

Learning to See the Stars:

The Earth Charter as a Compass for the New Century

Mary Evelyn Tucker

Voyages of recovery

Some years ago in Hawaii I attended an International World History Conference that was organized around the theme of "Oceans in World History." At the opening dinner of the conference Nainoa Thompson, a young Hawaiian sail master with the Polynesian Voyaging Society, told the story of the Hokulea voyages that recreated the earlier Pacific journeys from Hawaii south to Tahiti. These voyages took place in the centuries of great oceanic migrations in the Pacific from approximately 700 AD to 1400 AD. Hokulea is the name given to the canoe built for these voyages and is translated as "Star of Gladness" for a star that passes over Hawaii.

Here we were 200 academics sitting in a windowless banquet room with the usual generic hotel décor--high ceilings, heavy curtains, glitzy chandeliers, and predictable carpets. The speaker had been appropriately introduced and bedecked with a lei, the slides were in place, and his soft voice proceeded to narrate. Almost like an ancient Hawaiian chant his story began to unfold from this unassuming slight man before us. He began with disclaimers and modest apologies and then proceeded to electrify the audience with his verbal and visual images of the journey.

"We wanted to recreate the original sea voyages of our ancestors from Hawaii back to the South Pacific islands," he began. "They had been stopped for hundreds of years due to a mysterious taboo. We wanted to reconstruct the original outrigger canoes and to bring along only traditional foods.

"First we needed a navigator. We searched among our own Hawaiian people but no one emerged as knowledgeable enough to guide us across these vast

ocean distances. We sent word down to the South Pacific that some of us Hawaiians wanted to relearn the traditional navigation techniques. One of the last 'ancient mariners' of the South Pacific replied. Named Mao Pilaug, he came up to Hawaii from the Melanesian island of Satawal.

"Mao began to help us with the building of the canoe and with outfitting it. But most importantly he began to share with us his knowledge of how to sail it. Slowly we began to read the flotsam and plankton on the surface of the sea. Little by little we began to notice the patterns of birds' flight. We started to feel the movements of the waves and the direction of the currents. Eventually we learned to see the map of the stars on the low horizon and learned how to read it, providing us with direction. Gradually we discovered how to see the sun and to place its rising and its setting in relation to sea movements and sky constellations. We felt the voyage being born within us.

"We set out onto the high seas with two canoes and a crew of nine people. It was far from perfect, but we learned as we sailed--about human nature and conflict and cooperation, about Mother Nature and vulnerability and humility. We read the position of the sun and the stars, and discerned the movements of the currents and the waves. Without compass or modern technology we proceeded across the paths of our ancestors. We were both exhilarated and exhausted.

"Our challenges came quickly and sometimes unexpectedly. The most difficult was navigating on a cloudy or stormy night. With no moon or stars, it was impossible for us to continue to sail. It was especially at these difficult points that we had to call on the ancient mariner.

"On those dark, cloud-filled nights in the midst of this vast Pacific ocean Mao would go and lie in the hull of the canoe. As was the custom with children in Melanesia he had spent much of his early childhood in a canoe--

sometimes simply rocked in a canoe tied to the shore like a cradle, sometimes accompanying a family member on a fishing expedition. From both instincts absorbed as a child and knowledge taught by his elders, he could feel the swell of the waves and discern the movement of the currents. He would navigate our direction based on these ancient indigenous ways of knowing that had been learned and transmitted across the centuries. We were deeply moved in witnessing this."

The narrator, Nainoa Thompson, told us how he had to adjust much of his scientific training and bracket his "modern" skepticism to learn these ancient navigation techniques. But he acknowledged he had still not reached into the instinctual indigenous knowledge of reading the waves from the depths of the hull.

The story of the Hokulea journey can be viewed as a metaphor for our own need to recover and discover paths over vast tracks of uncharted waters toward a sustainable future. We are like the ancient mariner in a cloudy night trying to navigate our way into a new historical moment when humans will contribute to the flourishing of the Earth community, not to its destruction.

In this process the Earth Charter as a comprehensive global ethics serves as a compass to guide humans in such a new and creative venture. The Preamble and the Principles of the Charter act like a constellation of stars illuminating the voyage. The Way Forward provides a sense of destiny and commitment beckoning humans to build a sustainable global community. My participation in the drafting of the Charter has a long history, including over three decades of studying other cultures and religions, first by living in Japan and then by nearly a decade of graduate studies at Columbia University. My search has always been for the way in which we can create a

vision of a common future that will honor both cultural and biological diversity, or, in the words of the Earth Charter, "to live with a sense of universal responsibility, identifying ourselves with the whole Earth community as well as our local communities."¹ Like the Hawaiians, I had to cross the Pacific to find my way, bringing traditional values to bear on modern concerns like ecology and equity.

Voyages of discovery

It was more than thirty years ago that I took a voyage across the Pacific--but my direction was from west to east. Just at the time the Hawaiians were recovering their transoceanic routes of discovery from south to north, I was discovering traditional values of Asian civilization. I was young, innocent, and largely ignorant of Asian cultures. College had not prepared me for the vast differences of worldview I would experience. No classes had opened up the doors to the rich civilizations that I encountered, first in Japan, then in other parts of Asia. But I had begun to experience the emerging planetary civilization that was arising out of human exchanges across cultures on a scale never before possible. My journey toward the Earth Charter was underway.

In college I had traveled to England where I lived for a year at Oxford. I roamed England and the continent like a hungry child in search of the feast of culture, art, and history that Europe so readily provides. But even this journey into the heart of western civilization could not have prepared me for Japan--like England, an island country on the other side of the Eurasian continent. Japan, densely packed with people, and steeped in traditional ways, was still in the grips of its own post-war history. Yet it was already caught in the tensions of traditional customs and modern

aspirations. This would both fascinate and confuse me as I plunged into this unknown archipelago. Indeed, I had to climb a gate to get in.

I had traveled for endless hours across the Pacific in a small plane. I arrived alone late at night at Haneda airport and took an hour-long taxi ride through the winding streets of Tokyo. The convent gate was locked and there was nothing to be done but climb over. The taxi driver was dumbfounded, watching with silent amazement this tall foreign woman scale the gate. I walked up to the door and rang the bell. To this day what amuses me most is the fact that the woman who answered the door and walked back to unlock the gate so as to retrieve my luggage never asked how I had gotten in.

My experience of Japan was literally and figuratively climbing over a high wall to try and enter into a different culture. The Earth Charter explains that "We are at once citizens of different nations and of one world in which the local and the global are linked."² Having not yet bridged the gap between my own culture and other cultures, I was completely disoriented. The challenges were many and diverse as I was an unusually tall woman with auburn hair and blue eyes in a country where there was no box to check on the drivers license for hair and eye color because it was uniformly the same. Even within the protective walls of the university where I was teaching I was an oddity. On the street corners people would stare at me and point as they were not used to seeing foreigners. It was like being in Gulliver's Travels.

I had come to teach English language and literature at a university in Okayama, a castle town between Kyoto and Hiroshima on the Inland Sea. As I stood in front of the class, alone on a raised platform, my height was further accentuated. The students were all women who wore identical uniforms and their names were hard to remember. They were intrigued to learn English; but it was I who learned from them.

They taught me about the cultural habits that made this heterogeneous society work smoothly--the way people bowed and greeted one another, the politeness of phrase and expression, the gift giving and receiving with carefully consider proportionality. These deeply embedded ritual patterns of exchange fascinated me. Realizing too that a foreigner could never fully enter this web of human relations was daunting.

Nonetheless, as I tried with authenticity to lower myself gradually over the wall of cultural differences, I found myself accepted as more than a cultural oddity. I moved into a space of reciprocity, embraced by a web of human relations and values more intricate than I could fully understand. The tenderness and depths of friendships that opened up were truly astonishing. The wall disappeared and human affectivity flowed through the channels of ritual formality and into a giving and shared presence of person to person that was intense and heart felt. The space of our common humanity held us in a new pattern of respect, opening us up to a shared future not possible for our parents' generation locked in a time of war. Difference was overcome in the space of shared concerns.

In wandering about through the maze of human relations on the other side of the wall I became intrigued by family interactions, student-teacher exchanges, friendship bonds, as well as by more impersonal encounters in stores and public places. What was it that made this all work? What was the social glue that seemed to hold the society together? What kept crime so low and a sense of respect for neighbors so widespread? What could we in the west learn from Japanese values?

Although I studied Zen Buddhism intensively and read widely in Shinto, I came eventually to discover that it was Confucian ethics that governed these ritualized exchanges. Confucianism involves a system of mutual rites and responsibilities organized around an intricate understanding of

individual roles within a social network and hierarchy. The sense of traditional Confucian values guiding Japanese society was omnipresent. The values were intuited and taught by example, as well as embedded in the educational system. Their pervasive presence was like a cultural DNA passed on from generation to generation. These Confucian habits of the heart that imprinted Japanese society for more than a millennium had moved across East Asia from China through Korea to Japan. These traditions were strong even in the early 1970s in Japan.

But some of these values that held the society so tightly bound were beginning to unravel. Just as the Japanese made their way out of the Meiji era with the opening of the country by Commodore Perry, so now they were finding a path forward into new cultural values as the western world began to press in once again. The post-war industrialization and accompanying economic prosperity had provided the opportunity for the Japanese to look both inward and outward.

Inwardly Confucian conformity to tradition and to group loyalty was being challenged by the press of modernity and the appeal of western individualism. Could group pressures overcome the yearning for personal freedoms? Young disaffected youth with spiked and colored hair were gathering at Harajuku in Tokyo. Artists sought different modes of expression. The security of lifetime employment in large corporations was diminishing. Women were searching for other roles outside the family. Something new was emerging--a fusion of values and attitudes that was drawing on both tradition and modernity.

As they looked outward the Japanese were beginning to envision a new kind of "kokusaiteki shiso" or "international thinking" that would challenge some of their nationalistic loyalties. How could they weave together the sense of their own uniqueness as a nation and as a people ("Nihonjinron")

with a perceived need to join the international community? The phrase "ware ware Nihonhonjin" ("we Japanese") was frequently used to illustrate the dividing line with those in the rest of the world who were labeled "gaijin" ("foreigners"). All non-Japanese, no matter how long they had lived in Japan, were considered foreigners.

As an American in Japan in the early 1970s I was bewildered by this category of "foreigner" because the United States is a country based, at least in principle, on an acceptance of people with diverse ethnic backgrounds. The common myth is that anyone can become an American. As imperfect as the melting pot ideal has been in our short history, it at least aspires toward the values of providing a basis for "liberty, equality, and fraternity." Our nationalism, while often invoked for narrow and jingoistic ends, can also embrace difference. We are moving gradually from exclusion to inclusion of peoples. This is an ongoing process still with immense defects, as many minority groups will attest. And this same challenge is widespread around the world.

These vexing questions of personal liberties and public responsibilities, of inclusion and exclusion, of nationalism and internationalism are ones that both Japan and America have struggled to resolve. These experiences in Japan led me to ponder how we could begin to create the basis for a multi-form planetary civilization, a new global civil society. Different cultural and ethical values need to be respected at the same time as a sense of a common and sustainable future need to be created. Negotiating how to protect both cultural diversity and biodiversity is a new task at hand.

What could this be based on? What kind of appeal could be made to respect cultural differences and protect the planet's resources for present and future generations? Was a clash of civilizations inevitable? As I

traveled to other parts of Asia over the next thirty years I saw the immense variety of cultural diversity at the same time as I witnessed the steady erosion of the environment. Cities like Bangkok and Delhi that were livable in the 1970s became increasingly polluted and congested in the 1980s and 1990s. How would the press of peoples into cities and the growing competition for resources be resolved? It was overwhelming to contemplate. And as China and India began to modernize and industrialize, what would happen to the planet and its limited resources? Over two billion people in these countries were now eager to acquire cars, refrigerators, energy and luxury products. Was development actually sustainable? What could the world's cultures and religions contribute to an ethics of ecology and equity? Could we overcome our differences as humans to chart a course into the next stages of human history?

My journey, then, across the Pacific to Asia is one that has shaped my global outlook in countless ways. Just as the Hawaiians were recovering their own traditional values and environmental knowledge, so too the discovery of Asian values for westerners like myself was opening up the possibility for creating a new multiform global ethics. This was broadened and deepened with new college courses and translations of classical and modern texts that many of us in non-western studies have helped to create. The dialogue of civilizations was indeed growing. The Earth Charter, then, was already emerging in these cross-cultural exchanges of recovery and discovery that distinguished the post-war period.

Navigating our way forward

There has been no period in human history like these past sixty years when cultures have been able to interact on such a global scale. At the same time the threats to the planet's ecosystems and life forms have never been

more pressing as industrialization has swept around the planet. In the twentieth century we exploded from two billion people to over six billion people and consumption levels also spiraled upwards. There is an urgency about our present moment as we are realizing that our global environmental crisis is of a magnitude never before imagined. Its manifestations in climate change and species extinction are cause for concern for the future of all life. Is biocide or ecocide now possible? If so, how can this be avoided?

There is a profound sense emerging around the globe that we are at a critical moment of transition and transformation. The Earth Charter recognizes this and suggests that our present economic mode of unlimited growth and unrestrained development is 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 recognized as no longer tolerable. How then to realign our priorities and values within the human community for the enhancement of the larger Earth community remains the fundamental challenge of the Earth Charter.

The Earth Charter represents an historic effort to articulate the aspirations of humanity yearning for a peaceful, secure, and sustainable future. It is both a process for articulating an ethical path that respects difference and a document for upholding common principles for mutual cooperation. It is a context for constructing a multi-form planetary civilization. This requires a new integration of the values of the world's cultures and religions along with the contributions of modern science and technology. This inclusive ethical vision of the Earth Charter encourages us to move into the new millennium with an energized sense of our particular human role in the evolution of the universe and Earth.

The voyage of drafting

How to bring together a culturally and religiously diverse set of values to bear on our global environmental crisis was one of the principal tasks of the International Drafting Committee for the Earth Charter. My participation on that committee was an extraordinary experience of the creative efforts of citizens from many countries and cultures to help shape a dialogue of civilizations toward a sustainable future. The multi-year negotiations that took place involved conversations with thousands of people from around the planet. The negotiations recognized that such dialogue depended on affirming the potential force of global civil society and the interdependence of our planetary problems. As the Preamble states: "The emergence of a global civil society is creating new opportunities to build a democratic and humane world. Our environmental, economic, political, social, and spiritual challenges are interconnected and together we can forge inclusive solutions."³

To accomplish this, the Earth Charter observes that we need to "Recognize and preserve the traditional knowledge and spiritual wisdom in all cultures that contribute to environmental protection and human well-being."⁴ To identify this kind of knowledge was one of the primary aims of the Harvard conference series on "World Religions and Ecology" which was held from 1996 to 1998 at the Center for the Study of World Religions. During this period a draft of the Earth Charter was circulated for discussion among the hundreds of participants. One of the most recurring discussions in the different conferences was reflection on the various modes of human-Earth interdependence evident in the traditions. In this vein, values from each of the religions were considered regarding attitudes and practices towards nature and toward other species both historically and at present.

The ongoing debate concerning the inherent value of nature, for example, was given distinctive expression when the Buddhists suggested the

phrase "every form of life has value regardless of its worth to human beings."⁵ Likewise, the Dalai Lama contributed the concept of "universal responsibility" in contrast to an individual rights approach to planetary life.⁶ Moreover, Jain and Hindu representatives promoted the value of non-violence ("ahimsa"). Indigenous peoples called for recognition of their spiritual and human rights, as well as respect for their sustainable livelihood practices.

This carefully considered inclusion of cultural and religious perspectives was brought together with the best of current scientific and ecological knowledge. This was especially highlighted in the writing of the Preamble. We had gathered on a beautiful autumn morning at the Pocantico Conference Center in Tarrytown, New York, for one of the first meetings of the Drafting Committee. Eric Chaisson, an astrophysicist from Tufts and Harvard, was part of a three-person subgroup working on the Preamble, which included the Confucian scholar from Harvard, Tu Weiming, and myself. Eric suggested the sentences: "Humanity is part of a vast evolving universe. Earth, our home, is alive with a unique community of life."⁷ The first sentence was intended to include an evolutionary perspective in the Earth Charter while the second makes a reference to the Gaia hypothesis of Earth as an alive, self-regulating entity.

What was especially striking was that Beatriz Schulthess, an indigenous Mayan representative on the Drafting Committee, was deeply moved that the phrase "Earth, our home, is alive" was included in the Preamble. When the draft was brought to Rio in March 1997 the fact that this phrase remained in the text was for her, and for other native peoples, of singular importance. Indeed, when Mikhail Gorbachev held up the text for the 500 assembled delegates to adopt, Beatriz wept for joy. For the first time in an

international document of this kind the perspective of indigenous peoples was included. It was an historic moment for them and for all of us.

This story represents something of the remarkable process involved in the creation of the Earth Charter. The continued efforts to be culturally inclusive and religiously sensitive were noteworthy. How to craft a document that would be effective in identifying universal principles for a sustainable future and that would have an appeal across cultures was a challenge of significant proportions. The Earth Charter calls for such a spirit of unity amidst diversity: "To move forward we must recognize that in the midst of a magnificent diversity of cultures and life forms we are one human family and one Earth community with a common destiny."⁸

Conclusion

What is significant about the Earth Charter is that it draws on both the comprehensive context of evolution and ecology and the empowering context of an inclusive environmental and social ethics. The Preamble contains the phrase: "The forces of nature make existence a demanding and uncertain adventure, but Earth has provided the conditions essential to life's evolution."⁹ The Earth Charter thus affirms that the physical, chemical, and biological conditions for evolution are in delicate interaction over time to bring forth and sustain life. Our response to this dynamic process is responsibility for its continuity. We are called to become a life enhancing species.

Responsibility requires an integrated and empowering framework where humans can see causal relationships of problems along with interconnected solutions. This is what the Earth Charter aims to do as it delineates a viable blueprint for a sustainable future. It highlights the inter-linked issues of environment, justice, and peace as at the heart of our global

challenges. Against the comprehensive background of evolution in the Preamble, the main body of the Earth Charter outlines an integrated set of ethics and practices to address these three interrelated issues. It aims to address the sometimes competing areas of environment and development that together constituted the principal theme of the Earth Summit in Rio.

The Earth Charter begins and ends on a challenging note, stating: "The foundations of global security are threatened"; however, it observes: "These trends are perilous -- but not inevitable."¹⁰ The Earth Charter suggests: "The choice is ours: form a global partnership to care for Earth and one another or risk the destruction of ourselves and the diversity of life."¹¹ It concludes with a similarly challenging but cautiously optimistic tone saying, "As never before in history, common destiny beckons us to seek a new beginning."¹² It notes that "This requires a change of mind and heart" -- of vision and values.¹³

The Earth Charter, then, exemplifies an important contemporary trend toward identifying an integrative global ethics. Within the comprehensive framework of evolutionary history it highlights the significance of our moment in human history. It provides an empowering context of values and practices that will steer the human community forward toward the enhancement, not the diminishment of life. Further reflection on the Earth Charter in political gatherings, religious groups, academic settings, business offices, and environmental organizations is already well underway. In these contexts the Earth Charter acts as a framework for engagement in mutually enhancing human-Earth relations. To imagine, inspire, and activate these relations is to bring into being the contours of a multiform planetary civilization.

After he finished narrating his story about the recovery of ancient sea-faring knowledge, Nainoa Thompson highlighted its contemporary import. He

told us how the voyagers were eager to share their experiences with the children in the Hawaiian schools. In later voyages the classrooms were linked up to the Hokulea canoes by solar technology. The Hawaiian children could relay their questions on geography and astronomy to the crew who then answered them. Through modern technology the children were connected to a contemporary voyage that held the past in its wake and the future in its wave-shattering foam.

Just as the Hawaiian children were encouraged and inspired by sharing in this ancestral journey so, too, were several thousand natives who gathered to welcome the Hokulea canoes when they sailed into the bay in Tahiti. The Tahitians greeted the voyagers with their ancient melodic chants of welcome and the Hawaiians replied with their own traditional chants acknowledging their hosts. Across the gap of many centuries these ancient journeys were renewed and the peoples of the Pacific revitalized, learning to read the stars and the ocean in a new way.

Like the Hawaiians, we can call on both indigenous navigational knowledge and modern solar technology in our journey. For we are in the process of creating a multiform, planetary civilization drawing on wisdom that is traditional and modern, ancient and contemporary. As we are identifying the various cultural and religious values in the human community that will create the foundations for a sustainable Earth community, the Earth Charter can act as a compass for navigating our way into this promising future.

Notes

1. Earth Charter, Preamble, paragraph 5.
2. Earth Charter, Preamble, paragraph 5.
3. Earth Charter, Preamble, paragraph 4.
4. Earth Charter, Subprinciple 8.b.
5. Earth Charter, Subprinciple 1.a.
6. Earth Charter, Preamble, paragraph five.
7. Earth Charter, Preamble, paragraph two.
8. Earth Charter, Preamble, paragraph one.
9. Earth Charter, Preamble, paragraph two.
10. Earth Charter, Preamble, paragraph three.
11. Earth Charter, Preamble, paragraph four.
12. Earth Charter, The Way Forward, paragraph one.
13. Earth Charter, The Way Forward, paragraph two.