

Finding Our Way “Back to the Garden” Implications for Designers and Educators in the 21st Century

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*We are stardust...billion year old carbon.
We are golden...caught in the devil's bargain.
And we've got to get ourselves back to the garden.¹*



Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden by Jan Brueghel the Elder, 1615, Queen's Gallery, Buckingham Palace

Within the cosmology of Abrahamic religious traditions, The Garden of Eden serves as the archetypal utopia, that font of eternal peace and happiness where prototypical human beings, Adam and Eve, live in blissful harmony with their God, each other, and all of the other flora and fauna.² Similarly, the eschatology of these same religions anticipates that God will eventually restore creation to its original perfection at the end of time as an exclusive reward for those who have lived a life of righteousness.³

From the beginning, this mythic earthly paradise, given tangible expression by artists such as Jan Brueghel the Elder, has informed our desires, hopes, and dreams for a promised idyllic existence.

Viewers of the painting will observe that no single subject becomes its central focus. Instead, the composition reflects a gestalt whole from which its sense of harmony and peace emerges. Even Adam and Eve, the protagonists of the Genesis narrative, are relatively obscure and their presence is relegated to the background. There are no predators and no prey...only a single unified expression of the diversity of creatures that appears to be in “right relationship” with each other and which together represent what Article 47 of the *Summa Theologica* of Saint Thomas Aquinas describes as the divine goodness. In his book *The Dream of the Earth*, cultural historian, Thomas Berry describes this important insight of Aquinas:

“...he proposes an ultimate universal socialism where he says that because divine goodness ‘could not be adequately represented by one creature alone, He produced many and diverse creatures, that what was wanting in one in the representation of the divine goodness might be supplied by another. For goodness, which in God is simple and uniform, in creatures is manifold and divided: and hence the whole universe together participates the divine goodness more perfectly, and represents it better than any single creature whatever.’ From this, we could argue that the community of all the components of the planet Earth is primary in the divine intention.”⁴

At some point however, here in the west, we got tired of waiting for God to bring about this perfection and re-directed our psychic, emotional, intellectual, and physical energies towards achieving the ultimate goal of transcending our human condition. According to Berry, the biblical cosmology was to be achieved on our own, through human resourcefulness, intelligence, and creativity dedicated in service to the realization of ideals enshrined by “...the Enlightenment, the democratic age, the nation-state, the classless society, the capitalist age of peace and plenty, and the industrial wonderworld. It is a supreme irony of history that the consequences of these millennial expectations have been the devastation of the planet – wasteworld rather than wonderworld”.⁵

In our anthropocentric zeal to solve the needs of humans, the needs of the earth have been relegated to externalities within our economic equations. As such, we have accumulated an earth deficit of incredible magnitude, the horrifying consequences of which are only recently being articulated, experienced, and absorbed into our collective consciousness. Pollution, drought, extreme weather events, global warming and climate change are all beginning to precipitate mass human migrations to escape conflicts brought about by the consequent lack of access to basic resources necessary for human survival. A relevant example from my own Canadian experience can be seen in the devastation caused by the recent wildfires in Fort McMurray, Alberta.

An increase in fires such as the one that devastated Fort McMurray may be directly attributable to global warming due to the burning of fossil fuels.⁶ Ironically, the economy of the 88,000 citizens for Fort McMurray that had to evacuate the city depends upon the extraction of bitumen and the production of oil from the nearby Tar Sands. And whereas the forest surrounding Fort McMurray has a natural, adaptive capacity to recover from its collapse, the oil based human economy of Fort McMurray does not. Measures are already being taken to restore production in the Tar Sands in order to carry on “business as usual”. Re-imagining a human economy that is no longer dependent upon fossil fuels, but rather derives all of its energy needs from renewable sources such as the wind and sun, appears to have escaped our analysis and proven once again to be a missed opportunity. This is the pathos of our denial.



Fort McMurray wildfire raging courtesy: The Globe and Mail.com



Fort McMurray wildfire aftermath courtesy: The Star.com



Sunset over Alberta Tar Sands near Fort McMurray courtesy: Edward Burtynsky

The likelihood of arriving at any semblance of paradise, real or imagined, is lost if we continue to be entranced and allured by a dysfunctional worldview based upon stories that no longer work. Simply stated...we need a new story.

In response to this imperative, the paper seeks to draw from three significant voices in order to propose the basis for achieving a real and viable future for all living species. The paper will then posit ways in which these voices might influence the designers and educators amongst our conference attendees.

It will explore Thomas Berry's belief that we must now embrace and integrate the Universe Story in its unfolding from an explosive origin roughly fourteen billion years ago to the emergence of life and human consciousness here on the planet earth, in order to bring about a new Ecological Age capable of articulating and achieving a more functional mode of human presence.⁷

The paper will also draw from Jungian psychologist, James Hillman, who believes that solutions for solving the ecological crisis will not emerge from fear, guilt, or even religious devotion to the planet as mother, but rather from something as fundamental as love. In *City and Soul*, he draws upon the inextricable connection between ecology, love and beauty as the best means of defending the environment.⁸

Important insights shared by the Holy Father Francis in his recently promulgated encyclical, *Laudato Si', On Care for Our Common Home*, is the third voice of wisdom from which the paper will draw. A portion of the encyclical is dedicated to identifying the human roots of the current

ecological crisis. The Holy Father Francis challenges the basis of modern anthropocentrism, acknowledging we can no longer assume that we can get away with privileging our needs over the needs of the planet that sustains us.⁹ He feels, however, that yielding a misguided anthropocentrism in favor of “biocentrism” will merely substitute one imbalance for another, creating more problems without solving current ones.¹⁰ Instead, he defines what is necessary as an “integral ecology,” one that recognizes the interrelatedness of everything and our responsibility as humans to bring about a fair, just, and responsible relationship to each other and to all of creation.¹¹

These voices challenge us to design as if the planet were our client. They challenge us to ensure a responsible use of natural resources in their extraction, processing, and ongoing use throughout the life of the buildings we design in service to creating urban built environments that are generative, equitable, and enhance the quality of life for their inhabitants and the ecosystems within which they exist. The educators among us are similarly challenged to inspire and empower our students with the vision and skills necessary to re-imagine and design their way into a viable future that is worth inheriting. Only then, can we begin to comprehend the meaning of “right relationship” between ourselves, and the remainder of creation. Only then, can we hope to achieve Joni Mitchell’s prophetic refrain to “...get ourselves back to the garden”.

Endnotes

¹ Woodstock lyrics by Canadian songwriter Joni Mitchell, © Sony/ATV Music Publishing LL

² Genesis 2: 1-24

³ Isaiah 11:6-9; 35: 1-7 and Revelation 21: 1-4

⁴ Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth* (San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1988), 79.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁶ David Martell, Forestry Professor at the University of Toronto, CBC.ca interview, posted May 04, 2016 10:44 PM ET.

⁷ Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry, *The Universe Story: From the Primordial Flaring Forth to the Ecozoic Era - A Celebration of the Unfolding of the Cosmos* (San Francisco: Harper, 1992), 1-2.

⁸ James Hillman, *City and Soul* (Putnam: Spring Publications, Inc., 2006), 203.

⁹ Holy Father Francis, *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015), 87

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 88

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 103