

Eco-Chaplaincy: Spiritual Care for the Great Turning

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*Abstract*

Eco-Chaplaincy expands the field of pastoral care by addressing the spiritual implications present in this time of ecological crisis. The primary aspects of eco-chaplaincy are: acknowledging the ecological crisis as a spiritual crisis; honoring pain for the world in order to transform destructive emotions into empowerment based on choice; and attending to and empathizing with those committed to transforming our society toward a life-sustaining one called the Great Turning. These three goals are met through a combination of the four primary roles of a chaplain: theological, pastoral, healing, and change agency.

Chaplains provide support at moments of acute spiritual crisis, such as during times of war, when facing death or surgery in a hospital, or while doing time in prison. Eco-Chaplaincy expands the field of pastoral care to directly address the spiritual implications living through this time of the Great Turning when we are faced with choices regarding the current ecological crisis.

The term the ‘Great Turning’ came to the Eco-philosopher Joanna Macy during an exercise used in the Work that Reconnects where participants engage their moral imaginations to speak with beings who are born seven generations from now. The ‘future being’ to whom she was speaking referred to this time as the “Great Turning” – and the name stuck. Recently David Korten used the name as the title of his new book *The Great Turning: From Empire to Earth Community* (2006). He begins by asking: “by what name will our children and our children’s children call our time? Will they speak in anger and frustration of the time of the Great Unraveling?” Is it possible that instead they “will they look back in joyful celebration on the noble time of the Great Turning, when their forebears turned crisis into opportunity?” Korten’s introduction continues by stating that “the premise of the Great Turning [is] that we humans stand at a defining moment that presents us with an irrevocable choice. Our collective response will determine how our time is remembered for so long as the human species survives” (2006, 3).

Given the magnitude of environmental and cultural destruction, and the potential annihilation of the life-sustaining systems on Earth, eco-chaplaincy is both timely and appropriate. This idea is not particularly unique and certainly not new; it is, however, a skillful synthesis contextualized in a user-friendly profession. The power in naming this profession is to draw out a method of spiritual support available to address the severity of ecological crisis. Eco-chaplaincy opens a door between religiosity and environmentalism which is acutely spiritual in terms of working directly with the immediate issues of life and death among inter-religious and secular worldviews.

This vision of eco-chaplaincy is inspired by the work of Joanna Macy and the Work that Reconnects, however it is not the intention of this author to give an ‘eco-chaplain’ title to people already established in that field. The pastoral skill-set of an eco-chaplain can include facilitating the Work That Reconnects or other ritual-based work-designed to promote a biocentric view while modeling and promoting practices to sustain that intention over time.

Where eco-chaplaincy differs from Earth ministries is particularly in the qualitative distinction of the work of a chaplain being both inter-religious and more specific to an institution, or in this case a cause, rather than a set religious group or congregation. For example, the Boulder, Colorado based research institution National Center for Atmospheric Research (NCAR), or the direct action environmental organization Greenpeace could hire an eco-chaplain to provide pastoral support for its employees and the people with whom they work, while each individual can maintain her or his own tradition of faith.

Eco-chaplaincy is intended to support industrialized people participating in the Great Turning understand and work precisely with this time of choices and vast uncertainty, just as military chaplains provide spiritual support for soldiers in war not knowing whether or not they will survive. Theologically, eco-chaplains help people reconnect with the natural world within a more biocentric framework. This can be accomplished through supporting biocentric themes in a person’s own faith tradition as well as by helping people to develop an experience-based narrative theology of how they live within the world. Pastorally, eco-chaplains help people access and transform despair, apathy, urgency, despondency, overwhelm, and so forth into empowerment and a healthy equanimity; while the healing support comes through offering empathy and bearing witness to the pain and trials of these times. Eco-chaplains can provide spiritual support to those

already engaged in work toward a more ecologically-sound future as well as to people who may be realizing the enormity of our planet's situation, like the chaplain who sits at the bedside of a patient after the doctor has broken the news of a terminal illness.

### **What is Chaplaincy?**

Before going further into a discussion of what eco-chaplaincy can entail, let us first survey the general profession of chaplaincy. Chaplains provide spiritual or pastoral support to individuals or groups of people gathered together for reasons other than their shared faith. For example, the patients and staff in a hospital or inmates and staff in prison individually subscribe to different spiritual practices and/or faith traditions, but have access to spiritual support by the same chaplain who seeks to 'minister' in a pluralistic manner. Each chaplain is simultaneously informed by the lens of her or his own practice while also being able to provide care for people within a plethora of different traditions.

There are many varieties of chaplaincy: hospital chaplains, campus chaplains, prison chaplains, military chaplains, workplace chaplains, and more. *The Work of the Chaplain*, (McCormack, and Paget, 2006) says that "today chaplains are found in many settings. Placement is limited only by a lack of imagination." (2) This paper seeks to expand our imagination to include a new placement, namely eco-chaplaincy, rooted in the same skill-set shared by all chaplains while focusing specifically on the current ecological crisis as a spiritual crisis.

In order to be a professional chaplain, one generally needs to participate in an established religious or spiritual tradition and have endorsement from that community, have a theological degree from a divinity school or approved seminary, and participate in some form of on-the-job apprenticeship training. While each tradition, school or seminary, and apprenticeship varies, there are some consistent skills which all chaplains share. These next few paragraphs will summarize the skills shared by most chaplains. I am relying on both my own experiences and heavily summarizing a chapter titled "Ministry Tasks and Competencies for the Chaplain," found within *The Work of the Chaplain*, (McCormack, and Paget, 2006, 14-34), a new and useful survey text of the field. The skill-sets of chaplains can be summarized into four distinct categories:

- 1) Chaplain as a Religious or Theological representative;
- 2) Chaplain as Spiritual or Pastoral care provider;
- 3) Chaplain as Healer; and
- 4) Chaplain as Change-Agent.

The first, chaplain as a religious representative has everything to do with the outward expression of practice: rituals, rites, ceremonies and personal testimony of faith or practice. Chaplains are able to perform appropriate religious functions with or without the use of the traditional setting such as the chapel, synagogue, or temple. Chaplains are expected to be able to conduct various rites and rituals such as baptisms, funerals, and inter-religious services; as well as officiating ceremonies such as weddings and graduations. The chaplain is expected to be a religious witness to her or his individual religious or practice tradition, while also having an intellectual understanding of diverse religious beliefs and practices.

Secondly, all chaplains are expected to be able to provide pastoral or spiritual support for their clients, defined often as anyone within the institution – such as staff and patients. Pastoral support here involves accurately being able to assess one's needs, spiritual or otherwise; offering counsel; and providing appropriate care which can mean offering a service directly, or making a referral. Chaplains are also often intercessors, meaning that they can be called upon to act as both an advocate and/or a liaison when and where necessary, offering mediation, conflict resolution, and communication skills.

The least tangible, albeit arguably the most important aspect of chaplaincy, comes in the role of chaplains as healer. This role is perhaps the hardest to train for in school and easier to learn on the job. “As a healer, the chaplain is concerned with a person’s holistic condition—physical, psychological, and spiritual. Therefore, the healing function of chaplaincy encompasses key skills that address the whole person: being present, listening, encouraging, intervening in crisis, and teaching, or providing information.” (McCormack, and Paget, 2006, 27) By offering undivided attention and reflective listening, chaplains can open a door for great healing through the gift of presence.

As a change-agent, a chaplain engages their institution or the wider world actively. One of the common ways this role manifests in hospital chaplaincy is through directing the ethics committee for the hospital, or facilitating an ethics consultation with families, patients or staff struggling with issues of value. Other activities involved in this role manifest through teaching, leading seminars and workshops, talking at conferences, and writing books. The sky is the limit.

### **What is Eco-Chaplaincy?**

Using the same four primary roles of a chaplain, let us look at how they can be applied by an eco-chaplain.

#### *Eco-Chaplain as a Religious Representative*

First and foremost, chaplains have the responsibility of witnessing their own tradition through direct experience. In this case, besides participating in their chosen faith or practice, an eco-chaplain would be aware of ecological interdependence, understood here to include the social, political, and biological factors of inter-relatedness. Stemming from this, ‘theological’ duties could include any number of things such as:

- Conducting funerals and ceremonies honoring those and that who have passed/are passing (like ice caps, polar bears, capitalism...).
- Initiating and leading rites of passage ceremonies – e.g. for people coming of age in the ecological era.
- Conferring marriage ceremonies between body and mind, person and Earth...etc.

#### *Eco-Chaplain as Spiritual Care Provider*

Eco-chaplains offer spiritual support primarily through helping people honor their pain for the world. It is understood that in order for people committed to sustaining life on Earth to maintain their intention and vision they have to face the pain, acknowledge the feelings, and allow grief, anger, despair, apathy, overwhelm, and hope to express themselves. The ecological crisis is the pain we are honoring here, and it *is* painful. It is so painful that it is often impossible to look at directly. Eco-theologian and academic Roger Gottlieb articulates this by saying that before we can even face the ecological crisis we have to look at the ‘problem before the problem.’ Gottlieb says, “The problem is humanity’s devastation of the natural world. The problem before the problem is that it is very difficult to face this devastation.” (2006, 3) Eco-chaplains help people ‘face this devastation’ through pastoral or spiritual support.

One skillful tool for the pastoral tool-bag is learning to facilitate the Work that Reconnects, a tool *par excellence* for the eco-chaplain. Begun by Joanna Macy in the late 1970’s in response to the proliferation of nuclear power and its unbelievably long-term radioactive consequences, the work has expanded from her original “Despair and Empowerment” workshops to include an international network of facilitators who now lead the Work that Reconnects. Macy and Molly Brown Young wrote that “the central purpose of the Work that Reconnects is to help people uncover and experience their innate connections with each other and with systemic, self healing powers in the web of life, so that they may be enlivened and motivated to play their part in creating

a sustainable civilization.” (1998, 58) The Work that Reconnects involves group exercises and rituals designed to help people touch in to gratitude, honor their pain for the world, see the pain with new eyes and go forth in the Great Turning with renewed energy, clarity of vision, and nourished hearts. The basic suggestions are available for all future eco-chaplains as they are taught by Joanna Macy and others and also described in the book, *Coming Back to Life: Practices to Reconnect Our Lives, Our World* (Macy and Young Brown, 1998).

There are other important pastoral opportunities for eco-chaplains as well. The stakes are so high in the Great Turning -- the survival of life on Earth in fact -- that we often get daunted by the immensity and forget to take the time necessary each day to feed ourselves enough to stay engaged and inspired. All of the pastoral roles of an eco-chaplain have something to do with actively offering and implementing organizational and personal burnout-prevention strategies.

Eco-chaplaincy intends to inspire a culture of self care. This is done through reminding, inspiring and teaching people how to maintain the discipline of paying attention to their inner-health and engaging in activities to nourish themselves. Self-care activities can include spending time in nature, connecting with family, engaging in personal devotional practice, dancing, making and enjoying art, playing and listening to music, writing and reading poetry, engaging in mindfulness practices designed to remind us about interconnectedness and/or engaging in prayer.

Like the list in the previous section, the following list is not meant to be exhaustive, but is a heart-storm to begin the process of developing this arena of care. More direct pastoral roles include:

- Facilitating or aiding in the process of internal conflict resolution through mediation, restorative practices, group circle work, direct intervention, communication techniques, etc.
- Activating open systems by helping to re-distribute workloads, helping people share responsibility through collaborative processes and delegating tasks and minimizing overlap.
- Helping people ask for and receive help.
- Actively encouraging radical interdependence through cooperation, power-with-horizontal power structures, consensus and/or open decision making and the like.
- Soliciting and initiating eco-narratives from individuals and groups on given topics or stresses.
- Encouraging art such as mask-making, dancing, story-telling or re-imagining work designed to elicit a deeper understanding of ones place in the web of life at this critical moment in time.

#### *Eco-Chaplain as Healer*

The word healer brings up so many connotations, often evoking the image of a doctor or midwife who is ‘doing’ something. The chaplain as healer, however, has everything to do with ‘being.’ A great deal of healing is done through the practice of sheer presence. Like all chaplains, a bulk of an eco-chaplain’s time will most likely be spent attending the many people participating in the Great Turning and offering them empathy, listening, normalizing, and even sacralizing the intentions motivating so many in what author Paul Hawken calls the ‘blessed unrest,’ (*Blessed Unrest, 2007*) and generally noticing what is being done and offering encouragement again where appropriate. It may sound simplistic but this is where healing is done and the real art of chaplaincy is. Some of the techniques include:

- Being present and offering presence.
- Active and reflective listening.

- Basic attendance.
- Offering empathy.

#### *Eco-Chaplain as Change-Agent*

Last but not least, eco-chaplains are also change-agents, like all of the people they attend. This means eco-chaplains also can teach and train and speak out. In many ways chaplains thrive as change agents because they are used to being so versatile that there is less risk of letting this aspect of one's ministry monopolize. Some particular skill-sets and ideas ideal for this role include teaching living systems theory and connecting people with the appropriate religious teachings about interdependence specific to their tradition. Additionally, deconstructing the industrial growth society is important; as is being able to articulate and explain the shift to the Great Turning.

Overall, eco-chaplains can facilitate workshops or teach seminars, classes or groups in a myriad of ways when deemed appropriate. Eco-chaplains poignantly engage the role of change agent when interfacing with folks still invested in the perpetuity of the industrial growth society. For example, some activities are:

- Facilitating community-based dialogue between disparate interests involved with issues affecting the ecological crisis, such as corporate stakeholders, union leaders, affected community members and activists.
- Leading ethics consultations or boards in communities, counties, states and nations regarding social justice and environmental issues.
- Writing letters, articles, books, blogs, etc. and speaking publicly about the spiritual implications of ecological crisis.

#### **Whom do Eco-Chaplains benefit?**

As noted before, “chaplains serve in a pluralistic arena-multifaith-and therefore, must provide the same ministry to all people in the identified ministry group;” ( McCormack, and Paget, 2006, 4) which is why it is vital to identify who would and would not benefit from eco-chaplaincy. Similar to how twelve-step groups only work once a person admits to an addiction, eco-chaplaincy only works for people who believe that we live in a time of ecological crisis, and have the desire to do something about it. Clients do not have to be activists or educators, the *doing* can be feeling and grieving and participating in any which way, but it is important to note the stipulation that a client must already feel something about the ecological crisis, otherwise chaplaincy becomes a set-up for proselytizing in terms of *convincing* people that this is a crisis – a situation important to avoid.

The very foundation of this form of chaplaincy depends upon a shared belief that there is in fact a growing ecological crisis. Fitting clients have to believe that the current state of the environment is not in balance. A cautionary statement here is that there also does *not* need to be consensus about how and why different aspects of the environment are the most critical. Most likely the majority of clients for an eco-chaplain will already be committed to the Great Turning in some way although there is also certainly a need for pastoral support for people first realizing the extent to which survival of conscious life on Earth is in jeopardy.

Joanna Macy says that the Great Turning is unfolding in “three simultaneous and mutually reinforcing dimensions” which are holding actions, structural changes, and shifts in consciousness. (2007, 143) The holding actions are what we generally think of as activism: direct action, legislative and regulatory work all aimed at slowing down destruction. (Macy, 2007, 143) Structural changes involve new technologies that are more Earth-friendly, alternative forms of farming and healing and schooling, etc. (Macy, 2007, 145) Shifting consciousness involves working at the root to transform how we think and perceive the world which includes living systems theory, the work that reconnects, and eco-theologies. (Macy, 2007, 146) The reason it is

important to see how many roles can and need to be filled for the Great Turning to turn and not unravel is to understand that no one is left out. There is no hierarchy involved where one role is more important than another, but rather the roles work in a circle where everything belongs and affects everything else. For this reason, eco-chaplaincy is suitable in a myriad of situations.

Secondly, it is not the sole or primary role of an eco-chaplain to educate or advocate about the health of the environment to their clients. This cannot be understated. Eco-chaplaincy comes from the foundation that the current state of the environment reflects a spiritual crisis, and as such puts forward new forms of pastoral support to address it. It is possible that an eco-chaplain's work will inspire people to see the Earth and their place in it in a new way; however, if this caveat was not present, any role distinction between environmentalist or social justice advocate and eco-chaplain would disappear.

The third requirement for eco-chaplaincy to be appropriate is contingent upon the first belief that we are currently in an ecological crisis, while taking it one step further by stipulating that eco-chaplaincy is only appropriate for those who have a genuine desire for conscious and diverse life to thrive on Earth. Without that longing, there is little need for the kind of pastoral support eco-chaplaincy has to offer. This aspect is most pronounced and problematic when coupled with a theological system actually promoting the end of survival on this planet, while also strained by theological dispositions that value human life exclusively.

Advocating for the survival of life on planet Earth includes the *entire* ecosystem, including us human beings. It is hard to count the number of times scientists and activists have lamented over the destructive role humans have played in the global ecosystem in a way which hints that Earth would be better without humans on it. If this lament is expanded and cemented into an ideology which actively promotes the desire for the extinction of humanity as a species, then eco-chaplaincy would be a challenge. Most of the time, these nihilistic or disparaging statements come more from the form of solidified grief with which eco-chaplaincy is designed specifically to work and less from a developed theological view; but there can be a thin line which makes it necessary to clearly articulate this third requirement up front when building a pastoral relationship.

### **Going Forth: Eco-Chaplaincy**

Military chaplaincy acknowledges the spiritual dimensions of facing mortality in war by including chaplains in every unit. Eco-chaplaincy stems from acknowledging the ecological crisis as a spiritual crisis, and as such provides spiritual, theological and healing support to people engaged in transforming our way of life into a more life-sustaining society called the Great Turning.

Eco-chaplains help groups and individuals honor pain for the world in order to transform despair, apathy, anger, overwhelm and the like into empowerment based on choice while also bearing witness, attending to and providing empathy for those experiencing the uncertainty of these times of ecological crisis. These three are met through a combination of the four roles: theologian, pastor, healer and change-agent. Of course chaplains rarely act solely from one role. It is entirely possible to provide pastoral support for grieving clients after conducting a funeral service or while facilitating conflict mediation, for example. A chaplain's job is always changing shape to accommodate circumstances as they arise. Like the saying goes, the role of a chaplain is 'neither betwixt nor between,' which means the possibilities for how eco-chaplaincy can manifest are endless. Like all chaplains, the eco-chaplain would refer individuals to resources appropriate for them and provide specific support in ways appropriate to the situation.

Eco-chaplains can be hired by non-profit environmental and social justice organizations, boards, foundations, social work or environmental agencies in towns, counties, states and nations,

educational and scientific institutions, or by communities or individuals. The possibilities are as varied as the Earth is diverse. The key is that eco-chaplains will work for established groups, teams, cohorts or institutions like military chaplains are assigned to their unit or hospital chaplains to their ward. Most of the groups appropriate for hiring an eco-chaplain have yet to model their work environment in a way congruent with the shifting paradigm toward a life-sustaining society called the Great Turning. Many of the pastoral healing and spiritual support available in this arena is contracted by individuals outside of the work setting. This is not surprising as the modern work ethic is still dominated by the old industrial paradigm.

The message of the industrial era is clear, that if one is having a hard time dealing with the reality of work, be it researching the ramifications of global warming, or working day in and day out at a homeless shelter, one has to deal with it alone. If work becomes 'too-much,' one is responsible for her or his state of mind and s/he has to find some form of individual support; hence the myriad of workshops and healing modalities available. If conditions do not align for individuals to do this work, they can choose to take a break, quit, or simply go numb and trudge through burn-out for months or even years. By offering pastoral and healing support to organizations and institutions in line with the Great Turning, eco-chaplaincy offers a new message for an improved and congruent work ethic.

That eco-chaplaincy is timely and needed is not in question, what is in doubt is how and where to begin. Each aspect of eco-chaplaincy is already alive and well within the myriad of creative professions active today offering restorative justice facilitation, conflict resolution, eco-therapeutic techniques, and workshops and classes on everything from the Work That Reconnects to rites of passage work. What is not yet widely available is a workplace eco-chaplain who can provide group and individual support 'in-house' for the entire staff, community or cohort, rather than each person going on their separate quests to workshops and trainings.

By hiring an eco-chaplain on staff, organizations like Greenpeace, or scientific institutions like the National Center for Atmospheric Research would bring the power of transformation and health directly into their group field. Promoting eco-chaplaincy would send a tangible message of support and plant the seeds for sustaining vision over the long haul. Eco-chaplains can help individuals in groups transform and reduce overwhelm, despair and hopelessness into motivation, inspiration, and trust. Organizations can then retain staff and volunteers through thick and thin. Sometimes just having someone available to listen or be present is all a person needs to keep going. Sometimes groups need a chaplain to help mediate a dispute, facilitate dialogue, or convene a ceremony to begin or end a campaign. Eco-chaplains can help organizations transform in ways which are congruent with the Great Turning including promoting and implementing a staff-wide (movement-wide, profession-wide...) culture of self care. The potential for eco-chaplaincy is truly enormous.

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