SPEECHES AND VIDEOS

Reflections on the Earth Charter

Mary Evelyn Tucker
Bucknell University, USA

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The Earth Charter represents a key effort of people from many parts of the world to articulate the aspirations of humanity yearning for a more peaceful, secure, and sustainable future. There is a profound sense emerging around the globe that we are at a critical moment of transition and transformation. Our present economic mode of unlimited growth and unrestrained development is perceived by many as no longer viable. The increasing social gap between the rich and the poor is seen as no longer acceptable. The mindless ravaging of resources and the conscious abuse of human rights is viewed as no longer tolerable. How to realign our priorities and values within the human community and the earth community remain our fundamental challenge.

The Earth Charter calls clearly and directly for shifts in worldviews and action that will be more appropriate for the 21st century. The choice is emerging in rather stark terms between a future for humans filled with conflict over limited resources or a future where more equitable distribution of resources and more democratic modes of participation will be made possible.

The Earth Charter, then, reflects the hopes of many for new direction into the 21st century. It is like a compass, a guiding instrument across the unchartered waters ahead. It is a new kind of compass in several respects.

> 1) It calls upon the wisdom of the past from the contributions of world history, culture and religion.
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> 2) It relies upon the best knowledge of the present, affirming the contributions of humanistic science and sustainable technology.
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> 3) It points toward the hopes of the future by drawing on an understanding of ourselves as part of a vast evolutionary process whose continuation will be guided in part by our own decisions.

This compass, then, points us toward a new expression of a common future respecting difference and diversity while affirming our shared destiny as part of the human family. Like the unwritten codes that govern families, the Earth Charter affirms individual rights and freedoms along with individual responsibilities toward the global family and its future. It tries to strike a balance between a variety of conflicting tensions. In doing so it

hopes to find new harmonious chords among the creative tensions of the rights and responsibilities of humans and nature.

This involves a series of elaborate relationships between individuals and groups, men and women, older generation and younger generation, political leaders and citizens, business leaders and consumers. It recognizes that while governments and individuals need to play a critical role, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other leading groups in civil society have an important voice also. To bring these voices together we need to discover the common ground that sustains us as humans. We need to explore not only the relations of humans to one another but also the relations of humans to the natural world around us.

These common grounds and creative tensions are clearly articulated in the Preamble which sets the context for rethinking the foundations of a genuine and sustainable future. The Preamble captures the worldview change which grounds the principles that follow. If the Earth Charter as a whole is like a compass guiding us into the future, the Preamble points toward the key constellations by which we can navigate across the vast ocean in the dark night.

Just as the constellations have guided sailors in their ocean voyages for centuries, so too these seven paragraphs form a constellation of brightly burning stars. They move from a sense of **common destiny** to **cosmology**, from **crisis** to **choice**, from **challenge** to **community**, and finally to **commitment** and **confidence**.

Common Destiny:

The first paragraph of the Preamble sets forth the key idea that the Earth community and the human family have a common destiny. Indeed, without this profound sense of a common future, the human community may be on a self- destructive path. As Daniel Maguire suggests: "If current trends continue, we will not." In other words, we cannot pollute the sources of our very existence- namely air, water, and soil and hope to have a healthy or sustainable future. It is like fouling our nest without realizing the consequences. This is why the Earth Charter might be seen as the first major Declaration of Interdependence instead of independence. As Thomas Berry has noted, "The human community and the earth community will go into the future as a single, celebratory event or not at all."

Because of the power of individualism, the lure of independence, and the respect for diversity ever since the Enlightenment era, the notion of a common destiny has been difficult to foreground. Yet now more than ever this idea needs to be carefully articulated and clearly evoked so as to be embraced by a large number of people around the world. This implies that factionalism and intense individualism will lead to increasing fragmentation. On the contrary, solidarity with a common destiny points us toward survival. Individual rights can be respected along with responsibilities to a larger whole. Indeed, our survival as a species depends on this.

Cosmology:

The second paragraph opens with two sentences describing the cosmological grounding of

this common destiny. For the first time in a document of this kind there is an acknowledgement that evolution is the comprehensive context in which we need to rethink our role and purpose as humans. Scientists tell us that the universe is some 20 billion years old, that the earth is some 4.6 billion years old, and that humans are only about 150,000 years olds. To realize this enormous time perspective changes our sense of how we fit into the vast evolution of life and how we have come very late to this process. Yet in this short period of time we have managed to do almost irreparable damage to species and to ecosystems. The time line of evolution has been compared to a monthly calendar where life has evolved on the planet over 4.6 billion years and where we as humans have appeared only at the very end of the 30th day. A similar scale has been used with a clock where evolution is diagramed into 12 hours and humans appear a few seconds before midnight.

This evolutionary cosmology gives us a comprehensive perspective to reevaluate what we are doing to the planet and how we are going to manage to restrain our destructive habits, harness our creative energies, and reconfigure human earth relations in a more constructive manner. A new balance is needed lest we destroy ourselves and many other life forms in the process. While we may be the first generation to imagine our own termination, so also we may collectively begin to imagine a viable and sustainable future.

To help make this happen it is critical that we recognize the importance of the sentence, "Earth, our home, is alive with a unique community of life." This sentence was first proposed by a scientist, an astrophysicist, who suggested that the idea of "earth itself is alive" would be important to include in the opening of the Earth Charter. There are many possible interpretations of this phrase and indeed a fruitful ambiguity many be helpful in this regard. The scientist was clearly using the term "alive" in a metaphorical manner to suggest something of the vitality of the life forces that surround and constitute the earth. For indigenous people this was one of the most empowering phrases to be included in the text. Several said that they felt this phrase marked the first time that their worldview was included in such a document.

The cosmological context of a vast, evolving universe helps to situate and to ground the notion that at this juncture we have inherited a sacred trust- namely the preservation of the earth for future generations. This is what Thomas Berry has described as the Great Work of our time. Each person has an important role to play for we are now, in a certain sense, cocreators of the evolutionary process. The survival of many species and the integrity of various ecosystems is in our hands.

Crisis:

The next paragraph highlights the critical nature of the crisis that we are facing: "The earth community stands at a defining moment." The nature, size, and scale of this crisis is outlined here. Without a sufficient sense of the dimensions of the crisis we will not be able to develop the will to take the necessary steps toward change. There is an urgency that needs to be sounded regarding the magnitude of what we are facing. As the paragraph suggests, the foundations of global security are being threatened by the interlinking problems of endemic poverty and environmental degradation, as well as population growth and unrestrained consumption. These are problems which, if left unchecked, will

undermine the life support systems of the planet. While these are global problems, they are problems which threaten to further divide developed and developing nations. Hence we need principles and strategies for genuine sustainable development such as the Earth Charter contains.

While the magnitude and interconnected nature of these problems need to be clearly understood, solutions are not going to be simple or forthcoming without significant changes by individuals, institutions, societies, and governments. How to help make these changes possible without causing exhaustion of human energies and initiatives will be a considerable challenge. How to encourage institutions to become more sensitive to sustainable paradigms without causing them to become rigid or fossilized will require skilled and persistent effort. How to assist the changes without causing the rapid collapse of current economic, social, and political systems will be a formidable task. All of this is part of what Maurice Strong has referred to as "reinventing industrial civilization".

In this moment of crisis and transformation we need to avoid paralysis of action or indifference of attitude. We need to find the means to empower people to assist in this historical moment of transformation. This is what Thomas Berry calls the Great Work as we make the transition from the end of the Cenozoic era in the evolutionary timeline to what he calls the Ecozoic era of the next millennium. Along with the depletion of natural resources there is the potential depletion of human energy which is needed to make this transition possible. This is, in part, the role of the Earth Charter, namely, to serve as a compass which will inspire and guide human action at this moment of crisis.

Choice:

Thus the centerpiece of the Preamble is the phrase "the choice is ours." There is no more clearly framed challenge than this. It is a matter of human will power and creative energy to chart our way into the future. This choice is a stark one toward care and concern for the future or toward indifference and destruction. Both consciously or unconsciously we are already taking steps toward realigning our priorities and commitments. As the Earth Charter indicates, the choice that we are making will involve a change of attitudes, (worldviews) values (moral and spiritual commitments), and ways of living (consumption and production habits).

It is here that the world religions may be especially helpful as they are the repositories of key attitudes and values which have shaped individuals and cultures over many centuries. For this reason my husband, John Grim, and I organized a series of ten conferences from 1996-1998 at Harvard's Center for the Study of World Religions on "Religions of the World and Ecology." These conferences explored views of nature in the various traditions so as to discern viable attitudes and values that would contribute to resolving our current environmental crisis. The papers from these conference are being published by the Center for the Study of World Religions and distributed by Harvard University Press. Furthermore, an ongoing Forum on Religion and Ecology has been established to continue to this work of research, education, and outreach. Partner organizations include: The Harvard University Committee on the Environment, the Harvard Yenching Institute, the Center for Respect of Life and Environment, and Bucknell University's Department of Religion.

See website: http://divweb.harvard.edu/cswr/ecology

Challenge:

The last three paragraphs of the Earth Charter set out the sense of challenge, the scope of community, and the scale of commitment. The challenge ahead is how to help shape a global civilization built on democratic principles and law. The task is, in particular, to create modes of balancing tensions and reconciling opposites. This is one of the most difficult things to do for humans, especially because we tend to see things as polar opposites that are irreconcilable.

The challenge, then, is how to find principles and modes of conciliation and integration. This will at times involve skillful compromise which will help shape this new era. How to see opposites as interrelated: for example, human rights need to be balanced with human responsibilities, individual liberties need to be connected to a sense of a larger common good, short term gains (especially economic profits) need to be seen in the context of long term goals (environmental protection, health benefits, renewable resource use). Here is where concern for future generations is central to uncovering the motivational dimensions of change as well as functional models and principles that may be useful in deciding complex issues such as equitable distribution of resources. In all of this it is important to remember that the Earth Charter is a guiding compass. It is a soft law document which needs to be reinforced by a hard law document like the IUCN Covenant on Environment and Development.

Community:

The next paragraph describes an expanded sense of community that distinguishes the Earth Charter. We are in an era that suggests that peace among humans is only possible with peace with the planet. Further effort is clearly going to be needed to improve relations among humans already strained by ethnic and racial tensions, as well as social, economic, and religious differences. This is a formidable challenge to community building in itself. There are numerous examples around the world of the seemingly endless conflicts especially over religion and ethnicity.

However, humans are now realizing that their common future and global security as a human community rests on reconciliation with the planet itself. This overrides, although does not diminish, the basic differences between and among humans. For as the liberation theologian, Leonardo Boff and many others have noted, the liberation of humans can only take place in conjunction with a new understanding of human-earth relations. There will be no long lasting basis for just and sustainable societies without understanding the critical role of the earth to sustain life and community.

As the conservationist Aldo Leopold suggests, the expansion of ethics outward from within the human sphere toward the natural world signifies the moral growth that is needed to sustain life on the planet. Just as women, children, and minority groups have gradually been included in ethical concerns, so too other species and ecosystems need to be included in the discussion of ethics. The growth of environmental ethics and the

emerging involvement of religious communities in this expansion of ethics is a cause for hope. There is a lively debate occurring in various circles sponsored by this expansion of ethics to embrace the larger community of life.

Tensions can be seen between those advocating an anthropocentric ethics and those calling for a more biocentric ethics, or between those supporting social ecology and those favoring deep ecology. These reflect the healthy debate concerning what is it that humans will contribute toward a more just and sustainable future. Those who view these debates as irresolvable do not see how much they are part of the same creative tensions that will result in more holistic and inclusive human-earth relations. Like the yin and yang in Chinese thought, these opposites may be seen as complementary and mutually engaged in one another. Commitment and Confidence:

Finally, the Preamble brings us to a sense of shared commitment with confidence in the future. After much reflection, the need for a comprehensive and inclusive vision is affirmed. Even more critically the sense of a common commitment is evoked. Commitment here reflects a will that is indispensable for making the changes happen. The principles that follow in the Earth Charter can only become functional and operational if we have confidence in the deep processes of life itself which have brought forth this remarkable beauty and diversity of nature and human beings. This life force that has sustained the unfolding of the universe and our planet earth may enkindle in us courage and commitment that will be needed for the Great Work ahead.

As Thomas Berry suggests at the end of his essay on The New Story what is needed along with courage and commitment is an unassailable sense of confidence in the vast evolutionary process that has brought forth and sustained life until the present. He writes:

"If the dynamics of the universe from the beginning shaped the course of the heavens, lighted the sun, and formed the earth, if this same dynamism brought forth the continents and seas and atmosphere, if it awakened life in the primordial cell and then brought humans into being and guided them safely through the turbulent centuries, there is reason to believe that this same guiding process is precisely what has awakened in us our present understanding of ourselves and our relation to this stupendous process. Sensitized to this guidance we can have confidence in the future that awaits the human venture."

With this confidence and commitment we may indeed have a new beginning. As the Earth Charter suggests at the end, We will succeed because we must succeed.