



Features

Time to Kiss the Earth Again: An Exploration of Ecospirituality

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At a rustic campground in Big Pine, California, a rag-tag band of teenagers meets with guides from the School of Lost Borders, preparing to spend three days alone in the desert as a wilderness rite of passage. A workshop leader in Michigan, trained by African shaman Malidoma Somé, helps a group of middle-aged women create altars for the five elements of Dagara cosmology as they prepare for a traditional West African grief ritual under the stars. On a chilly night in South Dakota, a Lakota Sioux medicine man starts the first round of prayers in the sweat lodge (*inipi*).

Seeking spiritual connection through nature is the foundation of earth-based spirituality, sometimes called ecospirituality. Practiced for centuries by indigenous people around the globe, earth-based spirituality is gaining popularity among a small but growing number of Westerners who feel alienated from mainstream religions and modern culture's war on the earth. Common concepts can be found in Native American, Celtic, indigenous African, and Wiccan practices, as well as the Taoism of ancient China, and the women's spirituality movement.

Celtic shaman Tom Cowan notes that the ancient Celts saw everything in the universe as "alive, conscious, accessible, and power-filled."¹ This is echoed by Malidoma Somé, who describes his childhood among the Dagara people in West

Africa and their belief that “...every tree, plant, hill, mountain, rock...emanates a healing power whether we know it or not...”²

This way of seeing can provide a much-needed balance in modern culture with its view of humans as separate from and superior to the natural world, where the desires of the flesh undermine our spiritual longings. It also offers a different basis for morality. If all beings are part of the web of life, interconnected and interdependent, then our efforts to stop environmental destruction are truly an expression of enlightened self-interest. As Chief Seathl (Seattle) said in 1854, "What befalls the earth befalls the sons of the earth... Whatever [man] does to the web, he does to himself."³

Ecospirituality celebrates the cyclical nature of life, the dance of light and dark, activity and rest, expansion and contraction. In a culture that demands constant productivity and upward mobility, ecospirituality offers a framework for the natural ebbs and flows of a day, a year, or a lifetime. Practitioners of traditional five elements acupuncture build on the ancient Chinese knowledge of these cycles, as they help clients find rest and replenishment in the winter (water element) so that they have the strength to rise in the spring (wood element).

A growing number of psychologists, theologians, and environmental activists have come to believe that many psychological and social problems are rooted in our culture's disconnection from the natural world. Earth-based spiritual practices offer a way back to balance, to source, to what some would say is our true nature. Perhaps, as poet Robinson Jeffers wrote, “it is time for us to kiss the earth again.”⁴

¹ Cowan, *Fire in the Head*, 45.

² Some, *The Healing Wisdom of Africa*, p. 38.

³ Quoted in Seed et al., *Thinking Like a Mountain*, p. 71.

⁴ In Roberts and Amidon, eds., *Earth Prayers*, p. 104.

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