

Where Hope Lies

By Christine Loughlin, OP

The candleholders are polished, the evergreens cut, the luminaries prepared. Trays of onions, potatoes, and garlic stacked in the basement satisfy the base for our winter soups. Three spigots opened and drained protrude onto the late November landscape. Several years ago Farmer Ron laboriously guided a ditch witch through this rocky soil to strategically lay an irrigation system from gardens to greenhouse to vegetable washing station. Ron eventually married a young woman from New Zealand and today they are homesteaders on South Island. Each year when the long night denotes the dying back of our northern plant world, a delightful season's greeting arrives from Murchison. The homemade card displays flourishing plants, blossoming fruit trees, romping baby chicks and goats.

One ponders ~ what's the experience of celebrating our cultural holiday of lights and rebirth when the power of the Sun is outwardly at its strongest, the influence of the outer world pressing hard upon one's senses? In the North our cultural religious holidays fold in with the long night, and we are carried along in the sentiment of rebirth and hope in the human soul as we anticipate rebirth in the natural world. But there it is—the digital picture on the greeting card depicting Birth in the cosmic order. Earth engages Sun and concedes the promise held out to it. Life is the ecstasy of this bond. The question we must ask ourselves—if all of our traditional religious / cultural stories were born of human–earth experience are we enhancing or diminishing the primary relationship that awakened our human capacity for religious sentiment?

Whether in the North or the South we are stunned by the revelations reported from credible sources. Amid the desperate social dilemmas that mark our way—ravages of wars, a billion hungry, masses of political and ecological refugees, torture and death, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change describes the impact of global warming as “so severe and so sweeping that only urgent, global action will do.” We have already committed the world to droughts, floods, heat waves, diseases, vanishing of species. If the most ancient rituals of the season stir the memory of Earth's capacity for Rebirth, where do we place our hope?

In lines at the post office and the grocery store, in faculty rooms and staff meetings, at the corner coffee shop people have begun to reflect and to reconsider. Together we are coming to understand that the greatest challenge is not that the industrial countries will adopt legislation to limit carbon emissions, but can we look at our cultural stories that substantiate the cause of global warming? Do we dare to recognize that a religious cultural story disconnected from Earth's story fosters diminishment not only of our human self but the whole community of life?

It is the season for gift giving, the urge in the human heart to manifest ones love for family and friends as a reflection of the Greater Love from which all life flows. How ironic that the traditional holiday that demonstrates our love for others denies the context out of which that love was born, the ecstatic union of earth and sun? The spirit-life articulated in the plum blossom and the artichoke stem on South Island!

Over the past two centuries we have unleashed devastation with such a passion that the destruction has compromised the larger dimensions, the very living systems of our home planet. We are at a *planet-wide impasse* as regards our human consumption and earth's limits.

Over two hundred years ago a wise German philosopher recognized that *for peace to reign on earth humans must evolve into new beings who have learned to see the whole first*. In a way never dreamed by Immanuel Kant, it has been our astonishing gift to see “the whole.” His prophetic words of new beings is the promise into which we surrender our spirit-life force.

On the one hand the UN Committee on Global Climate Change predicts dire consequences due to our past and present choices. On the other the UN Commission on Environment issued a call for a “new charter” creating new norms needed to maintain livelihoods and life on our shared planet. The Earth Charter reads:

The emergence of a global civil society is creating new opportunities to build a democratic and humane world. Our environmental, economic, political, social, and spiritual challenges are interconnected, and together we can forge inclusive solutions. ... To realize these aspirations, we must decide to live with a sense of universal responsibility, identifying ourselves with the whole earth community...Everyone shares responsibility for the present and future well-being of the human family and the larger living world.

With this new global ethic, wherein do we place our common hope? Before we saw “the whole,” we may have placed our hope in transcendence or human escape from suffering. Ah, how blessed to see a vast new dimension to our own experience. The common work now lies not in taking us out of the context that dreamed us into being, but situating us in the very social and ecological context where Hope activates the Rebirth of cosmic wonder.

With all of you we engage in a cultural recovery and celebrate a collective Rebirth whereby we *live with reverence for the mystery of being, gratitude for the gift of life, and humility regarding the human place in nature and the Whole.*

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