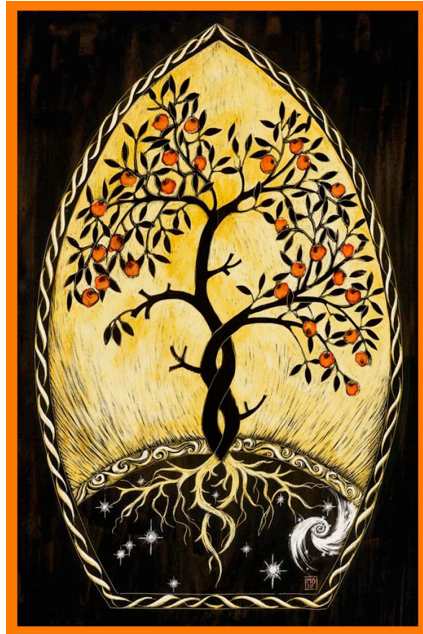


Creating Earth-Centered Community Ritual

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Dedicated to Fred Lanphear (1935-2010) – Friend, Mentor, Earth-Elder



Abstract

The intention of this essay is to lay the groundwork for creating large-scale earth-centered community rituals that can further the aims of the Great Turning. The dynamics of the spiritual crisis of the 21st century provides the context for the necessity of these kinds of ceremonies, understood as global initiatory rites of passage for the entire human species as it attempts to move through the Great Turning. The work of Thomas Berry provides the means to understand how earth-centered ritual accesses 'the dream of the earth', understood as the intelligence that moves through the universe. This genetic guidance is grounded in our interdependency with all of life, and is accessible through the dynamics of the deep imagination and the perceptual capacities of the human heart. An example of a large-scale earth-centered community ritual is analyzed as a way to understand what it takes to design and implement a global initiatory rite of passage. "A Celebration of the Tree of Life in the Time of the Great Turning" took place on November 6, 2010. Video excerpts of this event can be found at www.treeoflife-great-turning.org Its success illustrates the hunger for these kinds of rituals, a newly constellated archetypal urge to join with the human family and all the beings of the earth to acknowledge the suffering of the planet and celebrate the joy of being alive in this most auspicious time in the life of our species.

The Spiritual Crisis of the 21st Century

In the 21st century, the global human family is living in the midst of a spiritual crisis of unprecedented proportions. The assault on our spiritual foundations comes from two quarters – the threat to our survival as a species posed by environmental disaster and nuclear proliferation, and the complete inadequacy of contemporary religious (not to mention political and economic) institutions to awaken their constituents to the impending crisis posed by these threats. The facts are clear and brutal: human beings are consuming the earth's resources at a rate that is two and one-half times the ability of the earth to replace them. As of the year 2011, the human population will reach 7 billion people; we will be at 8 billion in the year 2024. At the same time, the current rate of extinction of species has not been seen for 67 million years, when dinosaurs disappeared from the face of the earth. Meanwhile, nuclear weapons are proliferating to rogue states that are more likely to use them as instruments of terror. Once a nuclear weapon is detonated against a human population for the first time since Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the principles of MAD (Mutually Assured Destruction) will be compromised, and all bets are off concerning their continued use. While there are many other imagined threats to our species, environmental disaster and nuclear proliferation remain the most obvious and the most urgent.

At the same time that these threats have become more pronounced over the past sixty years, our religious institutions have struggled to keep pace with the existential threat they represent. Organized religion in the West, the same religions that have colonized many regions of the world, have for the most part not recovered from the three revolutions of scientific discovery that destroyed the literal basis of their scriptures – the Copernican revolution that falsified its origin stories, the Darwinian revolution that altered its image of the human being, and the Freudian revolution that revealed the contingent basis of all human judgments. Taken together, these three discoveries led to revolutions in ideas that destroyed the mythic cosmos that Western religion espoused, leaving human beings in a terrible spiritual predicament that is perhaps best stated by the historian of ideas Richard Tarnas:

This double bind of modern consciousness has been recognized in one form or another since at least Pascal: "I am terrified by the eternal silence of these infinite spaces." Our psychological and spiritual predispositions are absurdly at variance with the world revealed by our scientific method.

We seem to receive two messages from our existential situation: on the one hand, strive, give oneself to the quest for meaning and spiritual fulfillment; but on the other hand, know that the universe, of whose substance we are derived, is entirely indifferent to that quest, soulless in character and nullifying in its effects. We are at once aroused and crushed. For, inexplicably, absurdly, the cosmos is inhuman, yet we are not. The situation is profoundly unintelligible.” (1)

Many poets, intellectuals, theologians, artists and community leaders have stepped into the vacuum created by our institutions to offer ways to re-mythologize this ‘unintelligible cosmos’, and they have developed many promising leads. But the immensity of the shifts that need to take place and the speed with which they need to happen seem to overwhelm the ability of the current human inhabitants of earth to transform their way of thinking, and therefore their way of behaving, into sustainable living. The obstacles to the transformation of consciousness that is required for sustainability are many – from the primal fear of death to the dynamics of repression that paralyze the imagination (2). As a result, most humans (especially in the developed world) live in a trance state that eliminates the capacity of their egos to perceive the dark global threats that loom over them. At the same time, as psychoanalysis has shown, their unconscious notices these threats and responds with manic behavior, narcissistic neediness, and psychic numbing. So the question is, how can human beings ‘wake up’ to the trance in which they reside? How do human beings transform, and how can they do so on a scale that is appropriate to our planetary crisis? How can religious institutions be an agent for this transformation and return to their rightful place as the carriers of the spiritual yearning of the human species?

The Dream of the Earth

In his essay on *The Dream of the Earth*, the theologian Thomas Berry makes the case that what we need at this critical moment in human history is guidance. In normal historical conditions we would turn to our cultural traditions to provide this guidance, but it is apparent that these cultural mythologies (e.g. the myth of progress, the myth of the fall, etc.) are insufficiently imaginative, and have themselves become obstacles to healing transformation. We need to go deeper to find guidance, to what Berry calls our ‘genetic coding.’ This coding is generated by the living forces of the earth, which is itself formed from the energies of the expanding universe. It is found in the very structure of the human mind and the instincts of the human body. It is embedded in our evolutionary history and expresses itself

in dreams, emotions, synchronicities, body sensations, and other ‘spontaneities’ that are apprehended through the imagination. As Berry states,

In earlier times these spontaneities were considered as revealing the natural law, the ultimate inner norm of guidance for human conduct, since they are the human phase of those instincts that enable a bird to build its nest, find its food and discover its migratory route. Ultimately, these instincts come from that mysterious source from which the universe itself came into being as articulated entities acting together in some ordered context. (3)

Berry points out that the spontaneities generated by the ‘mysterious source from which the universe itself is made’ are expressions of the ‘dream of the earth’ that flows through all living things. It is the same intelligence that guides galaxies in their life cycles, causes flowers to blossom and gives rise to the interconnectedness of all phenomena. Perceiving this intelligence is a function of the imagination, which is often understood as originating from the heart. Cultivating heart capacities, therefore, is crucial to the apprehension of the dream of the earth. (4)

In order to receive genetic guidance, we need to create conditions that encourage this guidance to arise from its mysterious source in the dynamic creative forces of the universe, from the dream of the earth itself. Like any dream, we can’t force it to appear at our bidding, but we can create conditions where it is more likely to appear of its own accord. When it does appear, it is experienced through the imagination as a communication from some kind of ‘sacred other’, which can be imagined as God, gods, goddesses, Spirit, Nature, the *anima mundi*, the unconscious or any number of other ‘god images’ that populate the human psyche. In an earth-centered ritual, this guidance is understood to be coming from the intelligence of the universe as embodied in the dream of the earth, which implies that all god images are equally welcome, since they are all grounded in the same universal mystery. Genetic guidance democratizes the god image of every religion, without negating any of them. We can celebrate the many faces of the divine because, as Berry points out, “*The greater the differentiation, the greater the perfection of the whole*”. (5) Needless to say, given our precarious situation, guidance such as this is to be ardently sought, especially since it has the power to both affirm existing traditions, yet make

them participants in a larger, mysterious whole. This is the promise of an ‘evolutionary spirituality’. (6)

Personal and Global Rites of Passage

When we look for examples of how this genetic guidance or ‘dream of the earth’ has been cultivated in the past, we find it in the traditional forms of initiatory rites of passage. Ritual rites of passage have been practiced in every human culture on earth, suggesting that they are deeply rooted in the human psyche. They are used to mark the passage of an individual from one state of consciousness to another, as he or she progresses through the life cycle. The stages of this process are carefully delineated in the anthropological literature through the writings of Arnold Van Gennep and Victor Turner. (7) They have been re-interpreted and expanded in the contemporary work of Joseph Henderson, Joseph Campbell, Malidoma Some, Ronald Grimes, Bill Plotkin, Michael Meade, Louise Mahdi and Robert Moore. (8) All of these writers use some version or another of Van Gennep’s original schema of separating rites of passage into three phases – separation, transition and reincorporation. The initiate separates him or herself from the everyday world of their community, undergoes an ordeal that fundamentally alters their sense of themselves, and returns to their home bearing a gift for their community. In this way, initiatory rites of passage create a reciprocal relationship between the individual and their community: the community communicates its core values to the individual, and the individual returns with new resources to revitalize the community. There is no way to anticipate what the initiate will experience during the transition phase, since that is when he or she is in the presence of the mysterious spontaneities of genetic guidance. All that is known is that the old stories that tell of who the individual is, and their place in society, will die, and new stories will arise to take their place. In initiatory settings, new stories are whispered to the initiate in conversation with the Sacred Other as perceived through the imaginal capacities of the human heart. In other words, the new stories will be informed by the lineaments of spontaneous creativity, the Great Mystery that lies at the heart of the universe. In this way, cultures with vibrant rites of passage rituals maintain their contact with the Mystery, and are guided into the future in communion with the forces of nature and the dream of the earth.

In most parts of the world, however, these rites of passage have been weakened under the weight of Western colonization that has sapped the vitality of indigenous mythologies and replaced them with gods that are not

dependent on place, or trivializes indigenous images as opportunities for shopping. As a result, few resources remain to tap into the dream of the earth. What resources are available, such as dream analysis, plant entheogens, improvisational arts and meditation practices, tend to focus on the individual and not the community. Into this vacuum, several organizations are arising that seek to restore initiatory rites of passage to their rightful place in our culture, including Rites of Passage Journeys, based in Seattle, Washington, Animas Valley Institute in Colorado and The School of Lost Borders in California. (9) In addition to working with individuals undergoing initiatory rites of passage, these organizations stress the importance of returning home with the elixir provided by the Mystery in order to revitalize their communities.

All of these organizations realize that their work with individuals and communities is mimetic to the whole, that is, that individual rites of passage provide the structure and language for understanding global rites of passage. Global rites of passage call for the transformation of the entire human species and is an entirely new kind of initiation never before seen in human history. It transcends the old divisions of nation states, economic class, and religious affiliation to include every kind of human being on the planet. It does this by making inclusion solely dependent on being a human being, a member of the human species. Like individual rites of passage, its goal is to dissolve the old stories that are destroying the planet, and replace them with new stories that can lead to a sustainable human presence on the earth. Since these new stories have never before been told, or have not been told in this way, we must seek them out, creating the conditions in which genetic guidance and the dream of the earth are more likely to be revealed, understood and enacted in conversation with the Sacred Other.

The scale of global rites of passage is unprecedented, as is every attempt to respond to the crises of the 21st Century. How can communities expand beyond their comfort zone to embrace ever-larger circles of people? How can a spiritual perspective be brought to bear on a ritual that includes people of many different faiths, or no faith at all? How can economic and political partisanship be transcended in service to the whole? How does one go about creating an earth-centered community that succeeds in accessing the genetic guidance of the dream of the earth? How can such a ritual lead to the transformation of human consciousness?

Creating An Earth Centered Community Ritual

These were the questions that provided the background for my colleague, Molly Brown (a Seattle artist), and myself when we first considered organizing an earth-centered community ritual. Molly and I had already worked together on a previous ceremony at our Episcopal church in Seattle. It was called “*A Requiem for the Species*” and was held in 2008 on All Soul’s Day, a day traditionally dedicated to praying for the dead. Our intent for this ritual during this unique time of the year, when the veil between the living and the dead is especially thin, was to honor the threatened and recently extinct animal species, our brother and sister beings who share the biosphere with us. Our expanding human presence on the planet is being bought at a terrible price, as the current rate of extinction of species has not been seen since the demise of the dinosaurs. It is a holocaust of dying. For those human beings who are aware of this holocaust, there is no means to honor it, to apologize for it, or to make amends. Our design for this liturgy was to organize ritual gestures around John Rutter’s *Requiem*, an especially moving piece of music dedicated to honoring the dead. One ritual gesture of note was to have members of the congregation create icons of a dying or extinct species and, holding them above their heads in a form known to humans for thousands of years, to process up the aisle to a waiting tree. As they hung the icon on the tree of life, they would speak the name of the species, and if it was extinct they would use clippers to cut the branch, signifying the annihilation of this branch of the tree of life. The end of the branch and the icon would crash to the floor, filling the church with the sound of irrevocable endings. The complete liturgy for this ritual can be found at www.treeoflife-great-turning.org, and it has been repeated in other settings. Rituals such as this satisfy a deep longing in the human soul to acknowledge the suffering that is happening in the world.

In January of 2010, Molly and I met to discuss the possibility of doing another earth-centered ceremony for All Soul’s Day, but this time taking it to a larger venue – St. Mark’s Cathedral on Capitol Hill in Seattle. We were drawn to this venue partly because of its high ceilings and amazing acoustics, but we were also aware that the St. Mark’s community thought of itself as a spiritual commons or crossroads for the city of Seattle, a place where large gatherings of people can congregate in a sacred space. Molly and I had been attending chanting performances given by Rafe Pearlman, and realized that we could design a ritual dedicated to the Tree of Life that utilized singing to access deep emotional spaces. The more we meditated on

the Tree of Life, the more we realized that it represented the dream of the earth itself. It was a symbol of the life giving powers of the universe.

Once we committed to doing an event, the ‘spontaneities’ that Thomas Berry says are evidence of the presence of genetic guidance began to constellate. It began with Molly’s dream of a boat that was festooned with lights and carrying a Christmas Tree on its bow. She experimented with several different designs before painting an image of the tree of life based on this dream. That image became an organizing principle for the entire event. An early setback came when Rafe was called to a 6-month sojourn to Europe and the Middle East and was not able to be our singer. We considered cancelling the whole thing, but then found Gina Sala, a sacred singer whose voice and presence was equal to the task. We decided that rather than focus entirely on a requiem, we also wanted to celebrate the joy of earth community. This led us in the direction of the work of Joanna Macy and her four-fold ritual spiral – expressing gratitude for the gift of being alive, honoring our pain for the world, seeing with new eyes, and going forth. (10) We realized that these four steps could provide the ritual foundations for an entire earth-centered community ritual. They would ground the ceremony firmly in the idea of the Great Turning, understood as the move from an unsustainable empire-based model of civilization, to one based in sustainable earth-community. For the first time we began to work with the title “A Celebration of the Tree of Life in the Time of the Great Turning”. As a long time student of Joanna Macy’s, I asked her if she would be willing to come to Seattle to participate in such a ritual, and she was gracious enough to say yes. And finally, we realized that the entire event, in order to create the sacred space and time sufficient to emotionally move a large body of people, would have to be performed entirely through the expressive arts. We needed some dancers, and were serendipitously led to Betsey Beckman, an experienced liturgical dancer who was excited to join our project. We needed a storyteller, and were honored to have the renowned mythologist Michael Meade agree to join our project. With these elements in place – an intention, an image, a speaker, a singer, a dancer and a storyteller – we were prepared to confront the rigors of mounting a large public event dedicated to creating an earth-centered community ritual for the purposes of transforming human consciousness and ushering in the Great Turning.

The Tree of Life Event

The Celebration of the Tree of Life event took place on November 6, 2010, starting at 7pm. The evening was rainy and dark, with traffic backed

up on the freeway. Nevertheless, the event was sold out and over 650 people filled the cathedral to capacity to start the ritual. Molly and I were overjoyed to watch the unfolding of our vision. Each ritual gesture, from the drummers' procession to the invocation of the six directions to the movements of the 50-person choir, to the gestures of the dance troupe – exceeded our expectations. Video of these performances can be found on the Tree of Life website – www.treeoflife-great-turning.org.

From my perspective as the Master of Ceremonies, I found myself reminiscing about the efforts it took to organize this event. They included:

1. Coordinating working groups between our design team and the steering committee of the cathedral
2. Constantly refining the outline of the ceremony in response to input from the artists.
3. Fundraising, grant-writing, marketing outreach and website design
4. Managing the budget in relation to actual and expected revenues
5. Organizing a visual art display at the back of the cathedral for a month long installation.
6. Coordinating rehearsals, technical support and all volunteers
7. Selling 400 tickets via a ticket agency, and reserving over a hundred more to give away to diverse and disadvantaged populations.
8. Coordinating events around the ceremony itself that included: a talking circle with Joanna Macy and community workers involved in the work of the Great Turning; a circle of elders interested in developing the concept of Earth Elders; and a workshop on the Work that Reconnects with Joanna Macy.

What became clear in reflection on these efforts was that the Tree of Life ceremony itself was just the most visible moment in the creation of Earth Community. All of the diverse relationships that were cultivated in the process leading up to the event were part of the creation of earth community, as were the connections that were created during the weekend itself. Indeed, the tree of life event is still taking place as of this writing, as the consequences of these new networks move into the community. They are the elixir being returned to the community for its own renewal. If we imagine the event as an image of flow dynamics, we could say that a well was tapped when Molly and I first felt the dream of the earth move through us. The water began to flow, attracting new rivulets and tributaries to its

current through synchronicities and spontaneities. As the weekend of the event approached, this river began to quicken in anticipation of spectacular waterfalls. As the water crested the falls, and the ceremony began, tremendous energy was released to combine and re-combine in new and unique ways. Hearts were moved, joy and laughter mingled with tears, beauty was all around, and for one evening, 650 people became one breathing body of humanity, reveling in the sensation of moving as one soul through the dynamics of the ritual. By calling in the spirits of the three times – our ancestors from the past; those living beings, human and more-than-human, who are currently alive but who could not be with us in that moment; and those future ancestors who have yet to be born, but who are counting on us to allow them entry into this world – we linked hearts with all sentient beings, and gave voice to our yearning to engage the spiritual crisis of the 21st century and step into sustainable earth community.

So where, in the midst of this ceremony, did the spontaneities of genetic guidance appear? How did this event create the conditions in which the dream of the earth could be heard? The answer to these questions lie within the felt-experience of each human being who was present. To ascertain how the Mystery was revealed to each human heart would require a description from each person about that part of the ritual which ‘spoke’ most eloquently to them. In this sense, an intimate sacred dialogue was created between participant and ritual, and what was whispered to each participant’s heart, whether through word, image, feeling, emotion or body sensation, comprised the genetic guidance. The responsibility of each participant now is to act upon the guidance. As with any initiatory rite of passage, each individual must re-organize the priorities that govern their will power in light of their conversation with the dream of the earth, and act as an agent of the self-organizing principles of earth consciousness. Did this happen? Anecdotal feedback we have received is in the affirmative. However, as the original dreamers of this event, Molly and I cannot be attached to the outcome of it. All we can do is create the conditions for the possibility of grace, and then let go.

The Four-Fold Spiral

The key to making this an earth-centered ritual was the use of Joanna Macy’s four-fold spiral. An international educator and ‘Gaian Teacher’, (11) Joanna insists that anyone who engages in her practices of The Work That Reconnects, the set of community practices that comprise her life work,

must go through this spiral. Taken as a whole, the four turns of the spiral allow participants to cycle through the reciprocal emotions of despair and empowerment. Joanna insists that so much of what is wrong with contemporary society is its inability to grieve the losses that are mounting all around us. But before we can grieve at such depths, we need first to express gratitude for the joy of being alive on this beautiful planet. Only then can we descend into grief. If we go deeply into the emotion of grief to reap its gifts, we eventually come out on the other side. With our souls cleansed by the tears, we can then see with new eyes in startling new ways, and go forth to our communities with renewed insight and energy, empowered to make change on behalf of the Great Turning. Our task for the design of this ceremony was to set these four turns of the spiral to music, dance, word and image, matching ritual gestures to each turn, and guiding the community through the flow of the ceremony as a whole.

I would like to share how we designed each of these moments for the purposes of this particular earth-community ritual in the hope of inspiring others to experiment with their own designs.

Introduction – After the procession and a beautiful calling in of the spirits of the six directions by Char Sundust, it was important to start with the premise that every person in the cathedral was welcome, because they are all part of the human family, a family which is part of a larger whole, --the entire earth community. As Master of Ceremonies, I spoke these words:

Welcome to one and all to this Earth Community ritual, a celebration of the Tree of Life in the Time of the Great Turning. We want you to know that every sentient being is welcome here. No matter your race, color, creed, sexual orientation, ableism, or anything else that makes you who you are, you are welcome here. No matter your political orientation -- right, left, center or none at all-- you are welcome here. No matter if you are animal, vegetable, mineral, Salmon, Cedar or Mountain, you are welcome here. For together, we comprise the Spirit of this region of the planet, our Pacific Northwest, Cascadian Bioregional home. I also want to invite into this ritual circle Coyote Trickster, ask him to find a good seat, and to remember that this is a community ritual, not a professional performance, and so to be kind to us.

And then the organizing principles of the ceremony needed to be spoken, as follows:

Joanna Macy has called this moment in history the Time of the Great Turning, the turning from an unsustainable empire-based culture to a culture of sustainable earth community. It is a time of great terror and great beauty. It is terrible because we grieve the death of countless species, and witness those parts of the world that are already suffering the Great Unraveling. It is beautiful because it calls the human species to move in the direction of conscious evolution, towards a world of greater intimacy, compassion and justice. Ours is the first generation that has come into full awareness of this fulcrum in time, this fragile moment of human history. We are the first to know, as Thomas Berry says, that the glory of the human has become the desolation of the earth, and that the desolation of the earth has become the destiny of the human. We know that future generations will look back on us and ask, "What did you do, once you knew?" They want to know how we managed this time. Did we come together as one people to support each other, calling forth each one's best efforts to step into their power as Earth Keepers? Did we celebrate together the gift of being alive? Did we grieve together the pain of the world? The answer we give to our beloved future ancestors tonight is a resounding "Yes!"

We gather this evening around the Tree of Life, an ancient symbol that brings together people of all faiths and cultures. The Tree of Life honors diversity and at the same time expresses a unity that every human can embrace. It is an image of the mystery that lies at the center of every religion, in the heart of each beloved being, and in the very DNA of our cells. It tells us that life is sacred – not just our own individual lives, or that of our tribe or community or nation -- but all of life, all of our brother and sister species, and us. Thank you to Molly Brown for hosting a dream of the Tree of Life, and out of that dream, creating this beautiful image, around which we have designed our ritual. Molly, we honor you.

Using Joanna Macy's four-fold spiral as the basis of tonight's celebration, we begin, always, with our gratitude for the gift of being alive. Only then can we move into the profound work of honoring our pain for the world. Out of this grief work comes new life, new energy, and new ways of seeing the world. And finally, we go forth, back into the world, empowered to hold up our part of the sky on behalf of the Great Turning. Ritual work like this must be grounded in the arts, and be led by elders. We thank Joanna Macy, Michael Meade, Gina Sala' and Betsey Beckman for showing up, and Molly Brown for the Vision.

And now, as we enter into the spiral of this ceremony, I invite Gina Sala' and the Spirit of the Sound choir to sing an invocation written by choirmaster Eric O'del, entitled "Choir Om".

What followed was a beautiful choir piece that filled the cathedral with sound and let people know that they were in for an extraordinary evening, moving along a spiral that could speak to the ‘indigenous one’ in each of us.

Spiral One: Gratitude – It was time to begin the first stage of the spiral by expressing our profound gratitude for the gift of being alive at this poignant time in earth’s history:

Thank you to our beautiful Spirit of the Sound choir led by Eric O’del, and thanks to our musical director and soloist, Gina Sala’. They, along with Betsey Beckman and our other dancers, remind us that every celebration begins with the sheer joy of being alive. Consider this: that in the beginning, all was stardust. As the universe expanded and evolved, it self-organized into ever more complex structures, until on one blue-green planet, carbon-based life forms emerged. Differentiating and growing ever more complex, organic life began to support a consciousness that became aware of itself, such that here we are, 650 human beings gathered together in a cathedral, joyfully aware that we are stardust that has been deftly woven into bodies by forces beyond our ken, and that our very purpose is to witness the glory of creation. In the face of such mystery, we can only lift up our voices in praise and thanksgiving, and be inspired by the words of ancient spiritual traditions. Let us sing our joy for being alive. Gina ...

And so Gina Sala led us in a thanks and praise song – 650 souls chanting in harmony. We then had four spiritual leaders from different faiths give two-minute reflections on gratitude from the perspective of their tradition. The traditions included Islam, Christianity, Judaism and the Goddess tradition. We concluded this section with the inspiring song from the Missa Gaia Mass, *Mystery*, sung by the choir with a beautiful solo, and dancing by Betsey Beckman and her troupe. It was beautiful; it was inspiring. And because of that, we were prepared to undergo a grief ritual.

Spiral Two: Grief – When Thich Nhat Hahn, the great Buddhist contemplative and activist, was asked what we needed to do to save our world, he replied, “What we most need to do is to hear within us the sounds of the Earth crying.” The second stage of the spiral requires us to embrace our grief and despair over the state of the planet and the feeling of hopelessness that is a natural consequence of being awake during the time of the Great Turning. In an earth-centered grief ritual, our tears are understood to be both from the earth (since we are created from her dust) and for the earth (since we are the perpetrators of her destruction). Facilitating the

expression of deep levels of grief is a delicate affair, no matter the numbers of people involved. To do it well in a large ritual setting, the expressive arts are required. We began this section with a short context-setting introduction:

Having celebrated the gift of being alive, we are now prepared to enter into the starkest realities of our time on this earth. This turn of the ritual spiral is the most difficult, since it requires us to stare unflinchingly into the degradation of the Earth. From the extinction of exquisitely beautiful life-forms, to the melting of the polar ice sheets, to the struggle for fresh water - the earth is under assault by the human species, spreading unspeakable suffering to the sentient beings of our island home. It is the image of the great Tree of Life being blown apart by human hands. How do we face such pain, and our role in causing it? How do we stand in its scalding rage, its icy fear, without turning away from it, escaping into mindless addictions or transforming our rage and fear into hatred projected onto manufactured enemies? Wendell Berry asks, "To destroy that which we were given in trust: how will we bear it?" This much we know: bearing the pain for the world is bigger than any one of us can manage alone. And so we gather together this evening as an Earth Community to grieve together all that has been lost, to acknowledge the collective suffering of our own and other species, to recognize that human beings may eliminate the very possibility of future generations, that the living body of Earth is in deep peril. Not alone, but as one people, we turn to the sounds of mourning, and the words of our elder Joanna Macy, a master of the rhythm of grief, to guide us through this dark realm.

And here Joanna Macy stepped forward in all of her elder majesty and spoke to the gathered earth-community about the sorrows of our time. Her cadence was both firm and compassionate, challenging us as representatives of the human species to come before the tree of life and cry our tears for what we have done and what we have left undone. She made the point that the tree of life asks us to honor that pain, for without it we will die. Can we do it? Oh yes, she said, breathing together, knowing that this pain is rooted not in our personal neuroses, but in our interconnectedness with all of life. We have to allow our hearts to break every day at the news of the lost ones, the dying ones. We can do it because we know that hearts are made for breaking, and that our tears are the tears of Gaia herself. We will offer the power of our sorrow to the service of life. With our tears we will be washed clean, and with them we will water the roots of the tree of life.

And that is what happened. In a tremendously moving set of ritual gestures set to the music of John Rutter's *Out of the Deep*, the dancers accumulated bowls full of tears from the audience and carried them to the tree at the center of the stage, and there they poured the water into the roots. Gina then transitioned into the singing of *Lay Back in the Arms of Love*, as the catharsis of grief was transformed into a profound love for life. After witnessing the power of this grief ritual, I began to realize that so much of this entire ceremony was designed to make possible the direct experience of the deeply rooted connection between grief and love.

Spiral Three: Seeing with New Eyes – Having been cleansed by the tears of the earth-community, it was time to see with new eyes. In one way or another, seeing with new eyes always requires the expansion of our limited perspective for seeing the world, from one of individualism and private pain, to one of the interconnectedness of all things -- of all beings and of all ancestors, both past and future. The context for this section was as follows:

And so a place is prepared for a Truth Teller, a Wisdom Keeper, for there is no substitute for confronting the truth of our situation on this Planet Earth. The stories of our species, told around innumerable small fires under ancient starlit skies, tell us that the dark truth that we have just experienced contains the source of new life. How can this be, that darkness contains within itself a new light, that truth, no matter how dark, can set us free? In this third turn of our ritual spiral, we sift through dark ashes for signs of new life and new eyes with which to perceive it. To change the perilous trajectory of our current path, we need eyes that can see more deeply into the interconnectedness of all things, how all things arise in concert with one another, illuminating our connection to each other, to ancestors past and future, to all life on earth. At root, at the root of the Tree of Life, we are all stardust, and to stardust we shall return. To help us with this movement to new life and new eyes, we turn to our own tribal storyteller, a man through whom the wisdom of our ancestors speak, Michael Meade. Michael ...

Michael reminded us that part of the darkness of our times is the way in which we have fallen away from story. To see in a new way after being cleansed by our grief is to fall back into story. And so he told a story from South America about what happens when the world consumes itself with fire and all that is left is ashes. (12) Two magical beings from the other world fly

over the desolate earth and, following the directions of Trickster, fly until their index finger points down to their home. There they pick up a piece of ash, and through much singing and dancing and drumming, they restore the tree of life. It was a magical tale, and the masterful telling of it brought laughter and joy, both of which were deeper for having traversed the terrain of grief. Soon thereafter, Gina sang *Out of the Ashes*, accompanied by a Native American feather dancer and a Sufi dancer. The audience joined in, and a new harmony began to form in our hearts.

Part Four: Going Forth – In the last turn of the spiral we prepare to leave this gathering of the earth community and return to our day world. It is a time to remind ourselves of what has taken place, and to set our vows for the changes we need to make to facilitate the Great Turning. Molly and I felt it was very important that the Tree of Life event should be the beginning of something, not a one-time event that moves the heart and then fades away. To that end, we cultivated the development of a series of workshops that could be used to maintain the energies awakened by the ceremony, and we gave those events prominent space in the program. I began our ending with the following words:

Thank you to Joanna, Michael, Gina, Betsey and our singers and dancers for lifting our spirits and restoring the Tree of Life to its rightful place in the center of our collective heart. May it blossom there for 10,000 years! In this final turn of our ritual spiral, we prepare to leave this sacred cathedral and return to the material world to which we have pledged our love. There is so much to do, and so much joy to be had in the doing of it! To help us imagine how to work further with the energy of this ceremony, we have listed in your program a series of possible next steps, culminating in the return of Joanna Macy next June for a five day intensive on the Work That Reconnects. But these are not the only events through which to nurture your commitment to the Tree of Life and the Great Turning. Anything you do with joy, compassion and love serves to water the roots of the Tree of Life and further the aims of the Great Turning. More information can be found on the back tables of organizations that are doing this work, and we thank them for supporting this event. After our last song, you are all invited to a reception at the back of the church, hosted by the Eco-justice Committee of St. Mark's Cathedral. We invite you to check out the beautiful art in homage to the Tree of Life that has been assembled by Joe Hester and the Grunewald Guild. But first, let us hear once again from our ritual elders and close the portals to the spiritual worlds with which we opened our

ceremonial time together. Thank you for being here tonight, and may you go in Peace, using your unique gifts, each in your own way, to serve the Tree of Life in the Time of the Great Turning.

Joanna stepped forward to remind us that the tree of life is inside of each one of us. It is the pulse of life that began in the fires of the flaring forth with which the universe began. It is the dream of the earth that lives within, between and among us. There will be dark times ahead of us, oh yes, but we have just learned what to do in those times – express our gratitude for being alive, honor our pain for the world, imagine new ways of sustainability, and step forward into our powers of leadership on behalf of the Great Turning. As a good elder, she reminded us that we don't step into our power out of personal virtue, but on behalf of the authority vested in us by our 4.5 billion years as Gaia. Then it was Michael Meade's turn, as he led us in a singing of an acappella prayer from South America, *Kanero*. It was a healing and reconciliation song, and when sung beneath the high ceilings of the cathedral with a 650-person choir, it seemed to mark us forever as an earth community.

Closing and Recessional – Whenever a ritual portal is opened in a ceremonial way, it must be closed. Char Sundust stepped forward and with great dignity closed each of the directions that had been opened at the beginning. Her prayers reminded us of what we had accomplished, and of what remained to do, and how it is that we do not do these things alone, but with the help of the spiritual beings, for they too are members of this earth community. She gave thanks for our elders, and asked that we all come into the power of our own stories. She asked that we master the art of love, to see with the eyes of our heart and that everything we do be in service to Spirit. She ended with great thanks, and released the spirits from this ceremony. Gina, Betsey, the dancers and the choir then broke into a song, *Turn the World Around*, which evolved into a joyous flash mob dance. In the midst of this the drummers began their beat and the ritual elders recessed. The dancing and singing continued into a crescendo that climaxed with a mighty chord from the Flentrop organ. The ceremony was over.

Shadow Dynamics

Whenever this much light is constellated, a dark shadow is cast somewhere. Usually, this shadow is swept under the rug and ignored, or is forgotten in the afterglow of a successful event. But in an earth-centered ritual, everything belongs, even the shadow. The more conscious it can be

made, the more wholeness is possible, and all life seeks wholeness. With this many people involved in planning and logistics, the usual interpersonal dynamics come into play. Personalities clash, patience is tested, commitments are broken despite the best of intentions – these are the normal conflicts of human groups. Our event was relatively benign as far as these dynamics go, partly because it was a one-time event, with no obligations beyond the day of the ceremony. People can put up with one another if they know it is not going to last. But another factor is that volunteers organized around the sacred image of the Tree of Life, which served to relativize hierarchical power dynamics. However, there were some patterns to the shadow dynamics of this earth-centered ritual that are worth naming.

Diversity Issues – From the beginning, we were aware that we wanted as much diversity in this ceremony as was possible. On the other hand, both Molly and I are white and middle-class, and the churches that supported and sponsored this project were predominately the same. How could we get an audience that mirrored more of the composition of the human family? We decided to set aside 25% of our \$20 tickets to give away free to community organizations that were diverse in their composition. Tickets were given to minority youth, homeless organizations and peace and justice organizations with high minority populations. But it was clear that much more effort needed to be made to cultivate good relations with these community organizations in order to target these tickets in a good way. This became especially clear in our efforts to request the presence of an indigenous tribal drumming group. Our lack of awareness of the proper way to approach such a group led to some misunderstandings and disappointments. The same might be said of our desire to bring an interfaith perspective to the ceremony. While we consciously avoided using the word ‘interfaith’ in our advertising, since it excluded those who do not identify with any faith, it was clear that we wanted to have participation by as many faith groups as possible. The solution to all of these diversity issues is to have more representation on the steering committee of both interfaith groups and people of color. Of course, to do so is to complicate the planning and design, but it is crucial to the future of earth-centered community ritual.

The Church – Molly and I dreamed up this ceremony in the context of our local Episcopal Church, St. Andrew’s. We held our first liturgy, *A Requiem for the Species*, at our church and this required the permission of the rector and the help of the staff. We felt very comfortable doing so because our spiritual values were in alignment with those of our priest. But for the Tree

of Life ceremony, we were asking permission to use the Episcopal Cathedral for the Diocese of Olympia, which serves most of Western Washington State. While we had the blessing of our own local church, we were now under the purview of the dean of the cathedral and her staff. They did not know who we were or the extent of our capabilities. Molly and I were concerned that they might not understand the radically ecumenical nature of our endeavor, or buy into the concept of an earth-centered community ritual. We were pleasantly surprised by the warm welcome we received, due no doubt to the recommendation of our rector, and the cathedral staff gave countless hours to the success of the ceremony. We were especially relieved to hear that they considered their cathedral to be a commons space for the community, so that doctrinal religious matters were minimized.

However, several issues arose as a result of using the cathedral. In the beginning, we ran into some differences of opinion about the use of the cathedral space. For example, we wanted to bring in a large, 40-foot living tree to serve as the altar for the ceremony. Even though we had researched the logistics of how to install this tree, we were told we could not do it. Likewise, we were told that we could not remove the table on the altar platform, and that we should not exceed two hours for the ceremony. Whatever the differences, large or small, the cathedral staff was clearly in charge and essentially had veto power over our design. While we were grateful to receive the wisdom of the cathedral staff's experience about the vast spaces of the nave, it reminded us that there is always a power dynamic when the church is involved. Fortunately, these differences of opinion were amicably resolved and we remain grateful for all the assistance given to us by the St. Mark's Cathedral staff. We thank them for their tolerance, and for their generosity of spirit.

A second set of issues arose from using the church space, on both ends of a spectrum. On one side, some participants who came for the earth-centered spirituality of the ceremony, were resentment-types against the Christian faith, and were put-off by having to worship in a space that brought back bad memories. On the other side, a conservative Christian group picked up the YouTube video of the interfaith reflections on gratitude, which included representatives of the Christian, Muslim, Jewish and Goddess traditions, and sent it out to thousands of their constituents. They were appalled at the use of a Christian venue for what they considered 'pagan' purposes, with one commenter saying "These people will be very shocked on judgment day". Ironically, another contributor said, "While I, as an Orthodox Christian,

certainly do not consider this rather bizarre entertainment to be worship, I'm afraid that the new-age wing nuts in attendance do. To each their own, I suppose, as the world resolutely marches towards perdition.”

Ritual or Performance – In a large ceremony of this scale, we found it valuable to have headliners with a national reputation such as Joanna Macy and Michael Meade. Gina Sala and Betsey Beckman are also well known, with a loyal following in the Northwest and beyond. These four names ensured that the Tree of Life event would draw a large crowd, and indeed, we felt we could have sold at least a thousand tickets. With talent of this caliber it is easy to imagine that the celebration is more of a performance than a ritual, and many times in our preparation, we used the terms interchangeably. However, the difference became starkly clear at our dress rehearsal. We were trying to determine how to recess at the end of the ceremony. Yes, we wanted the flash-mob dance to happen, but how were the main performers going to exit? We rehearsed one possibility that had the Master of Ceremonies joining with Gina and Betsey to bow to the audience. We would then be joined by Joanna, Michael and Char for another bow, before pointing to the musicians, then the light technicians, the audience, etc. It was the end of a musical with a choreographed conclusion, and all were to be acknowledged. But something didn't feel right. After people had left the rehearsal, Molly and I consulted with each other and agreed on the problem: this was not a performance. Instead, it was a ritual, and in a ritual there is no stepping forward for recognition. It is all done in service to the sacred. The bowing did not belong in a ritual; the ego must be relativized to something much larger than itself. This was an important learning for us as we continued our quest to ascertain the factors that create the conditions for the possibility of the Sacred to be present in earth-centered ritual.

While there may have been other shadow dynamics present during the nine months that the Tree of Life event was gestating, these three themes cover a lot of the territory, and may be of some use to others who are interested in putting on an earth-centered community ritual. I encourage anyone who is considering such a move to allow the shadow its own space. Called or not called, the shadow will be present. It is not necessary to name it every time it appears, for there are human niceties that must be observed. But tracking the shadow by journaling or with dream work or in small group discussions is an invaluable tool for learning how to dance with it gracefully. (13)

Conclusion

The intention of this essay is to lay the groundwork for creating large-scale earth-centered community rituals that can further the aims of the Great Turning. The dynamics of the spiritual crisis of the 21st century provides the context for the necessity of these kinds of ceremonies, understood as global initiatory rites of passage for the entire human species as it attempts to move through the Great Turning. Fortunately, there is guidance available to us in these dark times, when the Great Unraveling appears to be a more likely outcome than the Great Turning. This guidance is provided by the Dream of the Earth, understood as the intelligence that moves through the universe, which is grounded in our interdependency with all of life, and which is accessible through the dynamics of the deep imagination and the perceptual capacities of the human heart. An example of a large-scale earth-centered community ritual was analyzed as a way to understand what it takes to design and implement such a global initiatory rite of passage. *A Celebration of the Tree of Life in the Time of the Great Turning* took place on November 6, 2010. Its success illustrates the hunger for these kinds of rituals, a newly constellated archetypal urge to join with the human family and all the beings of the earth to acknowledge the suffering of the planet and celebrate the joy of being alive in this most auspicious time in the life of our species.

Endnotes

1. Richard Tarnas, The Passion of the Western Mind, (New York: Ballantine Books), 1994, p. 420.
2. See Ernst Becker, The Denial of Death, (New York: Simon and Schuster), 1973 and Joanna Macy, Coming Back to Life: Practices to Reconnect our Lives, Our World, (Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers), 1998, especially pages 25-38.
3. Thomas Berry, The Dream of the Earth (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books), 2006, p. 196. See also Bill Plotkin's excellent critique of Berry's idea of the dream of the earth in his essay, "Inscendence – The Key to the Great Work of Our Time: A Soulcentric View of Thomas Berry's Work", in Ervin Laszlo and Allan Combs, Thomas Berry, Dreamer of the Earth: The Spiritual Ecology of the Father of Environmentalism, (Vermont: Inner Traditions), 2011.
4. For more on the perceptual capacities of the human heart see Stephen Buhner, The Secret Teachings of Plants: The Intelligence of the Heart

- in the Direct Perception of Nature, (Rochester, VT: Bear and Company), 2004; James Hillman, The Thought of the Heart and the Soul of the World, (Dallas: Spring Publications), 1992; Joseph Chilton Pearce, The Biology of Transcendence, (Rochester, VT: Park Street Press), 2002; and Robert Sardello, Facing the World With Soul (Great Barrington, MA: Lindisfarne Press), 2004.
5. Thomas Berry, The Christian Future and the Fate of the Earth, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books), p. 18.
 6. For more on an evolutionary spirituality, see Michael Dowd, Thank God For Evolution; How the Marriage of Science and Religion Will Transform Your Life and Our World, (New York: Viking Penguin), 2007.
 7. Arnold Van Gennep, The Rites of Passage, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 1960; Victor Turner, The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure, (New York: Aldine de Gruyter), 1969.
 8. See Joseph Henderson, Thresholds of Initiation, (Chicago: Chiron Press), 2005; Joseph Campbell, Pathways to Bliss: Mythology and Personal Transformation, (New York: New World Library), 2004; Malidoma Some, The Healing Wisdom of Africa, (New York: Tarcher), 1999; Ronald Grimes, Deeply Into the Bone: Re-Inventing Rites of Passage, (Berkeley: University of California Press), 2000; Bill Plotkin, Nature and the Human Soul: Cultivating Wholeness and Community in a Fragmented World, (Novato, CA: New World Library), 2008; Michael Meade, The Water of Life: Initiation and the Tempering of the Soul, (Seattle: Greenfire Press), 2006; Louise Mahdi, ed., Crossroads: The Quest for Contemporary Rites of Passage, (Chicago: Open Court Publishing), 1996; Robert Moore, King, Warrior, Magician, Lover: Rediscovering the Archetypes of the Mature Masculine, (New York: Harper Collins), 1990.
 9. Websites for these organizations may be found as follows: Rite of Passage Journeys (www.riteofpassagejourneys.org); Animas Valley Institute (www.animas.org); and The School of Lost Borders (www.schooloflostborders.org).
 10. The spiral is clearly explained in Joanna Macy, Coming Back to Life, pp. 71-72.
 11. For more information on Joanna Macy as a Gaian Teacher, see her website at www.joannamacy.org
 12. This story can be found in Michael Meade, The World Behind the World: Living At The Ends of Time, (Seattle: GreenFire Press), 2008, pp. 152-157.

13. A good overview of the concept of the shadow can be found in Connie Zweig and Jeremiah Abrams, eds., Meeting the Shadow: The Hidden Power of the Dark Side of Human Nature, (New York: Tarcher), 1991.