

ECOFEMINISM AND THE FUTURE OF HUMANISM

Joy McConnell

He says that woman speaks with nature. That she hears voices from under the earth. That wind blows in her ears and trees whisper to her. That the dead sing through her mouth and the cries of infants are clear to her. But for him this dialogue is over. He says he is not part of this world, that he was set on this world as a stranger. He sets himself apart from woman and nature. And so it is Goldilocks who goes to the home of the three bears, Little Red Riding Hood who converses with the wolf, Dorothy who befriends a lion, Snow White who talks to the birds, Cinderella with mice as her allies, the Mermaid who is half fish, Thumbelina courted by a mole. (And when we hear in the Navajo chant of the mountain that a grown man sits and smokes with bears and follows directions given to him by squirrels, we are surprised. We had thought only little girls spoke with animals.) We are the bird's eggs. Bird's eggs, flowers, butterflies, rabbits, cows, sheep; we are caterpillars; we are leaves of ivy and sprigs of wallflower. We are women. We rise from the wave. We are gazelle and doe, elephant and whale, lilies and roses and peach, we are air, we are flame, we are oyster and pearl,

we are girls. We are women and nature. And he says he cannot hear us speak. But we hear.

-Susan Griffin, *Woman and Nature*

The ecofeminist concern is a concern for the fate of our species and all life on Earth. "It is clear to ecofeminists that the whole culture is free floating—from the lack of grounding in the natural world, from the lack of a sense of belonging in the unfolding story of the universe, from the lack of a healthy relationship between the males and females of the species."²

In their book, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno write of the Enlightenment:

[Women] become the embodiment of the biological Function, the image of nature, the subjugation of which constituted that civilization's title to fame. For millennia men dreamed of acquiring absolute mastery over nature, of converting the cosmos into one immense hunting ground. It was to this that the idea of man was geared in a male-dominated society. This was the significance of reason, his proudest boast.³

Women's issues are not separate from environmental issues but part and parcel of a just, caring, and responsible way of living on the earth and relating to all life, including human life. Humans are not a separate order of beings. We are an integral part of the

¹ Susan Griffin. *Woman and Nature: the Roaring inside Her* (New York: Harper and Row. 1978). 1.

² Charlene Spretnak. "Ecofeminism: Our Roots and Flowering." in Irene Diamond and Gloria Feman Orenstein. eds.. *Reweaving the World: the Emergence of Ecofeminism* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books. 1990). 9.

³ Quoted in Ynestra King. "The Ecology of Feminism and the Feminism of Ecology." in Judith Plant. ed.. *Healing the Wounds: the Promise of Ecofeminism* (Philadelphia: New Society. 1991). 18.

earth. What we do to the earth and other people we do to ourselves.

The world culture at the present time seems to be increasingly inhospitable to the nurturing of the earth and life, including that of human beings-children, women and men. It is a culture that is, in the words of Ynestra King, "founded on the repudiation and domination of nature. . . .The hatred of women and the hatred of nature are intimately connected and mutually reinforcing."⁴ Global and national economic and political forces have been oblivious to the connections between the way we live-the goals we strive for, the amassing of power and wealth for the few, the juggernaut of technological progress, the wanton exploitation of natural and human resources-and the consequences on the environment and on peoples' lives. It is no longer possible to live so heedlessly and survive.

Using their critical rationality, as well as their other human functions-sensing, feeling and intuition-women know that life must be nourished and cherished if it is to survive, grow, flourish, and reach its full potential. For thousands of years women's major role in civilizations around the world has been the bearing and nurturing of children and the welfare of families. Women have seen through our own experiences that everything is interconnected and interdependent; everything we do has an immediate effect on the people and the environment around us as well as incalculable, long-range effects.

Historically, women have been the primary carriers of socialization, the first caretakers and nurturers of all human potential. What happens to mothers is passed on to children and families, to all of humanity, just as what happens to the earth is passed on to all that is part of the interdependent web of life. In a

⁴ *ibid.*

very deep sense women, as mothers, are the hub of humanity, just as the earth is the hub of life. How we treat women is how all people are treated. When women are abused, deprived of basic human necessities, education and influence over their own lives, their children and families suffer. As children and families suffer, so do the cultures of which they are a part. When women are kept from reaching their full human potential, when they are relegated to limited roles within society, when they are treated as chattel, not only do they and their families suffer but so do those who are seemingly the beneficiaries of such a system. It is not only the oppressed who suffer but the oppressors as well; the humanity of both is diminished. When the roles of both women and men are narrowly circumscribed and limited, neither women nor men can reach their full potential. When men's roles have expanded to include parenting and nurturing of children and family, more of their full human potential has been actualized just as when women have entered the wider sphere of community, commerce, industry, the arts and government.

Women know that only a cooperative, collaborative, appreciative, nurturing, caring and responsible approach to living will save our environment and our species. We know that too much of the world's resources and wealth is being used to perpetuate war and violence as solutions to human conflict. We are horrified that "human progress" has brought us to the brink of nuclear annihilation and environmental disaster. We know that there are more constructive ways than violence and war to resolve conflict and maintain diversity in a complex world. We are repelled by policies that allow governments to finance the building of bombs and the mobilizing of armies but not the adequate nutrition, health care, or education of children. Economic and political practices and systems that stress competition, efficiency, unlimited growth, and

wasteful use of resources at the expense of human and environmental welfare are dooming themselves to obsolescence. Any system that doesn't care for those upon whom it depends for its success is doomed to eventual failure. That is the precarious state in which we find ourselves at the present time. I agree with Charlene Spretnak when she writes:

I cannot imagine a challenge greater than that addressed by ecofeminism. We know that we are of one fabric on this glorious blue-green planet, that the elements in our bodies and in the world around us were forged by the fireball at the moment the universe was born, and that we have no right to destroy the integrity of the Earth's delicately balanced ecosystems, whose histories are far longer than our own.⁵

I would like to close with a beautiful poem by Alice Walker from *Her Blue Body Everything We Know*⁶

We have a beautiful
mother
Her hills
are buffaloes
Her buffaloes
hills.

We have a beautiful
mother
Her oceans
are wombs
Her wombs
oceans.

⁵ *ibid.*, 13.

⁶ Alice Walker. "Her Blue Body Everything We Know." in Judith Boice, ed. *Mother Earth through the Eyes of Women. Photographs and Writers* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1992), 6.

We have a beautiful
mother
Her teeth
the white stones
at the edge
of the water
the summer
grasses
her plentiful
hair.

We have a beautiful
mother
Her green lap
immense
Her brown embrace
eternal
Her blue body
everything
we know.

Note: Giving this presentation, I consciously chose a clearly feminist and non-traditional approach to presenting a paper in a humanist setting. I would prefer to call this plank "eco-humanism." However, I believed that it was important to present a feminist critique of the traditional attitude toward women and nature because it is distinct from the scientific approach toward ecology and solving environmental problems. Ecofeminism sees that the fundamental problem is the Western/Patriarchal/Scientific belief that nature is totally understandable, predictable and therefore controllable by human beings, science and technology. I understand that I have also oversimplified the feminist critique here for the purposes of brevity and effect and that I have also presented an argument in part from a traditional feminine perspective that would be eschewed in a radical ecofeminist critique.

Additional Reading

- Anderson, Lorraine, ed. *Sisters of the Earth: Women's Prose and Poetry about Nature*. New York: Vintage Books, 1991.
- de Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1952.
- Dinnerstein, Dorothy. *The Mermaid and the Minotaur: Sexual Arrangements and Human Malaise*. New York: Harper and Row, 1976.
- Eisler, Riane. *The Chalice and the Blade: Our History, Our Future*. San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987.
- Merchant, Carolyn. *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution*. San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1989.
- Roberts, Elizabeth, and Elias Amidon, eds. *Earth Prayers from Around the World*. San Francisco: Harper, 1991.
- Seed, John, Joanna Macy, Pat Fleming, and Arne Naess. *Thinking Like a Mountain: Towards a Council of All Beings*. Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1988.

**"The Eco-Humanism of the Future"
Report of the Caucus Responding on Ecofeminism**

Participants: Edd Doerr, Roger Kuhrt, Andy Mayo, Joy McConnell (facilitator), Howard Radest, Carol Solomon

The major issues/questions/concerns of the group:

Geometrical human population growth

Pollution/ destruction of environments and species / depletion of resources / degradation of natural systems

Does humanity have a right to despoil the environment?

Dominance over nature versus harmony with nature

How should we balance human needs/demands with the effect of their fulfillment on the environment?

The role of ethics, morality, and politics in eco-humanism

The arrogance of anthropocentrism-short-sightedness-greed, species and personal self-aggrandizement

Is there a way to create a human culture that can sustain an environmental balance and bio-diversity?

Both men and women becoming more fully functioning-using a variety of functions and abilities, exploring potentialities

Issues/ questions/ concerns brought up by one or more individuals:

We are all collaborators in the destruction of the environment

Reluctance to see humanity as a disease on the face of the earth

Dislike of the excesses of modernism—totally rational, rigid, objective

Deep ecology versus temporality of the system; that which has been nurtured ultimately is self-reflective consciousness; what does that matter if the earth and all else will eventually end? Are our concerns irrelevant?

The conflict between having material things and relatedness, connection and unity

Thinking Toward Solutions:

This is an integrated problem which will need integrated solutions.

We need to have humility about our ability to predict infallibly the outcomes of our practices on the environment.

Economic—adequate and fair compensation for all work for all people; when industries and business compute costs, they should include long-term environmental and human costs.

Education—there needs to be increased education about the realities of the crisis we are facing; consciousness-raising about the effects of our life-styles on the environment and as a source of oppression. We must know and live according to the United Nations International Declaration of Human Rights.

Politics—We must create political/economic structures (reinforcements) to bring about changes in lifestyles, habits, commercial/agricultural/industrial practices; humanists must form coalitions with like-minded groups in order to exert more power and influence in making changes.

Personal-What would a humanist lifestyle look like if the environment really mattered? We should model our values in the way we live and create inclusive, egalitarian communities which embody values for humane sustainable culture.

Gender-women need to have control over their own bodies and reproduction; number of children per family decreases with the increase in economic well-being and education; women need to have economic equality.

Communal Living-We need to *celebrate* our experience as earthly, sensuous, thinking, feeling, conscious beings.