

# **Earth and the Measure of All Things**

**By**

**Rev. Dr. Todd F. Eklof**

**June 24, 2018**

Almost from the time we're born we're taught to mistrust our own humanity, an attitude society has reinforced in us for millennia. Society, or community, as the root implies, is defined by what its members have in common; common beliefs, common behaviors, and common values. Anyone who differs too much from these established norms threatens its cohesion and continuation. So, everyone must be made to conform. Everyone must maintain a conventional mindset.

But this mindset is only a step toward achieving our full potential as individuals. To fully mature, we must grow beyond the common thinking and morality of our provincial, tribal communities, to discover those overarching principles—like justice, compassion, and peace—that ought to be applied to everyone, whoever they are, wherever they're from. Yet society, whether the neighborhood on our side of the tracks, or the nation we've been taught to most identify with, is threatened by those outside, the outliers and innovators, for fear of becoming unstable and insignificant. So, it suppresses individual expression and, with it, individual fulfillment and maturation, preventing many of us from becoming, or even wanting to become, all we are meant to be.

To accomplish this, it establishes institutions to keep us fixated, or stuck, at its immature and incomplete conventional stage of development. These institutions convince us our society, our tribe, our team is as good as it gets and needs to get. To prevent us from bursting from the cocoon society has encased us in, and from transforming into the magnificent creature we are meant to be, they convince us to fear ourselves, to be afraid of being who we are, to dread the full expression of our own creaturehood, of the very thing that most makes us what we are, our humanity.

Perhaps the most effective institution erected for this task is religion, which hijacks our innate desire to be good and do good by insisting there's nothing good about us, that we can't trust ourselves, should be ashamed of ourselves, and must suppress our innate instincts, dreams, and desires. It further convinces us we need its help controlling our devious urges, that we're so weak against the dreaded forces of our own nature we must rely upon external authorities—gods, priests, and lawgivers—surrogate parents in our fixated state who gladly tell us the difference between right and wrong since they presume us incapable of determining it for ourselves.

To be good, they teach us to conform, while retaining the authoritarian mindset we should have begun outgrowing in grade school. Through doctrines of original sin and noble truths about how our desires lead to suffering, we grow convinced our very nature, the thing we

are, our humanity is the problem of our existence, and the one thing we must never allow ourselves to become, is ourselves. Hence, we remain the fixated animal, the stuck animal, the *puer aeternus*, the eternal child who never grows up, who is never allowed to fully develop our potential as an individual or as a species. “The whole life of the individual is nothing but the process of giving birth to [oneself],” Erich Fromm said, “indeed, we should be fully born, when we die—although it is the tragic fate of most individuals to die before they are born.”<sup>1</sup> So this, according to Fromm, is the real problem of our existence, that too many of us fail to achieve our full potential, fail to become complete human beings. By remaining stuck in the authoritarian and conventional mindset, shunning anything and anyone that differs from our norms, we fail to discover the one thing that can truly connect us with others, our love for and relatedness to all that is.

In authoritarian societies, which are most societies these days, the balance between maternal and paternal forces is skewed toward patriarchy, which, in turn, attempts to satisfy our lingering maternal longings by substituting our relationship to mother earth, with the paternal notions of “blood and soil.” According to Fromm, *blood* represents the feeling we are related only to the members of our own tribe; and *soil* our connection to the land or country we say we are from. Instead of experiencing our relationship to all people, all beings, and the whole Earth, to all of nature and our own human nature, we restrict our relationship to just a few people and to only one place.

But this kind of relating to the world, like our humanity itself, remains unfinished and unfulfilled. For the perverted affinity for only those we imagine are like us, and for a place we objectify as our own, is no substitute for the kind of relationship formed by genuine love, the kind of love that unites us with all beings yet allows us to remain wholly individual. “The necessity to unite with other living beings,” Fromm says, “to be related to them, is an imperative need on the fulfillment of which [human] sanity depends.”<sup>2</sup> Yet this need, which he calls the phenomena behind all human relations and passions is, “called love in the broadest sense of the word.”<sup>3</sup>

Broadly speaking, Fromm says, “*Love is union with somebody, or something outside oneself, under the condition of retaining the separateness and integrity of one’s own self.* It is an experience of sharing, of communion, which permits the full unfolding of one’s own inner activity.”<sup>4</sup> Thus, when a society strives to suppress individual expression and, with it, fulfillment and growth, we cannot consider it a loving society. For, as Fromm says elsewhere, “*the most fundamental kind of love, which underlies all types of love...*” includes, “*the sense of responsibility, care, respect, knowledge of any other human being, the wish to further [that person’s] life.*” Nor can a society be loving that depends upon uniformity and obedience

---

<sup>1</sup> Fromm, Erich, *The Sane Society*, Henry Holt and Company, New York, NY, 1955, p. 26.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 30.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 31.

without question, that marginalizes and oppresses those who don't think, look, or act like everyone else. For "Brotherly love... which underlies all types of love..." Fromm says, "is love for all human beings; it is characterized by its very lack of exclusiveness."<sup>5</sup> Nor can a society be loving that objectifies, exploits, and destroys the environment, for human relatedness always includes relationship to others, to oneself, and to nature. Human love, when fully developed, is neither anthropocentric nor egoistic, and, thus, "cannot be fulfilled in a state of unrelatedness to the world outside" oneself. Such love, furthermore, is not something beyond human capacity, but is the very essence of human nature. "Love," Fromm assures us, "is not a higher power which descends upon [humanity] nor a duty which is imposed upon [us]; it is [our] own power by which [we relate ourselves] to the world and make it truly [ours]."<sup>6</sup>

Hence, in exploring our relationship to the Earth and to nature through a humanistic ethic, "based on the principle that 'good' is what is good for [humanity] and 'evil' what is detrimental to humanity,"<sup>7</sup> we must first realize that our power to love must include loving the Earth. Those who do not and cannot love the earth, which, again, means respecting and caring for it, have not fully developed as human beings. They've not yet and may never be fully born into this world. For to be fully human means having the power to love; and having the power to love includes loving the Earth.

The patriarchal, authoritarian devotion to blood and soil, to nationalism and patriotism, is a weak substitution, for we cannot truly know the power of love until it transcends these tribalistic limitations. By limiting our relationships to one people and one nation we maintain the conventional mindset and morality, making nationalism and patriotism symptomatic of our failure to launch, to fully develop as individuals and as a species. "Nationalism is our form of incest," Fromm says, "is our idolatry, is our insanity. 'Patriotism' is its cult."<sup>8</sup>

How do we know these sentiments are a form of fixation and not love? Because they are conventional and, as such, require us to sacrifice our individuality and authenticity in order to do what's expected of us in the name of cultural honor and loyalty. But if society really loves us, it would not care if we should differ from others, if we are gay not straight, female not male, brown not white, born elsewhere not here, poor not rich, and so forth. For genuine love, Fromm says, "which is the experience of union with another person, with all [people], and with nature," is expressed, "under the condition of retaining one's sense of integrity and independence."<sup>9</sup> That's how we know if our society loves us, if it lets us be free to express ourselves and free to evolve. It's how we know we love others, if we let them freely express

---

<sup>5</sup> Fromm, Erich, *The Art of Loving*, A Bantam Book, Harper & Row, New York, NY, 1956, p. 39.

<sup>6</sup> Fromm, *The Sane Society*, Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p., 58.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 32.

themselves and want them to change and grow. “If I can say, ‘I love you,’” Fromm says, “I say, ‘I love in you all of humanity, all that is alive; I love in you also myself.’”<sup>10</sup>

Perhaps, from this, you’ll understand why, in talking about our relationship to the Earth, I’ve spent most my time talking about humanity and love; because we can’t begin to talk about caring for the Earth until we transcend the conventional mindset to become fully evolved beings, capable of loving ourselves, all others, all that is alive, and all the Earth. Caring for the Earth requires us to become fully human, to achieve our full potential and, with it, our capacity to fully love. Whether one is Christian, Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, Jewish, or atheist, such love requires a humanistic ethic, the sole criterion of which is human welfare and individual fulfillment.

I’ve also delved into this at such length because eons of being taught to suppress our humanity, that it is innately evil and the root of our suffering, is hard to surmount. Eons of being taught we can’t trust ourselves, that we need external authorities, like religion and laws, to help restrain our most natural instincts, makes it difficult for us to accept we cannot deal with the environmental apocalypse we’re now in unless we fully embrace our own humanity. The destruction of the environment is the direct result of being stuck in our development and not yet being able to adequately love ourselves, others, and the Earth.

Yet, our humanity and the Earth are so intertwined they practically mean the same thing. It’s why, in many languages, the words for “people” and “earth” are the same, *pueblo*, *Adam*, *humus*. Today the science of evolution tells us we evolved from the Earth, that we are made from earth, just as so many of our ancient origin myths claim we were fashioned out of mud. In the more familiar Hebrew account, the first man is formed by the Elohim, who call him *Adam*, a name meaning, “out of mud.” This probably derives from an older Babylonian story in which Apsu also molds humans out of mud. In Greek lore it’s Prometheus who makes them by mixing earth and water together, similar to stories of people made from mud found among numerous Native American and Mesoamerican traditions, as well as in African and Chinese lore. As Joseph Campbell, the late mythologist who studied these stories said, “if [we] think of ourselves as coming out of the Earth, rather than having been thrown in here from somewhere else, you see that we are the Earth, we are the consciousness of the Earth. These are the eyes of the Earth. And this is the voice of the Earth.”<sup>11</sup>

We are the Earth and the Earth is us, which means we cannot wholly love ourselves or humanity without loving the Earth. Nor can we love the Earth without loving ourselves and humanity. Self, others, Earth, are the true trinity, *homousios*, “of one substance.” This is why we cannot heal the Earth until we embrace our humanity, because doing so is the same as embracing the Earth. This runs counter to the segregated, conventional mindset that loves only its own country and its own people, and, even then, only those in it who are most like

---

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Campbell, *The Power of Myth*, *ibid.*, p.32.

everyone else. It is the mindset that wants to divide, conquer, and deport anyone who is different. It is the mindset that claims the right to have dominion over the Earth, to subdue her, tear into her, to burn and demolish the sacred forests she's been growing throughout time, to make room for hamburgers and palm oil instead.

Just last week, the International Panel of Climate Change, the IPCC, representing thousands of scientists working on Climate Change for the United Nations, released a study announcing the Antarctic ice sheet is melting three times faster than it was just five years ago, adding more than 200 billion tons of melt to our oceans every year. It also states that 3 trillion tons of ice in Antarctica has already melted since 1992. Keep in mind we are talking tons, not gallons. There are more than 250 gallons of water in a ton, so try multiplying that by a 200 billion, or by 3 trillion, to grasp the enormity of the problem. I can't begin to envision how much water is pouring into our oceans because of human caused Global Warming, but when I think that just a billion seconds is equal to 31 years, and that a trillion seconds is equal to 31 thousand years, I imagine it looks something like turning on a valve to fill a bathtub, though on a much larger scale.

The IPCC report predicts, with the amount of water now pouring into our oceans, our sea levels will rise half a foot within the next 80 years.<sup>12</sup> But we don't have to wait 80 years to start feeling the impact. Coastal communities around the world are already doing so. Just yesterday, Virginia's Governor Ralph Northam signed a bill establishing a new Cabinet level position, Special Assistant to the Governor for Coastal Adaptation and Protection. Chris Stolle, one of the Republican legislators who supported the bipartisan bill, told a local TV station the position will look, "at how we adapt. Our future's going to be living with water, moving forward and protecting our coast."<sup>13</sup> According to an article in this month's edition of *Insurance Journal*, which has a vested interest in the matter, high tide flooding in the U.S. alone may be 60 percent higher in 2018 than was typical just twenty years ago.<sup>14</sup> This is based on research from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, plus the fact that last year such flooding was already 50 percent higher than it used to be.

According to the NOAA's report, sea levels have already risen 7 to 8 inches higher than they were a century ago, coinciding with a 1.8 degree average temperature increase since 1900. "Thousands of studies conducted by researchers around the world have documented changes in surface, atmospheric, and oceanic temperatures," the report says, "melting glaciers; diminishing snow cover; shrinking sea ice; rising sea levels; ocean acidification; and increasing atmospheric water vapor."<sup>15</sup> More heatwaves, fewer cold waves, monsoons, droughts, forest fires, early snow melts, small snow packs, have also increased according to

---

<sup>12</sup> <https://therealnews.com/stories/antarctic-ice-sheet-melting-3x-faster-than-expected-sea-level-rise-inevitable>

<sup>13</sup> <https://wtvr.com/2018/06/23/gov-northam-creates-new-cabinet-position-focused-on-flooding-sea-level-rise/>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.insurancejournal.com/news/national/2018/06/07/491586.htm>

<sup>15</sup> <https://science2017.globalchange.gov/chapter/executive-summary/>

the report, and since 1980 the extreme events they've caused have cost the U.S. more than 1.1 trillion dollars.<sup>16</sup>

Despite the status quo's claim that it's not happening, or that it's completely normal, or that scientists can't agree on what's causing it, all so we can continue destroying the planet to make a few people rich beyond reason, the report states, without equivocation, that it is "human caused," mostly due to greenhouse gas emissions. "The global atmospheric carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) concentration has now passed 400 parts per million (ppm),' it says, "a level that last occurred about 3 million years ago, when both global average temperature and sea level were significantly higher than today."<sup>17</sup>

Dismal as it is, the report does offer some hope, noting that "In 2014 and 2015, emission growth rates slowed as economic growth became less carbon-intensive."<sup>18</sup> In other words, even at this point, the faster we can get off fossil fuels, the better chance we have of stopping Global Warming. "With significant reductions in the emissions of greenhouse gases," it says, "the global annually averaged temperature rise could be limited to 3.6°F (2°C) or less," far less than the potential 9 degree rise it predicts if we do nothing.

If you find in reports like this reason for both despair and hope, rather than succumbing to the urge to deny it, to think it must reflect a conspiracy against your beliefs and your way of life, it could indicate you care about the Earth and, thus, about others and yourself. It indicates you've embraced your humanity, your *humus*, your earthiness. It also indicates you've accepted your power to love, and with it, your responsibility to respect and care about human welfare, which includes the welfare of our environment, and the welfare of those people and beings suffering the worst impacts of climate change all over the world. For the sake of the world, our species can no longer afford to wait to unfold, to become what we're capable of becoming—fully human, the true source of salvation for our suffering planet.

---

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.