, I traveled through villages and city centers in Jiangsu Province in China where rapid industrialization has been occurring. I stayed where there possibly was a commune at one time where an estuary that might have hosted duck farms and vegetable gardens is now just a filthy estuary turned dumping ground clogged with plastic products.

Yet, nearby are huge structures that are being built to house industrial factories and manufacturing concerns. That the industrialization is sputtering is evident in the number of such structures already built but unoccupied. Taking the land route from Shanghai to Yancheng and Sheyang, and returning the roundabout way through Nanjing and the superhighway through Suzhou, the dislocation of labor and dysfunctionality of farms is there to behold.

Sustainable economy goes beyond the preoccupation with the bottom line of profit and economic growth. It must factor the health of the planet and its communities. The activity of delivering electricity and water has to be exercised like a sacred duty.

Pope Benedict, who at this writing is celebrating the Mass at the Yankee stadium in New York City, earlier this week addressed the United Nations General Assembly with this words: "International action to preserve the environment and to protect various forms of life on Earth must not only guarantee a rational use of technology and science, but must also rediscover the authentic image of creation."

The authentic image of creation is that of a living organism, and our strict dichotomy between inanimate and animate objects no longer applies. The planet and its component parts throb with the songs of the spheres, and Einstein's insight holds: a falling leaf reverberates across the universe.

His Holiness's message during the World Day of Peace early this year affirmed the Earth as the human family's home. He said, "For the human family, this home is the Earth, the environment that God the Creator has given us to inhabit with creativity and responsibility. We need to care for the environment: it has been entrusted to men and women to be protected and cultivated with responsible freedom, with the good of all as a constant guiding criterion."

Yet, all of this is academic unless the Earth becomes also the locus of human spirit definition. Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese Buddhist monk, wrote, *Call Me By My True Names*, and says: "Our Earth is somehow like a small boat. Yes, compared to other big things in the cosmos, it is a very small boat, and it is in danger of sinking. We need...a person to inspire us with calm confidence, to tell us what to do. And who is that person? The Mahayana Buddhist Sutras tell you one thing: You are that person. If you are yourself, if you are your best, then you are that person. And it is only with such a person, calm, lucid, aware, solid, that our the sinking of our small boat could be avoided."

That's why Beautify CNMI, or any other movements, stand a real chance for as long as it calls forth individuals who understand themselves as THAT PERSON. In this Earth Day 2008, we can be frontline fodder for all the cleanups needed; we could also begin to empathize with the health of the environment that is reflected in the food we eat and the dwellings we choose to habituate; we may begin to appropriate the profundity of the scientific, urban and secular revolutions of our time, but most importantly, in the transcendent and immanent traditions of the ancients, we can embody the spirit of Gaia on ourselves. Earth Day is finally ME!