

FIRST LIGHT OR LAST THINGS ?

Attunement, Guidance, & the Human-Earth Relationship

By Keith Helmut

Here I recaptured the former beauty, a young sky . . . The memory of that sky had never left me. This was what in the end had kept me from despairing. . . . There the world began over again everyday in an ever new light. O light! This is the cry of all the characters of ancient drama brought face to face with their fate. This last resort was ours, too, and I knew it now. In the middle of the winter I at last discovered that there was in me an invincible summer.

Albert Camus
"Return to Tipasa" (1)

The first effect of cloud study is a sense of presence in storm process. Weather does not happen. It is the visible manifestation of the Spirit moving itself in the void. . . . Hardly anybody takes account of the fact that John Muir, who knows more of mountain storms than any other, is a devout man.

Mary Austin
The Land of Little Rain (2)

To the Range of Light and the Bristlecone Pine

When John Muir first ventured into the high country of the Sierra Nevada he was especially struck by the reality of mountain light. John Muir was a person of clairvoyant openness to the experience of landscape, and the extraordinary quality of light in the high Sierra ushered him into a profound experience of presence. He called these mountains "the range of light" - a name that has entered the language of landscape and now has deep resonance for all those touched by the experience of this high country.

Two months ago, on repeated mornings, I sat on a second story deck overlooking the town of Bishop California and watched the first light reach the high peaks and snow fields of the central Sierra Nevada range. The presence that accompanied those times of mountain light has stayed with me. In one sense it is as clear as the light itself, but in another sense it is teeming with a caravan of associations. John Muir, of course, but also Mary Austin, Kenneth Rexroth, and Gary Snyder - all poets of mountain light. And in addition, and in a category all its own, the haunting story of Ishi, the last of his tribe, who, in 1911 appeared in the town of Oroville, not far from where we are now meeting..

But the primary presence and focus of this pilgrimage was our twelve year old granddaughter, Julia. This week long adventure was a gift to her at a time of transition - a time when a kind of holistic learning is still prominent, but the details and complex significance of all the relationships that make up the world are coming into view. My wife, Ellen, and I were, of

course, eager to revisit the West and we had the good sense to recruit my brother, Harlan, into our traveling party. He is a storehouse of geographic and natural history knowledge from his many years as a cross-country trucker, and he proved to be an ideal traveling companion for us all, but especially for Julia.

We had come to Bishop to visit the Bristlecone Pine - a pilgrimage into the presence of the oldest living things on Earth. This was the primary focus of our trip and accomplishing this visit truly lifted us into an elevated state of body and soul. As for body, the Bristlecone Pine Forest we visited occurs above 10,000 feet on the cresting plateaus and slopes of the White Mountains - mountains that frame the eastern side of Owens Valley across from the Sierra. From these heights, the view of the Sierra range to the west is spectacular. To the east you gaze into the desert environment of Basin and Range country. To the south, beyond the flow of still more shimmering ridges and hidden canyons, lies Death Valley. While the body has a little trouble at this elevation, I am happy to report that the soul experiences no hesitation. Soaring is the soul's natural response, and among the Bristlecone Pines soaring was the order of the day.

The sun had set behind the Sierra when, after our first day with the Bristlecones, we turned from the mountain road onto the valley road and headed north toward Bishop. The White Mountains were shading into a blue-gray twilight. I pointed out that the Patriarch Grove, where we had spent most of the day, lay just on the far side of the two most prominent peaks coming into view - Sheep Mountain and Campito Mountain. Julia looked up at the mountains and said, "Really?! We were up there? All the way up there?" I said, "Yes, that's where we were." There was a long pause, and then she said in a hushed voice; "It makes me feel so small." I heard this expression, considered the experience from which it arose, and tucked it away in special memory.

The next morning on our breakfast deck we laid out the maps, of which we had, by this time, collected a good supply. To the south the range of peaks led on to Mount Whitney. Later in the day, from this direction, we would see dark curtains of rain sweep down the steep eastern face of the mountains and walk in airy columns up the edge of the valley. To the north, the upland terrain led to Tioga Pass and the road to Yosemite country - the spiritual lodestone of John Muir's mountain experience. We discovered that a day trip from Bishop through the Yosemite high country and on to Yosemite Valley could easily be accomplished, including a visit to the Tuolumne Sequoia Grove. Our pilgrimage would now encompass visiting the largest living things on earth, as well as the oldest. Although I had seen these trees fifty-seven years ago - when I, too, was twelve years old - I was struck, like Julia, into a kind of speechless awe as we entered the grove and came face to face with the first of these immense and towering trees.

We had planned our trip around a visit to the Bristlecone Pine and to now have the Sequoia added to our experience gave our pilgrimage an even more fully rounded sense of presence. From the open, mountain top light of the Bristlecone terrain, to the deep forest light, filtering through the Sequoia grove, there was a reality of presence that manifested in our souls. There is a particular presence in the life of each tree, there is a wider presence in the larger forest environment, all of which arise for us from the plenitude of Earth. And this is just a consideration of trees and forests. Think of what needs to be added with regard to a still larger experience of presence - the whole world of animals! And indeed, animal encounters graced our experience of Owens Valley and its mountain regions. Julia kept a log book of the trip which included wildlife

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sightings. Of particular note was a coyote that passed so close to us that we could see the distinctive look of its face, and the twin fawns that emerged from under sage bush cover on the slope of Tioga pass only a few yards below our vantage point. This is only a sampling of what this trip included, but enough of the essence, I hope, to illustrate a central theme of great importance.

Flying back to Birmingham, Alabama, where Julia lives, she was sitting with my brother. As we descended toward the city, Julia said to him, “The rolling green hills of Birmingham look so friendly. It’s as if they are welcoming me home.” My heart leaped when he told me this. For now it seemed to me that not only had the mountains lands of California provided a new perspective, but something like a new sense of landscape had also come into place. New eyes were seeing the green hills of home with new affection. What more could I have possibly hoped for from this trip? No matter how much we may travel, we all know that it is love for our home place that is needed to preserve or recreate the beauty and health of the living earth.

What is our hope for the future? In the near term, we know we have to do everything we can to move, our households, our communities, and our regional and national jurisdictions toward an ecologically sound human-earth relationship. Creating opportunities for children that unfold into experiences of Earth’s great beauty, experiences that help create a sense of ecological identity, foster love for the land, and develop an ethic of care for all life is an important aspect of this work.

Old Growth Air

As you might have guessed by now, I have a passion for trees - trees and forest land. When it came time our us to retire from the farming business, and pass our farm on to another family, we retained a 70 acre tract of forestland. So my attachment to trees and forests still has real grounding. I have always felt that trees were elders providing a kind of continuous silent teaching and good companionship. I have a place where I can go, sit under two hundred year old hemlocks and ponder our responsibility to this part of the Saint John River watershed.

In my study of trees and the literature of forests, I have found some especially interesting information - information that illustrates the human-earth relationship in amazing and significant ways. Here is one example.

In June of 2005 I attended the Annual Meeting of Friends Association for Higher Education at Haverford College. Those of you who have been to Haverford College know that the campus is something of an arboretum with a abundance of lovely old trees. I had brought with me a new book by Joan Maloof, titled, *Teaching the Trees: Lessons from the Forest*. (3) During a time between sessions I retired to the base of ancient oak and began to read. The first chapter is titled “Old Growth Air” and tells the story of the author’s visit to the last remnant of old growth forest on the State of Maryland’s Eastern Shore. Included in her story is another story. There are times in reading when I am so struck by a particular piece of information that I have to stop, close the book and follow my thoughts. This second story sent me into one of those times. This is what prompted my pause.

In traditional Japanese culture there is a practice called “shinrin-yoku”, which translates as “wood-air bathing.” This practice of taking time for regular strolling through old growth wood

lands, of literally bathing in forest air, has long been known in Japan to produce good health effects. Now we might think of this in terms of general spiritual uplift or psychic rejuvenation, but it turns out that something of a more holistic nature is occurring. For example, Japanese researchers have discovered that when persons who are diabetic go wood-air bathing, their blood sugar drops to a better level of balance. These findings are stimulating further research. Whole research symposia are now being held on the health benefits of wood-air bathing. Trees continuously exhale a range of chemical compounds and forest air is, in this respect, a very different environment than non-forest areas. The human body, as we also know, is highly receptive and highly reactive to organic chemical compounds. So when we go for a walk in the woods and say, “Ah, that was refreshing”, or somehow feel distinctly better, we may be responding to a much more embedded and holistic human-earth relationship than we realize.

Researchers in the Sierra Nevada, here in California, have found 120 naturally occurring chemical compounds in the mountain forest air, only 70 of which could be identified. Isn't it interesting to think of the great sea of relationships from which we have emerged, to which we are biochemically adapted, and about which we often have an intuitive sense of response? Wood-air bathing - a stroll among the trees - is one such response - a behaviour, I strongly suggest, that should be taken as exemplary of the human-earth relationship at its best.

Think of what it would mean for the design of human settlement, social life in general, and economic adaptation in particular if so simple a practice as wood-air bathing became a high level priority. From the standpoint of the present political economy, and a way of life keyed almost entirely to resource exploitation and the accumulation of wealth, such a priority seems quaintly bizarre. But I suggest that the destruction of forests that has rampaged across this continent, and is still going on, is far more bizarre. I can just barely conceive of a time, an economy, and a way of life in which this rampage would cease, the restoration forest land begins, and wood-air bathing becomes a wide spread practice of health maintenance and of attunement to the human-earth relationship.

Attunement, Guidance & Adaptation

Practices of attunement are critical for a sense of guidance. We cannot do without some form of this process. Ceremonies of all sorts offer attunement and provide guidance. For example, Quaker Meeting for Worship is a practice of attunement that results in guidance. The Abenaki first light ceremony is focused on attunement and guidance. Informal and spontaneous ceremonies are often among the most powerful experiences of attunement. Here is an example.

Many years ago I spent several periods of time in Mombasa, Kenya's coastal city. On my first arrival, I was told by a long time resident about an informal ceremony that occurred each month in the park on the bluff overlooking the old harbour. He thought it would interest me. Being of an anthropological disposition, I followed up on this information, and, sure enough, on the appointed evening a little before dusk a leisurely flow of people began moving along the streets toward the park. Eventually, a large but unusually hushed gathering of residents collected on the bluff. Some had brought folding chairs, some blankets for sitting on the ground. Children collected in little groups. Some folks were eating. Families quietly conversed. Time that seemed out of time gathered the scene before me. Evening light faded and the darker hue of night rolled in abruptly as happens in the equatorial zone. Then it came: Quietly, at first, then swelling softly

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all around - an expression of delight, with hands outstretched, was drawn from the assembly. “Ahhhhhhhhh” There it was! The crescent edge of the full moon rising from the horizon of the Indian Ocean!

Now I have seen the rise of the full moon on many occasions, in many locations, but never before or since have I felt quite the particular quality of communal attunement to cosmic beauty that covered this gathering.

It would be a fortunate thing to live in a place, and in a society that spontaneously created such civic ceremonies of attunement from the ordinary events of earth process, or, in this case, cosmic process. It is not that some cultures have practices of attunement and others don't. All cultures have them. It's just that some practices enhance the human-earth relationship and some don't. If we don't think about it and don't consciously choose practices of attunement that result in good guidance, we will likely fall into practices of attunement that for some reason seem alluring and then come under the influence of whatever guidance is implicit.

Think, for example, about the aura of attunement created by devoted attention to big time sports events. I am thinking, in particular, about the followers of NASCAR racing. Consider the attunement that accompanies such events with regard to the culture of automobiles and the ethos of power, aggrandizement, competition and domination, not mention the glorification of an occasional sacrificial death. Think, too, about advertising in general, and about what is now called “branding” - the imprinting of logos right into the psychic core in a way that makes commercial guidance feel really personal. Think about this riddle: If the persuasive voice of advertising fell silent, what would people want?

A key factor of our species is revealed in these considerations: Both individually and collectively the human condition is one of great plasticity. The human is a highly malleable species. We have great latitudes of adaptational response. This is both our genius and our curse. This is the context of both our goodness and our evil. It matters a great deal, with respect to guidance, how we direct our attunement.

Attunement and guidance is a fundamental and pervasive process that shapes and directs human malleability. Within a certain range of options we can respond to or even quite deliberately choose our attunements. My experience and my faith tells me that attunement to the beauty and processes of earth in all its various forms, is a program, as it were, of the human condition. We are highly malleable, but we are not a blank slate. We have not come from the void bearing no imprint of our origin. We come from this earth with earth impressed grooves of attunement ready for recording and with the potential for making a contribution to the music of a larger life.

First light or last things? Where are we on the spectrum? Are we on the dawn horizon of a shift in the human-earth relationship toward ecological sanity, or is our high energy, high tech adaptation careening madly into a crash of last things? I fear the latter, but I believe with all my heart in the former. And the older I get the more I wish to hold high the banner of this faith and recount the stories that give us reasons to be hopeful, reasons to see, in the words of George Fox, the “ocean of light overflowing the ocean of darkness.”

At the core of what makes us human the light of faith continues, sometimes a flaring forth, sometimes just a flicker. We all vary in this regard and may, from time to time, cycle through various permutations of faith. But we need, in these times especially, to reach the condition of soul that Albert Camus described as the discovery within, through the medium of light, of “an invincible summer.” It is to a further consideration of this light and its guidance that I now return.

The Light of Presence and Presence of Light

Quakerism has a well developed language of light. It is a central motif in our way of talking about presence, and about presence behind presence. This is not really as obscure as it may sound. Nor is it necessarily mystical. It may be mystical, but that is something extra that happens to some people. Presence is actually the plainest thing in the world if we are truly awake, if we truly understand - as Thomas Berry never tires of pointing out - that earth is a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects.

When the coyote passes so close we can see the expression on her face, we are in a situation of presence. When the tall walking rain comes over the mountain and down into the valley it is a situation of presence. When I meet Paul Stone, a Paiute artist, in his Bishop shop, and he tells me he really doesn't understand how he makes the images that inform his work, and then adds, “It's the gift of the Creator”, I am in a situation of presence multiplied. All around me are paintings, drawings, and carvings emblematic of his culture and its profound attunement to the creatures and landforms of this region. Every item, every piece of creative work is a real presence. And in conversation, the artist is ever concerned that we recognize the wellspring, that we meet the source, that we honour the presence behind presence. He sees, and wants us to see, his work, and the world around us from which it comes, in a certain light - the light of presence and the presence of light.

In considering our experience of light, we clearly have to start with the immediate reality of ordinary daylight, the reality of the relationship between our eyes, the sun, and the world around us. From the beginning of human experience, this earth, with all its various landforms and life communities has been the context in which consciousness, reflective thought, and spiritual sensibility have developed. The reality of light - ordinary sunlight - in which this whole story unfolds, is clearly our underlying and overarching context, the context from which all our experiences and expressions of light come forth.

There is a tendency in some forms of spiritual thought to see the human as a kind of container into which an extraordinary form of consciousness has been poured from a source completely beyond the world. While this view has a certain attractiveness as way of explaining human uniqueness, it has only speculation to support it, and its effect is often to produce a sense of aggrandizement, alienation, and carelessness about world around us. It is true, in the scheme of things, human consciousness seems quite extraordinary, but that may be only because we have such a partial understanding of whales, wolves, or even bees. The fact that human cultures have, from time to time, created patterns of adaptation and ways of life that are spectacularly at odds with earth's ecological integrity, is not evidence that we are of a superior spiritual nature. All the evidence places human emergence within earth process, and the light that has nourished this emergence, and which has found expression in our best understanding of presence, shines across

the entire range of our experience from the firsts hints of dawn, to the recognition of relationships, to the inward clarity of the soul at peace.

First Light Guidance: Before the Metaphor

So much has been written among Friends, and in the wider world of other traditions, about the place of light in spiritual experience and religious discourse, that I do not imagine saying here anything that adds to the richness of this layered dialogue. What has come to me, however, is a kind of sidebar that makes a connection I have found, if I may say so, illuminating.

In the part of the continent I call home, Abenaki people, who practice traditional ways, have a ceremony celebrating the coming of the dawn - the first light ceremony. Although this ceremony is also practiced by other Aboriginal peoples, it seems to have special significance for the Abenaki. Perhaps because Mount Katadhin is a sacred site, and its peak is the first spot, each morning, touched by the sun in this region, the first light ceremony has a special potency for the Abenaki peoples.

Over the past several decades Quakers in Eastern Canada and New England have had a continuing association with Aboriginal people of this region. The annual Atlantic/New England Friends Gathering, in particular, has been the occasion of this meeting. The Quaker sense of being held in the light, and our Native friends sense of atunement to the circle of Creation through attentiveness to first light, have created an area of mutual recognition and sharing. At the initiative of our Aboriginal guests, first light ceremonies, from time to time, have been a part of our Gathering. A sense of being present to the light and of being in the presence of the light have become a feature of these occasions.

A few years after becoming acquainted with the first light ceremony, I was engaged in a study of seasonal affective disorder - the SAD syndrome - in connection with a vocational training and supported employment program of which I was the coordinator. In the course of reviewing the research on the relationship of light exposure to the onset and treatment of winter depression, I encountered an interesting fact: Research findings show that exposure to dawn and early morning light has a distinctly different effect with regard to alleviating seasonal depression. (4) (5) (6) Compared to light exposure later in the day, early morning light produces the beneficial effect needed in a shorter time at lower intensity. Light received in the early morning hours triggers a higher level of bio-active response. Why this should be the case is unknown. But we do know that every bodily function, including those that are responsible for emotional and mental states, are directed and regulated by chemical signals produced in that part of the brain called the hypothalamus. The hypothalamus functions in response to the flow of light coming through the eyes. It is literally the case that every cell in the body is directly affected in its function by the ebb and flow of light. As organisms we have emerged within the diurnal rhythms of day and night and our entire state of being, including the mental and emotional states which cradle our spiritual life, are keyed to this reality.

Light, as defined by its utilization in the body, is a nutrient. It is an essential component of biotic functioning. In this context, to say that light is also spiritually nourishing is not just a metaphorical statement. It is a precise description about the unity of body, mind, and spirit. The intuitive sense of the importance of light that has been carried within human development and

spiritual aspiration, probably since the beginning of conscious reflection, has, since the 1970's, been given a map of the pathways through which this unity is created.(7) The scientific information on this relationship does not replace its intuitive grounding, nor reduce the spiritual to biochemistry. The effect is, in fact, quite the reverse. The biochemistry folds into the overall holistic relationship. Light is, indeed, the "closing circle" in which we abide with all creation.

The first light ceremony stands as a remarkably central practice for human well being. Imagine all those generations of Abenaki people, as well as others, who, around the fire circle, have offered their prayers of gratitude to creation, and then faced into the dawning of a new day. I suspect the recent scientific information about the benefits of such practice would be met by Aboriginal peoples with a tolerant smile, and perhaps the slightly teasing question, "How else did you think the Creator worked?." Nor should it come as a surprise to Quakers that the central metaphor of our collective spiritual experience has a grounding that truly unifies body, mind, and spirit.

Bearing Light on the Intimations of Last Things

Turning now to the last area of this exploration - the horizon of last things - I want to address the sense of foreboding that I hear increasingly expressed, and that I share with those who are carefully considering the likely prospects of the near term future. We hear less and less environmental discourse these days that includes the old line about "acting now before it is too late." Climate change has changed all that. The now measurable slowing of the Gulf Stream in the North Atlantic, and the implication of this trend continuing, is beginning to sink in. The destruction of forest land world wide continues. The people who know about species extinction are ringing all the alarm bells they can, but the capital driven growth economy continues to bulldoze and "develop" the ecosystems on which bio-diversity depends. Widespread distribution of hormone disrupting chemicals is setting up a biotic meltdown scenario - a holocaust like effect on biotic integrity.(8) Researchers working in this area of biology are extremely alarmed. I need not extend this litany.

It seems to me, and, I think, to a growing number of folks, that we are passing more and more into a situation that will include various zones and levels of ecological, economic and social disruption - disruption that may lead to various degrees of collapse. For some folks these are hollow words. They already live in a zones of disruption. For example many of the transnational corporations that clustered their manufacturing plants along Mexico's northern border are literally closing down overnight and without warning. Thousands of workers who came north for employment are now suffering this collapse. It seems likely that the strategists of wealth will try to target and contain disruptions and collapses in a way that their effects will fall primarily on poor, powerless, and expendable people - most often women. This is not new news. The enclave strategy is already in effect, but in the conditions of a globalized political economy and a global ecological crisis, it seems unlikely that it will provide effective protection for anyone against the cascading dynamic of interlocking systems collapse.

Peter Maurin, the prophetic figure around which the Catholic Worker movement first developed, used to say we need to "build the new society within the shell of the old." This, it seems to me, is still good advice on what needs to be done to cope with our situation. It's good advice even if the worst does not happen. There are many current and developing examples of

what this approach means in terms of food systems, housing arrangements, energy use, education, health care, social relations, etc.. Much good work is being done, and there is a lot of readily available information about how to proceed in various contexts. Many folks here can probably cite chapter and verse on the nuts and bolts of ecologically sound re-adaptation. Or perhaps, I should say can probably sing the tune and the harmony of the relationships and processes of ecologically centered living. So I won't detail this kind of work further at this point. Instead, I want to consider two aspects of our situation with regard to the kind of re-adaptation that will likely be required.

The Spectrum of Adaptation

First of all, most of what is being done is, necessarily, a kind of hybrid adaptation. In most cases our moves toward more ecologically sound arrangements are staged on a platform of currently conventional energy sources, materials, and processes. This is good; lot can be done by way of conservation. But this platform may, itself, be ecologically regrettable, and vulnerable to disruption and collapse. Here is a personal example.

In 1971 my wife, Ellen, and I moved from theory to practice with regard to our concern about food systems. (I had been teaching environmental studies and socio-economic development at Friends World College). We established a small scale farm operation that was keyed to local marketing. We sold everything we produced through farm markets, at the farm gate, and in a few local food stores. Our goal was to make a contribution to the development of a more sustainable food system in our home region. This included helping to organize and manage a new farm market. We were successful in doing what we set out to accomplish, but we were completely dependent on our motor vehicles to make it all work. Even at this small scale and regional level, we were hooked into a transportation system that was a major contributor to ecological damage.

A step further along the adaptation spectrum entails the deliberate creation of life support arrangements that operate within the renewable energy sources and recycling processes of biospheric integrity. This is more than harm reduction, this is attempting to cease harmful behaviours almost entirely. This is a very good thing.

However, the technology and materials that are needed to set up this level of re-adaptation in a modern way are still pretty much dependent on energy, material, and processing sources that are unlikely to be sustainable.(9) Another caveat is the fact that this kind of move is usually piecemeal, building by building, garden by garden, when what is really needed are civic strategies and programs to effect this kind of conversion for whole settlements, whole urban zones and whole bio-regions. Nonetheless, as much of this kind of re-adaptation as possible should probably be done by those who can do it. The more examples the better.

Many of the activities that are now undertaken, at any level, in an effort to put ourselves, our businesses, our institutions, and our communities on a better ecological footing, are still hooked into, or may depend entirely on biotically harmful processes and relationships. There is no way to avoid this. It is just a feature of where we are on the re-adaptation spectrum. This will change as certain manufacturing and processing technologies are shifted toward more ecologically sound arrangements. This gradualist strategy could, undoubtedly, accomplish good things. For example, tax shifting, enlightened subsidies, new civic engagement, energy

conservation, urban agriculture, basic income, local currencies could all help move economic and social life in an ecologically sound direction.

All this, however, depends on there being no major disruption or collapse in any of the essential life support systems. What are the odds? Is our sense of this different than it was ten years ago, five years ago, last year? Should we plan only to continue working within this scenario? Personally, I don't think so. This strategy does not accord well with the precautionary principle. I think we should stop engaging in biotically destructive behaviours as much as we possibly can, not prolong them on the expectation that some new technology will enable us to continue these behaviours without harm, or at a reduced level. Of course I am not in a good position to be preachy about this. I came here, after all, on jet airplane. And we all came to this lovely place by automobile. The ironies of our lives in this regard are positively haunting.

I had a friend in New Brunswick who had been asked by the Canadian International Development Agency to serve as a representative to the United Nations Environmental Programme in Nairobi. She was in a real quandary about this. One evening after the conclusion of our Sustainable Development Working Group meeting, she said to me, "Keith, how long are we going to continue flying all over the world trying to save the earth?" I told her I understood the problem, but that for now, and considering the opportunity she was being given to advance our concerns, it was probably the thing for her to do." I tried to reassure her that I thought the time would come when all this flying would be a thing of the past. That was twenty five years ago, and here we are still flying. Is there something wrong with this picture?

I truly admire those folks who have taken radical, consistent, and effective steps to establish life and livelihood in an ecologically sound way. Our homestead farm operation moved strongly in this direction, but our conscious determination to engage the food system at the commercial level made us a hybrid - a useful hybrid, no doubt, but something short of a fully consistent ecological response.

And further to this discussion, I would add that the adaptation problem needs most of all to be addressed in the villages, towns, and cities. Self-provisioning rural homesteads and communities are excellent adaptations, and will, no doubt, continue serve well however the changes ahead work out. But it is in the context of villages, towns, and cities that the major moves of re-adaptation must be made. For example, as a food system veteran, I see urban food production as critical for city survival.

Risk and Vulnerability

The second aspect of our quest for ecologically sound adaptation that I want to consider is this: Our current situation could come apart at the seams, it could snap, it could flip into chaos with the disruption of major life support systems - food, water, shelter, finance, energy, health care, climate, etc. We now have the example of what happened in New Orleans with hurricane Katrina. The hurricane experts say it is only a matter of time, based on the building pattern of meteorological conditions, until a similar, or worse, storm sweeps up the east coast of the US. And when it does, the storm surge will, for example, fill New York's subway tunnels with water. Almost every major population area in the US is vulnerable to the ramped up climate violence that can - meteorological speaking - be foreseen.

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I now manage an academic bookstore and every season for the last several years new books by medical and economic professionals have appeared that argue for radical action on the US health care system. They no longer say the system needs this or that reform. They are saying plainly that the system is broken, dysfunctional, and is setting the country up for disaster.(9) (10) The bird flu professionals are also saying it is not a matter of if, it is a matter of when.(11) Put these two assessments together and the imagination of disaster is really unleashed. And these are only two of many potentially disruptive events that can be identified.

I don't have a good overall answer for what Friends should be doing, as Friends, with regard to this situation. But I do think we must think about it. We must fully consider our situation and work toward a response. One thing I have been working on is trying to understand the psychological and spiritual dimension of the changes that may come. It is to a further consideration of this factor that I now turn.

The physical routines of survival do not stand alone. They are embedded in a world view that helps us make sense of things. If changes come that overwhelm our world view, we may be stripped of our ability to make an effective adaptational response. It is, therefore, critical, that our world view be based on an accurate comprehension of the human-earth relationship, and the adaptational dynamics that are in play, or will come into play as changes occur. There is nothing unusual in this. This is how cultural evolution works. The unusual aspect of our situation is the speed with which changes are occurring, and will likely continue to occur, even to the point of unmanageability - ecological, social, and economic disruption and breakdown

The difficulty of this situation is almost beyond imagining. If we don't know the extent of the changes that may come, we don't know if our world view will accommodate them and provide us with an adequate adaptational response. If we haven't even thought about this problem, we have little chance of effective response. If we have thought about it, and have run as many test case scenarios as we can imagine, we will at least be able to recognize the ways in which our world view may be overwhelmed, and be in a position to keep thinking about it. To avoid preparing in this way is to court psychological and spiritual collapse.

Does this seem strange, or just too extreme? I suspect many you have already been thinking along these lines. This is thinking about "last things." Not that life won't go on, but that the ending of a reality to which we have been accustomed entails a sense of "last things." The dynamic I have been describing is often played out in modern life at a personal level, and that is difficult enough. Imagine the difficulty when the scale and scope of an overwhelming change affects a whole community or an entire cultural group, or, in the case of climate change, large parts of the whole world.

First light or last things? I am a partisan of the first light story because I have no doubt that the potential of its guidance is always a reality. At the same time, I see no way of being a responsible person and not think hard about last things, and what may come on the other side of last things, of what may be required of us on the other side of any number of momentous or even catastrophic changes; changes at the level of our communities, our economic adaptation, and our general cultural situation.

A Witness of Light Over the Darkness of Disaster

In the realm of last things and overwhelming change, the story of Ishi has a unique place. Ishi was the last surviving member of the Yahi people who lived in the ridge and canyon country in this area of the Sierra foothills below Mount Lassen. On August 29, 1911 he walked into the town of Oroville and was given shelter and protection by the sheriff. He then passed into the care of anthropologist, Alfred Kroeber, who provided a residence for him in the California Museum in San Francisco. This is a well known story, thanks to Theodora Kroeber who published the book, *Ishi in Two Worlds*, in 1961.(14) This work of popular anthropology has become a classic. Less well known, however, is the novel she also wrote about Ishi and the life of his small hidden community in its last years.

On one level this is a story of genocide, a story of the complete and intentional destruction of a distinct people by the settlers and prospectors of California. On another level it is the story of Ishi and his adaptation, after the disaster, to a new and strange situation. The most striking aspect of this story is that, although Ishi saw all the members of his family and community either killed or die as the result of the settlers incursions, he had no heart for revenge. He bore no trace of bitterness or hatred. He exhibited a demeanor and conducted his relationships with others in a way that was described by those who knew him, as of the highest humanity. This is hard to explain. How could Ishi possibly come through the most horrific experience of last things imaginable without deep psychic wounding, without damage that would manifest in disabling ways, and with out resentment and hatred toward the people who had destroyed his people and his world?

We will never know the full answer to this question, but I have found some hints in Theodora Kroeber's novel, *Ishi, Last of His Tribe*.(15) She was thoroughly familiar with the Yahi world view and the cycle of stories that supported and expressed Yahi culture. She weaves these stories into her novel in a way that I find particularly instructive to my question. The novel begins in the years just prior to the disruption and collapse of Ishi's community, a time when the cycle of life still proceeded according to the seasons and still included the ceremonial recounting of their founding stories. On the night of first snow, the Yahi creation story is told by Grandfather with Ishi and his girl cousin, Tushi, playing the parts of different gods. It starts in the time of gods and heroes when earth was fished up out of a great ocean by the god Jupka. Jupka, together with the god Kaltsuma, then prepared earth in all ways needful for the life to come. The time of gods and heroes then drew to a close and they began to transform themselves in to all the animals, birds, and fish of earth. Jupka and Kaltsuma took sticks from the buckeye tree, blew smoke across them and they became the first people. Quoting from Kroeber's novel, the story continues:

"Kaltsuma taught these first people to flake arrowheads, to make bows and harpoons, and to build houses. From him they learned to hunt and fish, to make fire, to cook and many things besides. Said Kaltsuma to them day after day, 'Do this and this and this as I show you, and teach those who come after you to do the same.'"

"Jupka taught the first people the meaning of the moons and the seasons and what work and prayers and songs and dances belonged to each moon. He also taught them something of the nature of men and women and the rules belonging to the wowi and the watgurwa [the women's

house and the men's house]. *From Jupka they learned about death and the Land of the Dead, and all matters which had to do with the Yahi Way. Said Jupka, 'Listen and remember all I tell and teach you now. In your turn, teach these things to your children and your grandchildren. Then in time to come, the people will always live in warm houses; their baskets will be full of salmon and deer; there will be peace within the village, and between neighbors up and down the streams, with the creatures of the air and water and brush. The people will not forget their Gods and Heroes nor their teachings. In the moons to come it will be as it is now.'*"

"Jupka's and Kaltsuma's work was now finished; the time had come for them, too, to transform themselves, leaving the World to the Yahi people."

And here is what these great creator gods choose to do:

"I, Kaltsuma, Maker of Arrows, choose to become a little rock lizard. My hide will remind the People of flint, gray flint on top, blue and yellow and white flint underneath. I will sun where the People sun and they will stroke me sometimes with a soft blade of grass."

"I, Jupka, choose to become a many-colored butterfly. The women will weave the pattern of my wings into their finest baskets. And when I flutter over the hillsides in the time of green clover and the New Year, I will remind the People that the world is dambusa [beautiful, gentle] and its Way a good Way."

Now the really extraordinary thing about this narrative is that the chief Gods turn themselves into lowly creatures that are always at hand. And all the other Gods and Heroes have also given themselves into Creation so earth will be just the kind of place needed by the People for a good life.

The significance of this story as a founding narrative for a world view and way of life includes the following elements: The fundamental powers of Creation do their preparatory work and provide the skills and teachings needed for a good human life. The full responsibility for continuity and maintenance is then given to the People. The primary Gods of Creation become forms of common life that continue in immediate and intimate relationship with the human. They become real presences that carry in their forms reminders, on the one hand, of the technical means of survival, and, on the other, of earth's great and essential beauty.

Picture for a moment this sense of reality, this blending of the domestic and the cosmic, a way of life attuned, in all its ordinary details, to the overarching cycle of the seasons. Picture, as well, the sense that earth and all it provides for a good life comes as a gift. Imagine that in stroking a little rock lizard with soft blade of grass as it rests in the sun, you are enacting a story that has come from the beginning of your people. Imagine gathering acorns in a basket in which the beauty of your world and its way of life is woven into the design. Imagine a world and way of life that continually gives rise to a sense of beauty. Imagine living in a way in which beauty is the dominant perceptual experience. Imagine this sense of beauty as a pervasive presence, as the light in which life moves ever forward through the seasonal round.

When Ishi walked into the town of Oroville, leaving his home region behind, it might reasonably be expected he would have been a man broken in spirit. But such, apparently, was not

the case. From all the descriptions of his subsequent demeanor and behaviour, he clearly remained a centered and fully intact person. Photographs taken at the time he appeared in Oroville show a figure suffering from malnutrition, but with aware and watchful eyes. As he came under the care of Alfred Kroeber, and a home was made for him at the Museum, he amazed those around him with his powers of observation and quick learning. But most of all, it was his profound sense of dignity, his unfailing kindness in relationships, and his cheerful demeanor that was most often remarked on by those who knew him.

How could this be? How could Ishi have suffered the most devastating loss it is possible for a human being to suffer, and remain, not only a centered, well balanced, and fully functional person, but a person imbued with the highest and best qualities of humanity? Ishi remained highly reserved in matters of person, and, thus, we cannot really know his inner life in a way that answers this question. But we do know, through the agency of stories, about world views, and the way they center and focus strength and meaning. Through the knowledge of Yahai stories and the Yahai world view that Theodora Kroeber brought to her novel, and through her poetic intuition, we may catch a glimpse, beyond time and below thought, of what it is that sustained Ishi in his humanity and provided guidance through deep crisis and great change.

The glimpse that we may catch, and the awareness and understanding that emerges from this contemplation brings us to the guidance of a world view, a world view that centers the soul in Creation, and is suffused with presence, light, and beauty.

We may have hard times to come. Who can tell what disruptions, or even severe dislocations of life ways may occur? Whatever happens in this regard, the effect will be - or should be - to refocus the centrality of the human-earth relationship and of ecologically sound adaptation. If our world view is centered in relationship with Creation, and if we live with a sense of this presence, we will have the guidance of beauty and of the light that overflows the darkness to keep us upright and as helpful as we can be in the work we are doing, and in whatever work is to come.

Looking Back to the Task Ahead

From the days of my childhood in northeastern Ohio, I have had an almost constant sense of this land's Aboriginal past; and, with the understanding I now have, I would say, of Aboriginal presence. When I first read, Theodora Kroeber's book, *Ishi in Two Worlds*, I had already turned from the study of history per se to the study of ecological relationships in history. It seemed to me then, and seems to me now, that all the stories I have encountered about the human-earth relationship are knit together with the thread of ecological adaptation, and that the contribution of our culture to the human future should start with the best delineation and articulation of the ecological world view that we can muster.

As I have worked at this task as a practitioner on the land and in my study, the Circle of Creation has been the opening that focuses human reality in the most fully rounded way. This comes not from adopting any particular ceremonial practice, but from simple exposure to, and on going relationships with, the various forms and processes of earth. From beauty to endurance to discipline to patience and around again to beauty, all in the presence of light and light of presence. There are certain photographs of Ishi taken in the last few years of his life in which I

see all this in his face, in his expression. As he lay near death, Ishi's last words to Dr. Saxton Pope, the person who knew him best, were, "I go, you stay."

It is now ninety years further on in the human story - not a long time, but such changes! Here we are a small group of Quakers, not far from Ishi's home place, wondering about our task and what the Society of Friends should be doing with regard to the human future. Although, I imagine most Quakers have made the ecological turn in their thinking, it seems to me the Society of Friends, collectively, is yet to realize its potential as an evolutionary catalyst for ecologically sound adaptation. There is a natural confluence between Friends testimonies and the ecological world view which, if we fully develop, will serve to advance policy initiatives and practical projects that move toward a mutually enhancing human-earth relationship. Last things continually trouble our journey. But first light is ever dawning, and the path of fully responsive living is ever more well illuminated.

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