

# An Ecology of Devotion

A Personal Exploration of Reverence for Life  
EarthLight Magazine, Issue 49, Summer 2003

revised February, 2004

by Dennis Rivers

Somewhere in his essays about the ecological crises of our time, I remember Wendell Berry writing “What we do not love, we will not save.” One of the many possible implications that I draw from his statement is that the eco-spiritual life is breath-like: the more we want to reach out to nurture the web of life (and save our own species along the way), the more deeply we will need to journey into our own hearts to connect with love’s sustaining energy.

Although Planet Earth needs love the way a person lost in the desert needs water, love cannot be summoned by a simple act of will. Love, in my experience, is not like an object already in our possession, that we could give if we chose to do so. Love seems to me much more like a garden that will eventually bear fruit if cultivated in a spirit of apprenticeship, taking the time to learn about each tree and plant.

In this essay I will explore a five-fold vision of what might be called an ecology of devotion: a way of seeing how our various loves, concerns, gratitudes, adorations and celebrations are all part of a larger organic unity.

These many loves and concerns call to us, often in a chaotic din, urging us forward in many directions, appealing to us at many levels: friends need comfort, a new baby is born, the forests are dying, the dolphins are beaching, millions of landmines wait silently for human or animal footstep. Where and how shall we turn toward life and begin (or continue) the labors of “mending the world,” the *Tikkun Olam* of Jewish tradition, which would also constitute the mending of our own broken hearts? As I have experienced the web of life being threatened by the explosive mix of greed, fear and technology, I have been

challenged to find inside myself a love stronger than all fears, a deeper reverence for life that could be my compass through the chaos of a world unraveling.



Pilgrim

Marion C. Honors

Over the past year, in dialogue with a community of supportive friends called Turn Toward Life, I have been exploring a kind of mental rosary of our various loves and devotions, reverences that span the spectrum from gratitude to care to adoration. Like a garland with five flowers arranged in a circle, this five-fold rosary holds the various loves that struggle to be born in me. Here is how I see them, and how I will discuss them in the pages that follow:

*reverence for the life that lives within us,*  
*reverence for the life that unfolds between us,*  
*reverence for the life that surrounds and*  
*sustains us,*  
*reverence for all the life of the future,*  
*reverence for the source of all life*

## 1. Reverence for the life that lives within us.

The closest life for which we can have reverence is the life that lives within us, our breathing, moving seeing, hearing, tasting, hoping, loving, yearning, and reaching; all the direct experiences of being alive, and those moments, often out in nature, when we suddenly feel good about being alive. I remember as a child the thrill, the infinite, bodily well-being, of running down a long beach near my house.

The Universe has labored mightily that we might breathe, and see the light of morning. The calcium, carbon and iron that support these processes were made in the hearts of ancient stars. The caloric energy that lets us run is compressed starlight, the light of the sun conveyed to us from leaf to corn and wheat through countless hands.

I have never felt more alive in my life than when I have been in love. For most of my life I took these feelings as revelations about the person with whom I was in love. Only in recent years have I begun to realize that these feeling were also saying something to me about my capacity to love, inviting me to get more acquainted with my own heart, with this intense aliveness. How is it that compressed starlight found this way of expressing itself? At times in my life I have complained bitterly to the Universe that love was not more evident in life. At some point the gestalt shifted and I suddenly realized how extraordinary it was that a universe composed mostly of rock and gas could have given birth to any experience of love, anywhere. And even more extraordinary was the fact that I was a carrier of this capacity, however clumsily I might carry it.

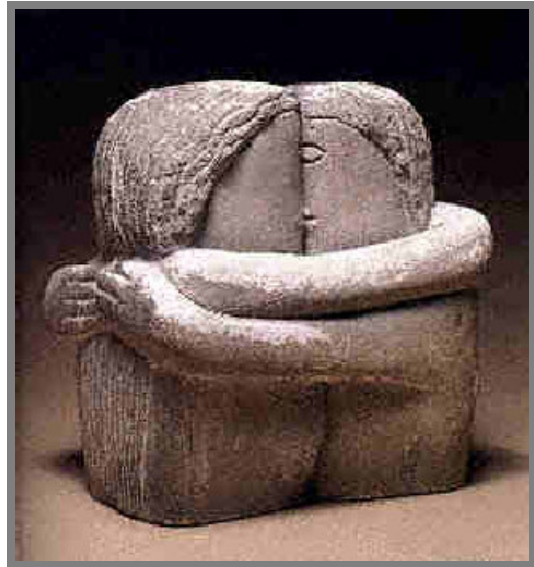
Our seemingly mundane existence, looked at from this angle, is a miracle of mind-boggling proportions. However ordinary or unworthy we may feel, we are nonetheless recipients of this galactic grace. Coming to understand how much we have received, beyond any measure of earning (for who could earn sunlight, or a billion years of evolution), sets the stage for us to give something back to life out of the fullness of gratitude, delight and awe. We are the Milky Way with arms and

legs, eyes and ears, and hearts yearning to love. What will we create with the creative energy that the Universe has poured into us?

## 2. Reverence for the life that lives between us

There is a paradox at the heart of human unfolding: We can only love others to the degree that we are capable of loving ourselves. But, on the other hand, we are not born loving ourselves; we develop self-love by internalizing the love of all those who have loved us. As infants, we do not make our own food; neither do we make our own love.

Later in life, having been given the template, we may become bestowers of kindness; having been fed, we will feel the rightness of feeding others; having been nurtured by someone along the way, we will find a way to nurture others.

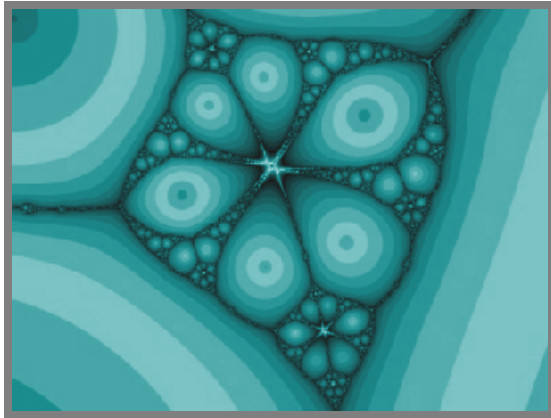


The Kiss

Constantin Brancusi

Like day and night, summer and winter, the nature that lives and breathes through us is full of polarities. I come into the fullness of MY personal being in relation to many YOUs. To cherish life at a deeper level is to accept this web of interwovenness, of land and sea, yes... of lake and forest, yes...but also, of you and me. This fragile human co-arising is as much a part of nature as spiderweb, wildebeeste or waterfall.

The life that emerges between us... The partnership of bodies brings forth new bodies. The partnership of minds, brings forth new minds. Hearts joined in love invite everyone to love more. "Love one another," Jesus said, "as I have loved you," not only counseling his followers but also describing the path love travels down the generations, if we let it, because we let it. So also do hatred and oppression travel down the generations.



Fractal

Mark King

And how beyond the circle of our human lives, one well might ask, is this related to ecology and reverence for life? In more ways than one would imagine. Perhaps the most dramatic link is that our human conflicts are having catastrophic impacts on other species. Driven by greed and unskilled in sharing, human beings are emptying the sea of fish and emptying the mountains of trees. Elephants in the jungles and forests of Indochina step on landmines just as people do. Our fears of our enemies, and their fears of us, have left the world awash in nuclear waste, which damages the gene-pools of human and animal alike. Ultimately, as Wendell Berry observes, we treat the natural world with the same love or disregard that we bestow on one another:

*The Earth is all we have in common. We cannot damage it without damaging those with whom we share it. There is an uncanny resemblance between our behavior with each other and our behavior toward the earth. The willingness to*

*exploit one becomes the willingness to exploit the other. It is impossible to care for each other more or differently than we care for the earth.*

To cherish the web of life, to protect life, it is now clear that we must necessarily face the shadow side of our own temperaments and our own cultures, the life that unfolds between us. For it is we humans, moved by various greeds and fears in relation to one another, who make and use these technologies of contamination and death.

The extremity of our predicament -- that we are destroying our own life-support system as we drive many species over the brink of extinction -- draws us toward the life that lives between us, not only as a source of despair, but also as a source of hope. Just as it is true that two together can carry a larger object than either would be able to carry alone, it is also true that in the company of supportive friends we can bear sorrows that are more than one heart can contain. I have become deeply convinced that creating an ecologically sustainable civilization will require creating a web of emotionally sustaining friendships, full of gratitude, listening and celebration. Gandhi would say start with yourself, be the change you want to see. A more intimate way of expressing this might be to say, embody the love, gratitude and compassion you want to promote.

### ***3. Reverence for the life that surrounds and sustains us***

This is the dimension of reverence for life that is most familiar to us, having been lived and expressed so beautifully by such eco-advocates as Albert Schweitzer, Rachel Carson, Jane Goodall, John Muir, Matthew Fox, Joanna Macy and Thomas Berry. Along with being great lovers of nature, these guiding lights were and are great students of nature.

A path of devotion in relation to the web of life around us is something more than just having a well of good feelings toward all creatures great and small, although that would be a great place to start. Feelings arise out of understandings. The

more we understand about the history of each bite of food we take, the more likely we are to be

filled with awe and gratitude. The more we know of fruit trees, the more each peach feels like a miracle. But if all of this is true, and the path toward a respectful partnership with the rest of nature is so straightforward, why is the world still falling apart. What is the problem? What follows is one approach to an answer.

Early in the twentieth century, the philosopher Martin Buber introduced what may be one of the most important distinctions in the history of human thought. Buber proposed that human beings do not have a sense of “I” in isolation. Rather, we have a sense of “I” in relation to someone or something. When we relate to another person as having experiences, feelings and purposes in the same way we do, we have an “I-Thou” sense of self. We strive to acknowledge the other person as an end in themselves, not merely as a means to the satisfaction of our own needs or desires. When we relate to an object that we experience as having no will, desire or consciousness of its own, we have an “I-It” sense of ourselves in relation to that object. We see the object as material for our use, as is often the case in relation to wood, food, oil, the ground that bears food, and members of ethnic groups other than our own. Buber acknowledged that we could not survive without using at least some of the objects in our world to sustain our lives. But he felt that we become truly human only when we are able to grant humanness to others, are able to feel others as worthy of our care and not just see others as sources of care, food, resources, power, status, etc. A healthy person would shift back and forth as appropriate, not treating a chair as if it

were a person, but also not treating a person as if he or she were a chair.

The decades that followed the publication of Buber’s book, *I and Thou*, developed the “I-Thou” and “I-It” ideas in two important ways. Within the field of human development, significant thinkers concluded that the ability to value other people as ends in themselves, distinct from oneself and yet worthy of care, was one of the central features of mature human development. And in the field of psychotherapy, there was a related realization that the inability to

feel the personhood of others, as a consequence of severely disturbed early relationships, was one of the major character disorders of our era (including the “narcissistic personality”). People suffering from narcissistic personality disorder experience an inflated sense of entitlement in which everyone and everything are reduced to the status of furniture to be used at will. (Think of a mountain with all the trees cut down.)

I have given this extended introduction to Buber’s ideas about the “I-Thou” and “I-It” ways of being a person because they describe the central area of problems for people in societies experiencing runaway industrialization. Runaway industrialization turns every person, plant

and animal on Planet Earth into a heap of inert raw material, into psychologically dead stuff, all the better to plan for how it may all be used for the only source of purpose and value left in the world: profits in capitalist societies, the triumph of the state in totalitarian ones. This is the “I-It” sense of self writ large across the world, leaving behind a trail of clear-cut mountains and flooded lowlands. Capitalism, communism and totalitarianism agree deeply on one thing: living nature is really just dead stuff in motion, therefore we may do with it whatever we please.



Life

Lila-Hog

The problem with this view is that, from a Buberian perspective, in “deadening” or de-personalizing the world in order to use it for our ends, we have deadened and depersonalized ourselves. We harden ourselves to not feel the pain of whomever and whatever we use, exploit and/or consume. And once having thus hardened, deadened and depersonalized ourselves, no amount of cars and refrigerators and 60-inch television sets can ever make us happy. We may not even feel the ecological cliff toward which we are racing.

In his book, *The Dream of the Earth*, Thomas Berry describes how interwoven our personal development is with the web of life on Planet Earth. To grow up in a world that includes whales and tigers and elephants is to have evoked in oneself a very specific sense of beauty and majesty. When those creatures are gone, that specific sense will be gone, and the personhood of humanity will be radically diminished.

Seeing the no-win nature of the “I-It” path can be a shock, but can also free us to explore more sustainable and fulfilling ways of living. There are two sides to this realization: a warning and a promise. The warning is that whatever we inflict upon the world around us we inflict upon ourselves in a variety of ways. The promise, full of transformational possibilities, is also two-fold:

the more value, beauty, depth of experience and purpose that we recognize and nurture in the world around us, the more of these we will be able to recognize and nurture in ourselves and in one another.

And the converse,

the more value, beauty, depth of experience and purpose that we recognize and nurture in one another, the more of these we will be able to recognize and nurture in the larger web of life around us.

This suggests to me an almost-haiku:

*start where you are  
the path  
is wherever you are standing*

#### 4. Reverence for all the life of the future

Like a pregnant woman big with child, the web of life today holds all future generations of life on Earth. Life blossoms forth through an endless spiral of eternal pregnancy, birthing, nurturing, coming together (of earth and seed, of egg and sperm) to begin again, and dying away to make way for the new.



Pregnant Woman

Sigrid Herr

Into this steady progression of ebbs and flows something new has entered, something that holds both promise and peril. In recent eras of evolution, *evolution itself has begun to evolve*, evolving from adaptation to adaptability, from the perfectly adapted claw to the hand and brain that can learn many new ways of holding many new things, and the evolution of a temperament to love one’s offspring and teach them these new ways of holding.

We humans are not alone in this development; we share this evolution toward learning and creativity with many species, especially our primate brothers and sisters, chimpanzees, gorillas and bobos. And we are far from fully understanding of the intelligence of

creatures quite different from us, such as dolphins and bee colonies. But we have gone further on this path of open adaptability, as far as we know, than any other species, and therefore our freedom and capacity to make catastrophic mistakes is much greater than that of any other species. No other creature, for example, leaves behind leaking piles of radioactive waste, slowly destroying the genetic integrity of all life as the radioactive contaminants circulate more and more widely through the biosphere.

Because we alone have developed the power to destroy all life, we alone are challenged to love all creatures intensely enough to want to save them, to love all creatures intensely enough to be willing to restrain our own appetites, to understand our own hatred and greeds. That, I submit to you, is a very intense devotion, a transformational gratitude, and, paradoxically, in this era of technological might, that all-embracing love has become the assignment of every human heart. As the cosmologist Brian Swimme has noted, from the point of view of species extinction our present era is the worst time in the last sixty-five million years. Without some deep transformation, it is not clear how life on Earth will continue. If there are going to be living plants and birds and fish and human beings in the future, it will be because we work to protect the seeds of their existence today, and the land and water that will make their lives possible. It will be because we open our hearts to love them now.

### 5. Reverence for the source of all life

In this exploration of reverence for life, I have deliberately shifted among a family of related words: love, reverence, devotion, gratitude, respect, service, celebration, nurture, protection, adoration. Other times and cultures would add such words as *agape*, *bhakti*, *karuna* and *caritas*. I used this wide variety of words out of my feeling that reverence for life is larger and more complex than any one word would suggest. I am deeply convinced, for example, that when we reach toward the source of all life, we are also reaching toward the ultimate source of love,

because love is the core of our aliveness. In a fertile arc of self-referentiality, our capacity to love life is something that life itself is exploring and developing!

As children it is very difficult for us to imagine how we might have come out of our parents' bodies. Later we understand that, but struggle to bring into focus the way our personalities emerged from the matrix of personalities surrounding us when we were young. Eventually, we face the deepest mystery of all: how all of us, the family of life together, are continuously emerging out of the womb of an endlessly pregnant Universe. In the galactic unfolding of life, the life webs and planets that may survive are those who learn to love and nurture the ongoing miracle of their own co-emergence!



Spiral Galaxy

Image Courtesy NASA

As our reverence for life deepens, it often deepens to include that something (or someone) larger than us, of which our lives are felt to be a creative and loving expression. The influence of science over the last few centuries has been to rule out such feelings of connectedness to something larger, because the science of that era could only look down the scale of connectedness at what were our "parts" and how those "parts" were hitched together. The emerging science looks both up and down and asks: what larger system enfolds this element (you and me), and how does this element function in relation to that larger system? Parts imply wholes, as your hand

implies every bit of the rest of you, raising the extraordinary questions of what *we together* imply and what life implies.

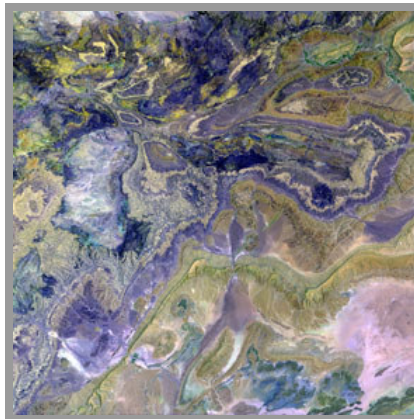
We may never be able to fully grasp the larger system that enfolds us, but we have many hints and many suggestive analogies. Consider the fern in your garden. The tiniest part of a fern leaf bears the shape of the entire fern branch. When we turn to nature, we find that there are many such “fractal” examples, from trees to rivers to blood vessels, in which the very small mirrors the shape and function of the very large. So it is much more thinkable today than it was half a century ago, for us to feel that the noblest impulses in us express a larger nobility that enfolds us.

In my own life my sense of “the larger something of which I am a part” have been deeply influenced by the teaching, affirmed by many faiths using different vocabularies, that “God is love, and whoever dwells in love, dwells in God and God in them” -- a truly fractal mysticism. For me, this teaching of lovingkindness, and the people who have embodied this lovingkindness, complete the spiral ecology of devotion.

*In reaching toward the infinite,  
I am brought back to my own heart,  
to the life that lives within me as love,  
to the life reaches toward people and plants  
and animals as caring,  
to the life in us capable of cherishing the  
presence in the now of all future  
generations,  
to the life in you and me that intuits  
and celebrates the presence in us  
of a life and love greater than our own.*

---

Dennis Rivers lives, writes, and teaches in Santa Barbara, California. Dennis is one of the founding participants in Turn Toward Life, an eco-spiritual, anti-nuclear affinity group and community-without-walls dedicated to exploring reverence for life as a spiritual path. A slightly shorter version of this essay appeared in the Summer, 2003, issue of *EarthLight Magazine* and is part of *Turning Toward Life*, a free web book about reverence for life as a spiritual path. To read the book, please visit [www.turntowardlife.org](http://www.turntowardlife.org). Dennis’s various books and essays are available free of charge in the Library section of [www.coopcomm.org](http://www.coopcomm.org).



Earth from Space

NASA Photo