It is an honour to be addressing you, and I want to join in thanking all of you for coming to this event today. It represents hope for the future when so many different constituencies, representing so many different perspectives on social justice, ecological sustainability, and spiritual fulfillment can come together for conversation and action.

It is my task to speak on ecology, spirituality, and the evolution of consciousness. My intention is to describe the characteristics of an ecological spirituality be for the 21\textsuperscript{st} century. Such a spirituality would transcend, yet include, all traditional religious expressions of spirituality. Each religious tradition, including my own – Christianity – is faced with the challenge of interpreting this ecological crisis through the lens of its tradition and mobilizing its constituency to take action. We either do this, or risk irrelevance. This is what I set out to do in my book, \textit{Darwin, Divinity, and the Dance of the Cosmos: An Ecological Christianity}.\textsuperscript{1} Yet there is a need to broaden the definition of spirituality in a way that speaks to that growing demographic – especially in Cascadia – that define themselves as “spiritual, but not religious”.

Where are we right now as a species? I will take the liberty of situating us by using a parable from my tradition.

A father has two sons. The younger one goes to this father and demands his inheritance, which the father gives him. This son takes the inheritance and leaves home. Soon, however, he finds himself profoundly alienated. He’s working for a gentile, feeding his pigs. For a 1\textsuperscript{st} century Jew this represented the height of indignity. The turning point of the story occurs when the son realizes that he would be grateful to be eating the food that he’s feeding to the pigs. The line upon which the parable hinges

\textsuperscript{1} Sanguin, Bruce, \textit{Darwin, Divinity and the Dance of the Cosmos: An Ecological Christianity}, Woodlake Books, 2007
follows next: “The son came to his senses” (Luke 15:11-32). He returns home, with his confession well rehearsed. He asks his father to receive him back, not as privileged son, but as a servant. But his father sees him coming down the road from far off and runs out to greet him, takes him in his arms, kisses him, before the son can complete his confession.

When looked at through an ecological lens, it’s not difficult to identify the human species in the 21st century with the younger son. In the last three hundred years during the modern era we have impetuously demanded the inheritance of a 14 billion-year universe, left home – the planet earth – and squandered the gift. We are now suffering the indignity of our arrogance, living in a state of exile from our own planet, and causing the degradation of biosystems, and the extinction of other species. We are yearning to return home. Our confession is born of deep lament. Our desire is to return home. One of the key features of the parable is that the son willingly offers to change his status from privileged son to hired servant. His journey home was the path from arrogance to humility. So, the question of the 21st century in the ecozoic era is whether we are willing to walk this same path home. Are we willing to change our status from the entitled ones to willing servants of the one earth community? Are we ready as the prodigal species to “come to our senses”?

What might it mean to “come to our senses” as a species? I suggest that it requires a radical reorientation of our understanding of what it means to be human in the 21st century. This reorientation forms the foundation of a possible ecological spirituality. The key features of this reorientation include:

1. An affirmation of creation as sacred text.
2. An affirmation that the capacity to consciously evolve, and in particular, to evolve toward ever-enlarged perspectives is a primary practice of ecological spirituality.
3. An affirmation that this 14 billion-year evolutionary story may serve as a sacred myth for our age, what cultural anthropologist Thomas Berry calls The Great Story.
Notice that I didn’t call these “beliefs”. Rather they are orienting affirmations. In traditional religious consciousness, believing the right things was how you were initiated and included in the community, and how you received the blessings of your God. In ecological spirituality, we do not claim that these orienting affirmations represent “The Truth”. Rather, we may choose to act “as though” or “as if” they were true and see where they lead us. They act as scientific injunctions in fact. Try these on for size, and see what difference they make in your life and in your ecological practice.

I will begin with the third affirmation: the evolutionary process or the Great Story may function as an orienting sacred myth for our culture. Priest and paleontologist, Teilhard de Chardin, wrote this about evolution in the 1940’s:

“Is evolution a theory, a system, or a hypothesis? It is much more: it is a general condition to which all theories, all hypotheses, and all systems must bow and satisfy henceforth if they are to be thinkable and true. Evolution is a light illuminating all facts, a curve that all lines must follow.”

Thomas Berry speaks of the evolutionary process as a new sacred myth. No society can function without a central myth – a narrative that orients the society to reality. It tells a story about the culture’s origins, where it is now, and points toward a hopeful future. The modernist and late-postmodernist narratives served to deconstruct all sacred narratives. This may have been a necessary evolutionary development, deposing superstitious belief and ecclesiastical authority of their power to shackle human imagination and spirit. However, the downside of this modernist myth is that it threw out the spiritual baby with the bathwater. Evolution, as Teilhard de Chardin is defining it, is not the materialistic version of neo-Darwinist modernism.

Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris and others reflect a modernist and late-postmodernist ideology that robs creation, including humans, of an interior dimension. In creation the ancients called this animating interior the animus mundi – the soul of the world. By identifying all spirituality with the most regressive of
traditional religions they are saying more, I would suggest, about where their own spiritual intelligence got stuck.

Affirming the 14 billion year story of evolution as sacred narrative – the Great Story – provides us with an orienting myth that is grounded in evolutionary science, minus the materialistic bias that robs reality of an interiority or subjectivity. The universe is winding itself up in the direction of increased complexity and consciousness. Somehow to use American philosopher, Ken Wilber’s phrase, “dirt got up and started writing Shakespeare”. By affirming that these two qualities are fundamental to fabric of the universe – that is by granting complexity and consciousness ontological status – we can affirm that creation is an external manifestation that has an interior correlate. Call that fundamental interiority God/Spirit/Cosmic Wisdom/Sacred Intelligence/Being or the Tao or the Hidden Wholeness or the Pattern That Connects, and then act as if the universe was thus constructed, and see what happens to your own energy, your own passion, your own hopefulness, and your own willingness to take action for a more healthy planet.

My own experience is that it is an enlivening, quickening orientation. On a silent retreat in Narragansett, Rhode Island, 20 years ago I had an enlightenment experience in which I realized my essential unity with all of creation. My dualistic worldview – a product of modernism – collapsed. I knew myself to be the self-reflexive consciousness of the universe. I was the universe noticing the universe, reflecting upon itself, dreaming as the universe about a new future. I no longer walked upon the earth that was located outside of me. I knew myself to be the earth in human form. I was what the universe was doing. And everything I gazed out upon – the water, the birds, the grass blowing in the wind was sacred. Every thing and every body pulsated with an interior sacred dimension. Sitting here today, being in conversation with each other, dreaming of a better future for our planet and for the left-behinds of the world, we are the universe in conversation; we are the consciousness of the planet coalescing; we are the planet plotting a resurrection.
By affirming that this evolutionary story of the universe is a sacred myth, grounded in science and yet possessing the power to awaken us in a fundamental way, the illusion of disconnection is overcome. There is differentiation, of course. Diversity seems to be a fundamental intention of the cosmos. Yet, there is no disconnection anywhere from bacteria to Bach – no line we can draw in the sand and claim that what happened from this point forward is unrelated to what preceded it. We ourselves are concentrated amalgams of everything that has gone before us – the sea, the bacteria, the stars, the plants, the animals all are gathered up in the miracle that is you. The poet Walt Whitman got it right when he wrote: “I am large. I contain multitudes”.

Oriented by this Great Story, we may realize our kinship with all creation – after decades of living in exile as a prodigal species.

This brings me to the second of those three affirmations – that creation is a sacred text. When we think and act “as if” the evolutionary story is a sacred narrative, then it follows that creation is the sacred text of the 21st century. Just as the Bible, the Koran, or the Bhagavad-Gita claim to reveal the God or gods of their traditions, so we may claim that creation is revelatory of Ultimate Reality – the external manifestation of the sacred interior nature of the universe. Every religious tradition has its version of the story of the King in pauper’s clothing. How the people treat the pauper is revealed to be how they treated their king. In my tradition, Jesus says: “Inasmuch as you did it unto the least of these, my kin, so you have done it unto me”. In this ecological age, we need to expand the definition of “the least of these” to include all of creation. Inasmuch as we have done it unto the spotted owl, the dolphins, Northern Alberta, our own B.C. rivers, we have done it unto our God. Creation, says 15th century Sufi poet, Kabir is “the secret One slowly growing a body”. To “come to our senses” in the 21st century is to treat creation and the human left behinds as though every thing and every body was “the secret One slowly growing a body”. Creation is the sacred text of our ecological age, revealing a sacred and holy Mystery.

---

2 Whitman, Walt, *Song of Myself*

3 Kabir, *Between the Conscious and the Unconscious the Mind Has Put Up a Swing*
Here is a poem by another Sufi poet, Hafiz, which reflects a consciousness well aware of creation as sacred text:

A leaf says,
“Sweethearts – don’t pick me,
For I am busy doing God’s work.

I am lowering my veins and roots
like ropes

With buckets tied to them
Into the earth’s deep lake.

I am drawing water
that I offer like a rose to
the sky.

I am a singing cleaning woman
Dusting off all the shelves in
the air

With my elegant green Rags.
I have a heart.
I can know happiness like You.”
To the prosaic mind of the modernist materialist this is romantic twaddle, anthropomorphism run amuck. On the other hand, for somebody who has come through modernism – who has transcended, yet included, the modern worldview – it represents what process philosophers call *postmodern animism*. The cosmos is infused with soul as in a premodern worldview, but minus the superstition, the fear, and the need to control the spiritworld with elaborate rituals. Empiricism and the scientific method remain valid, but we recognize the limits of science in its concern to measure exteriors.

Finally, an ecological spirituality affirms that consciousness and culture evolve along with biological life. As far as we know, humans represent that species which is able to consciously participate in its own evolution. Natural selection requires millions and millions of year for an organism to adapt to changing life conditions. But in humans natural selection gives way to *actual* selection, as we consciously participate in our own evolution. This capacity for conscious evolution means that we can adapt to changing life conditions very quickly once we “get it”. Implicit in this ecological, evolutionary spirituality is hope. It is the very nature of the universe to adapt to changing life conditions. It is the very definition of what it means to be human to bring our conscious awareness to this process of adapting and then selecting and co-creating our preferred future. In an ecological spirituality for our age, we are not waiting for any supernatural God to come and rescue us. Rather, the Holy is non-coercively streaming through each one of us.
In particular, we are that part of creation that has evolved to the point of being able to assume perspectives other than our own and to act empathically. This capacity to see the world through other’s eyes, and not just our own is a profound mystery. The evolution of worldviews parallel the evolution of consciousness in the individual. We evolve through stages, from egocentric (just me) to ethnocentric (us – defined as my family, my tribe, my religion) to worldcentric (all of us) to planetcentric (inclusive of all creation) to Kosmocentric (All That Is). This conscious evolution of perspective taking is a central spiritual practice in an ecological spirituality.

As we choose to include the perspective of the left-behinds in all creation and in the human realm, and then bring to bear the multiple perspectives of the business community, activists, politicians, indigenous people, social entrepreneurs, faith communities, we evolve to a higher level of consciousness – and as we do more of what I would call Spirit or the Hidden Wholeness at the Heart of Creation is able to manifest. Spirit grows as we take more comprehensive and inclusive perspectives.

I heartily recommend a new book by Sean-Esborg Hargens and Michael Zimmerman: *Integral Ecology: United Multiple Perspectives In the Natural World*. It should be required reading for everybody involved in the ecological activism. They identify a minimum of 200 distinct perspectives on any ecological issue you can imagine. Practically speaking this means that what Maureen and Be the Change Earth Alliance has dreamed into being here today is a profound spiritual initiative. By bringing together into the same room all of the multiple perspectives – and validating each perspective – this Unconference is displaying a highly evolved spirituality. I would say that Spirit is present in and as the many perspectives represented here today.

---

We have been prodigal as a species and it is now time to come home. It’s not that we’re bad. The planet would not be better without human presence. In evolutionary terms we’ve just come through adolescence as a species, like the prodigal son. And like adolescence, this period of time has been about distinguishing ourselves, discovering what was truly unique about us. But distinction morphed into disconnection and then into disassociation – a perilous, even psychotic condition. From this state of dissociation we have been able to enact all kinds of horrors upon the planet and upon each other. Now it is time to come home to the cosmos.

I have attempted to describe what it might mean for us to “come to our senses”, to adopt a spirituality that transcends, yet includes, our religious traditions. This ecological spirituality has the potential to re-orient us to a reality that is infused with sacred interiority, purpose and meaning – as distinct from the modernist and late post-modernist narratives. As we affirm evolution as sacred myth our dualistic consciousness dissolves and we may realize our essential unity with all that is – we are kin with all creation. This realization, along with the affirmation that creation itself is a sacred text – the exterior manifestation of the Holy – we gain the psychic and physical energy required to engage in the Great Work of our day: co-creating an ecologically sustainable, socially just, and spiritually fulfilling mode of human presence upon the earth.