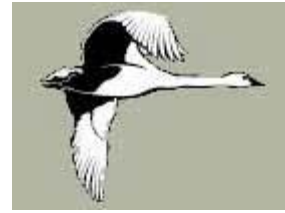


The Trumpeter (2001)

Report On The "EarthSpirit Rising" Conference

John Seed



A wonderful conference on “Ecology, Spirituality & the Great Work” titled “EarthSpirit Rising” took place at Bellarmine University, Louisville, Kentucky in June, 2001.

In honor of Thomas Berry, (the 84-year-old theologian who went on to become a “geologian”), the “great work” referred to in the conference title is also the title of Berry’s latest book.

The Great Work of our time, writes Berry, is to establish mutually enhancing human-Earth relations in all our endeavors and institutions. Keynote speakers were Brian Swimme, Miriam Therese McGillis, Matthew Fox, Paul Winter, Connie Barlow, Ruth Rosenhek and myself. A similar conference in Cincinnati 2 years ago had attracted 500 participants. This time more than twice that number showed up and there was a tremendous feeling that we were participating in a burgeoning movement which bridged communities of scientists, artists, eco-activists and spiritual leaders all sharing a common passion for the numinous story of Earth, of Cosmos, and an intuition that this story, correctly told, has the power to heal our world.

A spirit of activism was very present and at our Rainforest Benefit concert on the Saturday night, Ruth and I were able to raise more than \$5,000 to help us try and stop the oil industry from laying the Ecuadorian Amazon to waste with a new pipeline over the Andes that would DOUBLE the number of oil wells there laying that mighty jungle to waste (If you want to help, please visit forests.org/ric/wrr2001/wrr_apr/ocp.asp)

All the conference speakers held our rapt attention, but it is a contribution by Dominican Sister Miriam MacGillis, which I would like to share with you now. Here is her story in the words of Lauren de Boer who edits the EarthLight Journal, the leading forum for those ushering this Great Work into historical focus

Sister Miriam spoke of her ancestry from Ireland, Scotland, and England and her great longing in later years to discover who those ancestors were. Her ancestors communicated both cosmology and faith to her, and she realized that she would need to understand the

landscape out of which her ancestors emerged in order to truly know the origins of the faith given to her. She was able to go to Ireland several times over the past decade to share the new universe story. “That very process,” she related, “was gifting me with an invitation to trace my indigenous and feminist mind.”

She was surprised to learn that there had been a deep, highly-evolved Irish mind with its own mythos and logos long before the invading Celts arrived. She realized that the indigenous mind of her ancestors was shaped by the landscape of that island. In the oldest cosmological stories, the island itself was believed to be the body of the Sun Goddess. Through an act of love and giving, the Sun Goddess became the land. This cosmology held this relationship of land and sun as the most primal of relationships. It was the basic shaping of the early imagination of the Irish people. The oldest place names, Miriam related, were of the anatomy of the body of the Goddess.

“I learned that the early Goddess was benevolent. She was about abundance and fertility, and Her gift was fire and the renewing cycle of the seasons. There were two times when She shape-shifted into other forms and became the warrior Goddess: That was if anything threatened the land or the children. Then, watch out!”

“This deep, instinctual knowing of the significance of protecting what was essential shaped the Irish psyche,” she concluded.

Then, on a visit to the Emerald Isle this year, Miriam witnessed, as if for the first time, the rapid escalation of the commercial, industrial model into Ireland’s reality. “The seduction of the western, technological worldview was rapidly changing thousands and thousands of years of an unbelievably coherent culture that had endured such suffering and oppression over so many invasions,” she lamented.

Miriam was invited to take respite, on her last evening there, in a small cottage way up in the mountains of County Mayo in western Ireland. Aware of a grief and a sadness inside of her, she walked alone, marveling at the beauty of the place. She followed a path which would take her to the ruins of a small cluster of huts which were lived in at a time when the Irish had been displaced from their land and barely eked a living because the land had been taken from them. She noticed that the other cottages there had become vacation homes for the newly wealthy, that the farms were no longer farms, but “only a nostalgic decoration for the vacationing community.”

Weeping, Miriam came to an immense waterfall cascading down into a beautiful mountain lake. She looked into that waterfall, with its “absolute, unconditional giving of itself,” giving, even though it would eventually flow down “into the industrialized farms, with nitrates running off, hedgerows being taken away, industrial tractors coming in, and trout streams with cautionary signs not to eat the fish.”

She found herself, through opening up to the pain, “sounding,” in what she would later come to understand was “keening.” Keening, a groaning sound that carried the sorrow, mourning, and grief, was something women would do, Miriam explained, at the death of the members of families and communities. She realized, “that it is at this level that goddess, feminist wisdom must come forth. The energy must come forth from the deep grief of saying, no, we cannot do this!” Then she began to imagine what would happen if the women of Ireland, and the farmers with their deep, feminine, intuitive knowing, began to put on black shrouds, and showed up when the earth movers came in or incinerators were being built which would devastate the lakes.

We were all very moved by her story and I told Sister Miriam that as it happened I would be in Ireland the following weekend and, together with two Irish women, Dolores Whelan and Anne Kenny, facilitating a workshop in the Wicklow Mountains called “Deep Ecology in 21st Century Ireland.

That workshop turned into something very powerful and we all felt the presence of Brigid, an Irish saint and before that the Sun Goddess that Miriam had spoken of. Our altar contained water brought from three of Brigid's sacred wells scattered around the country and a flame we had lit the day before from the Brigid flame kept alive by Brigidine nuns in Dublin.

On the Saturday afternoon, it seemed appropriate to share the story Miriam had told at Earthspirit Rising just a week before. It made a deep impression and Ann Kenny then invited any of the women to explore this "keening" with her. Although they were afraid, some of them got together during the dinner break that evening before we convened for our solstice bonfire. Apparently it was very strong and the next day Ann and the other 7 women who had participated sat in an inner circle around the altar in the middle of our work room Ann played a recording of an old lady keening which had been collected by the Irish folklore society in 1950 and everyone called out what they wanted to keen about or for. Then the women in the centre started keening and the rest of us joined in. It was a revelatory experience for me and I had new insights and openings and understandings as did many of the others.

Later, in our final circle (which was about networking and action and taking our insights out into the world), one of the women who shared was an activist named after the goddess Onya, who in our "truth mandala" on Saturday morning had cried and raged about a proposed motorway through Kildare, the land of her birth. Now she spoke about how inspired she had been both by our keening and by the story of Miriam's vision of people dressed in black keening in witness or protest. She resolved to take this vision back to her people, those opposing the motorway, and promised to invite us all to dress in black and join such protests which she would organize.

The whole weekend was suffused with the presence of Brigid, the Saint and Brigid the Goddess, and the Irish soul shone forth through the thinnest of veils.

For more information on EarthSpirit Rising, see their website at imagoearth.com or check out the latest EarthLight Journal with lots about the conference (www.earthlight.org for details). Also recommended: www.metanexus.net - Online Forum on Religion and Science - and the Cosmogenesis listserve which they host. See also the Rainforest Information Centre's "Epic of Evolution" page (under "deep ecology" on forests.org/ric)

For information about Deep Ecology workshops in Ireland or her tours through Sacred Ireland, contact Dolores Whelan, journeys.irl@esatclear.ie

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