

*Ecospirituality: A Personal Reflection*

Kusumita P. Pedersen

Panel on “Spiritual Values and Their Role in  
Ecological Sustainable Development: Creating Common Goals”

21 October 2014

NGO Committee on Spirituality, Values and Global Concerns  
Eco-Spirituality Working Group

First and foremost let me offer my gratitude for this invitation. It is a joy to be here and to be asked to speak on ecospirituality, a subject very close to my heart. As Swami Parameshananda mentioned, I am a student of an Indian teacher of spirituality, Sri Chinmoy, who left his physical body in 2007. During his lifetime he held meditations for peace twice weekly here at the United Nations, beginning in 1970 at the invitation of U Thant. These meditations still continue today. When they began they continued an already existing tradition of giving value to spirituality, a tradition established by U Thant, Dag Hammarskjold and those who at the time of the UN’s founding called for the opening of the General Assembly to include a moment of silence. Looking back to the 1970s it is possible to appreciate how much more open acceptance of spirituality there is today in the United Nations context. This is due to the sustained efforts of many people and groups over the years, including many of you here in this room as well as the Peace Meditation led by Sri Chinmoy. The NGO Committee on Spirituality, Values and Global Concerns is a milestone achievement in this movement.<sup>1</sup> It has been a deeply fulfilling experience to be on this journey and I look forward to continuing on the way with all of you – the need for our service has never been greater.

All of this being said, what is “spirituality”? The term “spirituality” has no precise or technical definition and yet is becoming more and more common. I believe that the great increase in the use of the word “spirituality” is a very important development. It seems that it has

---

<sup>1</sup> See Kusumita P. Pedersen, “Sri Chinmoy’s Work at the United Nations: Spirituality and the Power of Silence,” special issue on “Religion and the United Nations.” Azza Karam and Matt Weiner, eds. *CrossCurrents* 60/3 (September 2010): 339-351.

two main senses, which overlap. First, “spirituality” is a matter of experience and feeling, not only of intellectual belief or external observance. Second, “spirituality” is often almost a synonym for contemplative practice, the life of prayer and meditation. “Spirituality” has to do with “inner” or even “the innermost” kinds of experience. In *Spirituality: A Very Short Introduction*, Philip Sheldrake says that spirituality involves a quest for meaning, a concern for integration and life “as a whole,” and a search for the Sacred.<sup>2</sup> These are also characteristics of “religion,” so that “spirituality” is often contained within “religion.” At the same time, more and more people today are seeking for and finding spirituality outside the context of organized religion and also combining spiritual practices from different traditions.

What kind of spirituality may be called “eco-spirituality”? The term “ecology” derives from the Greek *oikos*, meaning household or habitat, a dwelling-place. In biology, ecology is the branch of science that studies the relations of living organisms to each other and to their surrounding environment, the pattern of many relationships making up an “eco-system,” how organisms live together interdependently in a totality often spoken of as the “community of life” or the “Earth community” – phrases used in the Earth Charter. This interconnection is cosmic as well as biological. Not only all life but all that exists is interrelated and has a single common origin. This is the testimony of science and many religious traditions. From the primordial flaring forth, as Thomas Berry and Brian Swimme have called it,<sup>3</sup> the universe and all life has co-evolved. We humans are inseparable from all other life, from the Earth itself, and from the cosmos. If we say “the stars are our ancestors,” this is not just a figure of speech. All life is one family: “all my relations.” And if Nature – all things and all life – have a single Source, they somehow carry the being of that original Source. Whether or not it is spoken of as the Divine or the Sacred, it is within them or it is them or both.

In his extensive writings, Sri Chinmoy often speaks of God the Creator and God the creation; in other words, creation or Nature is God as manifested. He says, “Nature is/ The revealed Beauty/ Of God.”<sup>4</sup> “God speaks to me through Nature’s beauty”<sup>5</sup> – “The

---

<sup>2</sup> Philip Sheldrake, *Spirituality: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 5.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Berry and Brian Swimme, *The Universe Story* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992).

<sup>4</sup> *Seventy-Seven Thousand Service-Trees, Part 47* (New York: Agni Press, 2007), No. 46, 874

<sup>5</sup> *My God-Hunger-Cry Part 1* (New York: Agni Press, 2009), March 1, 2006.

inexhaustible beauty/ Of Nature's self -giving life.”<sup>6</sup> “Nature is never spent. /Nature's beauty, Nature's capacity, Nature's reality, /Never run short of God's infinite sea /And infinite sky.”<sup>7</sup> “Nature’s beauty helps us / To be as vast as possible, / As peaceful as possible / And as pure as possible.”<sup>8</sup> And the person “who admires Nature’s beauty is already accepted by God, the Mother, as Her chosen instrument.”<sup>9</sup>

When we put together ecology and spirituality, we have “eco-spirituality,” and if spirituality is a matter of inner experience then the oneness of all life and existence is not merely to be known mentally but “felt,” apprehended concretely. When we speak of “feeling,” again this term is vague yet very necessary and significant. This brings us to “the heart.” There is so much that we can say in answer to the question, “What is the heart and what does it do?” So I will simply say that when we feel pure joy, wonder and love, this is the heart. Eco-spirituality is a path to know not only in thought but in our inner and our whole being that we belong to a reality infinitely vaster than our own small bodies and selves. We realise we are not just “located in” the universe (think of that picture of the Milky Way with an arrow pointing to the words “You are here”) but we belong to it – we are members of the community of life. But to realise this and to experience the “communion of subjects” Thomas Berry speaks of, we must learn to relate to other beings not as things, but as subjects, as persons, not as an “it” but as a “Thou,” with love and care rather than the desire to possess and to use. Then we can relate to the eco-system as a community of souls as well as a group of organisms. In closing I would like to offer a poem that tries to express this. It is called “On Gorham Mountain” and is in a book, *Moments That Speak: Stories and Images of Connection*, created by Earth Charter International.<sup>10</sup> I was very honored to be included in that collection. The poem is about the island on the coast of Maine where I spent my childhood summers.

---

<sup>6</sup> Sri Chinmoy, *My Evening Descends*, (New York: Agni Press, 1996), 20 October.

<sup>7</sup> *A Souful Cry versus a Fruitful Smile* (New York: Agni Press, 1977), 158.

<sup>8</sup> *Twenty-Seven Thousand Aspiration-Plants, Part 169* (New York: Agni Press, 1992), No. 16,806.

<sup>9</sup> *God’s Hour* (New York: Agni Press, 1973), July 12.

<sup>10</sup> Lisa Marika Jokivirta, Anna Duhon and Shannon Walsh, eds., *Moments That Speak: Stories and Images of Connection* (Amsterdam, KIT Publishers, 2012), 72-73.

There was a fire on Mount Desert Island  
When I was one year old.  
For eleven days it flamed and spread.  
Where mountains come down to the sea  
Their pine forests were burned away.  
Westward they were left green.

When I was a child we would walk  
On burned mountains with no woods,  
The pink granite blackened and bare,  
The trees charred stumps, around us  
Low bushes, hot sun and open space,  
The ocean stretching below.

We would cross a line to mountains  
That had not been burned  
And walk deep in pine woods  
Dim, mossy and fragrant  
By lakes and cool streams,  
Seeing the ocean from the summit.

My father said the woods  
On our burned mountains  
Would be all grown back  
When I had become old.  
He is gone. That time is close.  
O mountain where we used to walk,  
I have come back to find you.

My mountain, you are green again.  
Your path goes through spruce trees  
Higher than the birch and aspen  
Who grew first after the fire.  
Only a searching eye can see  
Soot-darkened stone and  
Burned wood of hidden trunks.  
Only from your high ridge  
Can I see the ocean now.

The pines are still to come.  
When they have grown tall  
And your forests are dense,  
I will be gone – like a tree  
Consumed into air by fire.  
But you, my mountain,  
Will be in me still  
Wherever I will live

And I will be here ever,  
Still in you by the sea,  
Burned and grown again.

§§§