

Chapter 23

Revisiting the Earth Charter: Where are We, What did we Choose, Two Decades later?

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Abstract

The paper takes an in-depth look into the principles of the Earth Charter and asks the question whether we, as earthlings, are really paying attention to the signs of times and places and are really taking seriously the peril that we are in as a planet, the only planet where life exists, as we know it. We are indeed at a critical moment in Earth's history as the preamble of the Earth Charter says. The stark reality of climate change and wildlife trafficking not to mention human trafficking points to our disrespect and disregard for the community of life, which is contrary to the first two principles of the Earth Charter. Abuse and misuse of power of those in positions of power in various nations, leading to continuing poverty and inequitable distribution of wealth and resources, gender injustices – these make a mockery of the Charter's call for social and economic justice. Violence, war and failing democracies seem to be the order of the day. In 2000, the preamble of the Earth Charter exhorted humanity to choose its future. Two decades later and what have we as humanity chosen? With education being central to the mission of the Earth Charter International, the paper calls for and invites cooperation between educational institutions, religious and community organizations, governmental and non-governmental organizations "to share experiences and research on pedagogical approaches and lessons learned of the use of the Earth Charter."

*Touch the earth lightly,
use the earth gently,
nourish the life of the world in our care:
gift of great wonder,
ours to surrender,
trust for the children tomorrow will bear.*

*We who endanger,
who create hunger,
agents of death for all creatures that live,
we who would foster
clouds of disaster--
God of our planet, forestall and forgive!*

Standing outside the University of Peace cafeteria and looking straight ahead at Poás volcano doesn't necessarily engender a sense of peace, especially since Poás is an active volcano. However, there was a serenity, an ambience of grace as I stood looking at the volcano in the distance and what came to mind was this hymn by Shirley Eileen Murray titled, "Touch the earth lightly."¹

The Earth Charter conference in this beautiful lush country of Costa Rica and the University of Peace in January 2019, for me, was this divine call to touch the earth gently, this gift of great wonder that has been given to us. There was indeed a sense of peace while not diminishing the sense of urgency. We had some inspiring presentations, both at the plenaries and parallel sessions. The discourse was varied including the courses taught on the Earth Charter, the different pedagogical approaches, the many ways in which faculty and students have successfully dialogued and engaged experientially with the Earth Charter. However, I am taking a different route, essentially because it is equally important to check ourselves, hold ourselves accountable and so the title of my article as you see is Revisiting the Earth Charter: Where are We, What did we Choose, Two Decades later?

We stand at a critical moment in Earth's history, a time when humanity must choose its future². This sentence in the preamble of the EC gets to me every time. Everyday, when I make a choice, whether it is about the coffee that I drink, or the clothes that I decide to wear or purchase or the food that I consume or the mode of transportation that I use to go to

1 Shirley Erena Murray, Words © 1992, 2005 Hope Publishing Company, 380 S Main Pl, Carol Stream, IL 60188.

2 The Earth Charter (2000), <http://earthcharter.org/discover/the-earth-charter/>

work, I am choosing my future, not just my future but that of my children and grandchildren. As Akpezi, said in her response to Brendan Mackey's text, "our individual choices have the potential of distorting the scope of our hopes for world and for the future."³ The choices we make have consequences. Greshma, one of the students at the University of Peace is from my state in India and just as she was about to leave for Costa Rica the town that she comes from was devastated by floods. Torrential rains forced the dam shutters to be opened and the land was under water. It was a miracle that Greshma made it to the airport. Of course, the lifestyle of my fellow Keralites had a role to play in what happened, but all of us are also responsible for what happened there. Our actions here in the Central and North America or Europe have consequences for people and lands far far away.

In 1985, Julie Gold wrote the song, "From a Distance."⁴ It won the Grammy in 1990 when Bette Midler recorded it for her album, *Some People's Lives*. Different versions of the song have been recorded over the years with varying interpretations but Julie; in a radio show on February 19, 2005 said that "the song is about the difference between how things appear to be and how they really are."

From a Distance

Yes, from a distance, things look pretty good. As the songs says,

*From a distance we all have enough
And no one is in need
And there are no guns, no bombs and no disease
No hungry mouths to feed
From a distance the world looks blue and green
And the snow capped mountains white
From a distance the ocean meets the stream
And the eagle takes to flight*

3 Akpezi Ogbuiwe (2018), "The Contemporary Twist of Hope: A Response to Brendan Mackey's 'A Reflection on The Earth Charter Project and its Mission in the Anthropocene.'"

4 From a distance the world looks blue and green,/and the snow-capped mountains white./From a distance the ocean meets the stream,/and the eagle takes to flight. From a distance, there is harmony,/and it echoes through the land./ It's the voice of hope, it's the voice of peace,/it's the voice of every man. From a distance we all have enough,/and no one is in need./And there are no guns, no bombs, and no disease,/no hungry mouths to feed. From a distance we are instruments/marching in a common band./Playing songs of hope, playing songs of peace./They're the songs of every man./God is watching us. God is watching us./God is watching us from a distance. From a distance you look like my friend,/even though we are at war./From a distance I just cannot comprehend/what all this fighting is for. From a distance there is harmony,/and it echoes through the land./And it's the hope of hopes, it's the love of loves,/it's the heart of every man./It's the hope of hopes, it's the love of loves./This is the song of every man./And God is watching us, God is watching us,/God is watching us from a distance./Oh, God is watching us, God is watching./God is watching us from a distance.

But is it really the case? Do we all have enough? Is there no one in need? Are there “no guns, no bombs, no disease and no hungry mouths to feed?” Does the world look blue and green? What about our oceans and rivers? The song ends with the words God is watching us from a distance. The thing is, God, whoever or whatever that might be, is not watching from a distance. God is in the ruins, God is in the ashes of the forest fire, in the dead corals, in the devastation, calling us to see and hear the earth, to see with our ears and hear with our eyes.

In July of 2017, my husband and I visited the east coast of Canada and we went to see Hopewell rocks, in New Brunswick. On the way, we stopped at Moncton to see this amazing phenomenon called tidal bore. A tidal bore happens when water flows in the reverse direction, from ocean to the river. I was told that there is an amazingly beautiful one in El Pororoca, Brazil. The one we saw was beautiful as well. We could hear the sound of the rushing water as high as 2-3 feet coming in from the ocean. It was beautiful, for sure, but what was disconcerting was the number of plastic bags, plastic food wrappers, drinking bottles that came in with the tide. Littering of oceans is a global problem. I read a blog recently that said, “What is wrong if there is a small plastic in the ocean.” If we refuse to see it as a problem, come 2050, there will be more plastic in the ocean than fish by weight. What did we choose?

As those that use the Earth Charter, we are, indeed, aware of the importance of caring for the earth in light of the problems that face us. However, I think it is only right that we keep ourselves in check and ask ourselves - where are we, what strides have we made, what steps have we taken? When the Earth Charter was first drafted, Steven Rockefeller said, “only ideas and principles for which there was broad cross-cultural support were included in the final text.” And, that is the only way it could be, considering that, it was meant for the world wide context. However, context matters. Context is important and my challenge is to make the Earth Charter relevant to the context of the Anishinaabe, Haudenosaunee and Neutral peoples of the Grand River in such a way that it invites the people in that community and in my university context, students and other faculties to revisit and re-envision the way they think of the earth and her inhabitants so that it is life giving to all. We also need to remember that the Earth Charter was written two decades ago. Much has changed since then and we cannot but read and be attentive to the signs of times and places. Please indulge me as I take this slight detour into theology.

I teach theology and I run into major disagreements with my students who argue with me about the inerrancy of the Bible. Some of my Christian students get so upset when I say that the scriptural texts need to

5 This is the argument that Martin Luther makes in his text, “How People Should Regard Moses.” Martin Luther (1531).

be read taking the context into consideration. Their argument is that it is the word of God and it is true forever. I say, "sure it is the word of God, but you and I are not the people that it addressed⁵. What happens after that, is quite interesting to say the least but my point to them is that we need to interpret the sacred texts for our times and places. As the Latin phrase, *traduttore traditore* (translator traitor), says, we cannot but be traitors because we need to translate it for our times and places. The same is applicable to the Earth Charter. Brendan Mackey raised the question as to whether the Earth Charter needs to be updated! One of the respondents, Alide Roerink, said that it was not necessary. Of course, the vision still remains valid and maybe there are enough reasons to not the change the text. However, it will become irrelevant if it is not translated for the 21st century. Translation needs to be an ongoing practice.

The Earth Charter in context

The Earth Charter at its core is about solidarity that respects the interconnected, communal nature of life on planet earth. But, how do we translate this to the Generation Z, who are completely digital in their way of life? They talk blog or their language is blogging. Hannah Alper, the 11-year-old Toronto-based eco-warrior and activist and her popular blog, Call Me Hannah, is a case in point⁶. Hannah's blog is a space where she shares her environmental concerns and the people who inspire her, and she has been a We Day speaker at rallies across the continent. Hannah says she was motivated to start her blog at 9 because of her love of animals. Her interactions with animals helped her realize that animals relied on the environment and they trusted human beings to take care of the environment. Hannah says, "I did some research and found out there were so many problems in the world, littering, pollution, global warming, climate change, and we need to fix it. And I thought a younger voice could help spread the word."⁷ She goes on to say, "When you publish a blog, it's everywhere and anyone can see it and get inspired and motivated."⁸

The Earth Charter has indeed morphed into what is relevant for the current generation Z. A good number of the students in my undergraduate classes are of generation Z and I am reminded everyday that they are miles ahead of me as far as "thought transfer" is concerned. I wonder what the generation after Z might be like. TEDX speaker Mark McCrindle refers to kids post 2010 as Generation Alpha and says that Alpha kids will grow up with iPads in hand, never live without a smartphone, and have the ability to transfer a thought online in seconds. How can the Earth Charter be made

6 <http://callmehannah.ca/> Accessed on January 2, 2019.

7 Ibid

8 Ibid

relevant to them?

The Earth Charter is required reading for all my students – undergraduate to doctoral. What I ask them to do is to pick two principles and say why it is relevant to them and why not the others. I also show them videos and clips of climate change around the world trying to make it as real as possible for them. We have some great conversations and some not so great.

Besides the Earth Charter, most of the readings I assign have an ecological hue and I know for a fact that some of the students don't bother to read. But the ones that do are impacted by the conversations we have in class. One of the readings I gave a couple of years ago was from Mark Hathaway and Leonardo Boff's book, *The Tao of Liberation: Exploring the Ecology of Transformation*. One of the students held the class captive with a presentation on just this line: "In a very real way we are called to reinvent ourselves as a species." She challenged the class to reinvent themselves. I know from experience that it is not possible to guilt trip the students into anything. But as Mirian Vilela, Executive Director of the Earth Charter International Secretariat and Earth Charter Center for Education for Sustainable Development at the UPEACE, pointed out, I try to make that human connection. I tell my students that I will survive my lifetime without suffering the adverse effect of the careless ways we live our lives but not my students, not my children and grandchildren. One of the other things I do is show the documentary, *Chasing Corals*. It is about the bleaching of corals because of the rise in ocean temperatures. Students are crying by the time the documentary is over. I also have one of the scientists that worked on the documentary skype into my class and talk to my students. What is important is that we have to get the students involved by connecting with them and making them passionate about this home of ours, earth, where from the single atom, or the grain of sand to the most complex of beings or earth formations are interconnected.

So, what did we chose, where are we now? In 2000, when the Earth Charter was formed cabinet meetings of governments were held in official government buildings, not to mention on land. But in 2009, the Maldives government held its cabinet meeting underwater. This was an intentional move on the part of the Maldives government to highlight the impact of climate change. Climate change is no longer a far-off crisis. It is here and now and if it continues at the scale it is now, this archipelago, home to 350,000 inhabitants, will be swallowed by the waters. This will affect people who live on 1,192 coral islands which are in average only 2.1 metres above sea level. If we continue to make choices, we are making; if carbon emissions go on unrestrained, this land will become a memory soon. While under water, they signed a document calling on all countries to cut their emissions. It read, "We must unite in a world war effort to halt further temperature rises. Climate change is happening and it threatens the rights and security of every-

one on Earth. We have to have a better deal. We should be able to come out with an amicable understanding that everyone survives. If Maldives can't be saved today, we do not feel that there is much of a chance for the rest of the world.”⁹ President Mohammed Nasheed said, “We are trying to send our message to let the world know what is happening and what will happen to the Maldives if climate change isn't checked.”

While it is crucial that we keep a check on our actions, especially, the bad choices that have been made, it is equally important to celebrate some of the good that has been achieved, especially with regards to sustainable development, human rights, gender equality, just to name a few.

Let me share with you an example I give my students from my home, India. Saroj Kanta Biswal, a 33-year-old school teacher in Odisha's Kendrapara district and his bride Rashmirekha Paitala both, school teachers refused the practice of dowry to get married. Dowry is one of the heinous customs that have led to the death of many brides¹⁰. Although it was abolished, it still persists. Saroj Kanta and Rashmirekha took a stand against dowry and instead, they asked that the parents plant 1001 fruit tree saplings. This set the tone for many not only in that village but the neighbouring villages as well. It is heartening to hear that the youth of neighbouring villages are following the example of Saroj Kanta and Rashmirekha. While this has been heralded as a stance against the evil practice of dowry system, it is equally a living out of the principles 11 and 12 of the Earth Charter even though neither Saroj nor Rashmirekha had heard of the Earth Charter.

Canada, where I live now, also has a rich tradition of people, especially 12 year olds, fighting for their future on earth. How can one forget the passionate speech of Severn Suzuki, now a member of Earth Charter International? We have the wunderkind water keeper: Autumn Peltier who fights for safe drinking water in indigenous communities. And, then there is Captain Mackie Green and his efforts on saving whales; Joan Clayton, Ina Andre and Second Harvest has taught us not only to rescue fresh surplus food but also to deliver food to those in need. In Alberta, Dr. Kaminssky discovered a fungus growing on the dandelion that allowed it to inhabit harsh living quarters, and perhaps even more surprisingly, has the potential to clean up the coarse tailings it grows in. Thanks to Dr. Kaminskyj's research, it may be possible to clean up the petrochemicals in oil sands tailings with something as unexpected as a fungus.

9 “Maldives government highlights the impact of climate change... by meeting underwater.” Mail Online by Mail Foreign Service. Updated: 14:44 BST, 20 October 2009. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1221021/Maldives-underwater-cabinet-meeting-held-highlight-impact-climate-change.html> accessed May 10, 2019.

10 <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/in-odishas-kendrapara-school-teacher-refuses-dowry-demands-1-001-saplings-from-brides-family-1872731> Accessed on January 2, 2019.

Where are We, What did we Choose

Therefore, yes, we paid heed to the warnings in The World Scientists' Warning to Humanity both 1992 and then in 2017¹¹ and there are some very good things happening as a result, no doubt. Nevertheless, to answer the question – Where are We, What did we Choose, Two Decades later – from a distance, things look pretty damn good. Close up it is bad! We have some good courses and pedagogical approaches, but is that enough? We are definitely not where we need to be and we definitely can make better choices. So, how do we make that happen?

First and foremost, to remember is that the earth does not belong to us, but we belong to earth. She is our mother – janani janmabhui¹². It is very important to see ourselves as belonging to the earth, as being part of the earth community, both locally and globally. When we see ourselves in such a relationship, we are enabled to see the larger picture, the problems that plague us and for which we ourselves are the cause. We recognize that we are eco-crucifiers but we can and should be eco-guardians and eco-rescuers fighting for justice for the earth, our mother. And, we can do that if only we would stop being individualistic and instead remember our interconnectedness, that we are one community.

Some years ago, I came across a TED talk by Akpezi Ogbuiwge, "Africa: An Alternative Narrative", where she talks of a person waking up in 2026 to a new Africa that offered a model for the world. She goes on to say that, it was a group of young people who took it upon themselves to change the narrative and fulfill what was called the sustainability dream, which valued the collective, and not the individual. It is my responsibility, our responsibility, to instill that kind of passion and commitment in the young people and kids of our time. We have to find a way to inspire our students, our youth, our children and grand children to think outside the box, create cracks in their rigid framework, shift their level of consciousness and change the narrative so that it fosters respect and care for life, ecological integrity, diversity, human rights, economic justice, culture of peace. And, we are on track with Mohammed, Sara, Chantal, Saroj¹³ and Rashmirekha amidst us.

The present ecological crisis reflects a crisis in human consciousness, where the relationship with the earth and cosmos has been largely shaped and influenced by the stories that emphasized humanity's dominion over nature. We need new stories born out of an earth consciousness, a

11 The World Scientists' Warning to Humanity was a document written in 1992 by Henry W. Kendall. It was signed by about 1,700 leading scientists. 25 years later, in November 2017, 15,364 scientists signed World Scientists' Warning to Humanity: A Second Notice issuing a global warning.

12 Mother, the earth that birthed me.

13 Mohammed, Sara and Chantal were young presenters at the sessions of the Earth Charter conference.

relational and embodied understanding of ourselves vis-à-vis the earth; we need a re-storying about the earth that includes our interconnectedness with the planet, and the re-storying needs to start now and with each one of us, wherever we are and whatever vocation we are engaged in. I teach theology and so I start there. One of the required courses that my students have to take is Introduction to God and Theological Reflect and on the second day, I give them the reading, "Addressing God with names of Earth"¹⁴ by the Lutheran theologian Lisa Dahill. It is a text that exhorts its readers to address God, the first person the trinity as "Earth." While there are some students that welcome this suggestion, most of them, especially Christians, are appalled at the idea. While their question is how one can think of God in terms of the earth, my point is how can we not! It not only helps us to think outside the box, but more importantly, it fosters earth consciousness. Another reading I give is Fulata Lusungu Moyo's "*Ukugqiba Inkaba – Burying the Umbilical Cord: An African Indigenous Eco-feminist View of Incarnation,*" where she poignantly talks of one's connection to the earth in her mother tongue, isiZulu. She says, "to ask 'where are you from' one would say, *ikhupi inkaba yakho*" which literally means 'where is your umbilical cord buried?'"¹⁵ There is a deeper meaning to this question. She says that "the ritual of burying the umbilical cord signifies one's connection to the earth, the place of one's roots and belongings."¹⁶

"Earth consciousness fosters an understanding that humanity is part of the earth, part of the universe, not a separate entity¹⁷." Rachel Carson said, "In every outthrust headland, in every curving beach, in every grain of sand there is the story of the earth¹⁸." What can we do so that we enable each other, our children, our grandchildren, our students to listen to the voice of the earth and pay heed to her stories? Can we, all of us, pool in our resources and teach our children, our students in such a way that earth consciousness becomes their language, which in turn enables them to change the narrative and create a better world. I am asking for your help while promising mine.

I end with another verse of the hymn I started the paper with. These words are an exhortation, a calling that comes to each and everyone of us. If we heed the call, there is hope for us, and our home – earth.

14 Lisa E Dahill (2016), "Addressing God with names of Earth" *Currents in Theology and Mission* 43:3 (July).

15 In isiZulu, *Ukugqiba Inkaba* means burying the umbilical cord. Fulata Lusungu Moyo (2017), "*Ukugqiba Inkaba – Burying the Umbilical Cord: An African Indigenous Eco-feminist View of Incarnation,*" in Grace Ji-Sun Kim and Hilda P Koster, eds. *Planetary Solidarity: Planetary Women's Voices on Christian Doctrine and Climate Justice*, Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.

16 Ibid.

17 John Darrell DesRoches (2010), "The truth about stories: An autoethnography towards earth consciousness," M.Ed Thesis, University of Prince Edward Island, Prince Edward Island.

18 Citation for this was not available.

Let there be greening,
birth from the burning,
water that blesses and air that is sweet,
health in God's garden,
hope in God's children,
regeneration that peace will complete.

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