



**GENUINELY SENSING THE SACREDNESS OF THE WORLD:
SERIOUSLY ENGAGING ANOTHER US-ON-EARTH DAY**

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DR. MAULANA KARENGA

AS WE CELEBRATE US-ON-EARTH DAY again this year, I want to raise again the urgent and ongoing need for us to understand this day and our approach to it as not simply concerns about the earth, but also about us on the earth and what it means to us as well as to the earth and all in it. For this day and month of marking, reminding and reflection offer us an ongoing invitation and opportunity to actually become meaningfully engaged in personal and social practices that recognize and respect our relationship and responsibility to the health and well-being of the natural world. For we realize and respond to the inescapable fact that the health and well-being of the world is interdependently and inseparably linked to that of our own and that of the whole of humanity. Indeed, the Kawaida Maatian ethical imperative of *serudj ta* requires that we link well-being with right doing and good doing in the world in order to repair, renew and remake the world. In a word, we are to relate rightly, act justly and walk gently in the world.

Central to our relating rightly, acting justly and walking gently in the world is seeing and sensing the world and all in it as sacred. This does not mean we don't or can't also have special sacred places, but it means that we should recognize and respect the fact that the special sacred space is located in and part of a larger sacred space, the world. In our earliest sacred texts, the world was seen and sensed as sacred for several reasons and all of them were interrelated and central to the transcendent respect they had for

the spiritual, natural and social worlds of humans. In the Kawaida Maatian ethical tradition rooted in ancient Egyptian sacred teachings, humans are part of an interrelated reality of concentric circles of relatedness. In their identity as images of God, they are spiritual beings; in their embeddedness in nature, they are natural beings; and in their lives, work and struggles in society, they are social beings. And each of these must be seen, approached and engaged as interrelated, interdependent and inseparable.

What I want to do here is share some of the essential teachings of our ancestors on how we can relate rightly, act justly and walk gently in the world. Starting with some of our most ancient texts and ending with some of our modern texts on the sacredness of nature, I want to share how they sensed and engaged the world as sacred and worthy of transcendent respect. In the classical spiritual and ethical texts of ancient Egypt, the *Husia*, the Great Praise Poem to the Divine by Pharaoh Akhenaten stands out as an excellent example reaffirming the sense of the sacredness of the world. He says in this great work: "You are beautiful, great, radiant exalted above every land...sustaining all you have made...people, cattle, animals and all there is. You make a Nile (for Kemet) deep in the earth and you bring it because of your love that cause the people to live... All other lands, you make a way of life for them also. You place a Nile in the sky and it comes to them". In this praise poem the Pharaoh Akhenaten speaks of the beauty and

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sacredness of the world suggesting it is goodness of itself, a creation of the Divine, and a means of sustainment and beauty for human beings everywhere. He also stresses the equal access to and right to the necessities of life which the earth provides as a Divine endowment, “and everyone can see this so that they may live rightly”.

Also beautiful in the spiritual, ethical and aesthetic sense is the definition of holiness by a Bakwena (Setswana) person given to a colonial missionary who saw holiness in a less inclusive and therefore incomplete way. Approaching holiness as a wholistic and inclusive reality, he stressed in his definition that not only is spirit sacred, but also the earth and all in it. Thus, he says, “When abundant rains fall during the night and wash all the world, trees and cattle clean and the air breathes clean; and the rising sun shows a drop of dew on every blade of grass, that to us is holiness”. In a word, the forms, contents and processes of the world are both sacred and beautiful.

Another important sacred text which teaches us to recognize and respect the sacredness of the earth and all in it and our moral responsibility to care for it and do good for it is the *Odu Ifa*. It tells us, that “those whose turn it is to take responsibility for the world, they should do good for the world”. Clearly, it is our time and our responsibility, we, the living, conscious and capable, to take care of the world and do good for the world in the ways we each and all can.

Our ancestors also taught that “the world should stop making sacrifices for wealth,

and instead make sacrifices that would protect the earth from its enemies. In this way, we will live”. And again, this calls for us to sense the sacredness of the earth and all in it and relate, act and walk in dignity-affirming, life-enhancing and world-preserving ways.

In more recent times, Nana Dr. George Washington Carver gives us a beautiful model of sensing and appreciating the sacredness of the world. A highly accomplished and respected scientist, he also was a very spiritual person, combining it all in the way he conceived and lived his life and did his work. Sensing and seeing the world as sacred, he spoke of how he did “love the things God has created, both animate and inanimate”. Advancing love of creation as a sacred space of living, learning and working, he taught that if you approach nature with genuine love and a will to learn, it will give up its secrets just as other loved ones do. Nature, he taught, has wonderful stories to share and awesome goodness to give, if we love it and learn its languages and lessons. Indeed, he said, “the singing birds, the buzzing bees, the opening flower and the budding trees, along with other forms of animate and inanimate matter, all have their marvelous creation story to tell”. And “more and more as we come closer and closer in touch with nature and its teachings are we able to see the Divine and are therefore fitted to interpret correctly the various languages spoken by all forms of nature (around us”.

Nana Dr. Wangari Maathai, founder of the Green Belt Movement whose

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model offers a framework for environmental work in the world, also stressed “love for the environment,” as an indispensable value which teaches us to see and sense the earth as sacred. She taught an active caring for the world which “motivates one to take positive action for the earth, such as planting trees and ensuring that they survive; nurtur(ing) those trees that are standing; protect(ing) animals and their habitat; conserve(ing) soil”; and other related life-affirming and world-preserving activities. And she urged us to have and demonstrate “gratitude and respect for the Earth’s resources” and “valuing all that the earth gives us and because of that valuation, not wanting to waste any of it”.

Again, then, in our deep sense of the sacredness of the earth and all in it, let us dare to relate rightly, act justly and walk gently on earth. Let us relate rightly, embracing an expansive understanding of ourselves that reaffirms our ancestral teachings of the unity of being, the oneness of life, and the interrelatedness and

interdependence of the whole world. Let us act justly in and for the world and for ourselves, giving everyone and everything in the world their rightful due. It means respecting the earth as our honored ancestors taught, i.e., for: 1) its intrinsic value as a goodness in itself; 2) its status as a divine creation and sacred space, and (3) its being a central and indispensable source of our shared well-being, sustenance, our sense of the sacred and beautiful, and our expansive concept of ourselves and our responsibility.

And let us walk gently in the world asserting ourselves in the world as good relatives to all in it, without species arrogance, abuse, and insensitivity to other living and inanimate beings and without conscious or unconscious complicity in the plunder, pollution and depletion of the world by our own practices. In a word we must see and conduct ourselves not only as human beings (*watu*), but also as world beings (*walimwengu*) with joyful responsibility for the well-being and shared good of the world and all in it.▲

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