Spirituality and Environmental Education

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Let me walk in beauty
let my spirit see the dynamic spirit of life in all that exists
with no prejudice or malice toward any creation.
May I begin to remember who I am in the natural order of things
as I stand in my own shallow pool of time
may I come to know what time it is
in my life
and in all life.
Fran Peavey, excerpt from *Prayer*, 1988.

Introduction-Taking Action for the Environment

Environmental education in Australian schools is generally becoming recognised as education *for* the environment, as distinct from but usually including education 'about' and education 'in' the environment (Greenall, 1987). This means that students of environmental education will be encouraged to develop an attitude of caring for the Earth (including the biosphere) and its resources, and to participate actively in maintaining and improving the quality of their environment. What encourages students (and ourselves) to move actively towards these goals?

The desire to 'act', it will be argued, comes from within ourselves. Until recently taking action for the environment has been seen as the top of a hierarchy of environmental education objectives. It has been assumed that an awareness of environmental problems leads to the acquisition of knowledge, which contributes to the development of attitudes and values and a feeling of concern for the environment, which then prompts one to take positive actions for the environment (see for example, Carin and Sund, 1985, p.88). However more recent research has attempted to formulate theoretical models identifying the factors (and their possible causal connections) which result in individuals taking responsible environmental action. Hines et al., (1988), for example, hypothesised that personality factors (such as one's 'locus of concern'), knowledge of issues and action strategies, and action skills were positively correlated with taking responsible environmental action. The causal connections are problematic however and Iozzi(1988) concluded that simply being aware of environmental concerns and knowledgeable about them does not automatically lead to taking action for the environment. Further, these may not even be the initial steps - interest and concern may develop first, which could then lead to the desire to acquire knowledge about an environmental issue or concern (Fensham, cited in Greenall, 1987). Mechanisms to explain the willingness to take action for the

environment are therefore complex. One factor that has received little attention but may be very significant is our spiritual relationship with the environment.

A Spiritual Connection?

The recently released *Environmental Education Curriculum Statement (K-12)* in NSW (1989) makes one reference to spirituality and the environment. It refers to the Aboriginal people integrating "their spiritual, cultural and material life with the natural environment" (p.30) and comments that although today's Australians may not be able to achieve this 'integration', we can learn from Aboriginal societies of the essential interdependence between the environment and ourselves and that we should have a caring attitude towards the land and its resources. This poses several questions including:

- To what extent do we reflect upon how our spiritual life relates to the environment?
- What might be the implications of pursuing this reflection?
- Do teachers have a role in encouraging thought (and maybe actions) about such matters?

The following discussion primarily addresses the first question, but in so doing proffers some initial suggestions about the second. The third question is briefly explored throughout the paper and again in the concluding section.

Teachers have the responsibility to help children develop intellectually, emotionally, physically, socially, aesthetically, morally and spiritually [see for example the *Aims of Primary Education* (NSW Department of Education, 1977)]. To assist students' *spiritual* development is therefore seen as part of helping them to mature into well balanced adults. Although spiritual development is a responsibility probably underemphasised in public education, it may be asked in the context of the above remarks whether it could be partly encouraged through environmental education.

Spirituality Defined

Spirituality is a concept which is not easy to define and a word which is used in many different ways (see for example, Michaela, 1987). Here it will be described as an awareness within individuals of a sense of connectedness that exists with their inner selves and to the world (other people and the environment) around. The connectedness to the world around can be conceptualised as having both vertical and horizontal dimensions.

Vertical connectedness is related to the past and the future. Our spirituality will be manifested by the way we see these connections. Will we see that we are 'connected' to former generations and consequently the way that they related to their environment? Will we accept, for example, that we are associated with earlier generations and the degradation that they (perhaps unwittingly) inflicted on some aspects of the Australian landscape? Might it be that to experience this connection with the past that we have to decide whether to accept some of the blame? Vertical connectedness will also be evidenced in the 'way we see' our

relationship to the future. To what extent do we feel responsible for the environment that our children will inherit?

Our spirituality (or lack of awareness of it) determines (to some extent, but maybe completely) the degree to which we realise that we as individuals are of 'one essence' with humanity- past and future. Horizontal connectedness refers to the present: our lifetime, the world we live in. Our spirituality will be manifested here by the way we see our connections to our local environment as well as distant environments, for example, the Amazon rainforests or the ozone layer. Do we see ourselves as part of these environments and consequently feel the need to act for them? Nor Hall (cited in Greig et al., 1987, pp.9-10) "argues for a spiritual re-connection which recognises our interdependence with the earth and its natural resources...'We need ways to recognise collectively the spiritual dimension to water cycles and fuel cycles, for example- ways to recognise our spiritual dependence'". A consideration of spirituality and environmental education must at least raise the issue of each individual's connectedness both horizontally and vertically. The closest the *Environmental Education Curriculum Statement K-12* (NSW Department of Education, 1989, p.90) comes to capturing some of this meaning (but probably with no spiritual overtones intended), is with the definition of the concept of 'stewardship': "a sense of responsibility for managing the earth's resources, which are part of our heritage and which we wish to maintain for the future". "Stewardship", unfortunately, can also have the connotation of humankind's dominion over the environment and hence separateness from it. [One source of this interpretation is from some Christian literature (and perhaps also from writers of other faiths/ religions). Some recent writers (for example, Bradley, 1990, especially Chapter 5) have taken up this theme emphasising alternative views of stewardship which do not lose the feeling of 'one essence' with the environment.]

The above view of spirituality has similarities with Greig et al.'s(1987) conceptualisation of the person-planet relationship. They suggest there is an interplay between the individual and three 'outer' realities- "our 'close reality' (personal and local), our 'intermediate reality'(regional and national) and our 'distant reality' (the wider world). It is also hypothesised that there is a constant interplay between past, present and future. This "multi-layered 'outer reality'", they suggest, is in constant interplay with our "inner reality".

The Inner Self and the Environment

As theorised by Greig et al (1987) an awareness of connectedness with the world around could be fashioned by the awareness we have of "our inner reality"- what we could describe as our connectedness to our inner self. The possible implications of this argument may be extended by drawing an analogy from the view of psychotherapist, Scott Peck (1978, p.82): "we are incapable of loving another unless we love ourselves". Could we also be incapable (or severely hampered) in sensing our connectedness with the environment if we have not explored the connectedness within ourselves? Is the extent of our ability to relate to the vertical and horizontal dimensions of our spirituality limited by the extent of our knowledge of ourselves? Although not mentioning spirituality Parker (cited

in Greig et al., 1987, pp.43-44) sees people as being at the centre of a triangle of interdependent relationships, consisting of our inner self, other people and the global environment. Her views relate to the above questions. She argues that our "inner ecology" (our concern for our inner world) will be " an important dimension of our attitudes to environmental...issues". [She states "the way we view our world is often a reflection of the way we view ourselves", for example, "If I am uncaring of myself, I am careless of my environment and my sister creatures"]

The outcome of successful environmental education is that we will 'act for the environment' [see, for example, NSW Department of Education, (1989, p.6)]. We are being asked to nurture the environment so that it will be maintained or improved- this nurturing usually means making sacrifices in order to take responsible environmental action. We are in a sense being asked to 'love' the environment- the analogy with Scott Peck's (1978, p.81) definition of 'love' is apparent: "..the will (meaning to take action) to extend one's self for the purpose of nurturing one's own or another's spiritual growth". If this position is accepted, then to love others we must love ourselves. Could this also mean that to 'love' the environment (enough to act for it) we must love ourselves? Selby and Pike (1989), in encouraging the pursuit of 'global education' goals, argue that objectives related to development of self esteem and encouraging others should be pursued initially. Using this line of argument it is being hypothesised that to be integrated spiritually with the environment we may need the prerequisite awareness of spiritual connectedness within ourselves.

God, Spirituality and the Environment

Michaela (1987) describes spirituality as a response to the 'seed' of God that is within all of us. She attempts to extend her definition of spirituality to encompass more than a Christian concept of God, and opines that

> it is the extent and nature, the quality of each person's response, his relationship with God , whatever He is called, with Truth as he sees it, that we are aware of the spirituality of that person, be he or she Christian or Jew or Hindu or South African Bushmen or Australian Aborigine or Australian Caucasian, and perhaps the response is not always a conscious one (p.1).

Michaela seems to be saying our spirituality relates to our response (connectedness?) to our inner being (the 'seed of God' where God is interpreted fairly liberally), or as Bryant (1978) expressed it, our 'river within'. Michaela further suggests that the type of spiritual relationship we have with our environment is dependent upon our response to 'Truth' as we see it. This relationship with our inner being (the 'seed of God'?) is seen as an interactive one. Our response to 'Truth' will be affected by the various inputs we receive from outside of ourselves. In the context of our relationship with the Australian environment these inputs could include a consideration of the Aboriginal association with the land, the direct influence of experiencing the outdoor environment, the determination of a 'sense of place', the feeling of a 'sense of

wonder', and the reflection upon the contributions of literature which relate to the environment. All of these inputs contribute to our way of seeing things - our 'response' to 'Truth' - and as the above quotation indicates our own 'way of seeing things' may not even be a conscious consideration when we take actions related to our environment.

How have we responded to 'Truth' in our own lives? In Australia generally? Howard (cited in Michaela, p.8) is of the view that "perhaps the dominant characteristic of the relationship of whites to this land (Australia) is exploitation - even rape and pillage". What does this express about one's response to "Truth" (the presence of God?)? McDonagh (1986), cataloguing past environmental tragedies, has come to the opinion that this exploitation is an outdated (but one might add still commonly held) 'world view' of our relationship to the environment. It is a world view that could have been strongly influenced by the mechanistic approach taken by science to the study of our world which failed to take account of the holistic nature of the world and the interdependency of all entities within it. [There is some evidence that science in recent years has been altering this mechanistic image - see for example Capra (1985); Lovelock (1988); Gleick (1987)]. Those holding this 'world view' (of exploitation and dominance) may really be reflecting a sign of a deep chasm in their inner life (Nolan, 1990, p.9). Such a conclusion would be consistent with the the thesis that our spiritual development is about connectedness within ourselves and between ourselves, others and the environment. If this is accepted Howard's further comment can be better appreciated:

> ...we are at the centre of an ecological dilemma that is also a theological and spiritual dilemma. How do we get out of it? (p.8)

Obviously one way to approach Howard's question is to consider our spirituality and how we can help others (including the students in our classes) to discern their own spirituality. In particular we should question whether we associate ourselves with the spirituality of exploitation and what does this say about ourselves.

McDonagh (1986) has proposed an alternative way of seeing things (spirituality) to that of exploitation and dominion. The world view he builds is based on a religious perspective (which draws on Christian exemplars). It is briefly described as an example of how one's faith/ religion could be a significant contributor to one's spirituality. People of other religions and faiths will either identify with the outline given or are likely to use their own form of spirituality for understanding their 'inner self' (the 'seed of God'?). McDonagh's world view attempts to acknowledge the errors of individual societies (towards people and the environment), the peace and justice demands of the Christian gospel, as well as the past Christian traditions of caring for nature and the Earth as exemplified by for example, the Benedictines and the Franciscans. The spirituality he espouses is characterised by a vision of the world as a bio-spiritual entity, one in which we are interrelated to everything and everyone. [There are interesting comparisons that can be made here with Lovelock's (1988) Gaia

religion/ faith. As we live out our spirituality, I believe McDonagh is suggesting that we must integrate our vision of the Earth (maybe total interconnectedness, as McDonagh describes), with the relationship we have with our God. Such an integration could be manifested in many ways in our spiritual lives. The mode of our personal and corporate prayer and worship as well as the social and justice decisions we make as we interact with others are some of the examples McDonagh provides. He implies that to separate these two aspects (our vision of the earth and our relationship with God) is to make our spirituality far less meaningful. The response to our inner self (our connectedness), according to this thesis, reflects our relationship with God which should be intimately tied to the way we see our environment and hence our willingness to act for our environment. If this inner connectedness (our connectedness with God?) is broken where do we stand?

Birch (1990b) adds further insight to the relationship we might have with God and our environment. He views God as being involved in the cosmos but not identified with it. "God is both within the system and independent of it. This is parentheism" (p.5), and Birch distinguishes it from pantheism (God is inseparable from the cosmos) and classical theism (God is independent of the cosmos). Birch proposes an ecological model (in a theological sense) of the universe which sees the world "not composed of substances but of entities, which relate to their environment in ways analagous to the way humans do. Entities are subjects, with feelings but not necessarily consciousness, and entities are dependent in their constitution upon the environment" (Ingleson, 1990, p.25). This thesis of Birch (1990a) which is part of what he describes as 'process theology' could eventually have profound implications for the way we spiritually perceive our connections to the environment. If we see God (and his love) related to the world in this way (and fully explicated by Birch in *On Purpose*), then our desire to take action for our environment (and living things including our fellow beings) may take on a far deeper meaning.

Spirituality and Environmental Education

Spirituality has been argued to be central to our relationship with the environment. Environmental educators need to be aware of this spiritual dimension. Consideration of it suggests that students of environmental education need to be conscious of their connectedness with themselves, others, and the environment, near and far, past and present. This connectedness it has been hypothesised maybe associated with one's relationship with God and that if that relationship is broken so might our connections with the environment be broken. Even though the role of God is the most problematic in this argument and may not be accepted , the importance of spirituality cannot be overlooked. Our response to 'Truth' as we see it (conscious or otherwise) will be a powerful (perhaps the) determinant of the actions we take for the environment. Although not using the concept of spirituality Greig, Selby and Pike (1987, p.40) arrive at a similar conclusion: "the person/planet relationship has enormous implications for schools. Once understood, we see it is not finally possible to promote planetary consciousness in the classroom without the corresponding promotion of self-discovery" (p.40). Their book *Earthrights* offers several challenging insights about the possible role

for schools. Once understood, we see it is not finally possible to promote planetary consciousness in the classroom without the corresponding promotion of self-discovery" (p.40). Their book *Earthrights* offers several challenging insights about the possible role teachers could play in encouraging students to reflect and act upon their own spirituality (awareness of their connectedness in all its dimensions). For example Parker (in Greig et al., 1987, pp.43-44) describes how she set up a relaxed quiet classroom environment and invited:

> the students to join her on a journey in their imagination. We explore some favourite and familiar places. We slowly leave planet earth journeying into space, sharing the vision of the astronauts. Returning we find all subtly changed. Earth has become the planet of our hopes and dreams. We explore and notice the changes. Time is allowed for drawing or writing something about the earth of our hopes and dreams.
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> Next we move on, returning briefly to our visualisation, to discover how we fit into that planet: what our place in it is. Again we express this by drawing or writing. Finally we take time to think what quality of character we need to enable us to help this come about: love; courage; patience; anger; strength; impatience; determination (chosen by a group of 15 year olds).

Further details are provided, including other student outcomes. Just as Parker has attempted, teachers of environmental education need to seriously consider the role of spiritual development of the students in their care when they are focussing upon humankind's relationship with the world in which they live.

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