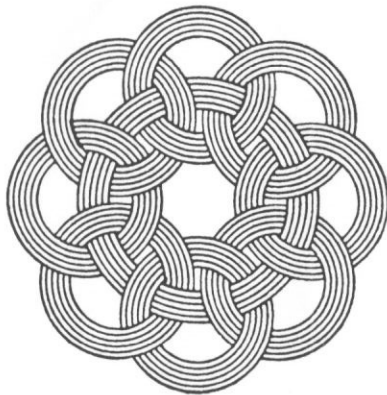


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REWEAVING
THE
WORLD
*The Emergence
of Ecofeminism*



1990

SIERRA CLUB BOOKS
SAN FRANCISCO

Charlene Spretnak

ECOFEMINISM:
OUR ROOTS AND
FLOWERING

OUR ROOTS, OUR BEGINNING, the increasing allure of "eco" for feminists offer some answers to a question of great immediacy: *What are the experiences through which humans raised in industrialized, modern society connect on a deep level with nature?* Our flowering, our insights, our growing impact on political philosophy and practice offer answers to another key question of our time: *What is the purpose of cultivating ecological wisdom at this postmodern moment in human history?*

OUR ROOTS

Our situation as a species is the following: the life-support systems of this almost impossibly beautiful planet are being violated and degraded, causing often irreparable damage, yet only a small proportion of humans have focused on this crisis. In our own country, our farms are losing 4 billion tons of topsoil a year; the groundwater and soil are being poisoned by pesticide runoff and toxic dumping; the groundwater table itself, accumulated over thousands of years, is being recklessly depleted to serve the profits of agribusiness and developers; the nuclear power industry has generated much more than enough plutonium to poison every creature and ecosystem on Earth and has no idea how to store it safely; we're losing 200,000 to 300,000 acres of wetland habitat every year; and the songbirds, which used to herald the coming of spring, are now perishing in large numbers every winter when they migrate to the devastated land in Central and South America that formerly was majestic tropical rain forest.

Is this many-faceted ecocrisis a focus of awareness in our society? Hardly. In the 1987 State of the Union address, our president did not

mention the present and pending environmental disasters at all. When the opposition party was given response time on national television and radio, no one mentioned this absence in the president's account of our problems. When members of the media, female and male, commented on the address, the glaring absence of ecological concern, let alone ecological wisdom, again went unmentioned. In the State of the Union addresses for the previous 2 years, the story was the same, except for the president's brief tip of the hat in 1986 to the Superfund (ridiculously underfunded for the cleanup of toxic dump sites) and his promising the previous year not to grant drilling and mining leases inside the national park system!

That politicians, the media, and the public barely noticed the crucial omission in the president's annual assessment of our national situation is merely one indication of pervasive alienation from the realities of nature. A powerful industrial giant like us lives on *top* of nature, it is understood, free to do with it what we will. The arrogance and ignorance behind that deadly folly are being challenged to varying extents by environmentalist organizations and to a much deeper extent by a loose aggregate of movements whose members are sometimes called the "new" ecologists: ecofeminism, deep ecology, Green politics, bioregionalism, creation-centered spirituality, animal rights, and others. Their numbers are not a large portion of our 242 million, but they are carrying on extremely significant work, feeling their way out of alienation toward a way of being that is infused with ecological wisdom. *Something* connected those people with nature; some event or accumulation of experiences woke them up to the centrality of ecology.

In the case of ecofeminism, there are many paths into our rich and fertile garden, each with its own occasions for awakening. What cannot be said, though, is that women are drawn to ecology and ecofeminism simply because we are female. The very first issue of *Audubon Magazine* in 1887 contained an article by Celia Thaxter titled "Woman's Heartlessness," on the resistance she and other activists met in trying to get women to stop wearing on their hats the feathers and stuffed bodies of birds: "Not among the ignorant and uncultured so much as the educated and enlightened do we find the indifference and hardness that perplexes us . . . I think I may say in two-thirds of the cases to which we appeal. One lady said to me, 'I think there is a great deal of sentiment wasted on the birds. There are so many of them, they will never be missed, any more than mosquitoes.'" Clearly those ladies were team players, defenders of patriarchal, anthropocentric values,

which is exactly what we were raised to be, too—until we figured out that the game was dreadfully wrong.

Ecofeminism grew out of radical, or cultural, feminism (rather than from liberal feminism or socialist feminism), which holds that identifying the dynamics—largely fear and resentment—behind the dominance of male over female is the key to comprehending every expression of patriarchal culture with its hierarchical, militaristic, mechanistic, industrialist forms. The first tendrils of ecofeminism appeared not in the exuberant season of Earth Day 1970—for feminists were quite preoccupied with the birthing of our own movement then—but in middecade. Our sources of inspiration at the time were not Thoreau, John Muir, or even Rachel Carson (though we have certainly come to appreciate those beacons since then) but, rather, our own experiential explorations.

One path into ecofeminism was the study of political theory and history. Radical/cultural feminists who had been exposed to Marxist analysis in the 1960s as well as those who had gone on to study critical theory and social ecology in the early 1970s built upon the framework of dominance theory. They rejected the Marxist assertion that domination is based solely on money and class: if there is a universally dominated class, surely it is women. Experiencing and naming the inadequacies of classical dominance theory, which ignores nature as well as women, such radical feminists moved in the direction of ecofeminism. Another source of radical/cultural feminist dominance theory was the work of cultural historians who explored the roots of patriarchy.¹

A second path into ecofeminism is exposure to nature-based religion, usually that of the Goddess. In the mid-1970s many radical/cultural feminists experienced the exhilarating discovery, through historic and archaeological sources, of a religion that honored the female and seemed to have as its "good book" nature itself. We were drawn to it like a magnet, but only, I feel, because both of those features were central. We would not have been interested in "Yahweh with a skirt," a distant, detached, domineering godhead who happened to be female. What was cosmologically wholesome and healing was the discovery of the Divine as immanent in and around us. What was intriguing was the sacred link between the Goddess in her many guises and totemic animals and plants, sacred groves, and womblike caves, in the moon-rhythm blood of menses, the ecstatic dance—the experience of *knowing* Gaia, her voluptuous contours and fertile plains, her flowing waters that give life, her animal teachers. For who among us would ever again see a snake coiled around the arms of an ancient Goddess statue,

teaching lessons of cyclic renewal and regeneration with its shedding of skins, as merely a member of the ophidian order in the reptilian class of the vertebrate phylum? That period of discovery—which would certainly not have been news to primal peoples, but was utterly earthshaking for us Judeo-Christian women of a thoroughly modern culture—inspired art, music, poetry, and the resurrection of long-forgotten sacred myth and ritual, usually held out of doors, of course, often on the Earth's holy days of cosmic alignment, the solstices and equinoxes. They are rituals of our own creation that express our deepest feelings of a spirituality infused with ecological wisdom and wholeness. At the beginning of that period, ecology was not on our minds; since moving out of that period into activism, ecology has never left our minds. Today we work for ecopeace, ecojustice, ecoeconomics, ecopolitics, ecoeducation, eco-philosophy, ecotheology, and for the evolution of ecofeminism.

A third path into ecofeminism comes from environmentalism. For many women with careers in public policy, science and technology, public-interest environmental organizations, and environmental studies programs in universities, their initial connection with feminism was the liberal-feminist attention to how and why their progress on the career ladder was blocked. From there they eventually encountered a book, an article, or a lecture with ecofeminist analysis—and suddenly their career work was framed with a radically different meaning. Similarly, women and men who become involved with Green politics for environmental reasons discover ecofeminism and deep ecology there. College students, male and female, who feel that feminism was merely an issue for their mothers' generation and who enroll in an environmental studies course are often exposed to ecofeminist analysis and recognize a depth not present in their textbooks.

There are many variations of these three well-trodden paths into our garden, and perhaps other paths altogether. I have delineated them in order to acknowledge our diversity, which brings strength, but also in the hope that the social and political theory evolving within ecofeminism will address not only the interlinked dynamics in patriarchal culture of the terror of nature and the terror of the elemental power of the female but also the ways *out* of the mesmerizing conditioning that keeps women and men so cut off from our grounding in the natural world, so alienated from our larger sense of self in the unfolding story of the universe. If we look into this matter further, I think we'll find that many people connected with nature on a deep level through a ritual moment of awakening, or perhaps several of them. These moments

may have occurred in the context of spiritual practice. They may have occurred in childhood. They are the precious moments we need to acknowledge and to cultivate, to refuse to let the dominant culture pave them over any longer with a value system made of denial, distancing, fear, and ignorance.

The moment of awakening, however, is only the beginning. After that comes a great deal of work if we really want to transform patriarchal culture into new possibilities informed by justice, wisdom, and compassion. We have to be willing to do intellectual work—to explore the books and articles, the speeches and debates that contribute to the evolving social and political theory of ecofeminism. We have to be willing to seek a holistic understanding of ecofeminism, to make an effort to learn about the priorities and experiential wisdom of ecofeminists who came from paths different from our own. We have to be willing to pursue self-education in ecology since our schooling for the most part failed us in that, to read an ecology textbook, for instance.² We have to be willing to educate ourselves about the major ecological issues of our day and to understand the economic and political forces at work.

Extremely important is a willingness to deepen our experience of communion with nature. This can be done in the mountains, at the ocean, in a city park, or a backyard garden. My own life is a rather embarrassing example of how long one can be absorbed in ecofeminist intellectual thought, political activism, and ritual honoring of nature *after* the moment of awakening and still know almost nothing of the richness and profound depth of communion that nature can offer. Several years ago I was invited to a conference on bioregionalism and Green politics in Santa Fe and met the environmental editor of the journal that was then called *CoEvolution Quarterly*. We went for a walk, conversing all the while, and when we returned a colleague asked if the editor, who was wearing a large pair of binoculars on a strap around his neck, had seen any birds. "I didn't see any, but I heard four," he replied. "What?!" I thought to myself, "Four birds? On that walk? Just now? I didn't hear anything. Four birds?!" It was at that moment that I realized that, despite my intellectual and political understanding of ecofeminism, I was a tourist in the natural world. In the intervening years, I have gone on many birding hikes, which I love, as well as canoe and backpacking trips into the wilderness. Nature has given me gifts, teachings, and revelations, but none more intense than those times in the wilderness I approached in silence, simply observing and being aware of the sensations I was experiencing, until eventually I was enfolded by the deep, deep silence

and the oneness that is almost palpable. At that moment the distinction between inner and outer mind dissolves, and we meet our larger self, the One Mind, the cosmic unfolding. I feel that various intensities of that mystery are revealed to us during the postorgasmic state and during certain kinds of meditation and also ritual, but the grandeur and majesty of oneness I have found only in nature. A starting point for ecofeminists who are as backward in their direct knowledge of nature as I certainly was might be to learn about ten birds and ten plants native to their bioregion. The rest will come quite naturally.

All these kinds of work are the nutrient-rich compost that has yielded the vibrant flowering of ecofeminism today. Composting good soil takes time, and the work of ecofeminism goes back more than a dozen years. In fact, it goes back to a number of feminist writers (including Simone de Beauvoir in 1947) who mentioned in passing the attitudes of men (under patriarchy) to nature and to women and the connection between the two. The first conference to address this idea was "Women and the Environment," organized by Sandra Marburg and Lisa Watson at the University of California, Berkeley, in 1974. In 1980, spurred by the Three Mile Island catastrophe, Ynestra King, Celeste Wesson, Grace Paley, Anna Gyorgy, Christina Rawley, Nancy Jack Todd, and Deborah Gaventa organized a conference in Amherst, Massachusetts, on "Women and Life on Earth: Ecofeminism in the 1980s." Prior to learning of that gathering, Susan Adler and other spiritually aware women at Sonoma State University in California began planning a 1981 conference entitled "Women and the Environment: The First West Coast Ecofeminist Conference." In London, an ecofeminist conference called "Women and Life on Earth" was also held that year. The number of ecofeminist books and articles as well as running debates in anthologies and journals is far too great to cite here, but certainly *Woman and Nature* by Susan Griffin (New York: Harper & Row, 1978) and *The Death of Nature* by Carolyn Merchant (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980) were particularly important contributions. Both of those books were begun many years earlier, but they were immediately recognized as the ecofeminist classics that they are because so many radical/cultural feminists had moved in that direction during the second half of the 1970s.

OUR FLOWERING

So those are our roots. Today ecofeminists address the crucial issues of our time, from reproductive technology to Third World develop-

ment, from toxic poisoning to the vision of a new politics and economics—and much more. We support and join our sisters fighting for equal pay, for battered women's shelters, for better child care, and for all the efforts to stop the daily exploitation and suffering of women. But we see those efforts as bandages on a very unhealthy system. Radical/cultural feminism is sometimes called "big-picture" feminism because we examine the deepest assumptions, values, and fears that inform the structures and expectations of patriarchal culture. The reason we insist on integrating radical analysis with ecological perspective is best understood in the larger framework of the fate of our species and all life on Earth: *What is the purpose of cultivating ecological wisdom at this postmodern moment in human history?*

Our society is facing a crisis in agriculture, a crisis in education and literacy, a crisis in national security and the arms race, a crisis in the international debt situation, and a crisis in the state of the global environment. For the first time in the modern era, there is widespread agreement that something is very wrong. The assumptions of modernity, the faith in technological "progress" and rapacious industrialism, along with the militarism necessary to support it, have left us very lost indeed. The quintessential malady of the modern era is free-floating anxiety, and it is clear to ecofeminists that the whole culture is free floating—from the lack of grounding in the natural world, from the lack of a sense of belonging in the unfolding story of the universe, from the lack of a healthy relationship between the males and females of the species. We are entangled in the hubris of the patriarchal goal of dominating nature and the female. On August 29, 1986, the *New York Times* published a lead editorial titled "Nature as Demon," reminding everyone that the proper orientation of civilization is to advance itself in opposition to nature. The editorial advised that disasters such as "Hiroshima, DDT, Bhopal, and now Chernobyl" simply require "improving the polity," that is, fine-tuning the system. Such smugness, of course, is the common response of guardians of the status quo: retrenchment and Band-Aids.

But ecofeminists say that the system is leading us to ecocide and species suicide because it is based on ignorance, fear, delusion, and greed. We say that people, male or female, enmeshed in the values of that system are incapable of making rational decisions. They pushed nuclear power plants when they did not have the slightest idea what to do with the plutonium wastes—because, after all, someone always comes along later to clean up like Mom. They pushed the nuclear arms

race because those big phallic missiles are so "technologically sweet." They are pushing reproductive technology with the gleeful prediction that children of the future, a result of much genetic selection, will often have a donor mother, an incubator mother, and social mother who raises them—making motherhood as disembodied and discontinuous as fatherhood, at last! They are pushing high-tech petroleum-based agriculture, which makes the soil increasingly brittle and lifeless and adds millions of tons of toxic pesticides to our food as well as our soil and water, because *they* know how to get what they want from the Earth—a far cry from the peasant rituals that persisted in parts of Europe even up to World War I where women would encircle the fields by torchlight and symbolically transfer their fertility to the land they touched. Women and men in those cultures participated in the cycles of nature with respect and gratitude.

Such attitudes have no place in a modern, technocratic society fueled by the patriarchal obsessions of dominance and control. They have been replaced by the managerial ethos, which holds efficiency of production and short-term gains above all else—above ethics or moral standards, above the health of community life, and above the integrity of all biological processes, especially those constituting the elemental power of the female. The experts guiding our society seek deliverance from their fears of nature, with which they have no real communion or deep connection, through their seeming victories over the great forces: their management of the vast watersheds and forests of the planet and its perilously thin layer of topsoil; their management of the economics and daily conditions of people of color throughout the Third World (the so-called developing nations) and the Fourth World (the indigenous peoples); their management of "improved animal tools" for agribusiness; their management of women's economic status; and finally—so very technologically sweet—their management of women's birthing power, beginning first with control over labor and delivery, then control over breastfeeding (which the AMA almost succeeded in phasing out between the 1930s and the mid-1970s), and now control over conception and gestation, with the prediction that they will one day colonize the universe by sending frozen human embryos or cells for clones into space to colonize planets.

The technological experts of the modern era, with their colleagues in business, government, and the military, are waging an antibiological revolution in human conduct. The moral systems of Western ethics and

religion are nearly powerless in this struggle because those systems themselves are largely devoid of ecological wisdom. The crying need right now—if we have any hope of charting a postmodern, posthumanist, and postpatriarchal transition to the Age of Ecology—is for a new philosophical underpinning of civilization. We need an ecophilosophy that speaks the truth with great immediacy in language that everyone can understand.

That work has already been started by ecofeminists and by the deep ecology movement, many of whose pioneering members are philosophy professors drawing on ecology, ethics, philosophy, and religion. There has been little serious contact between these two movements, a situation that I hope both parties will work to change, for ecofeminism has a great deal to add to the evolution of ecophilosophy. The following are a few examples. Deep ecologists write that Western philosophy, religion, and culture in general are estranged from nature, being anthropocentric. Ecofeminists say, "Yes, but surely you've noticed something else about them, haven't you? They're intensely *androcentric*. And surely you've noticed that Western conquest and degradation of nature are based on fear and resentment; we can demonstrate that that dynamic is linked closely to patriarchal fear and resentment of the elemental power of the female." Deep ecologists write that our estrangement from nature began with classic Greek humanism and the rise of Judeo-Christian culture. But ecofeminists say, "Actually, it began around 4500 B.C. with the Indo-European invasions of nomadic tribes from the Eurasian steppes, who replaced the nature-based and female-honoring religion of the Goddess in Europe, the Near East, Persia, and India with their thunderbolt God, removing that which is held sacred and revered from the life processes of the Earth to the distant realm of an omnipotent, male Sky-God. It is in the Indo-European Revolution, not in the Scientific Revolution of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, that one finds the earliest sources of desacralized nature, the foundation of a mechanistic worldview." Deep ecologists write that the only incidence of ecological wisdom in Christianity was Saint Francis of Assisi. But ecofeminists say, "There were many other creation-centered great mystics of the medieval era, including Hildegard of Bingen, Mechtilde of Mageburg, Julian of Norwich, and Meister Eckhart, who said he learned much from the Beguines, a female lay order." Deep ecologists write that the well-being and flourishing of human and nonhuman life on Earth has value in itself and that humans have no right to reduce

the richness and diversity of life forms except to satisfy vital human needs. Ecofeminists agree but wonder how much one's concept of "vital needs" is shaped by the values of patriarchal culture.

There are also some philosophical ecologists who favor abstract schemes such as "ecological process analysis" to explain the natural world. But ecofeminists find such approaches alone to be sterile and inadequate, a veiled attempt, yet again, to distance oneself from wonder and awe, from the emotional involvement and caring that the natural world calls forth.

To care empathetically about the person, the species, and the great family of all beings, about the bioregion, the biosphere, and the universe is the framework within which ecofeminists wish to address the issues of our time. The problem of world population, for example, is one that attracts no dearth of single-minded solutions. The New Left claims that any population-control program proposed for the Third World is genocide of people of color. The Reagan administration cut off U.S. money for abortion operations in Third World countries and talked of cutting off support for contraception on the grounds that growth always brings prosperity—meaning, I suspect, that Third World fetuses are viewed as future markets. Ecologists point out that the Earth's ecosystems are strained almost beyond their carrying capacity and that a major collapse is imminent if human population continues to soar. Radical feminists say that any population control is patriarchal domination of women's wombs.

The reality that many Third World countries are facing is one with half of their populations under age 18, roaming shanty towns in overcrowded cities looking for food and work while ecosystems die around them. An ecofeminist response to this suffering would involve the following elements: (1) the health of the biosphere demands that the rate of population growth level off *everywhere* and then decline (with the exception of tribal peoples in danger of extinction); (2) Third World women have made it clear that they are not interested in contraception unless health and economic conditions are improved (studies have shown that when the death rate of children goes down, the birth rate goes down); (3) women at the regional level must be involved with the planning of population-control programs, health care, education, and nonexploitative small-scale economic opportunities; (4) the political struggles between indigenous cultural nations and the capitalist or socialist states that have been created around them (a freedom fight that accounts for 78 percent of the current wars globally, according to

one study) must be resolved so that the women of the ethnic nations are no longer pressured to have many babies in order to outnumber their oppressors; (5) governments and institutions must address the patriarchal attitudes that condition men to demand a large number of offspring in order to prove their virility—as well as the patriarchal attitudes that bring such misery, and sometimes death, to young mothers who give birth to a female under China's "successful" one-child-only policy.

It is our refusal to banish feelings of interrelatedness and caring from the theory and practice of ecofeminism that will save our efforts from calcifying into well-intentioned reformism, lacking the vitality and wholeness that our lives contain. We need to find our way out of the technocratic alienation and nihilism surrounding us by cultivating and honoring our direct connections with nature.

In my own life I have found that many of those connections have been long since buried. In thinking about ecofeminism recently, I remembered an event that took place 16 years ago, which I had nearly lost from memory. When my daughter was about 3 days old and we were still in the hospital, I wrapped her up one evening and slipped outside to a little garden in the warmth of late June. I introduced her to the pine trees and the plants and the flowers, and they to her, and finally to the pearly moon wrapped in a soft haze and to the stars. I, knowing nothing then of nature-based religious ritual or ecofeminist theory, had felt an impulse for my wondrous little child to meet the rest of cosmic society. Perhaps it was the ultimate coming-out party! The interesting thing is that that experience, although lovely and rich, was so disconnected from life in a modern, technocratic society that I soon forgot all about it. Last year when I heard about a ritual of the Omaha Indians in which the infant is presented to the cosmos, I waxed enthusiastic and made copies of the prayer for friends who were planning a baptism—but forgot completely that I, too, had once been there, so effective is our cultural denial of nature.

I cannot imagine a challenge greater than that addressed by ecofeminism. We know that we are of one fabric with all life on this glorious blue-green planet, that the elements in our bodies and in the world around us were forged by the fireball at the moment the universe was born, and that we have no right to destroy the integrity of the Earth's delicately balanced ecosystems, whose histories are far longer than our own. Around us we see the immensely destructive thrashing of patriarchal leaders *who cannot even name the pain and ignorance that*

drive their greed. In their frenzy, they push 10,000 species into extinction each year, a figure that is ever increasing. Can ecofeminism and the related grassroots movements heal those people, heal ourselves, and heal the planet?

Our society is lost and very confused. Perhaps the most effective strategy for us—and certainly the most difficult—is to lead by example: to contribute to the new philosophical base and to work in its new ecopolitics and ecoeconomics; to organize around the concrete issues of suffering and exploitation; to speak out clearly but without malice against those who further policies of injustice and ecological ignorance; to nurture the relationships with our colleagues, never feeling that we must ridicule and crush those with whom we disagree—but most of all, to unlock our memories; to follow the “body parables” of our sexuality; to cultivate our spiritual impulses; to act, as best we can, with pure mind/pure heart; to celebrate with gratitude the wonders of life on Earth; and to seek intimate communion with the natural world. All of these are the flowering of ecofeminism.