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A BELATED RESPONSE TO GORE

Chris Roth  
Trumpeter

**Chris Roth** attended the National Audubon Society Expedition Institute for two years in the early 1980s, and has never been the same since. Footloose and rebellious, he has nevertheless settled down long enough to work on a Native American reservation and in several intentional communities, build solar cookers, practice organic farming, and found the Carsick Billions (P.O. Box 3678, Eugene, OR 97403) to protest our addiction to the automobile (see *The Trumpeter*, Vol. 11, No. 1). Contact him at: 80574 Hazelton Rd., Cottage Grove, OR 97424.

**Author's note** (June 1994): The past year, since I originally read *Earth in the Balance* and wrote the following review, has been a rough one for my opinion of Al Gore and his book. Its nadir came last fall, when an *Earth First!* Journal article entitled "Throw the Book at Al," and unfortunately bearing my byline, described in acerbic terms (only half of which were mine; the editors took liberties) the Vice President's apparent abandonment of his book's ecological consciousness, and the book return campaign that had been organized in protest. "It's hoped," I wrote, "that the receipt of thousands of copies of his own book will prompt the Vice President to reread it, and to rediscover the 'ecological self' that he seems to have lost due to Campaign Trail and Oval Office stress."

Reflection, however, has given me renewed appreciation for Gore's book, and renewed hope that, as we all aspire to do in our own lives, its author will have to compromise less and less of his insights and values in coming years in order to fit into the setting he has chosen. All changes take time; that *Earth in the Balance* was written by a successful politician is still remarkable to me.

And I still hope he reads this review. I've left it intact, despite the unconventionality of its humorless (but accurate) anecdotal introduction, which follows.

Several mornings ago I awoke with a tune in my head:

- Last night I had the strangest dream
- I'd ever had before
- I dreamed I wrote a book review
- That was read by Albert Gore

Though I still have no recollection of the dream it referred to, this tune has been so persistent, even annoying, in its domination of my consciousness ever since that I have decided to seek its source - to attempt to make the dream real even if heretofore it never existed - by writing about what I think it may have been.

Based on my first-hand knowledge of the psychology of authorship, I'd guess the subject of the review was *Earth in the Balance: Ecology and the Human Spirit* (Al Gore, Houghton Mifflin/Plume, New York, 1992/1993). This best-seller is on its way to becoming one of the most widely-read ecology books of our time, especially since the Senator's ascent to the Vice Presidency. Anyone concerned with the intersection of ecological consciousness and popular consciousness must take its content seriously.

And despite shortcomings and internal inconsistencies, it is without doubt a visionary, heartfelt book, much of it a truer assessment of the current human/earth condition than anything its author will get an easy chance to say in his present role. With the hope that the truth contained in *Earth in the Balance* will not be blown away by the "political winds," and that some of what I perceive as its errors can equally come to light and be corrected in the Vice President's and the popular mind, I am setting fingers to typewriter keys.

## Deep Ecology: The Gorey D. E. Tales

My initial impression of the book was far from positive, as I happened to open first to the page where Gore characterizes deep ecologists as making "the deep mistake of defining our relationship to the earth using the metaphor of disease, [a metaphor that] defines human beings as inherently and contagiously destructive, the deadly carriers of a plague upon the earth. Some [deep ecologists] are actually advocating a kind of war on the human race."

Certainly some deep ecologists have made misanthropic statements, but that as serious a student of ecology as Gore could come away from his readings with such a skewed understanding of deep ecology's essence is troubling at best. For every "Why I Am a Misanthrope" article in the *Earth First! Journal*, a "Why I Am Not a Misanthrope" rejoinder has appeared. Furthermore, species-cide would seem to be, even to misanthropes, an extremely uninteresting, dead-end foundation for a philosophy.

Gore seems unaware that deep ecology is a widespread, diverse, overwhelmingly life-affirming movement, with goals much the same as his own. *The Trumpeter: Journal of Ecosophy*,<sup>1</sup> one of the movement's major forums for discussion, aims to "investigate deep ecological philosophy as [manifested] in the activities and lives of people working in different ways to come to a deeper and more harmonious relationship between self, community and Nature," and to contribute to "the practice of forms of life imbued with ecosophy (ecological harmony and wisdom)." Likewise, *Talking Leaves: A Journal of Deep Ecology and Spiritual Activism*<sup>2</sup> seeks to uncover and celebrate what it means to be human in right relationship with the earth: its presentation of alternative, earth-conscious ways of seeing and being (many of them indigenous) remind me that it is our industrial civilization, not the human race as a whole, that is "fallen" and in need of redemption. Books like Dolores LaChapelle's *Sacred Land Sacred Sex - Rapture of the Deep*<sup>3</sup> explore paths to ecological harmony for us as individuals, as communities, as a species. Gore's misrepresentation of what I believe to be the most promising school of thought concerning "Ecology and the Human Spirit" needs, in future editions, to be corrected.

## A Deep Ecologist in the Making

For Gore shows himself to be a serious, concerned student of his subject in almost every other area. His chapters on global warming and climate change, ozone depletion, the population explosion, waste, degradation of water and soil, deforestation, and threats to genetic diversity are comprehensive, exhaustive (given space limitations), and uncompromising in their portrayal of the gravity of our crises. His "search for balance" in Part II probes for the causes of imbalance - in politics, in economics, in attitudes toward consumption, information and technology, in religion and science, and in our "dysfunctional civilization." He has his "blind spots" - particularly in the areas of religion, the military, and the "war on communism" - but even in some of these areas he makes concessions to a more holistic view. In the context of the larger picture he presents, his occasional errors of analysis in human affairs seem relatively inconsequential.

Like most deep ecologists, Gore traces our environmental crises not to a flaw in the human species, but to the techno-industrial developmental route that some members of our species have taken. "Civilization itself has been on a journey from its foundations in the world of nature to an ever more contrived, controlled, and manufactured world of our own imitative and sometimes arrogant design.... Mass civilization has led to the creation of impersonal, almost industrial processes for educating, employing, sheltering, feeding, clothing, and disposing of billions of people." Arne Naess could not say it better: "Our species used to flourish within the intricate and interdependent web of life, but we have chosen to leave the garden. Unless we find a way to dramatically change our civilization and our way of thinking about the relationship between humankind and

the earth, our children will inherit a wasteland.”

Ironically, Gore dismisses deep ecology in the same chapter in which he offers his most searching analysis of the roots of our disease. His insights into the nature of dysfunction and addiction deserve special attention: “Dysfunctional families enforce adherence to the rules and foster the psychic numbness on which they depend ... by teaching the separation of mind and body and suppressing the feelings and emotions that might otherwise undermine the rules. Similarly, ... our civilization secures adherence to its rules ... by teaching the separation of people from the natural world and suppressing the emotions that might allow us to feel the absence of our connection to the earth.” The result? “We internalize the pain of our lost sense of connection to the natural world, we consume the earth and its resources as a way to distract ourselves from the pain, and we search insatiably for artificial substitutes to replace the experience of communion with the world that has been taken from us. ... In psychological terms, our rapid and aggressive expansion into what remains of the wildness of the earth represents an effort to plunder from outside civilization what we cannot find inside.”

These observations exactly parallel those of innumerable deep ecologists exploring the psychological underpinnings and consequences of our lost ecological harmony. To counter any lingering suspicions that Gore the author may be a defender of the status quo - and in hopes that a similar “wake-up call” to Mr. and Mrs. America may some day, somehow, emanate from the Oval Office - I’ll quote one more failure to mince words: “We have constructed in our civilization a false world of plastic flowers and AstroTurf, air conditioning and fluorescent lights, windows that don’t open and background music that never stops, days when we don’t know whether it has rained or not, nights when the sky never stops glowing, Walkman and Watchman, entertainment cocoons, frozen food for the microwave oven, sleepy hearts jump-started with caffeine, alcohol, drugs, and illusions.”

## Technology, Information, and What Life Is About

Too many in the high-tech “information age” believe that the way out of our mess is through yet higher technology and more information. At least in Parts I and II of his book, Gore sees the fallacy of this approach. Our “technological hubris... tempts us to believe that our new powers may be unlimited. We dare to imagine that we will find technological solutions for every technologically induced problem.” Meanwhile, “far too often, our fascination with technology displaces what used to be a fascination with the wonder of nature.” Likewise, as “information consumers,” our mental lives have become more and more dominated by “direct experience with information representing the world rather than direct experience with the world itself.... We now face a crisis entirely of our

own making: we are drowning in information.”

We’re also drowning in information technology, with its own set of side effects. A personal story is relevant here: I recently helped out a friend by entering a mailing list on a computer - the first time with the exception of a few hours in high school 17 years ago that I had worked on a computer. After an hour-and-a-quarter I’d reached a renewed appreciation of why I have avoided computers and similar devices for so long: I came away feeling like a zombie, with my mind in a ”different world.” As an organic farmer, accustomed to staying intensely attuned to the natural world, its weather and other patterns - and since I had just arrived in town after an exhilarating bike ride through a thunderstorm - the sleepwalking state in which I emerged from the computer terminal stood out vividly to me (once I shook myself out of it) as the very opposite of aliveness.

Moreover I started to understand why most people in our culture seem to walk around with dulled senses, in a state of constant non-alertness, addicted, as Gore says, to the ”consumption of the earth itself,” and apparently oblivious to its wonders (which we are collectively bulldozing). It’s because the vitality has been taken out of their daily experience - their living and working environments have been deprived of life, replaced with what has become literally a ”terminal illness” - and they *don’t know it*, or can’t face the knowledge. The great tragedy is that, immersed in the ”froth and frenzy of industrial civilization,” most never recognize their internal emptiness for what it is: a loneliness for ”that communion with the world that can lift our spirits and fill our senses with the richness and immediacy of life itself.”

That experience of immediacy - of immanence - often requires the absence not only of advanced technological intermediaries but even of words, which, as Gore notes, ”homogenize and routinize.” In my experience wordlessness, silence, listening, and transcending language are *essential* to attunement with the earth, and during various periods of living on the land in relatively natural settings I have made a deliberate practice of shedding myself of ”verbal addictions,” opening myself to being simply alive, which inevitably leads to a more holistic rather than linear understanding of the process of life. Human language can stifle and limit who we are as beings just as it can inspire, liberate, and help us connect with others. Above the din of human-created ”information” we civilized moderns are surrounded with, all the voices telling us what (by the standards of a dysfunctional, consumeristic, self-destructive society) is ”important,” it is hard to hear the voices of other beings or of our inner selves, which only sometimes speak in words.

Al Gore, unfortunately, may not have much access in Washington, D.C. to the kind of wordlessness that can be found in organic gardens, unspoiled country, or quiet minds. His insight into the distortion inherent in the use of information and language could nevertheless be an important contribution to popular ecological understanding. (Of course this respect for wordlessness must coexist - in our modern world at least - with a respect for words and the realities they

do convey; escaping from important information is no better than drowning in the irrelevant type.)

## Apocalypse Now?

Gore joins many others in observing that divorce from our feelings and divorce from the natural world are one and the same. Accepting feelings means accepting the flow of life, the ways of nature, rather than attempting to control or dam them. Conversely, our civilization's morbid fascination with emotional and physical apocalypse, with figurative and literal dams that (though we like to deny it) will inevitably collapse under the tension of the life they are holding back (creating predictable destruction), is part of our fear of nature's cycles. Gore reminds us that some exploit the biblical idea of Armageddon to justify environmental rape and pillage: James Watt and his ilk expect God to destroy everything soon anyway. Far more inspiring, and more in accordance with what we observe in harmonious ecological relationships, is a concept articulated by Anishnaabe activist Winona LaDuke: "continuous rebirth."

Yet our escalating environmental crises can inspire visions of apocalypse that make "faith in the future" hard to cling to. Ironically, our denial of natural cycles, denial of change, and striving for steady-state homogeneity and "comfort" have brought us to the brink of causing some of the greatest, most humanly uncomfortable changes our planet has ever undergone. It is a testament to Gore's courage that he can confront our civilization's calamitous assault on the earth with honesty, grieve for it rather than deny it, and thus open the way to change and healing. Earth seeks its own balance: like our individual bodies, it can heal itself through the actions of nature and nurture - but we (if we are to survive this healing) must admit that disease exists and allow ourselves and our planet to be healed, which will mean learning the lessons of our sickness.

## The Cure Is Recognition

In Part III, "Striking the Balance," Gore attempts to offer cures for our disease, with many of which I disagree. Perhaps to maintain his political credibility, or because he himself cannot accept all of the implications of the information and insights he offers, he returns in his "Global Marshall Plan" to many of the false assumptions our dysfunctional civilization is based on. Making liberal use of military metaphors, he suggests largely non-bioregional, high-tech solutions, including schoolroom computerized data-collecting schemes, increased telecommuting, a national network of information superhighways, and underwater superconducting cables linking energy generation in the Eastern and Western hemispheres. In addition to the fact that these hardly appear to be logical or

even appealing ways "back to the garden," by definition any healing cannot be human-engineered: as Gore admits, we face a spiritual crisis larger than any practical problem we can figure our way out of, and we will truly have to listen to the voice of the earth.

The question the book left me with was: How much can we save the planet? And how much will the planet have to save itself? What if we allow the planet to save itself from our assumptions? What if we stop trying to dictate the conditions and course of our disease, and work with rather than against nature in seeing healing come about?

The conclusion I always come to is that either we must gracefully dismantle our civilization (which may be impossible), or it will disintegrate of its own accord, having started out with rotten foundations and then having fouled its nest beyond immediate remedy. Either we choose to lead simple, low-tech, earth-conscious lives (an option Gore pays little attention to), or the planet will make this choice for us - after a lot of suffering and addiction-breaking. We need, it seems to me, to stop seeking human-engineered piecemeal remedies, and to start radically revisiting the assumptions that have led us into crisis in the first place. Maybe "comfort," imagined momentary "security," distance from nature, and denial of life and death are *not* what we should be striving for.

One current scientific research goal is to find a "safe" substitute for CFCs, originally thought harmless but now implicated, as we all know, in ozone depletion. Gore supports this research effort. But we, and he, need to step back and first ask: what do CFCs, or CFC substitutes, accomplish? They make possible such things as modern refrigeration and air conditioning. What do modern refrigeration and air conditioning accomplish? They make it possible to keep meat and other animal products for long periods without spoiling, and they make it possible for people to work in offices, shop in stores, play video games, and ride in cars without being intolerably uncomfortable in the absence of shade trees or the natural coolness of bodies of water. And what do modern factory-farmed animal-based diets, and air-conditioned offices, stores, video arcades, and cars accomplish? Essentially, the ever-accelerated destruction of the earth, by people who are living unnatural, unecological lives in a manufactured world that keeps them clueless as to the source of their being or of the great spiritual emptiness they feel, ever-further divorced from nature, ever dissatisfied, ever-hungry for "more," and ever-chasing false promises of fulfillment.

What if all our grandiose creations, like glass houses built over a subduction zone, collapse? Put more simply: What if we no longer have refrigerators or air conditioners? What if we no longer have electricity? *Could we live?*

We did it for millions of years. And evidence indicates we and the earth were a lot happier. We knew what our lives were about. We knew what a miracle life is. We were not afraid of fluctuations, sensations, awe or wonder. We saw, correctly, the universe in a grain of sand, the powers of creation in a flicker of



torchlight.

The answer is yes.

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