

Permaculture: Breathing Earth ... Finding Home

David R. Weiss – May 27, 2019

The Gospel in Transition #27 – **Subscribe at www.davidrweiss.com**

“Then the LORD⁹⁰ God formed a man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.” (Gen. 2:7) Forget Jesus’ breath in John’s Easter scene, *this* is the moment when the Judeo-Christian tradition first affirms permaculture.

In my last post (GIT #26), I said Christian communities were “commissioned” as it were to be permaculture communities all along. Of course, that’s a bit of a rhetorical claim—permaculture as an intentional movement appeared nearly 2000 years *after* the first Christian communities. But my point stands. John’s Gospel links Jesus so clearly with the Biblical figure of Wisdom (who the Bible links with the wisdom inherent within creation) that Christians *ought* to enthusiastically embrace the core insight of permaculture: that nature itself is a repository of lived wisdom useful in shaping human life as well.

Not that nature *dictates* how we live, but our capacity for reflection, self-transcendence, and choice doesn’t set us *above* nature any more than the capacity for flight, parthenogenesis, underwater breathing, or photosynthesis sets any other bit of creation above nature. Permaculture, the infrastructure for the Transition Movement, suggests it’s both wise to learn *from* nature and ethical to seek to live in harmony *with* nature because we *are* nature. We’re simply nature with elevated cognitive, emotional, cultural, spiritual capacities.

That most Christians find this idea quite foreign reflects how far we are from the truth of our own tradition. Worse, given the way scientific-industrial progress has raced forward largely unbridled by ethics in a culture self-identified for generations as “Christian,” the church has been (at least!) complicit in the reckless advances that now threaten to wreck the ecosystem that sustains us. Permaculture argues that other paths were, and perhaps still are, available to us. So does this creation account in Genesis.

As a creation myth it oozes truth (not fact) in a story about how creation came to be and where we fit within it. However, it’s a myth made for people in another time and place. That doesn’t mean it has nothing to say to us, but it does mean we’ll need to listen carefully to hear across cultures, languages, and whole eras of understanding. Still, for those of us who continue to draw meaning and life out of this faith tradition, that extra care is worth it. And as we meet the climate emergency in front of us, there’s an added urgency to pay attention. Because some of the things we’ve often missed just may become lifelines in this moment. I’ll suggest several.

English translations have always told us “God formed a man from the dust of the ground.” The exact words vary, but every translation I’ve seen BURIES the truth of the Hebrew where God fashions an *adam* from the *adamah*. Later on, these translations render *adam* as the man’s name, Adam. But it is Hebrew for “earthling” fashioned from earth, or “dirtling” made from dirt, or “humus being” formed from humus. The truth intended by the original teller of this tale was that *we are dirt*. Enlivened by divine breath, but nonetheless still—forever and always—kin to the ground beneath our feet. The claim isn’t intended to humiliate us. Rather it tells us, on this ground *we are home*. No small truth for beings who have evolved our way into existential loneliness.

In this tale, God’s breath brings one particular bit of humus to life by breathing into it. We become humus beings—living soil. Later on the Hebraic Wisdom tradition begins to intuit what both science

⁹⁰ In many English translations of the Old Testament you’ll often see the word LORD printed in upper case letters. When you do, it indicates that behind this word lies the Hebrew word often viewed as the name of God: *YHWH*. Jews consider it too sacred to speak aloud, so when reading their scriptures they replace it, by saying the word *Adonai*, which means “Lord.” (It actually means “Lords”—plural—which is itself a fascinating detail, as though in the midst of Judaism’s strict monotheism, a bit of the God’s ineffable “moreness” leaks through here.)

and permaculture confirm: *we aren't the only soil that is alive*. Whether you call it the breath of God or the ferment of microbes, the black dirt under our feet is fairly crowded with animate energy. Permaculture begs us to honor it; this Genesis creation tale says no less.

This creation account goes on to describe Eden, the garden planted by God into which the humus being (*adam/Adam*) is placed. We do an injustice to the peoples who first heard this tale when we presume they regarded it as a divinely-relayed newspaper account of an anthropomorphized God, who acted like a supernatural botanist in setting up Eden. AND—we do an injustice *to ourselves* when we presume we're either beholden to read the verses that way today—or entitled to be embarrassed by verses so unembarrassed about narrating divine activity. Ancient peoples were “fluent” in myth. They felt no need to decide between fact and fiction. Myth told truth—and it moved freely across these less important distinctions in telling its truth.

With the garden in place, we learn that God set the *adam* [that is, “the humus being”—as yet single and ungendered] in the garden of Eden “to till it and keep it.” (Gen. 2:15) This, then, is the paradigmatic human vocation according to this account: *to work the land and sustain its abundance*—in other words: *to practice permaculture*. There is no talk of being *imago Dei* (“in the image of God”) or “having dominion” in this account—I’ll discuss that in a future post.

Almost as soon as the humus being begins tending the humus, God observes, “It is not good for the *adam* [the single “humus being”] to be alone.” (Gen 2:18) So God fashions all manner of animals, none of whom provide quite sufficient companionship, until God splits the *adam* itself into two: man and woman. (Gen. 2:19-23) One might consider a host of (worthwhile) gender issues here, but today I simply want to note that in this story God invites the humus being *to name* each creature. The invitation and the act are significant because throughout the biblical text names are *not* used to establish the power of ownership or exploitation, but *to carry the truth of relationship*.⁹¹

In Eden, naming is a vocational act alongside tending the garden. *It is a prototype of ecology*. Indeed, once we see the purpose of naming as placing ourselves and our companion creatures into appropriate relationship, then naming and tending become essentially one *interwoven* vocation. We cannot tend the humus well if we do not attend as well to the ways that *all life* is humus-borne.

From creation to Christianity, authentic biblical faith anticipates permaculture (and Transition). To understand ourselves as *humus beings*—“breathing earth”—places us firmly *within* this natural world. And not as punishment or burden, but as home and calling. We were not made to be masters of this material world. Rather, *we were intended for intimacy with it*. Facing a climate crisis of apocalyptic scope, that intimacy will mean allowing ourselves to feel unfathomable grief. But it will also mean catching glimpses of revelatory joy. Perhaps most of all, it will mean holding earth in our hands and feeling the goodness of home.

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⁹¹ Just a few examples: “Eve” means “the mother of all living”; “Isaac” means “laughter”—the child whose unexpected birth brought laughter; “Israel” means “one who wrestles with God.” There are a number of ways to convey the sense of YHWH: “I am what I am”; “I am who I am”; or “I will be who I will be.” Because the most vivid account of God’s self-revelation comes in the scene with Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3:1-15), linked to a series of future promises, I find it evocative to hear the name as “I will be who I must be for your liberation.”

Permaculture ABCs: Apples, Boundaries, and C(K)ings

David R. Weiss – June 2, 2019

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Eden's idyllic garden setting (the focus of my last post) doesn't last long, of course. As the tale continues (Genesis 3:1-24) we encounter apples,⁹² boundaries, and—hiding at the edge of this narrative—c(k)ings. Without claiming that this 3000 year-old myth speaks directly to the issues of a changed climate, I do believe it can help us re-root ourselves (and our faith) in a worldview rich in pre-scientific wisdom.

I noted earlier (GIT #26) that permaculture—the DNA for the Transition Movement—began in the 1970's as a response to a very broken garden. Its own antecedents appeared early in the twentieth century through pioneering thinkers and growers whose holistic views of an interconnected living world shaped their approach to agriculture. But it was the post-WWII boom in the use of petro-chemical fertilizers—and the mechanized machinery that applied them—that permaculture directly responded to.

In particular (although they wouldn't have phrased it exactly so), permaculture arose as we increasingly traded *tending* the soil—our kin if you recall my last post—for *dominating* it. Industrial agriculture represented a tragic dys-tending of the living earth, twisting it asunder from its own natural cycles and pressing it to deliver according to our desires. *Genesis warned us of this*. And warns us still.

As anyone familiar with the creation account featuring the Garden of Eden will recall, there is a tree in the center of Eden that is off limits to Adam and Eve, those first humus beings.⁹³ It's the Tree of the knowledge of good and evil. It's the *only* tree they are forbidden to eat from, but of course they do, and that eating becomes responsible for “the Fall”—the end of that first paradise and the entry of sin and death into the world. Now, *this is myth* (see GIT #27), which means there is no biblical claim here that there was some time in primal history when humans didn't die. Myths offer truths not facts.

There was never a time when death itself—mere mortality—was not part of human life in this natural world. But there *was* a time in our pre-human past when instinct still reigned and our cognitive capacity was poised just at the cusp of self-consciousness. And this story tells the truth of what happened as we moved beyond that cusp into fully self-aware beings. It tells us that (at least, in this Hebraic tradition) *only God has sufficient perspective to render final judgments about good and evil*. We humans are consigned to live by making our best assessments of moral situations—and maintaining a hefty dose of humility. And when we choose to act as though we are privy to absolute knowledge of good and evil? Inevitably: sin, domination, violence, and death. From Cain's murder of Abel right on up to the present.

This myth is not about breaking an abstract divine command (as though God simply made one tree off limits to test our uncritical obedience). It was always about more substantial boundaries: that we live best when we make a wise peace with the ambiguity that speaks the final word about our best guesses—and thus allow that ambiguity to usher humility to the forefront of our judgments. More often, however, from Eden onward we transgress that boundary. And our overblown confidence that we—little more than dirt whirling in Wind—can assert absolute value judgments ... that kind of thinking has often characterized the worst excesses and atrocities of human history.

Apples and boundaries. And c(k)ings. This creation myth is part of the larger Yahwist narrative, that long strand of the Hebrew Scriptures—myth/legend/history—named for its use of YHWH as the name of God.⁹⁴ And it has a couple kings hiding at the edges. The Yahwist narrative as a whole is interested in

⁹² While most of us *do* encounter “apples” in Eden in our popular imagination, the Bible only mentions “fruit.”

⁹³ There's A LOT going on in this tale (including an infamous serpent). I'm only scratching the surface.

⁹⁴ There's currently a lively debate over the dating of the Yahwist narrative. For years it was dated around 1000-950 BCE: contemporaneous with King David and/or King Solomon. Recent scholarship cites linguistic clues and allusions to historical/theological motifs to argue for a much later date, perhaps between 600-550 BCE.

recounting the accomplishment of King David in uniting Israel's tribes into a monarchy, which then reaches its apex under King Solomon (and then almost immediately fractures). But this creation myth stands as a subtle critique of both kings and their unwillingness to live within Eden's boundaries.

David is largely honored within the biblical tradition—his passion for God becomes the measure of future kings, and an entire millennium after he lived, the Gospels view it as an honor to link Jesus to David. But the sin that undoes his kingdom from within is his rape of Bathsheba.⁹⁵ When the prophet Nathan confronts him over this, his words evoke Eden's garden. Basically he tells David, "As king, you *could* have chosen a wife from *any* of the trees in Israel—*except one*: the tree of married women. Yet you took from the one tree forbidden to you." David's sin is to presume that boundaries do not apply to him.

Solomon is lauded for his wisdom and wealth (1 Kings 1-12). Less known is that after David's death Solomon consolidates his rule by violence. And the opulence of his reign rests on plundering his own people and the land.⁹⁶ None of his prosperity reached the peasants in Israel. Ultimately, his many wives are blamed for luring his loyalty away from Israel's God to foreign gods. There may be some truth to this, but the "proof" of Solomon's disloyalty to YHWH is less that he has multiple marriages than that he turns Israel into a kingdom that, for those at the bottom, *echoes the experience of their ancestors who were slaves in Egypt*. Solomon's sin, like David's, is to presume that whatever he *could* do, must be good.

Both kings are hiding in this tale—eating the apple, transgressing its boundary, and wreaking havoc as a result. The power of myth is that it exists "outside of time" and tells a tale that can be true again and again.

In so many ways the story of our modern acquisitive culture is the story of presuming that whatever we *could* do, must be good. Apples, boundaries, and c(k)ings all over again. More is better. And when the land—our kin—shows its inborn limits, why, we'll *force it* to give us what we want, when we want it, and as much as we desire. That's the story of industrial agriculture, too. And by now it's done untold damage to the familial earth beneath our feet. It's played a lead role in threatening the very extinction of insects. It's fostered structural violence against both farm workers and farm animals. And ... insofar as "we *are* what we eat," all of us raised on industrial agriculture have been fed not simply the food *but the story that somehow earth's limits don't apply to us*.

When I said industrial agriculture began in the "post-war boom" of petro-chemical fertilizer, that wasn't colloquial dating. During the war "thriving" industries developed to produce nitrogen-ammonia for weapons: for dealing out death. After the war, there were stockpiles of nitrogen-rich ammonia and the means to make more—that needed a market. So what we couldn't use for bombs we sold to farmers to "bomb" the soil with chemicals to bend it to our will. When Cain murders Abel (Gen. 4) God says to him, "Your brother's blood is crying out to me from the ground! And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand." What irony, that we used the overflow of materials no longer needed to kill people to curse the ground instead.

Permaculture believes a better way exists. Transition builds on permaculture. And our future rests upon our ability to hear both the wisdom and the warning in this creation myth. And to hear in permaculture a story about what *might* be. What *must* be if we want a future to be at all.

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⁹⁵ 2 Sam. 11:1-12:23. Often described as David committing "adultery" with Bathsheba since she is married, there was *ZERO* consent in this sex. This is royal rape; any other description erases the very real power dynamics at play.

⁹⁶ The forced labor, large army, and high taxes predicted by Samuel (1 Sam. 8:10-18) are fulfilled under Solomon.

Permaculture and Dominion: A Creation Account from a Cliff

David R. Weiss – June 10, 2019

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Dominion. It's the elephant in the room, I suppose. No matter what I say about Eden and those first "humus beings," someone is whispering the whole time, "Sure, sure, but *dominion*."

Or maybe not even whispering. Almost thirty years ago I spent about thirty inauspicious days as a Greenpeace door-to-door canvasser. The cause was already dear to my heart, but it was hardly work that matched my psychic energy. Read: introvert's nightmare. I still recall one man who met me at his door, his demeanor dismissive before I even finished my short introduction. He smiled, patronizingly (he was old enough then—maybe early 50's—to be my father), and said, "I have four words for you: '*Let. Them. Have. Dominion.*' End of conversation." And he closed the door in my face, smiling the whole time.

Today's post is NOT for that man. Would it be great to swing the minds of those most opposite me in their views? Sure. But there are already a host of other people who find themselves increasingly uneasy with their inherited understanding of humanity's place in creation. You don't have to be a Greenpeace supporter to worry that we are "dominioning" ourselves and some of our favorite creatures to death. I write for that "moveable middle," hoping to invite those of you there to reconsider a cosmology⁹⁷ that is in at least as much crisis as our climate is.

Permaculture sets the "cosmology," as it were, for the Transition Movement. It paints the picture of a world in which mutually beneficial ecological relationships are possible, desirable, and rewarding. I offer my reflections on the Genesis creation narratives to suggest that they (both!) carry a cosmology that resonates far more with permaculture than we've been taught. Because our best wisdom—both its Hebraic roots and early Christian expression—has been largely submerged by another story so pervasive that we presume it's "our story." *But it's not.* That other story glistens with shiny things, but upon a closer examination the pattern in the weave reflects domination, alienation, dualism, and exploitation. Look closer still and you'll see that the threads are woven strands of insecurity, arrogance, and fear.

"Dominion" first enters *our tradition* in the Priestly creation account found in Genesis 1:1-2:3. Like the Yahwist account (see GIT #27 & #28), the Priestly account is entirely *disinterested* in telling us science. But it's not quite myth either (myth tends to have a richer narrative plot). This "story" is really *liturgy*. It holds the rhythm, the soothing cadence, of worshipful words: *these verses invite a community to rehearse the truth of its world.*

When I taught Bible in college I told into my students, "Scripture has nothing to do with nowhere." By which I meant that every text has *context*. Yes, some passages speak well across time and place, but the most potent clues to their meaning and message are bound up with their birth. So it matters profoundly that *this creation liturgy was born into a shattered world.*

This creation account is ascribed to the Priestly Source, one of the major author-editor voices present in the Pentateuch—the first five books of the Bible. Concerned with ritual and its role in securing the Hebrew people's identity, most scholars date it to the Exile.⁹⁸ That is, this voice (likely a *collection of*

⁹⁷ Cosmology can be either scientific or religious-cultural. A scientific cosmology is the best picture science can offer of how the universe came to be and how/why it unfolds as it does. A religious-cultural cosmology is the picture offered by religion (often through origin myths) or, more often today, submerged in a whole set of explicit and implicit cultural assumptions that speak to the 'how' and 'why' of the universe and our place in it. In many ways our current climate crisis is a symptom of a crisis in our religious-cultural cosmology.

⁹⁸ Some date it to the post-Exilic period; for my purposes the exact dating isn't significant. It's likely the Priestly material took its final form over several generations, and even post-Exile, Israel's life and theology was indelibly shaped by the impact of the Exile itself.

voices with a shared worldview) appeared in Israel's life *after* the kingdom united by David (1000 BCE) and expanded by Solomon had been fractured by civil war (930 BCE). It surfaced *after* the Assyrian empire swept across the Northern Kingdom and forever scattered those ten tribes to the wind (722 BCE). And it arose *after* the Babylon Empire not only overshadowed Assyria but claimed the tiny Southern Kingdom, comprised of the remnant tribes of Judah and Benjamin as well (597-586 BCE).

In this last national catastrophe, not only did the people see their countryside overrun and the capital city laid waste, they even saw their Temple burned to the ground. They found themselves landless people—exiles. What does it even mean to be a people without a land? To borrow the image from the older Eden tale, *what does it mean to be humus beings torn from the humus that you know ... and that knows you?* It means that among the many forces shaping Israel's shared identity, the very precariousness of their even being a people at all threatens to be the loudest “rhythm” in their daily life.

But even more than this—with the Temple reduced to dust and ashes—*what does it mean to have a “homeless” God?* Isn't that an ontological oxymoron? Perhaps a lesser spirit, perhaps a demon, might be homeless. But to be incapable of protecting one's temple lay on the wrong side of any ancient litmus test for a god. If to be a landless people stretched the notions of “peoplehood,” to be a God-less landless people snapped those notions of “peoplehood” altogether.

THIS is the context—the *precipice* on which the Priestly writers crafted their words. These were *cliff-dwelling theologians* not because of the physical terrain in which they lived but because of the social and theological reality into which they wrote—audaciously. So while there is more to say about this creation account, the first thing to notice—*BECAUSE WE READ IT FROM A SUCH A DIFFERENT PLACE*—is that the Priestly account is speaking to people whose power political has been brutally broken, whose national identity has been almost entirely erased, and whose personal-communal-religious self-esteem has been completely shattered.

In THIS context, to announce—through liturgy—that people are *imago Dei* (in the image of God – Gen. 1:26) is no invitation to arrogance; it is the incredible assertion that, contrary to all outward appearances, *you carry within yourselves the very echo of the energy that animates the universe*. This image is salve for the soul of a people otherwise undone by their history.

Likewise, in THIS context, “dominion” (also in Gen. 1:26) is hardly a summons to dominate. It is more the suggestion of the *possibility* of life in which one's place in the natural world does not merely punctuate the chaos of the last military campaign. This sense of dominion, too, stands in stark counterpoint to an experience mostly unknown to us: the cataclysmic erasure of both personal and national power. It comes as a word of comfort, not conquest.

It's possible that yet in *our lifetimes* (or our grandchildren's) we will *ourselves* be people undone by our own history, experiencing the cataclysmic erasure of both personal and national power. In that case, we might learn first hand the original power of this creation account. Though perhaps we can still turn away (one might say “repent”) from that future.

In my couple of posts I'll explore these notions—*imago Dei* and dominion—further. They're actually *rich with promise* for a cosmology that would've served us much better than the one that's given us a changed climate. And, if we reclaim them quickly enough, they might indeed serve us well as we move toward communities of faith that can embrace Transition and be resilient in the midst of uncertainty.

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Permaculture and Imago Dei: An Ecological Divinity

David R. Weiss – June 18, 2019

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We're coming back to "dominion," I promise. But in Genesis 1:26, the conferral of dominion happens like this: "Then God said, 'Let us make humankind* in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion ...' So it makes sense to consider first *imago Dei*, the Latin phrase that captures this declaration that we are somehow "in the image of God," as a prerequisite to exploring what it might mean to "have dominion."

*As in the Yahwist account (Gen. 2:4-25), the Hebrew word behind "humankind" here is also *adam*—a play on the word for dirt: *adamah*—so God is effectively saying, "Let us make dirtlings, earthlings, humus beings in our image ..."

I want to suggest that *imago Dei*—to carry an image ... reflection ... echo ... of divinity—evokes an *intrinsically ecological notion of divinity*. Most of us grew up steeped in a sense of God's transcendence, although we likely didn't have the words to say it. We knew God as infinitely distant, infinitely other; certainly in heaven and certainly not on earth. It's true that both Christian theology and the Hebraic spirituality that came before it, have held distinct strands of *both* transcendence and immanence (God's infinite nearness), but Christians in particular have tended for generations to downplay immanence. Seems like it's easier to ruthlessly exploit the planet if God is elsewhere.

But what if our ancient cosmologies carried a wisdom predating scientific fact that saw animate energy interwoven with cosmic matter from the very start? Recognizing that the deep cosmology of the Bible is a distant but clear cousin to permaculture just might inspire us to get better acquainted with this legacy that might be our lifeline toward Transition.

Even before we take up *imago Dei*, this verse raises another interesting question. God says, "Let us ..." Just who is that creative *us*? Some scholars view it as a vestige of an ancient sense of multiplicity in the godhead: that even as the ancient Hebrews embraced the radical notion of monotheism (with frequent slips into worshipping other gods), there was still an overwhelming intuition that God's oneness was somehow *also a manyness*. Others regard it as an instance of the "royal we" or the "majestic plural," where the writer shows God speaking like a monarch on behalf of the royal house, perhaps a collective reference to the whole host of heaven: God and all the angels. I've even seen arguments that this is a hint at the Trinity—as if we overhear God conversing with godself.

I'll offer a more evocative reading. Genesis tells us, "God said, 'Let the earth put forth vegetation ...' creatures ..." and "God said, 'Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures ...' and "God said, 'Let the earth bring forth living creatures ...' (1:11, 20, 24) These aren't scientific or historical claims, but it seems significant that this account portrays a God who works *with* creation in creative partnership. Given what we know today of life's unfolding course, why not read the "us" as God turning *to the entire animal kingdom* (all brought forth in the immediately preceding verses), and saying to them with a grand *evolutionary* invitation, "Now, let *us*—all of you creatures—let us *together* make human beings in *our* image ... so that they carry within themselves both the seeds of creaturely roots and the aspirations of God."

Alongside the theological awe in response to God's absolute otherness, there is an equal awe appropriate to God's absolute nearness. God's wisdom is writ upon the natural world. Those who dare, might say God's wisdom is *wholly at home there*. And what are we humans, if not earth, able at last—after eons of cosmic patience—to sense the wisdom and beauty that has been waiting to be known all along?⁹⁹

⁹⁹ Already 35 years ago, Brian Swimme's dialogical parable *The Universe is a Green Dragon* (Bear & Company, 1984) blended contemporary physics with sacred reverence to suggest that human beings are (at least one instance of) the universe coming to conscious awareness of itself.

Now, *imago Dei*. Few biblical notions are so dear to our heart—and so dysunderstood as this one. (Okay, that’s not a real word, but it’s accurate: we don’t merely *misunderstand* this word, we twist it to suit our desires; we intentionally *dysunderstand* it.)

The burden of self-consciousness is existential anxiety. We actually know we *are* ... and can anticipate that we might one day *not be*. Our drive to fashion meaning—through religion, culture, art, work, etc.—is the basic alchemy of humanizing our lives. Done sufficiently well it “treats” our existential anxiety and makes life bearable. Done exceptionally well it renders life meaningful.

This is the inescapable predicament of humanity: this is what it means to carry within ourselves both the seeds of creaturely roots (finitude) and the aspirations of God (imagination). And, too often, we prefer to evade the entire ordeal by pretending as though “we’re not really from around here.” We read *imago Dei* as lifting us above creation. We take *our* lesser angels, lust for absolute power and absolute knowledge; we project them upward onto God; and then congratulate ourselves on bearing that image.

In the biblical story, while God certainly exercises power as one might expect, God also and remarkably *chooses* vulnerability again and again. Look at the company God keeps: second-born sons, enslaved people, slow-tongued leaders, women, Gentiles, and awkwardly outcast prophets. God opens godself to a depth of emotion that we rarely connect with divinity: feeling anguish at the suffering of the Hebrews in Egypt; betrayal by their infidelity; sorrow at their exile in Babylon; even compassion for the Ninevites in the Book of Jonah. It would overstate it to call God an emotional wreck, but the God of the Hebrew Bible chooses to *be whole* not by avoiding vulnerability but by embracing it.

But what if God is in fact unimaginably *from around here*—far more intimately immanent than we expected? Mechtild of Magdeburg (1210-1280 CE), a Beguine mystic, said, “You ask me where God dwells. I will tell you. There is no lord in the whole world who lives in all their dwellings at once except God alone.” About fifty years later, Meister Eckhart (1260-1329 CE), the famous Rhineland mystic, offered an even more visceral image: “God was pregnant with every creature from all eternity.”¹⁰⁰ In other words, what if being *imago Dei* means to be intimately interwoven with the natural world? What if being *imago Dei* means *exactly* to call the tension between finitude and longing *HOME* and to do so with grace?

We find ourselves as a society—no, *as a species*—in the most excruciatingly vulnerable moment of our existence. We have pretended for so long—and with such a vengeance—that we are not from around here, that Here is on the verge of becoming no longer hospitable to our being. If there is a way forward in this moment, permaculture and Transition will be essential companions. Recognizing their essential kinship with our being in the image of an ecological divinity may help us embrace them as the family we need right now.

PS: I've set up a Patreon site to help fund my work in this area. I hope you'll invest in my thinking and writing. You can learn more about how to support me here: www.patreon.com/fullfrontalfait

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¹⁰⁰ Mechtild was a German Beguine (a lay religious order that was dedicated to serving the poor, but did not take did formal vows). Eckhart was a Dominican theologian and friar (preacher). Both quotes appears in *Meditation with Mechtild of Magdeburg* (ed. Sue Woodruff, Bear & Company, 1982, pp. 15, 29).

Permaculture and Pride: Queer Gifts in a Time of Climate ChangeD

David R. Weiss – June 23, 2019

The Gospel in Transition #31 – **Subscribe at www.davidrweiss.com**

I have one more essay on “dominion” in Genesis 1:26 to write, but this week, in honor of LGBTQ Pride, I want to consider how Pride offers some timely gifts that should resonate in faith communities adapting to climate changeD.

Permaculture, as we’ve seen, begins with the presumption, *Earth knows Earth best*. Because of its capacity to “think” and “problem-solve” across a geological timescale, Earth can patiently tease out the best way to do things. Hence, permaculture encourages us to work *with* Earth’s “best practices” when interacting with Earth (e.g., farming) and to learn *from* Earth as we *earthlings* fashion the physical communities and cultural worlds where we dwell. Permaculture says we’re wise to follow Earth’s lead rather than dictate terms that may be more to our immediate liking but aren’t likely to be sustainable. And permaculture gently, persistently reminds us that because *we are Earth first*, if it isn’t sustainable for Earth, it isn’t wise for earthlings.

Pride is a celebration of resistance by the LGBTQ community. Sure it has its gaudy, *fabulous*, festive expressions, but it began—fifty years ago in the Stonewall riots of 1969—as an act of resistance and ultimately a declaration of authentic selfhood. After decades, generations, centuries of being marginalized, ostracized, criminalized, and demonized, through Stonewall the queer community said, ENOUGH!

Now, there is a *long complex* history here, and I’m not fully competent to tell it. But I can say a few things. While Stonewall became “the” lightning rod event, it was far from the first moment of resistance. And the visible faces, audible voices, and leading figures within the queer community have been contested at length. Although the Stonewall riots were led by drag queens and transwomen, in the wake of the riots it was primarily gay men, whose relative social/economic status gave them more power than others in the queer community, who emerged as most visible vanguard of Pride. But over the past five decades—with plenty of vigorous discussion along the way—many others have emerged, bringing their own particular colorful identities to Pride: lesbian, bisexual, transgender, asexual, gender fluid, intersex, queer persons of color, and more.

Regardless of their pathway into Pride, what links these persons together is their resistance to being socially othered: deemed criminal, forced out of view, condemned as sinful, or branded as “queer”—queer as “that-which-fouls-the-normal.”¹⁰¹ And the positive expression of this resistance, seen in Pride celebrations and even more importantly in the daily dignity with which these persons carry themselves is this permaculture-like assertion: *We know our own truth best, and we will live from the truth that is ours.*

Over against a dominant patriarchal society that has worked relentlessly to objectify earth, animals, persons of color, women, and LGBTQ persons—pressing them all into the service of foolhardy dreams of domination, Pride becomes one more voice among many saying, *ENOUGH*. Earth knows Earth best. Animals have intrinsic dignity, “knowing” themselves in way we can only humbly guess at. Persons of color bear witness to an experience of life—especially in white-dominant societies—that is unknown to the rest of us unless we listen in rapt silence. Women know women (across a multitude of particular experiences) best. And queer people (in all their extravagant diversity) know queer people best.

¹⁰¹ True, some persons choose to wear “queer” itself as a term of pride, “turning the symbol” so that its othering power is erased. Such acts may render the symbol itself harmless to certain hearers, but it’s a much bigger project to render the systems that use the term harmless.

In some ways the Garden of Eden myth of eating from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil (in Genesis 3 and discussed in GIT #28) is the story of the primordial “fall” into the arrogant—and often deadly—presumption that I can know you *absolutely* and without needing to listen to you. It tells of the temptation for those with social power to believe they can map out the world’s morality without reference to the world’s diversity—as though the measure of “good” and “evil” is ours alone. Such efforts are worse than foolish. They inevitably alienate us from Earth, animals, and others, and usually that alienation is costly—even deadly—for those with less power.

Indeed, one might view much of the arc of human history through this lens. Different empires competing for whose version of the world can “map” the rest of the world most to their advantage. It’s a story of human folly and tragedy ... and evil and genocide. And as human technology has advanced the stakes have gotten higher for everyone, including Earth herself.

There are at least two fundamental gifts that Pride might bring to conversations about how we live toward Transition in light of our changed climate. Foremost is this permaculture-like assertion: *each community*, whether Earth or animal, gender, or sexual identity, *knows itself best*. And deserves to be met on its own terms. That’s the heart of Pride. It sits at the intersection of resistance, celebration, and wisdom. And it’s a truth we all need today.

The second gift is more sobering but just as essential. Both on account of its enduring across long generations of oppression and more keenly through its searing experience with HIV/AIDS, the queer community has learned—by sheer necessity—to foster community by leveraging inner resources more than outer resources. Even to tend to its dying members with grace without knowing when—or if—its suffering would end. This is NOT a lesson anyone would be eager to learn. But as the disparities in our world deepen and as ecosystems became more strained and as we begin to experience the backlash of having lived so long out of sync with our own Earth home, we may need this “gift” most of all.

I just finished watching HBO’s miniseries, *Chernobyl*. It’s a piercing look at the factors that led to that nuclear catastrophe and the devastation it wrought. I’ll be haunted for a long time by words spoken by Valery Legasov, one of the lead characters in assessing how this unimaginable disaster could’ve happened: “Every lie we tell incurs a debt to truth. Sooner or later that debt is paid.”

Our consumptive industrialized world, so dismissive of the wisdom of permaculture, has lived a long lie. The rising rate of carbon in the atmosphere is but one indicator of how great our debt to truth has grown. And it is coming due soon. It is no small thing to suggest, as Pride celebrations swirl around us this week, that if we can learn the first lesson of Pride, acknowledging and honoring the integrity of each Earth (and earthling) community we will be better able to transition away from the lie that has claimed most of our lives to date.

And it is no small thing to whisper that if (when?) chaos, uncertainty, and suffering come to define our world it may be the hallowed memory of the queer community that can help show us how to hold onto dignity and joy even then.

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Permaculture and Dominion: An Unlikely Love Story

David R. Weiss – July 9, 2019

The Gospel in Transition #32 – **Subscribe at www.davidrweiss.com**

This is my fifth and, for the time being, final essay on the biblical creation narratives (the others are GIT 27, 28, 29, 30). These origin tales from our distant religious roots don't offer perfect ecological wisdom. They grew out of a culture and worldview already knocked askew by patriarchy. But they harbor wisdom born of a relationship more attuned to both the divine and the mundane than is common today. And the power we often borrow from them to fuel our domination of the planet comes to us only by misreading the terms and ignoring the distance between their context and ours.

So, *dominion*. The word (in Hebrew *rahad*) appears in Genesis 1:26-28, where it describes the relationship God sets us in with respect to the rest of creation. But wait. This account—like *all* Scripture—does NOT objectively record God's actions or inclinations. To say these verses report “the relationship God sets us in ...” is accurate enough of the words themselves, but hardly sound as theology. Truer to say: in these verses an ancient Hebrew storyteller *imagines God* setting humans in such relationship. Theology is *always* expressive of decidedly human imagination, and to do theology responsibly *always* involves a readiness to critique that imagination.

Still, if there there's a blank check in the biblical creation accounts, whether from God or from that ancient storyteller, it's “dominion.” Arguably no concept has so fueled our un-ecological relationship with the planet as dominion.¹⁰² But what if these verses *never meant that*? What if we've been raised to *misread* this text to our own planetary peril?

As I explained earlier (GIT 29) the context for this creation account/liturgy is on the far side of national disaster—and *that makes a big difference*. We don't know its exact dating, but scholars agree it was written either for people living as refugees, exiled to a foreign land, or for Israel's post-Exilic community, former refugees seeking to rebuild after having lost *everything*. For such people to be told (Gen. 1:26) they were created *imago Dei* (in the image of God) is far from a prideful assertion. It is the sacred reaffirmation of a dignity by then thoroughly shattered by the world.

Similarly, to be set into a relation of *rahad*/dominion with the natural world—whatever that might mean—sits differently when you realize the word comes to people who've been scattered and whose *best* technology can only hope to eek out reliable harvests but cannot inflict real damage on the earth. Context matters. But so does original meaning.

Imagine: there *are* other ways to arrange the stars in the night sky besides the constellations so familiar to us like the Big Dipper. But by now our eyes *insist* on seeing *those* patterns. At least since the King James Version (1611CE) the Hebrew word *rahad* has been rendered as dominion. Against the backdrop of the Renaissance, the Scientific Revolution, and the Age of Discovery,* translating this word as the “politically correct” version of “domination” made a certain sense—because it took (West European) humanity's burgeoning *hubris* and dressed it up as God's own commission.

*More accurately: “The Emerging Scourges of Colonialism, Capitalism, and White Supremacy.” *Seriously*.

Considering how *rahad* is used elsewhere in the Bible and how it functions in this text shows that domination has NO relationship to *rahad*.¹⁰³ “Dominion” is, in fact, *a very poor choice* to translate this word for God's desired relationship between humanity and the rest of creation. Nowhere in the Bible does *rahad* carry a sense of domination or oppression. Most significantly, in Psalm 72 *rahad* describes the rule of the king *who ensures that justice is done and that the needs of the vulnerable are cared for*. Thus, *rahad*, minimally, is “righteous reign.” But we can suggest even more.

¹⁰² For instance, see Lynn White, Jr., “The Historic Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” *Science* 155 (1967), 1203-07.

¹⁰³ My thoughts here are indebted to and in conversation with Lloyd H. Steffen, “In Defense of Dominion,” *Environmental Ethics* 14:1 (Spring 1992), pp. 63-80.

Rahad is established as the human vocation *before* humanity is distorted by sin so its later uses (as in Psalm 73) may name those fleeting glimpses when humans manifest the wholeness for which they were intended. And because the Priestly editors chose to place this creation account first, as a sort of prelude to the (earlier) Yahwist account, they likely meant to show the naming of the companion creatures in Eden by the original Humus Being (*adam*) as original *rahad*/dominion. Yet this naming creates the conditions NOT for oppression but for relationship—for *intimacy*. In this regard, *rahad*, far from what we think of as dominion, is much closer to the Native American notion that sees humans in familial relationship to all other creatures.

I'll go one step further. When Jeremiah (22:13-16) describes God-pleasing kingship he echoes Psalm 72: doing justice and protecting the vulnerable are defining royal deeds. But then he asks, most evocatively, "Is not this what it means *to know* me?" says the LORD." That verb, "to know," is the same Hebrew word for love-making. It carries the sense of deep authentic intimacy. For Jeremiah, to practice justice and mercy is to know God ... intimately. *Without being explicitly sexual about it, rahad is God's commission that we stand in erotic¹⁰⁴ relationship to the world around us.* To know creation intimately, to name it well, with a deep mix of wonder, awe, understanding, and care. This is *rahad*, and *it's a love story*.

Given these rich justice-driven, mercy-friendly, eco-sensitive connotations, the challenge isn't to "redeem" some nuanced version of "dominion," it's to find a phrase that actually carries *rahad* into English. Something like: "Then God said, 'Let us make humankind [*adam*: humus beings, earthlings] in our image, according to our likeness; and let them exercise *rahad*/~~dominion~~ [an eco-intimate and just-knowing relationship] with the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and the cattle, and with all the earth and every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.'" (Gen 1:26) That's *rahad*.

Of course, almost right after this (Gen. 1:28), we're instructed, as one primary expression of *rahad*, to *kabash* the earth. For 400 years we've read *kabash* as "subdue," translating it in tandem with the "dominion" rendering of *rahad*. But, having reframed *rahad*, it becomes evident that *kabash* actually means nothing more—and nothing less!—than to "till and keep" the garden. (Gen. 2:15) In fact, drawing all the richness of *rahad* into *kabash*, it's fair to say that *kabash* anticipates *permaculture* as the most practical expression of our human vocation.

Words matter. And translation is no innocent enterprise. The 2016 film *Arrival* is (among other things) a compelling reflection on the stakes in translation, where humanity's fate (not unlike our own!) hangs in the balance over how to translate a single word from an alien message. Is it "weapon" ... or "tool"? And what leads us to select one over the other?

It is the height of folly to think the biblical creation tales authorized our ecocidal exploitation of the planet, but it's equally foolish to write them off as fairy tales that ask us to believe in magic. These texts bear deep wisdom. This Priestly account invites us to see our relationship (*rahad*) to the earth and our companion creatures ... as a love story. Doing so won't solve the climate crisis, but it will offer us a warmer and wiser posture from which to address it, providing us with an unlikely but essential love story as we prepare to meet the tempest coming our way.

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¹⁰⁴ On the "the erotic," see Audre Lorde, "The Uses of the Erotic," (1978) in *Sexuality and the Sacred*, eds. Marvin M. Ellison and Kelly Brown Douglass (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2010), pp. 73-77.

Mucking Along in the Great Marsh – Air Thick with Hope

David R. Weiss – July 13, 2019

The Gospel in Transition #33 – **Subscribe at www.davidrweiss.com**

“I swear, if we meet a triceratops around the next bend I won’t be at all surprised!” Of course, I was mostly joking; I would’ve been *very* much surprised. But the ambience of the marsh was so ancient, it was hard not to feel a little anxious at Margaret’s reply: “Well, if we do, you’re on your own, because I’ll be busy filming it chasing you with my phone, so I can text it to the grandkids and say, ‘Look what Grandpa found on our hike!’”

We were meandering (and melting in the humidity) along the [Great Marsh Trail](#),¹⁰⁵ part of the Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore. “Hiking” would be an overstatement because the mile-and-a-half trail is entirely flat and comprised mostly of a mown grassy path. But “walking” or “strolling” would be an understatement. We seemed *far* from civilization, as the muck that occasionally sucked at our shoes intimidated.

And “intimated” itself is an interesting word. It means “suggested,” of course, but perhaps in a more *intimate* sort of way. And once we’d ventured the first hundred yards into the marsh, it swallowed us ... *intimately*. We were wrapped in a sultry sensory concoction of croaking frogs, flower scents, buzzing insects, swampy smells, bird songs, and a host of verdant hues. The marsh embraced us with the enthusiasm of a dear friend who hasn’t seen us in ages. We felt *known*.

Setting my imaginary triceratops aside, and making allowance for the infrequent car we could see driving along the road at the far edge of the marsh, the trail did feel like we’d passed through time, back to a terrain unmarked by human activity. But not quite.

There are three levels to the tale, each holding its own measure of wonder.

The Great Marsh once stretched for about fifty miles in a crescent just beyond the first ripple of sand dunes along Lake Michigan’s southern shore.¹⁰⁶ For hundreds of years the marsh was a crucial wetlands habitat and an important layover for migratory birds. Then, many portions of the marsh were “developed,” which, if we’re blunt, is a nice way of saying they were destroyed. Because: humans. Dried out and turned into farmland, industrial sites, or (in our case) residential neighborhoods. Habitat loss was extensive as even the “undeveloped” sections were changed by non-native and invasive species.

About twenty years the Dunes National Lakeshore began a concerted effort to restore a 500-acre strand of the Great Marsh—with great success. Drainage ditches were plugged so that the soil could again saturate itself (and then some!). Plants that didn’t belong were removed, and others, long lost in the marsh, were replanted and thrived. Today this section of the Great Marsh teems with waterfowl again and is an oasis for migrating birds. Parts of its prehistoric feel comes from the dead trees—some still standing, many toppled over—that came in when the land was drier and are now being repurposed by the marsh itself. Hardly lost, they’re being embraced (albeit a bit more aggressively than Margaret and me—thank goodness!) by the ecosystem, becoming infrastructure and food.¹⁰⁷

As we walked the trail, it was apparent that had we strayed three feet off the trail in either direction we’d have been in ankle-deep muck or knee-deep water at any point. I remarked to Margaret, “I wonder how they even made the path we’re walking on. They must’ve had to fill it in.”

¹⁰⁵ <https://www.nps.gov/indu/planyourvisit/gm16.htm>

¹⁰⁶ For a pair of personal blogs (by someone I don’t know at all) that offer appreciative and accessible (non-scientific background on the Great Marsh written six years apart, see: <https://terriofthetrails.blogspot.com/2013/07/the-great-marsh-of-indiana-dunes.html> and <http://terriofthetrails.blogspot.com/2019/06/the-great-marsh-trail-redux.html>

¹⁰⁷ Find our photos from the day here: www.facebook.com/davidrweiss/media_set?set=a.10156702212626596&type=3

When we got back to my parents' home, I pulled the area up on Google Maps to show them where we had walked. My first surprise came when I clicked it over "satellite" view. Perhaps the image was several years old—and likely taken during early spring or late fall because very little foliage is present—but what *is* clearly present is the "echo" of old residential roads still visible peaking up through the marsh. You'd never know they were there from ground level; they've been reclaimed more thoroughly than the dead trees.

Then I looked closer and the first wave of wonder hit me: the trail we'd walked matched *exactly* the lines of several of the abandoned roads. We had, in a sense—a very humid, sweaty, sultry sense!—strolled the streets of that planned but never fully built neighborhood from 90-plus years ago. *And never knew*. Because: marsh.

The second wave of wonder came courtesy my dad. As he looked at the map showing the now marshed-over streets, he shook his head with a smile of recognition. He said, "You know, when my dad [thus, my paternal grandfather] was just eighteen years old, in 1930, he had a job driving a town car for a real estate company. He would pick up the sales agent and together they would drive to the south Shore train station [it still operates, just 600 feet south of where the Great Marsh Trail begins] and pick up well-to-do clients coming in from Chicago. They'd ride the train to Michigan City to consider where they might build a summer home. *My dad drove those streets 90 years ago.*"

No wonder the marsh knew us. "We'd" been here two generations earlier. Under very different circumstances. I can't—and *don't*—blame my grandpa for his tiny (and teenage!) role in trying to develop the marsh. But I can't help but wonder whether that oh-so-warm embrace we felt from the Great Marsh held an offer of forgiveness. Not for my grandpa's actions, but for humanity's general *hubris* in thinking that every corner of creation is just waiting for our imprint. We came to the marsh with our eyes, ears, noses(!)—and hearts—wide open. And she welcomed us back.

Which leads to my third wave of wonder.

If you've been following my blog for much of these past 33 weeks you know that my hope for a future in which humans have a healthy relationship with the planet runs thin most days. I often think the planet is just waiting us out. That a century or two from now *most* of our cities will look like the Great Marsh: reclaimed by Earth for Earth.

But there is a seed of hope here. Because the Great Marsh Trail bears witness to Earth's eagerness to heal itself if given half a chance. Make no mistake. She *will* seek to heal herself—with or without our aid. And if necessary, she will rid herself of us in order to make healing possible. BUT that trail is also hint of Earth's readiness to welcome us as partners in renewal. I suspect though, as I've suggested across my past columns hearkening to permaculture, that this time she'd like us to take our places as *junior* partners—apprenticed to her—in that work.

I'm game for that. Are you?

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