

# ***Earth Day, the Phoenix, and Human Extinction***

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This is the time of year I celebrate Earth Day, and I pull out my tattered copy of Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*. In a world that's losing its rain forests, where hundreds of species are becoming extinct every year, where our polluted oceans are losing the ability to sustain fish populations, and where glaciers are melting at unprecedented rates, it becomes all that more important for each of us to reconnect ourselves with the natural world.

Prior to Earth Day, I observe Good Friday, and on that day I ponder the following distressing questions: Is humanity really walking in darkness to the extent that if God would appear to us, we would fail to recognize him? Not only would we fail to recognize him, but would we actually torture and execute God like a common criminal? Is humanity's ignorance really that deep?

These are the questions that present themselves on Good Friday, and their significance has nothing to do with whether or not we believe the story of Good Friday. It is the mythological meaning that I am asking you to ponder, and given the direction our world seems to be headed, I regrettably must answer these questions in the affirmative. Sorry to be such a pessimist.

Then comes Easter, when I celebrate hope through and glorious resurrection of... the Phoenix. Yes, the Phoenix, that great mythological bird with wings of fire. Flying out of the sun, it journeys to Earth, cremates itself, then resurrects out of its own ashes to begin a new life. Finally, it ascends back to heaven to reign supreme after its magnificent conquest of that ultimate enemy of humanity, death.

The oldest meanings attributed to this myth deal with the movement of the sun through the sky, that the sun "dies" in the evening when it sets, and is reborn each morning as it rises. In the ancient world, the myth also offered an explanation for how fire came to earth from heaven. Later the myth came to reflect the ancient view that Creation is self-sacrificial by design. As Alan Watts explains in his book, *Myth and Ritual in Christianity*, living things live by killing and devouring other forms of life. Life in the generic sense sacrifices itself to itself in order to perpetuate itself - every creature that is killed offering itself in sacrifice (Watts, 1968: 37).

This great paradox, that life is actually sustained through death, was embodied in the ancient Phoenix myth, conveying the belief that death is not an end to life, but rather, a means through which it is transformed. It was believed that humans have a dual nature; that is, a lower animal nature which is material and temporal, and a higher spiritual nature which, while bound in the physical body was destined to ascend so as to return to its heavenly home and eternally reside with the Creator. But one did not have to wait until physical death to experience one's higher spiritual nature. We simply had to undergo a trial in life, a trial of adversity, a "baptism by fire," which would awaken our spiritual nature bestowing on us new life. Such an experience would cause one to "die within," so that a person would, as if, be born a second time in this life, thereafter to be guided by one's higher spiritual nature.

Those of you who enjoy natural philosophy will appreciate the use of the butterfly as a metaphor for this spiritual birth. The butterfly spends the first portion of its life crawling on the earth as a caterpillar, after which it enters its cocoon, and from a seemingly lifeless state, emerges as a glorious creature, ascending to enjoy its newly acquired power of flight. Long ago, someone must have pondered the question: Are humans capable of such a metamorphosis, not physically of course, but psychologically and spiritually?

To fully appreciate this concept of second birth, we must understand that there are two definitions for life. The first is the biological definition, what we all learn in our high school biology classes. Two crucial characteristics are necessary to fulfill this definition, these being 1) that the organic structure be able to reproduce itself, and 2) that

it respond to stimuli. This biological definition of life is cut and dried. Either the structure we are observing is alive or dead.

The second definition of life is an aesthetic or, you could say, spiritual definition. Unlike the biological definition, this explanation is not dualistic. In this case, you can be more alive or less alive, and the property of life can even be ascribed to something which is biologically lifeless. We say that a sculptor can aesthetically infuse life into a piece of marble. We may refer to someone as the “life” of the party, or if not much is happening, we say the party was “dead.” And let’s not forget the familiar phrase “life begins at 40!”

When we use such language, we clearly are not defining life in biological terms, but rather in the quality of life we seek and enjoy, or the awakening that we experience from a moving work of art or a life changing moment in our life. When we talk about second birth, it is in the context of this aesthetic definition of life that makes possible an inner psychological change we poetically label as a spiritual metamorphosis. The phoenix myth may have provided a way to explain this experience to ancient people.

While the story of the phoenix is most known as an Egyptian myth, it is perhaps the most pervasive myth of the ancient world. It is also found in Russian mythology where it is known as the "Firebird." Igor Stravinski's Firebird Suite was composed to accompany the ballet version of this myth. But the oldest written rendition of the Phoenix is in the Hindu scripture known as the Rig Veda where it is referred to as the "sunbird." The following lines of poetry from the Rig Veda deal with this image. In these verses, “Varuna” refers to the “guardian of sacred laws and cosmic order,” and the word "Yama" is the Hindu name for the god of death.

Longing for you in their heart, they saw you flying  
to the dome of the sky as an eagle, the golden winged messenger  
of Varuna,  
the bird hastening into the womb of Yama.

Then the divine youth climbed straight back up to the dome of the  
sky bearing his many-colored weapons.  
Dressing himself in a perfumed robe, looking like sunlight,  
he gives birth to his own names...

The wise see in their heart, in their spirit, the bird anointed...  
The poets see him inside the ocean; the sages seek the footprints of  
this rays. (Rig Veda, 10,123.6 and 7; 10.124, 1 - as translated by  
O’Flaherty, 1981, pg. 191, 193).

In the first verse quoted above, we find the word eagle, which, in the Rig Veda is a symbol for the Sunbird. We find this same symbol in the Hebrew scriptures where it becomes a symbol for spiritual strength and ascension. God says, for example, to the ancient Israelites in the book of Exodus, "...I bore you up on eagle's wings and brought you to myself" (Exodus 19:4). But what is most odd about the Vedic text is the phrase "womb of Yama." How is it that the Hindu god of death could have a womb? After all, womb is something we associate with birth rather than death! The answer most given, is that death here is not viewed as an end, but as a means of renewal, as the leaves die in the fall only to nourish the soil in preparation for the rebirth of spring.

Beyond the symbol of the eagle, the image of the sunbird is further found in Judaism and Christianity. A verse in the Hebrew book of Malachi reads: "the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings" (Malachi 4: 1,2 RSV). This image corresponds to another passage in the Rig Veda where the sunbird is said to carry soma, the fiery juice of immortality on its wings. Soma in the Rig Veda is also associated with healing (Rig Veda, 8.79.2 - as translated by O'Flaherty, 1981, pg.121).

In Christianity, I maintain, at the risk of being called a heretic, or even better, a "dangerous professor," that the Christ figure in the gospels is the sunbird given human form. Myth and history are thereby united and expressed through the life of a person. I mentioned earlier how the Phoenix myth may have helped explain to ancient peoples how fire came to earth. The Gospel of Luke, chapter 12, verse 49, describes Jesus as a bringer of fire, quoting him as saying that he "came to cast fire upon the earth" (Luke 12:49). It is somewhat amusing to consider how a literal interpretation of this verse would render Jesus to be a raging pyromaniac. But neither Jesus nor Malachi were speaking not of literal fire, but of the spiritual fire that awakens the seeker to the mystical experience which descended upon the Apostles at Pentecost. The Christ figure in the Christian Epic then, is a person of both myth and history, for like the phoenix, he dies, resurrects and ascends back to heaven, the ascension corresponding to the flight of the sunbird back to the sun.

Several years ago, I realized there was a connection between the self-sacrificial message of the phoenix myth, the miracle of Easter, and the teachings of the great innovative architect, Buckminster Fuller, designer of the well-known geodesic dome.

Now being a product of the '60's, it is not possible for me to celebrate Earth Day, without invoking the name of Bucky Fuller! Furthermore, you can't celebrate Earth Day without playing a game of Frisbee.

The prevailing model for interdisciplinary studies in the 1960's and 70's was known as General Systems Theory, and Buckminster Fuller described the universe as a self-regenerating system, able to perpetually renew itself. Practically speaking, we see this in the changing of the seasons. We see this in ecosystems as they recover from natural disasters, and we see this in our own lives as we cope with and strive to overcome personal disappointments and tragedy. Whether it be the loss of a loved one the personal defeat of losing one's job, suffering a debilitating injury, or struggling with cancer, a heart condition or other frightening disease, we can discover within ourselves the peace gained through the act of surrender, and the strength gained from enduring the struggle required to see us through our adversity.

In the 1990's, Yellowstone National Park was stricken by a great forest fire, and there was much controversy over the policy of the National Park Service to simply allow the park to burn. The fire was seen by ecologists as a necessary part of the life cycle of the forest, and eventually from the ashes of this disaster emerged a regenerated ecosystem.

The assertion by Buckminster Fuller that the universe is self-regenerating, coupled with the realization that the fossil fuels and other non-renewable resources which drive our industrial civilization are rapidly being depleted and are the probable cause of global warming, has helped give rise to what is being called the "Sustainability Paradigm." Through the "Sustainability Paradigm," we seek to cooperate with the self-regenerating nature of the universe by shifting our reliance from expendable fossil fuels to renewable resources. We also seek to apply agricultural practices which rejuvenate the soil and discourage further destruction of the earth's valuable rain forests.

In contrast to this emphasis on sustainability is the old paradigm which I call the "Dominion Paradigm." The Dominion Paradigm dates back at least 3500 years and is rooted in the Book of Genesis. There, in the Garden of Eden story, God tells Adam and Eve to, "be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over every living thing that moves upon the Earth. Indeed, human beings have been

remarkably successful as subduing the earth, even to the point to manipulating the atomic building blocks of matter. But taken to the extreme, the Dominion Paradigm results in exploitation whereby we rape the earth and its resources, even to the point of possibly destroying the very life-support system on which civilization as we know it depends. Through such exploitation we have induced global warming and now risk permanently disrupting the balance in nature needed for human survival.

The late Pulitzer Prize winning astronomer Carl Sagan pointed to cloud-covered Venus as a planet that had suffered the consequences of a run-away greenhouse effect. Tragically, the earth may have begun a similar transition resulting from our unchecked greenhouse gas emissions. I personally believe that the atmospheric changes we have triggered may be irreversible, the result being an unprecedented disruption in the earth's biological diversity which will inevitably lead to human extinction within the next 150 years.

But, my friends, there is no need to worry. If we humans become extinct, biological life will go on. The evolutionary process will no-doubt replace us with some new specie which will rise out of our ashes, as millions of years ago, mammals took advantage of the niche that opened when the dinosaurs breathed their last. But I predict when this happens, this new specie that will inherit the earth will be more intelligent, living in a higher state of consciousness, and the earth will at last be inhabited by a race of butterflies rather than a race of maggots.

To prevent our own demise, we must reorient ourselves to embrace the sustainability paradigm, and declare that the ancient commandment of having dominion over the earth has indeed been fulfilled and must now be abandoned. Or we must at least redefine dominion to mean not dominance, but rather, intelligently managing the earth's resources so as to reverse global warming and preserve the ecological balance on which our own survival as a human race depends.

The sustainability paradigm requires that we learn from our failed military efforts in Vietnam and Iraq and reject war as an obsolete mechanism for reform. We must see beyond religious, ethnic and nationalistic boundaries, and apply the nonviolently strategies proven successful by Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King in our fight for social justice. The sustainability paradigm demands that we cooperate with the self-

sacrificial, self-regenerating design of Creation, and that we approach this not only as individuals, but collectively as cooperating nations. It may also require changes in our political structure so we can enact an ethical foreign policy that places long-term global interests over short-sighted self-interest.

To help symbolize our commitment to long-term sustainability, I propose that every nation fly the Earth Flag. At the risk of sounding like a “dangerous professor,” I further propose that all the nations of the world fly the Earth Flag above their own national flag. This symbol, constantly present, will help remind us of the dangerous and often negative effects of extreme nationalism. In addition, it might prompt politicians to place global interests over and above short-term national self-interests. This shift consciousness and in political thinking worldwide is what will be necessary to save our planet, save our civilization, and save our human family.

## **References**

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