

"Earth" - What's in a Name?

The observation that, "language structures reality," has been made by linguists and psychologists as well as anthropologists and cultural historians for several decades. Our experience of the world—what we see or don't see, what is understood as ultimately real—is shaped by the language we use. Those of us who have only one word for "white precipitation that comes down from the sky in winter" (i.e. "snow") experience this phenomenon much differently than those who have dozens of names for it depending upon its nature and context, such as the Inuit of Alaska. Our language both reveals our world view and reinforces certain attitudes toward life, as feminist writers have repeatedly shown. Centuries of common use notwithstanding, "man," used to refer to our species as a whole, is not inclusive of fully half of humanity.

Because language structures reality, how we refer to "the third planet out from the sun" makes a world of difference, literally, regarding our perception and experience of it. The other planets of our solar system each have a proper name: Mercury, Venus, Mars, and so on. So does Earth. We do not hear people talking about "the jupiter" or "the mars." Why then do we speak of "the earth?"

Using the definite article, "the," in front of an uncapitalized "earth" has its roots in an inadequate and now ecocidal world view. It subtly reinforces the perception that we are separate from and fundamentally different than the planet. But this is simply not the case. We humans are not so much separate beings on Earth as we are a mode of being or an expression of Earth. We did not come into this world; we grew out of it! Earth is the larger body of which we are an organic but by no means indispensable part. It is our larger Self.

To refer to the very ground of our being, the divine source and substance of our life as "the earth" is to objectify it. Such objectification encourages us to continue seeing "the earth" merely as a resource for human consumption. On the other hand, by using the planet's proper name, "Earth," we honor its integrity as a living system. (A growing number of scientists and others are now calling the planet "Gaia," the name of the ancient Greek goddess who symbolized Mother Earth for the same reason.) It is important to note here that this is far more than a question of semantics; it is a question of honor—which may be the most important question before us as we move into the next millennium. As geologist Thomas Berry insists,

The world we live in is an honorable world. To refuse this deepest instinct of our being, to deny honor where honor is due, to withdraw reverence from divine manifestation, is to place ourselves in a dead-on collision course with the ultimate forces of the universe. This question of honor must be dealt with before any other question that is before us. We miss both the intrinsic nature and the order of magnitude of the issue

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that is before us if we place our response to our present situation on any other basis. It is not ultimately a political or economic or scientific or psychological issue; it is ultimately a question of honor.

Following Berry, I would submit that only the sense of the violated honor of Earth, and the need to restore this honor, can evoke the understanding as well as the energy needed to carry out the renewal of the planet in any effective manner. It may be the only hope that our grandchildren have of being spared a literal toxic hell.

So what's in a name? Much! Of course, changing our language will not save the world by itself. But if changing both our world view and our relationship to Nature is as important as many of us sense that it is, then changing our language may be a significant step in the right direction. As we drop the definite article, "the," from our speech, and as we capitalize "Earth" both in our minds and in print, I believe future generations of Earth-life cheer us on with gratitude.

The above was sent to us in the form of a letter with permission to reprint by Michael Dowd who is the author of EarthSpirit: A Handbook for Nurturing an Ecological Christianity (Twenty-Third Publications, Mystic, CT, 1991), and the 1993 book, with Steve Torra, Living SacredStory: Science, Deep Ecology, and the Fate of Earth.

ed. note: The environmental crisis that faces the global community is too vast to be considered in a single issue of Radical Grace. This issue offers a broad context within which to consider the global situation. The April/May Radical Grace will feature 150 Practical Steps Everyone Can Take, a comprehensive look at how we can become part of the healing of Earth.



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