

# **Replenishing the Earth**

*Spiritual Values for  
Healing Ourselves and the World*

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## Introduction

**D**uring my more than three decades as an environmentalist and campaigner for democratic space, people have often asked me whether spirituality, different religious traditions, and the Bible in particular inspired me and influenced my activism and the work of the Green Belt Movement (GBM). Did I conceive conservation of the environment and empowerment of ordinary people as a kind of religious experience or vocation? Are there, people asked, spiritual lessons to be learned and applied to environmental efforts, or to life as a whole?

Upon reflection, it is clear to me that when I began this work in 1977, I wasn't motivated by my faith or by religion in general. Instead, the motivation came from thinking literally and practically about how to solve problems on the ground. It was a desire to help rural populations, especially women, with the basic needs they described to me during seminars and workshops. They said that they lacked clean drinking water, adequate and nutritious food, income, and enough energy for cooking and heating. So, when these questions were asked during the early days, I'd answer that I didn't think digging holes and mobilizing communities to protect or restore the trees, forests, watersheds, soil, or habitats for wildlife that surrounded them was spiritual work or only relevant to the religious.

Personally, however, I never differentiated between activities that might be called "spiritual" and those that might be termed "secular." After a few years I came to recognize that our efforts weren't only about planting trees, but were also about sowing seeds of a different sort—the ones necessary to heal the wounds inflicted on communities that robbed them of their self-confidence and self-knowledge. What became clear was that individuals within these communities had to rediscover their authentic voice and speak out on behalf of their rights (human, environmental, civic, and political). Our task also became to expand democratic space in which ordinary citizens could make decisions on their own behalf to benefit themselves, their community, their country, and the environment that sustains them.

In this context, I began to appreciate that there *was* something that inspired and sustained the GBM and those participating in its activities over the years. Many people from different communities and regions reached out to the GBM because they wanted to share the approach and the experience. In time, I came to realize that the work of the GBM was driven not only by passion and vision but also by certain intangible core values.

#### **The Four Core Values of the Green Belt Movement**

1. **Love for the environment:** Such a love is demonstrable in one's lifestyle. It motivates one to take positive actions for the earth, such as plant trees and ensure that they survive; nurture those trees that are stand-

ing; protect animals and their habitats; conserve the soil; and undertake other such activities that show appreciation in a tangible way for the earth and the immediate environment and all they provide.

2. **Gratitude and respect for Earth's resources:** This entails valuing all that the earth gives us, and because of that valuation, not wanting to waste any of it, and therefore practicing the three R's: reduce, reuse, recycle. In Japan, the term used for this concept is *mottainai*.
3. **Self-empowerment and self-betterment:** This is the desire to improve one's life and life circumstances through the spirit of self-reliance, and not wait for someone else to do it for you. It also entails turning away from inertia and self-destructive activities such as addictions. It encompasses the understanding that the power to change is within you, as is the capacity to provide oneself with the inner energy that's needed.
4. **The spirit of service and volunteerism:** This value, which is at the forefront of the Green Belt Movement's work, means using one's time, energy, and resources to provide service to others, without expecting or demanding compensation, appreciation, or even recognition. It is the giving of self that characterizes prophets, saints, and many local heroes. It puts a priority on doing one's part to achieve the common good: both for those who are near and dear and for strangers who may be in faraway places. "Others" should also include nonhumans, with whom we share life and the planet.

These values encapsulate the intangible, subtle, nonmaterialistic aspects of the GBM as an organization. Without them, I'm convinced the organization couldn't have survived and thrived, because many of the labors were never undertaken for money, fame, or advancement, and certainly not with the expectation of someday being awarded a Nobel Peace Prize! At times, the work brought much misery and weariness. But due to our embracing these values—as well as a commitment to embody justice, equity, responsibility, and accountability—persistence became our trademark: through our campaigns, and in our interactions with communities, elected officials, religious leaders, activists, and even heads of state.

Such values are not unique to the Green Belt Movement. They are universal, but they can't be touched or seen. We cannot place a monetary value on them: in effect, they are priceless. They define our humanity.

These values are not contained only within certain religious traditions. Neither does one have to profess a faith in a divine being to live by them. However, they do seem to be part of human nature, and I'm convinced that we are better people because we hold them, and that humankind is better off with them than without them. Where these values are ignored, they are replaced by vices such as selfishness, corruption, greed, and exploitation, and can even lead to death.

Through experience and observation, I have come to realize that the physical destruction of the earth extends to humanity, too. If we live in an environment that's wounded—where the water is polluted, the air is filled with soot and fumes, the food is contaminated with heavy metals and plastic residues,

or the soil is practically dust—it hurts us, chipping away at our health and creating injuries at a physical, psychological, and spiritual level. In degrading the environment, therefore, we degrade ourselves and all humankind.

The reverse is also true. In the process of helping the earth to heal, we help ourselves. If we see the earth bleeding from the loss of topsoil, biodiversity, or drought and desertification, and if we help reclaim or save what is lost—for instance, through regeneration of degraded forests—the planet will help us in our self-healing and indeed survival. When we can eat healthier, nonadulterated food; when we can breathe clean air and drink clean water; when the soil can produce an abundance of vegetables and grains, our own sicknesses and unhealthy lifestyles become healed. The same values we employ in the service of the earth's replenishment work for us, too. We can love ourselves by loving the earth; feel grateful for who we are, even as we are grateful for the earth's bounty; better ourselves, even as we use that self-empowerment to improve the earth; offer service to ourselves, even as we practice volunteerism for the earth.

Human beings have a consciousness by which we can appreciate love, beauty, creativity, and innovation or mourn the lack thereof. To the extent that we can go beyond ourselves and ordinary biological instincts, we can experience what it means to be human and therefore different from other forms of life. We can appreciate the delicacy of dew or a flower in bloom, water as it runs over the pebbles, or the majesty of an elephant, the fragility of the butterfly, or a field of wheat or leaves blowing in the wind. Such aesthetic responses are valid

in their own right, and as reactions to the natural world they can inspire in us a sense of wonder and beauty that in turn encourages a sense of the divine.

That consciousness acknowledges that while a certain tree, forest, or mountain itself may not be holy, the life-sustaining services it provides—the oxygen we breathe, the water we drink—are what make existence possible, and so deserve our respect. From this point of view, the environment becomes sacred, because to destroy what is essential to life is to destroy life itself. Likewise, the spiritual values explored in this book are closely linked with nature. Many prophets from various religious traditions were inspired by nature or withdrew into it to tap its wisdom. In addition, we humans often don't have the vocabulary to express our thoughts and ideas about the numinous, so we use symbols, many of which we find in the natural world, such as the tree, river, sun, moon, and animals.

Indeed, it's because of this connection that people who are religious should be closest to the planet and in the forefront of recognizing that it needs healing. Unfortunately, many of us have become detached from the natural world through industrialization, mechanization, urbanization, and habitat loss. The original ideas and thoughts of the founders of religions and traditions were distorted or modified to suit the customs of people who embraced them. As a result, over time the followers became distant from what was initially conveyed by the founders. In the Christian tradition, for example, aspects of the original faith were disconnected from care of the earth, when carriers of the faith became politically entangled with the expansionists, colonialists, and exploiters of peoples and

the planet. They at once facilitated and created the wounds that need to be healed today.

In *Replenishing the Earth*, I explore the broader application of the core values that continue to guide the Green Belt Movement and that remain at the center of its activities, wherever the spirit of the movement is embraced. These values must be more widely embraced if we are to heal the myriad wounds that have been inflicted on the planet and subsequently on ourselves. I am neither a theologian nor a student of religions or faith traditions. Therefore, this book should not be read as a theological statement or moral guideline for environmentalists. The values I explore here are not exhaustive: rather, they are those that have been most relevant in my own life and work. They are not commonplace, and members of the Green Belt Movement, both new and old, are constantly reminded about them.

The book is divided into three parts. In the first part (chapters 1 and 2), I explore the relevance of the core values and describe how they became central to the work of the Green Belt Movement and, to an extent, my life, too. Then I relate a long journey that culminates with a trip I made into the Congo rain forest that illustrates many of the earth's wounds. These are the external conditions of our damaged world that impact not only the environment in which we live but also what we might call our inner ecology, our soul and sense of being human. Our first task must be to acknowledge these wounds, something that is at once simple and, because some of these wounds are so deep, immeasurably difficult.

Sometimes, in order to see clearly, we need to step aside and



look at a situation from different perspectives. In chapter 3, the second part of this book, I enumerate three ways of looking at our planet. The first is the big picture, using the vision of Earth from space that has been available to us since man landed on the moon. The second is a simple but long view of Earth's history over the eons. The third is the picture of Earth we receive when we concentrate on the local and the small. Each of these perspectives helps us to shift our consciousness and make us aware of our relative position within the cosmos and the fact that we are a part of, not apart from, all that exists.

The third part of *Replenishing the Earth*, from chapters 4 through 11, examines the relevance of the four core values of the Green Belt Movement to our everyday actions, whether we live in Africa or elsewhere. Even though my life experiences have led me to an ecumenical understanding of faith, in Kenya, as in much of Africa south of the Sahara, Christianity is the dominant religion and the Bible is usually the only text that people associate with it. Therefore, in the GBM's efforts to reach out to local communities we use the Bible, and as a result, many of the examples are drawn from what to Christians are known as the Old and New Testaments. These teachings offer guidance—alas, widely ignored by the faithful—on how the earth's natural resources ought to be treated. I also explore in these chapters other faiths and spiritual traditions that indicate a reverence or respect for the natural world and that suggest ways of acknowledging the earth's wounds and working to heal them.

In tandem with the Judeo-Christian heritage, throughout *Replenishing the Earth* I illustrate some of the themes with examples from the traditional practices of the Kikuyu community, to

which I belong and in which I was raised. Its worldview is generally representative of many native and indigenous communities, or micro-nations, and is the tradition with which I am most familiar. Although this worldview was considered "primitive" by Christian missionaries, the mores and values of traditional societies were not necessarily in conflict with the "new" or "modern" religious doctrines, which promised enlightenment, wealth, and happiness, especially in the afterlife. Sadly, however, the missionaries judged native rituals and ceremonies incompatible with the new faiths. Therefore, these practices were often demonized or eventually destroyed, with the full participation of the natives themselves. This was especially tragic because scientists are beginning to recognize that these traditional cultures and their lifestyles were responsible for the conservation of rich biodiversity in their environments. Therefore, many people—both scientists and laypersons—are finding it both self-evident and worthwhile to revisit the beliefs of native peoples to try to learn what they can from them before they vanish altogether.

My layperson's understanding of the divine is very limited, and although throughout this book the word "God" is used to describe the monotheistic deity of the Abrahamic traditions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) and the Kikuyu, I also use the term "the Source." Such a term helps remove the image that retains a hold over many Christians of a kindly grandfather sitting in heaven watching over all things and controlling our destinies. In this sense, then, the Source is the place of all knowledge and awareness. It is the repository of all that we cannot explain: which some call God, some Nature, and some the Creator. Although different cultures have different names for

this originating energy—what the ancient Greeks called the Alpha and the Omega—and some may be unwilling to give it a name at all, who will claim that there is no Source or deny that in some way we are not all forms of energy?

In this conception, the Source is not in the business of fixing the mistakes of those who are careless or ignorant. If farmers overgraze their land, encourage desertification by cutting down trees, tolerate soil erosion, or don't harvest rainwater, then it's not God's fault when there is a drought and humans face the adverse consequences. One is left to wonder whether conceiving of God as the origination of all that is would make people of faith recognize that they have a responsibility to be the custodians of God's creation and, in the process, their own survival.

Even though God is the Source, there is not a limitless provision of all that our hearts desire. When a well is dug in the village or a river flows nearby, too many faithful believe blindly that the Source will provide that water forever. But the river or the wellspring can run dry, and what we thought of as something without need of replenishment is depleted. Our capacity as human beings to understand limits, to recognize that the planet we live on has finite natural capital, is failing to keep up with science. The lifestyles of the relatively rich, and the ever-increasing numbers of people wanting the material goods that come with those lifestyles, are placing enormous strains on the ecosystems on which that wealth depends.

Scientists, climate specialists, and others are alerting us that we have limited time to start making serious attempts to

mitigate the effects of climate change. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) estimates that by 2100, the global temperature is set to climb significantly, by between 1.8°C (3.2°F) at the low end and 4°C (7.2°F) at the high end. Sea levels are expected to rise by the end of this century by between 11 and 17 inches, threatening small island states.<sup>1</sup> Extreme weather events such as droughts, floods, heat waves, and hurricanes have increased in frequency and this trend is expected to continue as the climate becomes less predictable.

Africa is expected to be particularly hard-hit by climate change, with temperature rises of 0.2°C (0.4°F) per decade to 0.5°C (0.9°F) per decade. Warming will be most intense along the semiarid margins of the Sahara and in central southern Africa. Under the high estimate of possible warming, large parts of Africa would experience significant variability in seasonal rains, which could mean more frequent droughts, failed harvests, flooding, and more desertification. In addition, according to the IPCC, "There is wide consensus that climate change, through increased extremes, will worsen food security [in Africa]."<sup>2</sup>

Climate change is forcing all of us—rich and poor—to acknowledge that we have reached a point in the evolution of this planet where our needs and wants are outstripping the ability of the earth to provide, and that some of us will have to do with less if those who have very little are going to have enough to survive. It may require a conscious act of some of us saying no in addition to finding other, less destructive ways to say yes.

We do not know exactly what will happen, or where, in the coming century as the effects of climate change become

evident. Computer models forecast that storms, droughts, and other catastrophic weather events will get more frequent and more intense. According to such models it is also highly possible that rising sea levels will flood low-lying areas of the planet, including those with dense human populations, forcing millions of people to move en masse inland or take to the open water in huge flotillas of refugees. It seems probable that more uncertain harvests and pressures on scarce natural resources will make conflict between peoples (whether displaced or otherwise) more common. Indeed, we are already seeing this in Sudan, East Africa, and elsewhere. The industrialized countries may have the technological and financial means to deal with the worst of the upheavals, but most of the more than five billion (and rising) people who live in the less industrialized world currently do not.

None of the healing that is necessary is automatic; it will require much work, for the wounds that have been created in the earth are deep. If we can't or won't assist in the earth's healing process, the planet might not take care of us either. As the scientist James Lovelock has hypothesized (conceiving the planet as Gaia, a vast, interconnected organism in its own right), the earth will find ways to return to thermal equilibrium by whatever regulatory means it can. But we and other species may be the losers if we cannot adapt fast enough. The questions we have to ask ourselves are these: Will we have the foresight now to stop the worst from happening, or will we wait until it is too late? We have the power to guide the earth toward a goal that's beneficial for our own goals, too. Will we adjust our practices and values in time to stop our own destruction?

These questions insist on more than merely a scientific answer, which is why the ecological crisis is both a physical crisis and a spiritual one. Addressing it requires a new level of consciousness, where we understand that we belong to the larger family of life on Earth. If we were able to achieve this consciousness, we'd see that the planet is hurting, and internalize the spiritual values that can help us move to address the wounds. We'd recognize that it should be in our nature to be custodians of the planet and do what's right for the earth and, in the process, for ourselves.