

# An Introduction to “The Blue River Declaration” An Environmental Ethic and a Thinking Community

By MICHAEL P. NELSON

**A**mong the ancient, moss-draped Douglas firs at the H.J. Andrews Experimental Forest in the Oregon Cascades, twenty-three people gathered to take seriously the task of penning an environmental ethic appropriate for our time. We were philosophers, scientists, writers, poets, students, and professors of various bents. Over four intense days we thought collaboratively and open-mindedly, we learned from one another, and we worked hard to create something together none of us could create alone.

The following convictions brought us together and shaped our views as we began our work: We live at a time of profound environmental crisis. Our most fundamental ideas about the nature of this world, our assumptions about the relationship between human beings and this world, and our corresponding notions of value and proper conduct are flawed at their core, inaccurate, harmful to both humans and this world, and desperately in need of rethinking. Our current ethical beliefs, while consistent with those ideas (beliefs that commit us to ideas mistakenly equating happiness with accumulation, or the belief that growth can be unlimited), are likewise dysfunctional. These beliefs are incompatible with the facts of the working world, a world that is in fact resilient yet finite, interdependent, co-evolved, and inclusive of humans, boldly rejecting all forms of human exceptionalism. Our current ways of living on this planet are not only destructive, they are morally shameful.

We also believed, desperately, in the necessity of a new environmental ethic. We were encouraged by Aldo Leopold’s assurance that extending ethics to “the land” was “an evolutionary possibility.” We *could* do it. His urging that such an ethical extension was “an ecological necessity” infused our work with a sense of urgency. We *had to* do it. We were following at least half of Leopold’s advice when he pointed out, “nothing so important as an ethic is ever ‘written’ . . . it evolve[s] in the minds of a thinking community.”

So we gathered our thinking community. We knew, too, that an ethic must inspire us to be better people, to live better lives. We took seriously the advice of French author, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, who wrote, “If you want to build a ship, don’t drum up men and gather wood, divide the work and give orders. Instead, teach them to yearn for the vast and endless sea.” So we wanted to write just such an ethical statement: a belief or set of beliefs about what is right, and good, and worthy, and of value; beliefs that guide our actions and behaviors with each other and with the Earth.

Finally, we began with the belief that we fiercely protect what we love, and we love what we feel we belong to. Again, Aldo Leopold: “All ethics so far evolved rest upon a single premise: that the individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts.” Since our current lives and institutions tragically enact an ethic not of, or for, this Earth (our home), an ethic not worthy of us as Earthlings (members of the community of Earth), the work to nurture a new environmental ethic is also the work to re-weave communities, both human to human and human to non-human. Let us, all of us, begin this work.

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# *The Blue River Declaration: An Ethic of the Earth*

By THE BLUE RIVER QUORUM

**A** truly adaptive civilization will align its ethics with the ways of the Earth. A civilization that ignores the deep constraints of its world will find itself in exactly the situation we face now, on the threshold of making the planet inhospitable to humankind and other species. The questions of our time are thus: What is our best current understanding of the nature of the world? What does that understanding tell us about how we might create a concordance between ecological and moral principles, and thus imagine an ethic that is of, rather than against, the Earth?

## WHAT IS THE WORLD?

In our time, science, religious traditions, Earth's many cultures, and artistic insights are all converging on a shared understanding of the nature of the world: The Earth is our home. It will always be our only source of shelter, sustenance, and inspiration. There is no other place for us to go.

The Earth is part of the creative unfolding of the universe. From the raw materials of the stars, life sprang forth and radiated into species after species, including human beings. The human species is richly varied, with a multitude of persons, cultures, and histories. We humans are kin to one another and to all the other beings on the planet; we share common ancestors and common substance, and we will share a common fate. Like humans, other beings are not

merely commodities or service-providers, but have their own intelligence, agency, and urging toward life.

We live in a world of nested systems. Living things are created and shaped by their relationships to others and to the environment. No one is merely an isolated ego in a bag of skin, but something more resembling a note in a multidimensional symphony.

The world is dynamic at every scale. By processes that are probabilistic and often unpredictable, the world unfolds into emergent states of being. Our time of song and suffering is one such point in time. The life systems of the world can be resilient, having the ability to endure through change. But changes create cascades of new events. When small changes build up and cross thresholds, sudden large transformations can occur. Thus, the world in its present form—the world we love and inhabit—is contingent. It may be, or it may cease to be. If the Earth changes in ways that undermine our lives, there is nothing we can do to change it back.

The Earth is finite in its resources and capacities. All its inhabitants live within its limitations and by its rules. And although life on Earth is resilient and robust, rapid irreversible changes and mass extinction events have occurred in the past. As a result of ignoring the Earth's boundaries, we are on the brink of causing a transformation of the Earth and the sixth great mass extinction.

Our knowledge of the Earth will always be incomplete. But we know that the world is beautiful. Its life forms, unique in the universe, are wonderful in their grandeur and detail. It follows that the world is worthy of reverence, awe, and care.

#### WHO ARE WE HUMANS?

We humans have become who we are through a long process of biological and cultural evolution. As do many other social species, we possess a complex and sometimes contradictory set of possibilities. We are competitive and cooperative, callous and empathetic, destructive and healing, intuitive and rational. Moreover, we are creatures of consciousness, emotion, and imagination, beings through whom the universe has evolved the capacity to celebrate its own beauty and explore its own meaning in the languages of science and story.

We are dependent on the sun and the Earth for everything. Without warmth, air, water, and fellow beings, we would quickly die. At the same time, we are co-creators of the Earth as we know it, shaping with our decisions the future of the places we inhabit, even as our relation to those places shapes us. In this way, we are members of a community of interdependent parts.

Humans are beings who search for meaning. Our beliefs about the origins of the cosmos influence the way we relate to each other, to other living things, and to the habitats we both depend upon and constitute. Sometimes, we experience wonder and awe at the mysteries of the universe, and fall silent in reverence. Yet, as we strive to comprehend the world, we often divide it into hierarchies of value—pure/impure, spiritual/material, human/subhuman. Although we often exclude and exploit those we judge less valuable than ourselves, we yearn for belonging.

We are born to care. From the first moments of our lives, we seek connection. We deeply value loving and being loved. We find comfort in close connection to other people, other species, and to the wild world itself.

We are adaptable and resilient. Our imagination gives us the ability to envision alternative futures and to adapt our behaviors toward their achievement. When we are at our best, we develop cultural systems in which we, other living beings, and ecosystems can flourish.

We are moral beings. We have the capacity to reason about what is better and worse, just and unjust, worthy and demeaning, and we have the capacity to act in ways that are better, more just, more worthy, more beautiful. Because we are these things, we can change. Because we are these things, change will be difficult.

#### HOW, THEN, SHALL WE LIVE?

Humanity is called to imagine an ethic that not only acknowledges but emulates the ways by which life thrives on Earth. How do we act when we truly understand that we live in complete dependence on an Earth that is interconnected, interdependent, finite, and resilient?



*Blue River Quorum*

**Given that life on Earth is interconnected**, we are called to affirm that all flourishing is mutual, and that damage to the part entails damage to the whole. Accordingly, our virtues are cooperation, respect, prudence, foresight, and justice. We have the responsibility to honor our obligations to future generations of all beings and to take their interests into account when we reflect on the consequences of our actions. To discount the future, to take all we need for our own well-being and leave nothing for others, is unthinkable. We should take only what the Earth offers, and leave as much and as good as we take. To live by a principle of reciprocity, giving as we receive, re-creates the richness of life, even as we partake of it. Then, our harvests are respectful and thoughtful. We learn to listen, which means that we learn to value congeniality, patience, fairness, and moral courage, which creates the possibility of heroism in the face of disagreement and discord. Moreover, the new ethic calls us to remedy destructive distributions of wealth and power. It is wrong when some are made to bear the risks of the recklessness of others, or assume the burden of others'

privilege, or pay with their health and hopes the real costs of destructive practices.

**Given that humanity is inescapably dependent on the Earth** for gifts both material and spiritual, we are called to be grateful and humble. To be grateful is to express joy for the fertility of the Earth, to be attentive to its gifts, to celebrate its bounty, and to accept responsibility for its care. Humility is based on an understanding of our own roots in the soil; we recognize the danger we face and the damage we do when we get that wrong. So we are well-advised to be humble about our claims to knowledge; and with art and heart and science, to strive for continuous learning that is open to evidence from all ways of knowing and from the Earth itself. The generosity of the Earth models generosity in our relations with others, and calls for collective outrage when we fail in that duty. A new ethic calls us to defend and nurture the regenerative potential of the Earth, to return Earth's generosity with our own healing gifts of mind, body, emotion, and spirit. We can find joy and justice in sustaining lives that sustain our own.

**Given that the Earth's resources and resilience are finite**, human flourishing depends on embracing a new ethic of self-restraint to replace a destructive ethos of excess. Greed is not a virtue; rather, the endless and pointless accumulation of wealth is a social pathology and a terrible mistake, with destructive social, spiritual, and ecological consequences. Limitless economic growth as a measure of human well-being is inconsistent with the continuity of life on Earth. It should be replaced by an economics of regeneration. Simple lifestyles that include thriftiness, beauty, community, and sharing are pathways to happiness. Celebrated virtues are generosity and resourcefulness.

**Given that life on Earth is resilient**, humanity can take courage in Earth's power to heal. We can find guidance in the richness of diverse cultures and ecosystems if we honor and protect difference. Equality and justice are necessary conditions for civilizations that endure, and truth-telling has strong regenerative power. Virtues we can embody are human courage, creative imagination, and perseverance in the face of long odds. The effect of humans on the land can be healing; our obligation is to imagine into existence new ways to live that create resilient and robust habitats. If we can

undo some of the damage we have done, this is the best work available to us. On the other hand, damaging the natural sources of resilience—degrading oceans, atmosphere, soil, biodiversity—is both foolhardy and an offense against the future, not worthy of us as rational and moral beings. If hope fails us, the moral abdication of despair is not an alternative. Beyond hope we can inhabit the wide moral ground of personal integrity, matching our actions to our moral convictions. Through conscientious decisions, we can refuse to be made into instruments of destruction. We can make our lives and our communities into works of art that express our deepest values.

The necessity of achieving a concordance between ecological and moral principles, and the new ethic born of this necessity, calls into question far more than we might think. It calls us to question our current capitalist economic systems, our educational systems, our food production systems, our systems of land use and ownership. It calls us to re-examine what it means to be happy, and what it means to be smart. This will not be easy. But new futures are continuously being imagined and tested, resulting in new social and ecological possibilities. This questioning will release the power and beauty of the human imagination to create more collaborative economies, more mindful ways of living, more deeply felt arts, and more inclusive processes that acknowledge the ways of life of all beings. In this sheltering home, we can begin to restore both the natural world and the human spirit.

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