

My Earth Based Spirituality
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Dorothy Blair

I grew up in Los Angeles County, which you might think of as a sea of concrete or at least wall-to-wall suburbs. Yes, that was part of my experience, but California is also the land of out-door living, with oceans, mountains and parks at easy reach. My earliest years were spent in Culver City, a short bus ride from the beach. Water, waves, sand and my slightly older sister were my earliest friends. We lived with and later near my grandfather. After losing everything in the depression, his love of plants led him to become a gardener for the Hollywood stars, and also for my family. Even though he was a stern, Germanic man, hardly warm and fuzzy, he impressed on me his love of growing things, particularly flowers, and the rich pungent smell of good earth.

Then there were the Mountains. Our first house was in Arcadia, 3 miles from that coastal range you can see looming above the Rose Bowl. The mountains were always a presence, jutting 6000 feet to 10,000 feet above the valley floor. My father lived for those hikes up into Chantry Flats, better yet weekends spent camping at the 12,000 ft. San Josinto. For his brief summer vacations we would pack the old Dodge with his World War II issue canvas tent and head for the Sierra Nevadas – Kings Canyon usually, or Sequoia – and spend 2 weeks living in that canvas tent without a floor set up near a rushing river, swimming in icy snow melt, and taking 10-mile hikes to the tops of peaks sheltering emerald lakes. For me it was a magic world, even with the earthquakes, mudslides and forest fires.

These are the sharpest and clearest memories I have of California – the redwoods, live-oaks and alpine meadows, the streams you could cross jumping from boulder to bolder, the fragrant sage brush and eucalyptus, the rushing waters and ocean waves, and those long, long hikes. We moved to New Jersey in my teen years, where I would bike around the old abandoned farms, sold and waiting to become developments, with black berries and apples free for the picking. Coastal woods, hidden ponds, wild blueberry patches and ocean inlets became the places I haunted. In College I began to introduce my friends to camping and hiking, borrowing the family car for trips to the Catskills. I befriended the gardener on a fabulously landscaped Johnson & Johnson Estate next to my dorm recently acquired by Rutgers, and roamed my own private nature preserve. The need to be in nature, particularly to be alone there, was a very strong urge I did not observe so much in others, but perhaps this is a secretive delight that others do in private as well.

In his 2001 article in the journal *Religion*, Bron Taylor defines nature-based spirituality as finding ultimate meaning and transformative power in nature. That is my experience. Nature is a model for how I try to live my life -- in balance with the beautiful and bountiful, and yes, predatory natural world. My life only makes sense in the context of nature. I am a collection of bacteria and cells, each doing its job in cooperation to insure the survival of the whole organism. The water currently in my body could be the

same that flowed up to the top of the giant Sequoias, or that has resided for millions of years in the Ogallala aquifer that lies under the plains states and waters many of our crops and meat animals. The minerals that support my body pass on at my death to bacteria, fungi and plants. Nature, without man's heavy hand, is a deeply moving, even magical place for me to be, quiet and alive, observing, feeling a deep sense of peace. I am simply one of nature's creatures, and can escape temporarily from the heavy-handed anthropocentrism that guides the construction of our agriculture, businesses, factories, towns and cities and has never made much sense to me.

We are the children of the earth. For our own benefit, I believe we should live our lives in cooperation with nature, control our numbers, and live within the boundaries and limits set by the finite nature of Earth. But the reality of limits is clouded by an aggressive mindset to control the Earth and use it for human purposes until its beauty and resources are used up. We have misunderstood nature, its incredible and wonderful complexity, wisdom and healing power, and also its power to destroy; we have excluded nature from its rightful place as the larger partner in our human undertakings. This is a fool's approach to living, and I fear that most organized religions put an anthropomorphic god on their pedestal of goodness and have encouraged the mantra of "increase, multiply and subdue the Earth." We use our brainpowers and opposable thumbs to further those destructive goals; many religions are still Earth's enemies.

I have had several, what I will call defining moments, like a born-again person receiving salvation. Once I was jogging on Penn State's golf course and I saw at my feet a still warm, dead dove. I stopped in my tracks, picked up the dove and spread its wings, struck and absolutely refocused by the proportion and beauty of each of those feathers. To me, Darwin's theory of natural selection over the millennia holds tremendous spiritual majesty compared to the creationists' 7-day time frame. Imagine, achieving the beauty of a dove's intricate wing over billions of years and millions of genetic mutations. Another time I was riding my bike between Linden Hall and Center Hall, when a loud voice commanded me to "**Know Plants,**" in the style of Moses and the Ten commandments! I was utterly shocked, and had to recover for half an hour by the side of the road. I still don't know what to make of that internal pronouncement, but I have made it my business to know plants.

I have searched a long time for a spiritual home where the members did not automatically assumed that humanity and its particular needs should be their rightful spiritual focus, or that the world existed for the good of humans. **We**, I believe, need to exist for the **good** of the world, and that requires a whole different way of seeing ourselves, *visa vie* the rest of living things on earth. I am a UU today, because you have openly honored the web of life as one of your central tenants. Of course, I believe it could be closer to the top of the list.