Columns
Spirituality



A meditative moment by the ocean at Bodega Bay in Northern California (Courtesy of Bette Gambonini)



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My story of moving into deeper ecological consciousness begins on a day I still vividly remember. It was in the early 1980s. I was a young adult, walking along the side of a wooded lane near my apartment in Lakewood, Colorado. With growing despair, I noticed all the litter lining the bank of the lane. As I walked, I pondered why decades-old campaigns like "Keep America Beautiful" were so ineffective.

An idea began to take shape. Could it be that ecological consciousness is a journey that happens from the inside out? In other words, could it be that people won't stop littering because they are told to do so? No, something must change in what they believe about themselves and their relationship to others and the planet. That idea seemed worth pursuing, and from that point on, the issue of personal transformation became a passionate interest that guided my ministry path.

Fast-forward a few years to my MA studies as a staff member at Mundelein College in Chicago. My coursework included "Transformation Spirituality: A Feminist Approach." I learned that though it has many names (breakthrough, transcendence, renewal, conversion, grace, resurrection, revolution) personal transformation is about a change in consciousness that leads to new behaviors.

My studies at Mundelein didn't make me a feminist. They helped me claim my identity as one. However, I also began questioning whether the feminist agenda was broad enough to address humanity's impact on the environment. It was during that time that I was thrilled to discover the emerging “ecofeminist” movement.

I still had questions, though. One day, I focused on what might be at the root of the social and environmental issues (all the "-isms") with which we humans struggle. My pondering led me to another insight: They all have to do with the way we answer important questions: Who are we? Why are we here? How are we to be here with others?

After naming those questions, I made another mental leap: those are "Spiritual questions," questions humans have asked for eons. Furthermore, how we answer them is rooted in a foundational question: "Who is God?"



(Unsplash/Patrick McManaman)

The impact of these insights on my further studies and work was tremendous. I began conducting workshops describing the emergence, key insights and integration of the three movements — ecology, feminism and spirituality — as a path of personal and human transformation.

Yet there was more. During a sabbatical year in 1992-93, I had my first exposure to the new cosmology taught by Thomas Berry and Brian Swimme. The universe then became my "ecosystem." This was not something new, but a deepening of an earlier stance. After all, I had been a keen observer of U.S. space flights and an avid Star Trek fan since childhood. It was then an integration into adulthood of my interest in space and my spiritual journey. I began to incorporate in my workshops the evolutionary ritual known as "The Cosmic Walk," developed by the Dominican Sr. Miriam Therese MacGillis.

At the end of my sabbatical, I told anyone who would listen: "We need to get spirituality back into the conversation about what it means to be a human being —

not a saint, just an ordinary human being." I also wanted to understand the process of human psycho-spiritual growth and how it impacts effective leadership. I began saying to people, "I don't know what my next ministry is going to be, but it is going to have to do with the relationship between spirituality and leadership."

Following that conviction into an unknown future, in August 1994, I became the executive director of the Institute for Spiritual Leadership, or ISL, a spiritual direction training center in Chicago with a program grounded in the process of personal transformation. In 1995, I was asked by the faculty to offer my workshop "The Eco-Feminist-Spirituality Movement: A Transformative Path" in the ISL program and did so annually through 2009.

During some of those years, I also engaged in obtaining a doctor of ministry degree with a focus on spirituality and spiritual leadership at Chicago Theological Seminary. It was there that I was first introduced to Ken Wilber's Four Quadrant Model of the Kosmos. I found this model, with its understanding of the link between individual and cultural transformation, enormously helpful and immediately began integrating it into my teaching. It held great meaning for me, as it helped me interpret what had and was happening for myself and other women of feminist consciousness within my congregation of women religious and the church. While our consciousness might have changed, we were living within collective understandings and patterns of behavior that were still heavily patriarchal. The model, however, offered great hope: One person can make a difference!

A central element in all this work was my exploration of underlying principles and values, and the alignment of the principles and values of the movements I was studying and teaching: ecology, feminism, spirituality and leadership.

While The Earth Charter was under development, I attended public hearings on the draft of the charter and immediately became intrigued with the fact that though the charter draft contained more than 70 principles stated as a to-do list, no one seemed to be talking about the personal transformation needed before a person would choose to act on that list. I wrote to the committee regarding this. After the charter's adoption, I was gratified to find in its concluding section the statement: "This will require a change of mind and heart." There it was. One sentence on the need for personal transformation. I ran with it and began to offer a workshop on "The Spirituality of the Earth Charter" at various venues.

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Now, in my current role as director of a leadership development project at DePaul University, I require my students to write a vision and mission statement, and to reflect on how that statement influences their leadership in action. I believe crafting such a statement is one way to bring one's "mind and heart" into greater focus and clarity.

I'd like to share my own statement, through which I attempt to give voice to what is in my own mind and heart:

> I view myself as a member of Earth's community of life, brought into existence by the One in whom we all live and move and have our being. I believe in the right of all members of Earth's community to freely and responsibly experience, celebrate and sustain the gift of life in communion. My mission stems from this vision and belief and is twofold:
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> 1. To continually come to greater knowledge and awareness of the unique gift of my own being, especially my feelings, beliefs, and values, so that I can make free, responsible, and life-sustaining choices;
> 2. To develop and utilize my unique talents and skills to help others find their own integrity, freedom and responsibility within Earth's community of life.

As I reflect on my path, I extend an invitation. Join me in this collective effort: Explore your own journey, discover your unique gifts and contribute to the flourishing of our shared home. Together, let's shape a future rooted in mindful, responsible leadership.