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God and the Earth

Michael Hooghiem

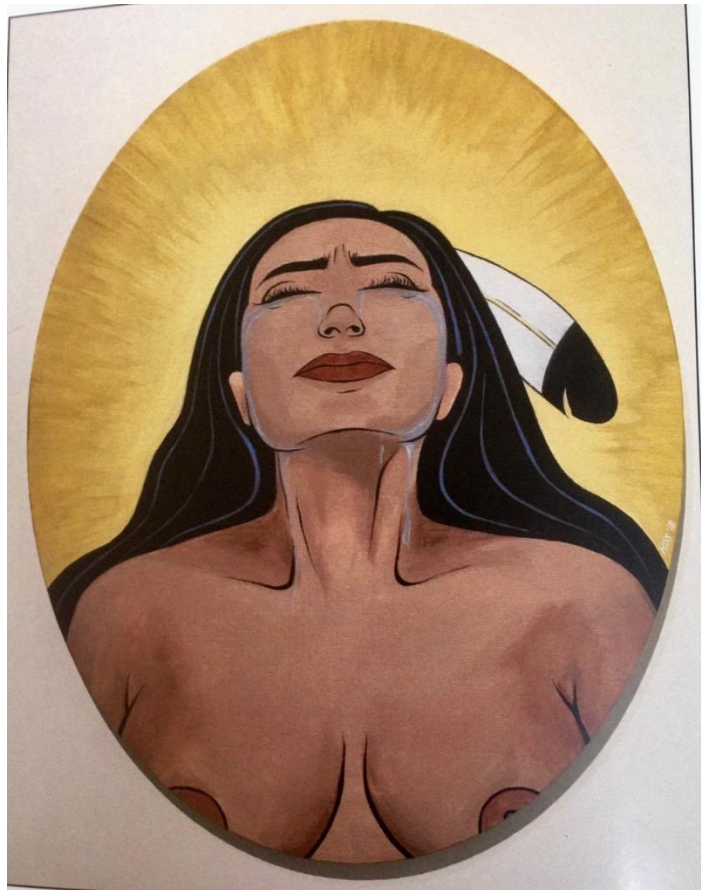


Figure 1 - Smith 2019, *Cheerful Sunrise Woman*

Hillary Smith's *Cheerful Sunrise Woman* (2019) depicts an Indigenous woman, eyes closed and face upturned, tears streaming down her cheeks. Though described as a warrior, in this painting she stands vulnerable, deeply sorrowful in her awareness of the injustices to which she and her people have been subjected. The grieving state of this woman might well be likened to that of God in relation to all of creation. The earth is under dire duress due to the behaviour of its human inhabitants, and God groans along with it, ever present with those whose suffering is greatest, both human and non-human members. It is the oppressed and marginalized across the world who suffer the most from the devastation facing the planet, and it is they who are best able to recognize injustice when it occurs. They are familiar with inequality, with the way current human systems favour the interests of some over others. Orobator (2018) states that love for the environment involves "solidarity expressed at times in lamentation or rage" (p. 111). Thus, love (and therefore God) cannot stand idly by while its greater community is oppressed; though there are times to weep, injustice must also be named and actively resisted.

Such a love can be seen in God's reprimand in Jeremiah 2:17, unsparing in its accusations: "I brought you into a plentiful land, to eat the fruit of it and the goodness of it;

but when you entered, you defiled my land, and made my heritage an abomination” (WEB). This rebuke might speak to the way humanity, as a whole, has failed to care for the precious, unearned gift it has been given; related, it might be applied to the colonization of Indigenous lands and subsequent careless use of those lands. In both cases, the colonial mindset of dominance, selfishness, and greed responsible for the destruction is condemned by God, who responds with disgust. What was good, entrusted to humans to be enjoyed and appreciated, has been abused, treated as a possession rather than respected within a mutual relationship. It is in light of such irresponsible stewardship that *The Earth Charter*, in sub-principle 5, emphasizes the need to “Protect and restore the integrity of Earth’s ecological systems.” The exploitative attitudes and practices that have caused the earth to suffer cannot be allowed to continue, and careful consideration must be taken in all areas of life to act in ways that seek to prevent further damage and work towards restoration.

The principles proposed by *The Earth Charter* are not intended to be delegated to large institutions and organizations; every human being has a responsibility to our common home. Therefore, these principles are to be implemented by each individual within his or her own sphere of life. Within the field of psychotherapy, this might involve helping clients to heal, in order that the earth might be healed in turn. As Pope Francis states, “we cannot adequately combat environmental degradation unless we attend to causes related to human and social degradation” (LS 48). Thus, psychotherapists’ aims of restoring health and wholeness in individuals may ripple outwards to communities, and further, to the earth. In this way, a psychotherapist’s support of others’ wellness might have a greater cumulative effect on restoring the earth than any individual could hope to achieve acting in isolation.

More specifically, psychotherapy might help address climate change is in empowering and challenging individuals to channel the growth they have achieved through therapy into meaningful engagement with social causes. Doherty (1995) advocates for this approach as a way to combat the individualistic mindset plaguing modern society, by providing people with “self-awareness and interpersonal sensitivity coupled with moral awareness and moral courage” (p. 109) that may be wielded regarding current issues. In such a manner, *The Earth Charter’s* challenge to safeguard human rights and community well-being (Sub-principle 7) might be fostered, as individuals are led to look outside of themselves, to move beyond self-interest and recognize their connection with the larger communities of which they are an integral part. Thereby might they come to reconnect with the earth, honouring humanity’s mutual relationship with it, and in understanding “our environment is an extension of our deepest selves” (Orobator, 2018, p. 122), take seriously the responsibility each person has in working towards greater ecological wellness, familiar as they are with striving towards their own personal wellness.

Many Indigenous cultures have long realized the interconnectedness of humanity with the natural world, how deeply dependent each is on the other, and so have inherently prioritized living in harmony with their environment. Such a lifestyle aligns organically with the principle of “Ecological Integrity” described in *The Earth Charter*, as opposed to many of the industrialized world’s current systems. This is highlighted especially in Principle 8b, in which the onus is placed on modern society to engage with and learn from such cultures, a vital step in realizing how humanity’s current relationship with the earth might be reformed. Through such dialogue, not only can humanity seek to reclaim a healthier connection with our surrounding environment, but steps might be taken towards mending relations between Indigenous cultures and those who have colonized them, through a greater respect and

appreciation for their long-neglected wisdom. Thereby might the larger global community be brought closer together, joined in the mutual goal of ecological restoration.

Smith (2019) describes the catharsis evident in her warrior as proceeding from the heaviness of unspoken painful truths coming to light; the hard conversations are finally starting. Similarly, deep pain ensues from the destruction facing the earth, felt by God and creation alike, particularly those most vulnerable. Yet difficult truths about climate change, which many have sought to deny or ignore, are emerging further into the light of public consciousness. With such injustice plain to see, the mindset of a warrior becomes imperative, committed, as God is, to taking necessary action in standing up for those who are unable to stand up for themselves. At this critical point, together as a species we will decide how the rest of the story will play out. While *The Earth Charter* has pointed the way forward and positive steps are being taken, “a much more rapid and serious effort is necessary if we are to win this war” (Sakimoto, 2018, p. 22).

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