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Hearing Gaia's Call

BART EVERSON



The living Earth is abuzz with communication. Honeybees dance to signal the location of flowers with nectar to harvest. Whales sing to each other in the ocean deep. The human sphere is rife with innumerable messages, from song and dance to the written and spoken word, to say nothing of the digital messages pulsing through the silicon web we've spun around the planet.

If we take Gaia theory to heart, if we accept that we are all cells in Gaia's body, then we may consider every one of these messages to be, in some sense, part of Gaia. Some messages seem to carry Gaia's voice more clearly than others. We might hear Gaia's voice in the song of a bird, but can we discern it in the billboard exhortation to *BUY MORE STUFF*, or in the hate-mongering effluvium of neo-fascist demagogues? That is more difficult.

We might investigate what we know of our bodies. When a foreign object punctures my epidermis, as an example, certain signals are transmitted: *Intruder alert! Make more antibodies! White blood cells, activate!* These are signals of and by my body.

The words that come out of my mouth are different: "Ouch," I might say. "I cut myself. I need help. Can you please get me a bandage?" Obviously, I am not speaking to my platelets; I'm speaking to another human being like myself.

That distinction is clear enough, but the situation with Gaia is different. As far as we know, Gaia doesn't speak like that, to another planetary being like herself. As far as we know,

Gaia is unique. We don't know of any other living planets. All the Earthly messages that surround us are better understood as internal communication within the planetary system, component parts speaking to one another. Some may even be dysfunctional, counterproductive, cancerous. This is how I understand the endless advertising campaigns of consumer capitalism.

The tweeting of the songbirds, however, carries a distinctly different message.

A Call to Wholeness

Among this sea of messages, some stand out as having a different character, of belonging to a different order of communication. There are some messages that remind us of our radical interconnectedness, that evoke a sense of sacred awe at the web of life. These messages may evoke in us an image of the whole Earth, Mother Earth, mother of us all. They may engender a welter of diverse and even contradictory feelings: concern, shame, alarm, devotion, fear, yearning, grief, love.

In these messages, we discern a call to a greater wholeness, of which we are a part. This is not the false promise of the ethno-nationalists. We discern the call of the entire Earth community. We hear Gaia's call.

We are human, so many of us will hear Gaia's call in a human song, in a poem, or in a speech. Despite the auditory metaphor, we might "hear" the call in visual works of art, or in the writings of Rachel Carson, Aldo Leopold, Arne Naess, or even Pope Francis.

It was two scientists, James Lovelock and Lynn Margulis, who brought the name of Gaia back to wide popular attention, though the name was in fact the suggestion of the poet and novelist William Golding.

It isn't always easy or pleasant to hear this call. To give the most pressing current example, many perceive a dire message in the novel Coronavirus. I track such things, and I can confirm that in the earlier months of 2020 I've heard a steady drumbeat of essays and analyses making the connection between COVID-19 and Gaia theory. For example:

- “Consider the COVID-19 virus as Gaia’s defensive system,” writes Sati Sil for the Statesman Journal, likening the viral assault to “an army of foot soldiers, conveying a strong message that our planet is sick and some remedial measures are necessary to restore its health.”

What of the birdsong? I'm pretty sure the main message the birds send is related to sex and reproduction, warning of nearby threats, and other matters urgent to the birds. We humans might simply appreciate the song as a lovely noise. But we might also perceive something deeper in it, something bigger. Any one of us might hear Gaia's call in the song of a bird. We might 'hear' the call in the beauty of a flower or a mountain. It can happen when we least expect it.

It's a blessing, to be sure, to receive such messages from our more-than-human kin, or from the land. These mystical experiences can prove difficult to translate into human language. They may belong in another category altogether. There's no point in seeking after such experiences. They ambush us, if they happen at all.

Nevertheless, we can be intentional. The best we can do is set the stage for such encounters, to relax our guard while continuing to pay careful attention, to maintain openness without expectation. It may be difficult to hear Gaia's call if we are always distracted by the latest controversy on social media, or enraged by the headlines of the day. It's right to be enraged at manifest injustice, and to take

action, but rage without renewal exhausts us. The vast array of contemplative practices, from ritual to meditation, can bring a measure of clarity and peace. This may help us to be receptive.

A Call to Action

Having once heard the call, having become aware of our relation to the living Mother, whom we constitute with our very lives, we know that we are also called to right action on her behalf.

We are called to a different way of living, certainly, than the typical consumerist lifestyle. Our radical individualism, ironically, can have the effect of subordinating us within systems of production and distribution in which we feel very little agency. We are called to change, and these changes require collective action.

We are called to join the struggle for justice, and it's imperative to know that we are not alone. It's imperative to reach out and connect to others who have also heard Gaia's call, to discover how we can engage the transformative work that we know is necessary.

Gaia is calling. Will we hear? Will we answer?



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