

## **Earthlings** **Honoring the Four Elements, Part II**

by  
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November 11, 2007

One of the most powerful dreams I've ever had occurred just last year. In it, I find myself prostrate on the ground using my hands to turn over and examine the moist soil beneath me. As I look at the rich black earth I can see thin veins of deep green in it, which I understand are the millions of imperceptible microorganisms working unseen to give the soil its life-producing properties. "It's alive," I realize, "the whole thing is alive." Just then, I hear a few drops of what I take as rain hitting the earth around me, one of which lands on the back of my head creating an experience so vivid it remains with me still. It was loud, like a small painless explosion, and soothingly warm. "Can it be?" I ask myself, "Can it be oil?" I'm reluctant to touch it for fear it might not be so. For I know warm oil upon one's head, especially when falling directly from heaven, represents Divine anointing—God directly setting me apart to do something important.

The comforting and well-known *Psalms* 23, from the Hebrew Scriptures, which begins "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want," also includes a line that says, "thou anointest my head with oil." The word *anoint* itself originates from a Latin word meaning, "to smear with oil." In *Genesis*, after Jacob laid his head on a stone and dreamt of his famous ladder extending all the way to heaven, he awoke convinced the site was sacred and, according to the story, "took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it."<sup>1</sup> In the same way, those set apart as Jewish kings and priests were anointed with oil. *Exodus*, for example, instructs that during the ordination of priests, "You shall take the anointing oil, and pour it on his head and anoint him,"<sup>2</sup> and regarding Saul, Israel's first king, "Samuel took a vial of oil and poured it on his head, and kissed him; he said, 'The Lord has anointed you ruler over his people Israel.'"<sup>3</sup>

In my dream then, I understand that if what I feel on my head is oil, it's a big deal! It means my life is blessed, that God is with me in a profound way, that I have great purpose and meaning. Naturally, I want this to be the case, but, like most westerners, having developed psychologically in a culture that must demean others in order to feel justified dominating them, upheld by a theology of fall and redemption, of sin and shame, I ultimately feel unworthy of such blessing, and find it hard to imagine that, like a king or a priest, my reason for being is important, that I'm in this world for a special purpose, that my calling, my life, has divine significance. Nevertheless, as my dream continues, hoping against hope, I reach up to touch the warmth spreading slowly atop my head. It's thick. I rub it between my thumb and index finger to discover, to my delight, that it is, indeed, oil. Still in the prostrate position, I begin weeping, "Even me?" I cry, "Even me?"

I suppose this dream could represent what Freud called “wish fulfillment” on my part—that part of me that wants to feel special, unique, set apart, important. It could also, for this same reason, signify a degree of ego inflation, the feeling that I’m more important than I really am. Or, if dreams are divinely inspired, as they have been considered to be by people throughout history, then, perhaps, I really have been anointed, set apart for some special purpose. My own interpretation of the dream, however, suggests that it is simply my ordinary connection to the soil itself that makes me special, that—counter to a culture that largely considers the Earth an inanimate dead object, and a religion that views it with contempt, as a fallen world of sin and depravation—each of us, merely by virtue of being human, is divinely anointed. Each life, each being, each moment, is sacred and important, even me, and even you.

Somehow we have been twisted to think and feel that our lives are ordinary, that our world is profane, and that everything sacred is otherworldly, in a heavenly realm or spiritual dimension, anywhere but here. To be of the Earth is mundane, is to be cursed. As Yahweh tells fallen Adam, whose very name means *Earth*, “cursed is the ground because of you; you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”<sup>4</sup>

Although this seems to be true, that we all come from the Earth and must eventually return to it, I don’t think there is anything mundane or profane about life on Earth. Much of the earth beneath our feet, out of which emerge all life sustaining plants and animals, is composed of minerals derived from rocks formed by the compressed remains of our planet’s first life forms, decaying organic materials, like, leaves, plants, and animals, and, as in my dream, living organisms, like moles, worms, and microscopic bacteria. The Earth beneath us contains our ancestors, not only our human ancestors who have returned to the dust in the sacred cycle of life, but also our most ancient ancestors, the first forms of life without whom none of us would exist, and, ultimately, the first stars that sacrificed themselves to impregnate the universe with stardust, the same dust that helped create all the elements in the universe, along with our planet, and even our bodies. Yes, we are dust, and to dust we will return. But this is an extraordinary fact, not an ordinary one! Not only are we dust, we are stardust, and someday, even as our bodies return to the Earth, our Earth will return to the stars. “You are stardust, and to the stars you shall return.”

Evolution and religion, faith and reason, tell us the same thing; that we come from the Earth. And whether we study the 13.7 billion years of cosmic history describing the extraordinary and nearly impossible journey of our existence, or are satisfied with the simple religious sentiment that we are all made in “the image and likeness of God,” we

must conclude that each life is important, that each person is unique, that we have all been divinely anointed, set apart from the other stars in the Universe to share in this wondrously rare experience of breathing, and thinking, and feeling here on Earth. In the human, the heavens have the singular opportunity to reflect upon themselves, to appreciate their beauty, to enjoy their warmth, to wonder about their meaning. We are stars looking at stars, beings of light looking for enlightenment. We are protoconscious beings, the Universe's most successful attempt thus far, so far as we know, to become self aware, to understand itself. The Universe is, of course, a big place, and I'm confident it's struggling to open its eyes everywhere, in every galaxy, and may have proven even more successful elsewhere. Still, as far as our limited knowledge allows, life is a rare cosmic gift, and being human is an especially significant part of cosmic evolution.

This cosmic perspective, in contrast with fall/redemption theology, suggests humanity represents a bifurcation point in the universe, that is, a point in which the Universe, which, until now, as far as we know, has remained completely unconscious, is beginning to wake up, beginning to become self-aware, and is opening the door to an entirely new way of being. Although we're not the end, but only the beginning of this new cosmic experience, we represent such extraordinary potential for the entire Universe, that it seems unfathomable that anyone, especially a human being, could think our existence is tainted, evil, ordinary, or shameful. As Rabbi Heschel put it, "Just to be is a blessing. Just to live is holy."<sup>5</sup>

Even so, in our endeavor to explore the stars, to let our lights shine, it is not necessary that we become stars ourselves. Being set apart—Divinely anointed—doesn't mean we must be recognized by others. It only means we must come to recognize ourselves, our own value, the significance of our lives, and the gift of being. In other words, we don't have to be anything other than human, that is, of the Earth. The word *human*, like *Adam*, and *man*, comes from the Latin, *humus*, which simply means "earth." To be human, is to be of the earth. To be human is to be humane, humble, and humorous, for the same root, *humus*, is at the core of all these words, and at the heart of what it means to be human.

The first of these qualities, being *humane*, emphasizes our capacity to be kind and compassionate. Most certainly this is not always the case. Some people are cruel, and greedy, and ruthless. But I don't believe such behavior truly reflects human nature. On the contrary, this behavior occurs because we have forgotten our humanity, our place among the stars, and have succumbed, instead, to a story telling us to ignore our humanity, and to ignore humanity itself, because there's something wrong with being human, that to be of the earth is dirty and shameful. And it is in shunning our humanity that we behave inhumane. To reawaken our species' capacity for loving kindness, we must first reawaken to the beauty of the human; that we are made in the image and likeness of God.

*Humus* is also the root of the word *humor*. To be human is to laugh and make jokes. Humor helps us bring all our lofty and over-inflated ideas down to earth, and down to size. “Satire,” for example, comes from the Greek *satyrs*, referring to those somewhat lude mythological figures that often went around with erections. Satire is the original “dirty joke,” and is funny because it presents a shock to the system by revealing something unexpected or obscene that’s not supposed to be “brought up” in polite society. The word *komos*, itself, from which we get the word “comedy,” etymologically means, “to reveal.” Humor, like exhibitionism, reveals something that’s otherwise unseen, which is why it’s often shocking and why we can’t help but laugh or blush in response. When speaking of the Greek garden god, *Priapus*, for example, Thomas Moore explains he “is the spoiler of all that looks dignified in human life.”<sup>6</sup> Priapus, a rather unattractive fellow with a constant erection, was often used as a scarecrow in Greek gardens. This is really the point of obscene humor, to scare away “all kinds of winged spirits—our lofty thoughts, our airy ideas, our flighty opinions, and our otherworldly aspirations.”<sup>7</sup>

Our cultural myth, Christianity, unfortunately, doesn’t have much of a sense of humor. It tells us “Jesus wept,” but it never says he laughed. This lack of laughter is probably why it ultimately chose the image of Pan to represent the Christian Devil. Pan is a Pagan nature god, part goat, part man, who likes to play jokes on wayward travelers wondering through his forest. The word *pagan*, like *human*, also means “of the earth,” which is why Christians don’t like pagans and, especially, don’t like their gods. Pan, and now the Devil, are down to earth, cast out of heaven, and don’t take God very seriously. Yet, both these figures have goat feet, suggesting humor has the power to make us more surefooted, especially as we struggle to climb the steep, rocky hillsides we encounter throughout our lives. Humor makes these obstacles a little less troubling. It makes the unbearable bearable. But to take advantage of our humor, we must more fully embrace our humanity. Being human is about laughing.

Finally, to be human, to be of the Earth, is to be humble. Human means humility, and humility represents our ability to recognize the divine in all things, to bow before the sacred, to treat all beings with dignity and worth. This is why, in my dream, my anointing happens when I’m in a prostrate posture, that is, when I’m bent low to the ground, when I’m humbled before the Earth, and through this humility, am able to see that even the dirt is sacred. In Islam, the word *mosque* simply means “place of prostration.” I love this concept because it means every place is sacred so long as we’re willing to humble ourselves before it; so long, that is, as we’re willing to see it as such. But again, our cultural tradition teaches us the Earth is a fallen place that we must rise above and subdue and dominate it. Embracing our humanity, becoming humble, enables us to appreciate the Earth, and helps us understand we are its tenders, not its masters.

Today, unfortunately, because we have lost our humanity, the Earth, including the soil,

one of the fundamental elements of life, is in danger due to modern agricultural practices in which we're destroying the delicate ecosystem of microorganisms that make it alive. We're literally killing the earth. And this is happening through arrogance, through the thought that we can somehow improve upon nature, rather than through humility and the appreciation of natural processes. Thus, the life forms that are part of the very definition of "soil," are being poisoned to death through overuse of herbicides and pesticides. In addition, because there are more than 20 billion livestock animals on the planet, creating far more manure than can be sustainably reused by nature, top soil, that part of the earth that makes food production possible, is being destroyed at an alarming rate. According to John Robbins, "The amount of topsoil we are losing from Iowa alone would fill 165,000 Mississippi River barges a year."<sup>8</sup>

But, there is still time to turn this around, by embracing our humanity, that part of us that is humble before the Earth, that knows every place, every microbe, every handful of dirt is sacred. It's the part of us that says, despite the rocky road we're on, "someday we're all going to laugh about this!" That's what each of us is anointed to do.

For now, however, I'd like to simply invite you to participate in a brief Earth honoring ritual from Russia regarding *Mati-Syra-Zemlya*, which means "Moist Mother Earth," similar to the Native American prayer to the four directions. Stand if you will and begin by facing the East, and repeat after me...

"Moist Mother Earth, subdue every bad disease so that it doesn't make us sick or do us any harm."

Turning toward west, "Moist Mother Earth, engulf the unclean power in your caldron womb, and your purifying fire."

Turning toward the South, "Moist Mother Earth, calm the Winds coming from the South and all bad weather. Calm the earthquakes, tornados and tsunamis."

Turning toward the North, "Moist Mother Earth, calm the North Winds, the black clouds and cold snow storms, that life may continue on."

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 28:18

<sup>2</sup> Exodus 29: 7

<sup>3</sup> I Samuel 10:1

<sup>4</sup> Genesis 3:17-19

<sup>5</sup> Fox, Matthew, *Original Blessing*, Bear & Company, Santa Fe, NM, 1983, p. 42

<sup>6</sup> Moore, Thomas, *The Soul of Sex*, HarperCollins Publishers, New York, NY, 1998, p. 118.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 120.

<sup>8</sup> Robbins, John, *The Food Revolution*, Conari Press, Boston, MA, 2001. p. 241.

