

Welcome to the back issue library of Context Institute's award-winning journal

IN CONTEXT

A Quarterly Of Humane Sustainable Culture

[CI Home](#) | [About CI](#) | [Back Issue Listing](#) | [About IC](#) | [CI Web Store](#) | [How You Can Help](#) | [Search](#)

The Meaning Of Gaia

Is Gaia a goddess, or just a good idea?

by *David Spangler*

One of the articles in [Earth & Spirit \(IC#24\)](#)

Late Winter 1990, Page 44

[Copyright \(c\)1990, 1997 by Context Institute](#) | [To order this issue ...](#)

For many, a spirituality of the Earth has quickly become equated with Gaia worship - but this, suggests well-known writer and holistic thinker David Spangler, may be a serious wrong turn. Gaia is the name of the ancient Greek goddess of the Earth, and as a name it was recently revived to refer to the hypothesis formed by James Lovelock and Lynn Margulis, who postulate that the whole biosphere may be alive in that the Earth's life forms are themselves responsible for regulating the conditions that make life on the planet possible.

Spangler questions whether those who would also revive the goddess have considered the possible consequences, and he sketches out a way of thinking about Gaia that might best serve both humans and the planet.

I recently was invited to a worship service and celebration in which Gaia was specifically incorporated as a source of spiritual nourishment and help. In ritual and song, the participants called upon the "Spirit of Gaia" to heighten their awareness of their connections with the earth and to fill them with love and compassion for all creatures and for the physical environment as a whole.

The idea of a "Spirit of Gaia" is definitely alien to the original Gaia Hypothesis as developed by James Lovelock and Lynn Margulis. Though it does conceive of the earth as a living entity, such a being, if conscious at all, has (in the words of Margulis) the

sentient "of an amoeba" - hardly the stuff of myth and spiritual invocation. On the other hand, the idea of a world soul, an *anima mundi*, a planetary Logos, is an ancient one found in both Eastern and Western culture. This world soul is usually conceived as a "formative force," an active, intelligent, purposeful spiritual presence at work in the material world to guide and guard the course of planetary evolution. It is generally not accorded the status of being the ultimate source or Creator but might be looked upon as a great angelic or archangelic being presiding over the well being of the world, or as the *gestalt*, the wholeness of all the lives and patterns that manifest upon, and as, the earth.

It is this tradition that Gaia reinvokes in our culture. However, a reinvocation is not the same as a reincarnation. The sense of a living earth enjoyed and practiced by earlier, non-industrial cultures grew out of living experience and a closeness to nature that our culture has set aside. It was woven into the fabric of life and culture. This is not true for us. Furthermore, the Judeo-Christian tradition arises from the semitic spiritual perspective of God and creation being separate and distinct, as well as from patriarchal social structures. In such a context, sacredness has overtones of authority, power, distance, and maleness that would have been alien to the spirituality of, for instance, the ancient Celts or the Native Americans, two cultures that incorporated a sense of the living earth. This means that when we strive to imagine the sacredness of the earth, we do so in a very different cultural context than did those who took for granted an immanent, accessible sacred presence pervading all things.

Can we simply adopt and graft on their notion of a living, sacred earth? I don't think so, at least not without distortion. We have to deeply think into and live out this idea in a modern context. Until we do, Gaia, the spirit of the living earth, is an idea to think *about* rather than an idea to think *with*. It is a novelty rather than a tacit assumption, and as a spiritual idea it can be superficial. It lacks the overtones and undertones, the deeper connections with our everyday life and with the mysteries of creation, that it possessed in earlier cultures. As an idea, it becomes a suit to try on, rather than a body to inhabit and live through.

In this respect, some current images of Gaia are to the ancient mythic idea of the living earth what a Disney cartoon version of a fairy tale, such as *Sleeping Beauty* or the current hit, *The Little Mermaid*, is to the original folk story. The cartoon is witty, bright, colorful, delightful, fun, and very superficial. It lacks the depth, the resonances, the hidden meanings and undertones of the original. The appearance, the *skin* of the story is there, but the bones and muscle have been removed.

THE "TOP LINE"

When we talk about the spirit of Gaia, the spirit of a living earth, or even of the earth as being alive, just what do we mean in our time? Do we even have the same sense of life, of what being an entity means, as did our ancestors? We are the products of a materialistic, technological, rational, male-oriented culture that over two hundred years ago set aside the medieval notions of the Great Chain of Being in which each and every life had a purpose, a place, and a meaning. The importance of the bottom line has made us forget that there is also a "top line" that gives the spiritual value, the *holistic* value, of

a person, a plant, an animal, or a place. If at worst the bottom line represents how entities can be exploited and used for profit, the top line represents how entities can empower and must be empowered for the good of the whole.

It is this sense of the whole as a component of life and of the individual as an expression of the whole that we do not have. We have a sense of incarnation but not of co-incarnation, of the many ways in which the fabric of our identities are interwoven and interdependent in ways extending far beyond just the human milieu. Thus our definitions of life become very reductionist, individualized, and utilitarian. What, then, does it mean to us to speak of the earth as a living being, not in a biological sense but in a metaphysical sense?

Accepting Gaia simply as a "return of the Goddess" or jumping on the bandwagon of a new planetary animism, without thinking through the implications of just what Gaia might mean in our culture, can lead to sentimentality rather than spirituality. It leads to what William Irwin Thompson's daughter Hilary calls "the Goey-Gaia Syndrome."

If Gaia is an important spiritual idea for our time, then we must remember that a spiritual idea is not something we think about but something that inhabits and shapes us. It is like a strand of DNA, organizing and energizing our lives. A spiritual idea is not just another bit of data to be filed away. It is incarnational in a profound way, coming alive only when incorporated (made flesh) in our lives through work, practice, effort, skill, and reflection. It becomes part of the foundation and the architecture of our lives. Being a new icon for worship is not enough. Invoking the spirit of Gaia is insufficient unless we understand just how we shape and participate in that spirit, and how we in turn are shaped and participated in by it.

DO WE REALLY NEED GAIA?

However, a deeper question is whether we really need Gaia as a spiritual image. Do we need another spiritual source, another presence to invoke? If there is a true Spirit of the Earth, a Planetary Logos, is it hierarchically superior to humanity? That is, does it stand somewhere between ourselves and God? If so, we run the risk of interposing yet another image between ourselves and divinity. Or if the earth is seen as sacred, just what does that mean? Why should the earth be conceived of as sacred simply because it is alive? Do we extend the same privilege to other living things? Is life alone the criterion for sacredness? Or does something become sacred when it is living and powerful, big and capable of doing us either harm or good? Does Gaia become a substitute for God? What would such a substitution mean? Does it bring God closer to us, or does it further muddy the meaning and nature of God, making it yet more difficult to clearly determine just what the sacred is and what our relationship is to it?

These are important questions, and unfortunately, exploring them in the manner they deserve would far exceed the space I have in this article. Still, they need to be raised. There is a strong tendency as new planetary and religious paradigms emerge in our time to affirm the sacredness of all life and of the earth as a whole. However, the object of this exercise, it seems to me, is not to come up with new images of divinity, but to

affect behavior. What we really want is to relate to ourselves, to each other, and to the world as a whole as if we all have ultimate value apart from utilitarian considerations. If something is sacred, it is assumed to have value beyond its form, usefulness, duration, and products. It is valuable; it is precious. It is worthy of respect and honor, love and compassion; it is worth entering into communion with. Its very being is its only justification; it needs no other.

As things stand, before we can manipulate or exploit something or someone, we must first devalue it, making it lower than ourselves. That which is sacred cannot be devalued, and by naming the earth and all upon it as sacred, we seek to protect it and ourselves from ourselves. Yet, if we must call something "sacred" before we can extend ourselves to it with love, empathy, communion, honor, and compassion - if something must be alive and have spirit before we can relate to it as having value - then we dishonor and devalue the spirit within us that sets no such preconditions. We devalue the meaning of the sacred itself, which is not a status but a function: it manifests when there is a sharing of love and being in order to empower, uplift and liberate that to which the sharing is directed. The sacred does not pick and choose what it shall love. It is love given freely and unconditionally, just as in the Christmas celebration, Christians honor the mystery of a God who "so loved the world" (even though, in traditional Christianity, that world is not "sacred") that He made the ultimate sacrifice of Himself through His only Son on that world's behalf.

Paradoxically then, we seem to need to call something sacred in order to make it worthy of receiving our highest values and noblest relationships, while in the Judeo-Christian tradition God appears under no such constraint, giving Himself freely and totally to creation whether it is seen as "sacred" or not. To bring sacredness into the world, should we not be more like the God many of us worship? We should not need to make either ourselves or the earth "sacred" in order to love it and ourselves and to get on with doing what needs to be done to heal and protect the biosphere.

Turning Gaia into a mythic or spiritual idea may be inappropriate or premature, leading both to misplaced concreteness and misplaced spirituality. On the other hand, Gaia can be an *inspirational* idea. Such an idea, to me, is like an enzyme. It is not important in itself except as it catalyzes a process. An enzyme is a means towards something else, a component of a larger emergence. In this context, Gaia would be an enzyme of consciousness, promoting and aiding a process of expanding our awareness in at least five areas important to our time.

The first of these is the most obvious: the idea of Gaia heightens our awareness of ecological and environmental necessities and responsibilities. It inspires us to translate theory and concern into practical strategies to preserve the environment and to meet ecological crises.

The second area of awareness follows from the first: Gaia focuses our attention on issues of *life*. It shifts our operating paradigm from a mechanical one based on classical physics to an ecological one based on biology. It puts the phenomenon of life itself back into center stage in our culture. It inspires us towards a reformation that produces a

culture that is truly life-affirming and life-centered.

Third, because the phenomenon of life as expressed through organisms and ecologies of organisms manifests more than the sum of its parts, it cannot be understood using solely analytical and reductionist techniques or modes of thought. Thus, Gaia represents an epistemology as well, a way of learning, seeing, and knowing. It inspires us to develop modes of thinking and acting that are holistic, systemic, symbiotic, connective, and participatory. We must learn to see the world in terms of patterns and not just positions and points; in terms of networks and lattices, not just centers and peripheries; in terms of processes, not just objects and things. We are encouraged to develop and practice an "ecology of mindfulness," to paraphrase Bateson, as well as a mindful ecological practice. It inspires us to act towards each other as well as towards the environment in ways that serve and nourish the whole of which we are all participants - in ways that are compassionate and co-creative, cooperative and co-incarnational.

Fourth, Gaia *does* inspire us to think of the spirituality of the earth and to explore an "eco-theology." Such a spirituality is important, for beyond ecology and conservation lies a deeper dimension of spiritual interaction and communion with our environment that is mutually important for ourselves and for nature. Within that dimension we will also find new insights into the meaning of the divine that cannot help but aid us in the emergence of a healthy and whole planetary culture.

My earlier comments are not meant to belittle or discourage this search, only to suggest that its importance warrants the best of our thinking and contemplation. We cannot simply take up the mindsets of our ancestors nor wear their myths as if we have not changed in the interim between their world and time and ours. We cannot *assume* the sacredness nor spiritual livingness of the earth or accept it as a new ideology or as a sentimentally pleasing idea. We must experience that life and sacredness, if it is there, in relationship to our own and to that ultimate mystery we call God. We must experience it in our lives, in our practice, in the flesh of our cultural creativity. We must allow it to shape us, as great spiritual ideas have always shaped those who entertain them, and not expect that we can simply use the image of Gaia to meet emotional, religious, political, or even commercial needs without allowing it to transform us in unexpected and radical ways. The spirituality of the earth is more than a slogan. It is an invitation to initiation, to the death of what we have been and the birth of something new.

Finally, Gaia provides a mirror in which to see ourselves anew. It inspires us to reflect on our own natures, on the meaning and destiny of humanity. Lovelock paved the way for this in his book *Gaia* in which he first presented the Gaia Hypothesis. In the last chapter, he suggested that humanity might be the evolving nervous system of the earth, the means by which Gaia achieves self-awareness. At a time when our society seems motivated by no higher purpose than endless expansion and the making of money and when humanity seems to have no purpose beyond itself, this image is striking and refreshing. It would seem to suggest a direction, a connection, a role that we can play in a world that is more than just the sum total of human desires.

Paradoxically, this image of humanity as nervous system is itself very unGaian in that it is not systemic enough. If by nervous system we mean the wiring that carries the sensations and thoughts of a larger being, then that is not a very participatory image, reducing humanity to being simply the instrumentality for the transmission and execution of the thoughts of the earth.

On the other hand, if by nervous system we mean the whole system that governs, guides, and controls the organism through reception and integration of sensation and the transmission of thought, then such a nervous system is more than just wiring. As modern medicine and biochemistry increasingly show, the whole body is an integrated sensing/directing organism. Glands, hormones, blood, circulation, physical structure, and interrelationships between organs play as much a role in structuring and transmitting "thought" as does the nervous system itself. Thus, to be the "nervous system" of the earth really means to be integrated with all the systems of the earth, from wind and weather to tidal flows and the growth of plants, from the ecology of watersheds to the migration of birds and insects from one bioregion to another, and so on. It means *being* Gaia in a way that transcends and enlarges our humanity. Just what that really involves is what we have to discover, but surely it goes beyond accepting without reflection pat slogans about Gaia and the sacredness of the earth.

I do not see Gaia itself as an image of human destiny, but it enlarges our vision of human purpose and activity beyond the personal and the local and puts it into a planetary and cosmic context. At the same time, the actions of Gaia are very local and specific, so that we are made more aware, not less, of our interactions with the particular places we inhabit. This is an important shift in our time.

Gaia is an important idea, both as a scientific hypothesis and as a spiritual image. However, I see it as a transitional idea. It is not so much a revelation in itself as a precursor to revelation or to new insights that can come when that idea is examined and lived with and given a chance to settle into our bones. Its meaning now lies in what it can inspire us to discover about ourselves and the nature of life, in rallying our energies to meet the needs of our environment, and through these processes of discovery and healing, to become a truly planetary species, blessed in ways we can now only imagine.

Please [support this web site](#) ... and thanks if you already are!

[All contents copyright \(c\)1990, 1997 by Context Institute](#)

Please send comments to [webmaster](#)

Last Updated 29 June 2000.

URL: <http://www.context.org/ICLIB/IC24/Spangler.htm>

[Home](#) | [Search](#) | [Index of Issues](#) | [Table of Contents](#)