

A few days ago, my wife and I hiked up the Pine River trail, and on the way back down, we saw a cinnamon bear on the other side of the river. We spent some time watching it. I don't know much about bears, but it looked skinny and acted hungry and a little confused about how to make its way in the world. I was glad it wasn't close to cabins or campgrounds and humans, because bears and humans don't mix very well, and it could get into real trouble. We hear all the time about bears being killed because they can't stay away from humans.

Here's a question: What kind of world is it where we'll put down a bear that gets into trash bins in search of food, but we can't close down a corporation that trashes lives and the land in search of profit?

That question provokes another question: Who or what counts as a person?

A corporation counts as a person under the law. It has power and rights, and maybe responsibilities. A bear is not a person under the law, and has no rights.

Here on Turtle Island, bears were seen as persons by most indigenous tribes. Bears had their own sovereign nation, as did the trees and the plants and the other animals, living alongside ours. The tribes saw the world as webs of relationships, each nation of beings holding a place on the circle of life. The center belonged to all the nations.

The essence of this way of living held that all the other life on Earth are our relatives, beings with worth and dignity and something to teach us. Equal recipients of the sacred gift of existence with an equal right to their share of that gift.

Of crucial importance is sacred reciprocity, that all interactions be mutually beneficial. We take care of the world and it takes care of us. We honor the lives

of the plants and the salmon and the deer and the buffalo that keep us alive. We never take more than we need, and we give back in equal measure. The result is mutual flourishing.

But that way of life is almost gone, and we can't go back. Maybe we can bring some of that thinking and being forward, though.

Western law and custom are philosophically based on Greek thought and religiously based in Christian theology, wedded to some of the worst parts of the Enlightenment, and then corrupted by capitalism. Medieval Christian monks came up with what they called the Great Chain of Being. This hierarchy posits God at the top, then the angels, then fallen angels, then humans, then animals, plants, and minerals. Humans were given dominion over those below us by God. We, of course, were made in the image of God. But as we all know, it's really the other way round.

Hierarchy applied to the human world as well. Kings, then nobles, then farmers and craftspeople, then others like serfs and slaves. Men, then women, then children. The rich above the poor. The saved, then the heathen. And all ordained by God, of course, along with the dominion over command. And once Europeans began to colonize the world, they added another: the hierarchy of skin color, light to dark. This hierarchy is still embedded in Western culture. Implied if not explicit.

The Enlightenment was not just one unified field of thought. There were a number of branches – the English, the Scottish, the French, the Dutch, and the Radical enlightenments. The radicals wanted equal rights for all, and an end to religion and the monarchies.

There was a deep and passionate dispute among these thinkers as to the nature of the material world. The metaphysical perspective promoted by Isaac

Newton and Robert Boyle, among others, saw matter as being brute and inert and imagined God as a “clock winder” of sorts, giving the universe an initial push from the outside to set the mechanism in motion.

The other metaphysical perspective agreed with the significant details of the new scientific discoveries but saw matter as being infused with an “inner dynamism” that was itself divine. Matter as the divine flesh of God, if you will.

To these free thinkers, if matter were seen as brute and inert, this would lead to unending attempts to conquer matter with all manner of destructive technologies, spurred on by visions of profit and material wealth. (This is where capitalism comes in.) The fear was that this would ultimately destroy the material world as both a natural habitat and as a humanitarian world for human beings.

That fear has come to pass.

It is tempting to consider that this as a forerunner to our contemporary ecological concerns, and while aspects of this are true, *what these free thinkers feared more was the loss of a world imbued with inherent value.*

That they happened to think the source of such value was divine shouldn't to be a stumbling block for us. The point is that if it were filled with value, it would make ethical and social demands on us, whether we are religious or not, demands that did not come merely from our own needs and desires.¹

¹ The source of this history is from Akeel Bilgrami.

"Occidentalism, the very idea: An essay on the enlightenment and enchantment." *3 Quarks Daily*. 09 08, 2008.
<https://3quarksdaily.blogs.com/3quarksdaily/2008/09/occidentalism-t.html>.

These demands would come from the other than human world - with its own purposes and meanings - with *just as much right to the gifts of existence as we have*.

This is an idea we are barely beginning to consider.

And let's not make the mistake of thinking this mindset is unique to the West. There's plenty of evidence of hierarchal societies and conquest and greed and ecological overshoot in our collective past.

The basic truth of life in Earth is that life needs other life to keep on living. Life eats life. Death means food. Decay from the bodies of the once living are resources for new lives. Life provides things other life needs to survive, filtering the water and air, for instance. Species numbers fluctuate all the time, and sometimes those populations crash if their food sources have bad years. Extinction is not a rare event.

But if your species consumes or lays waste globally the basic resources that it depends on, disrupts the cycle of life and death, and poisons everything with carbon and plastics and chemicals... oy!

That's what we've done, and are doing. The climate crisis is just one symptom of this larger crisis of out of control humans. The whole mess is teetering on the edge of failure. There are a lot of very smart people who think population collapse is just around the corner due to warming and ecological overshoot. Not the end of the world, by the way.

You know, I've been thinking and writing about this since the late eighties. I'd been preaching about it since divinity school. I'd pretty much given that up a couple of years ago, because the juggernaut just keeps on rolling, and most

people think we can keep on living like this. When you tell people it can't go on, their eyes glaze and the cognitive dissonance takes over. They laugh nervously and look at their phones, and we silently agree to ignore the elephant in the room.

There is a fairly widespread belief that new technologies will save us, but I think the problem is not how we can keep living this way, but that we think we can keep consuming and growing in a closed and finite system.

Nobody wants to give up their giant pickups and their fifth-wheelers. No one wants to give up flying or driving to wherever they want, whenever they want. No one wants their world to shrink and have all this cool stuff go away.² I get it. It's amazing. We live better than any Pharaoh ever did, and we have trouble imagining something different.

Sacrifice is a suspect idea in our global industrial consumer culture. We are a rarely asked to simply do with less, to rein in our desires. It seems pretty certain the planet can't support anything resembling our Western lifestyle for billions of people. It's already straining under the weight. The planet could maybe – maybe – sustainably support our lifestyle for a billion or so. But which billion? And who decides?

What would it look like, if we each used an equal share of the planet's available resources? I once read a paper that estimated we can support 8 billion people at roughly the level of comfort attained by the urban middle-class in Europe and America in the mid to late 1800's.

² Giving up these things wouldn't necessarily change the world. The problems are: 1) what it takes to produce them (their production and the pollution and destruction that entails); 2) so many have these things or want them (scale); 3) their use is further damaging; and 4) the sense of entitlement to them by many in the developed world, whether they actually need them or not.

Think about that for a minute. Could you live like that? That means enough food – no avocados all year round, or shrimp flown in daily, or twenty seven different kinds of craft beers – but an adequate diet of mostly local foods. That means adequate shelter with clean water and sewers. That means clothing adequate to meet your local environmental conditions – but no constant chasing of fashion. If you really want to go to Cancun, it'll take days or weeks.

But that's what *our fair share* looks like in a world of 8 or 9 billion people. That's what *a just world looks like* with 8 or 9 billion of us. And I'm not sure that leaves anything left over for bears or the other living things. There's only so much to go sunlight and water and nutrients to go around. We don't have the right to all of it.

It is extremely difficult for us to stop taking. Personally, it would take a lot of effort to reduce my American ecological footprint to that of someone living in what we so arrogantly call the less-developed countries. This is not because I don't do things like recycle, or save as much energy or water as I can, or fly only when there's no alternative. It's because being embedded in our industrial consumer culture means that my hidden share of the taking force is so great and almost impossible to balance out on my own.

The questions now before us are many.

Who or what is a person with rights? What are the limits of our wanting? How do we learn to return as much as we take? What do we give up so that ALL the people may live? The bear persons and the sea persons and the tree persons and the winged persons and plant persons and all the other persons besides humans? We need them, more than they need us. How do we make them persons in our hearts and in the law? How do we find our way to a sacred world that benefits us all in mutual flourishing?

Somehow, the answers must come from all of us together. No peoples or persons left out. That's going to be a real challenge.

I think a first step³ is to stop taking more than we need, to distinguish between our real needs and our desires for more and newer stuff, desires that are manipulated for gain by an economy whose primary goal is profit, fueled by growth and consumption. We need something different. Another BIG challenge.

The Buddha taught us that the root of individual suffering is clinging to desire. Desire for power and wealth or recognition or love. Desire for this or that, desire for things to stay the same, desire for things to be different. Dissatisfaction.

To which I would add that the fulfillment of this seemingly endless wanting of ours is causing the suffering or extinction of countless other beings. I can't even think about the karmic debt of that.

When will we be satisfied? When will we say, basta!, enough? When will we say we are content? I think this is the heart of the matter before us. The deep hidden root of many of our current problems, including the climate crisis. Perhaps when that line is drawn, we can begin to solve some of these problems. Otherwise we're just moving the goalposts.

I can feel the questions hanging in the air between us like hungry ghosts wanting to be fed with answers. My advice not to feed them. Share the questions with those who will listen. My dream is that these questions will lodge in our hearts like seeds and flower within us, and we will bring them into our conversations and deliberations. Maybe they will stay hidden, along with all the other

³ Repair and restoration needs to take place alongside that first step. Again, how does that happen?

questions we are afraid to ask in polite company. I hope not. I hope they come alive in us, stirring up our deep hunger for something wonderful, a reenchanting world for all.

Today I won't end with 'May it be so', but with "Let us make it so". I ask all of us to be gardeners of these tender inquiries, nurturing them into great towering trees of curiosity with questions ripening into fullness on their branches.

The answers will arrive in due time. I, for one, can hardly wait to see what they are.