

Our Gaian Identity

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We humans have traditionally and routinely described our ancestry and identity within the narrow terms of human communities and citizenship; of familial, national, political or religious genealogies. James Lovelock's Gaia theory expands the breadth of our self-understanding; situating us where our ancestry and present identity are actually grounded: within the evolutionary lineages and environments of the whole Earth community. He named this Earth community "Gaia," describing it as a superorganism in which all life is tightly coupled with air, ocean and surface rocks.

In this whole that is more than the sum of its parts there is no question of human life being external to or independent of that whole. To imagine and to act out our human identity as if it were outside of or in control of Gaia's self-regulatory functioning, its common environmental and climatic variables or ecosystem constraints, is now seen for what it is: so serious a misunderstanding of how we are constituted as to put our survival, never mind our thriving, in gravest danger.

In fact, a Gaian human identity is a gift given us at birth; one given from and within the entire history of life's emergence on this planet. It went largely unnoticed throughout much of our lives. But Gaia theory enlarged our vision with a truth about ourselves that compelled a radical shift in our self-understanding. It extended our historic perspective on the past, present and future beyond that of family, race, country, church, or nation.

With this wider vision came a growing awareness that our past and present are inextricably linked: not just to the past and future of one particular evolutionary lineage but to that of all life on Earth. All living beings now on Earth are literally related. We may be closest to African apes. But we are also related, albeit more distantly, to mice and fish and beetles, to worms and mushrooms and oak trees . . . and so on to the tiniest bacterium.

And each of these is not only related to but tightly coupled with the environments of other life forms; interrelated to them and co-arising with them. Each life depends on the work and gifts of other lives; of those who once lived and those alive today. Each is bound ineluctably to all others past and present in a continuing cycle of birth, life and death that sustains each within all. Our relatedness to all forms of life is at the heart of our Gaian identity.

Gaia theory has shown us how to trace that identity back, however sketchily, through Earth's history; marveling at the uniqueness of our own lives while sensing the strange relatedness of others. Knowing that we remain related to them through the air we breathe, the solar energy we share, the components of soil, atmosphere and water that nourish us in life and to which we all contribute both in life and in death.

This relatedness in all its forms is the present source and sustenance of our physical being and of all other living entities. It is, therefore, the source of our identity: of the sameness (*idem*) of being (*ens*) that creates and sustains our Gaian being. Together we continually contribute, for good or ill, to that identity. Through it we share in the mutual benefits of a common life that we in turn continually create—or destroy.

Our home is within Earth's biosphere: that Gaian space structured by concentric spheres surrounding the planet. Solar energy heats the atmosphere and oceans, driving the global circulation of these two planetary systems. Like skin and fur, the atmosphere keeps Earth's surface warm. It also shields the delicate living cells of the surface against exposure to solar radiation. Earth's magnetic field prevents it from being blown away by solar winds.

This Gaian atmosphere evolved to be just thick enough for us to breathe but not so opaque as to absorb entirely the light from other bodies in the universe. Therefore we can breathe and we can see the stars. This fragile balance between the indispensable and the sublime gives us an experience of transcendence on which to build our concepts and theories of what transcends us.

While Gaia theory offers us a scientific understanding of the structure and composition of the planetary environment and atmosphere that both transcends us and makes Earth habitable for us, it also allows us to glimpse the reality of the whole community of life within which we belong.

It enables us to see that community as embodying a sacredness that attaches to the whole of existence; and to see the sacred as the internal transcendence of all living beings. This is embodied in the tight coupling, the delicate balance within our Gaian identity between what is indispensable for our continuance as individuals and what we intuit as the sacredness of the whole of existence.

*The gift
of Gaian identity
unknown to the family
whose name I claim as mine
being grown
before familiar time
breaking through
and beyond
recognized bounds
of ages, race, place, kind, creed
to kin
taking a liminal pace
forward
from sea onto shores
now lifted
into familiar skylines
within which we trace
a descent
transcending known identities
gifted into becoming
known
as a Gaian being*