
Dark Spaces Birth New Stars

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This brief response attempts to bear witness to Indigenous peoples' contributions, practices, and wisdom toward restoring the health of our common home, Earth. Climate change and eco-refugees of the twenty-first century are symptomatic of the earth herself in exile as destitute individuals find themselves amid diminished ecosystems of contaminated water, fouled air, soil erosion, pesticide, agrochemical contamination, disrupted weather, and fire patterns. Land and whole ecosystems have been lost. The Earth Cross reveals the suffering of the earth, the shadows of the times we are living. At 12,000 feet above sea level in the southern Andes of Peru, the Milky Way over Lake Titicaca is so brilliant that it also reveals the dark spaces that have been given names by the local indigenous peoples over centuries. Rather than despair, dark spaces birth new stars, new hope.

Laudato Si and the Amazonian Synod point to the growing movement to reconnect to the wisdom of indigenous peoples to restore and care for the earth. Indigenous knowledge is being sought after in the collaborative environmental assessment projects by western scientists. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada underlines the church's commitments to indigenous peoples of the land: to learn about the church's role in colonization amid the residential schools, to educate in order to prevent future spiritual violence, to work for ongoing healing and reconciliation as marked by Pope Francis' Penitential Pilgrimage in July of 2022. We need to be aware that the same colonizing forces that oppressed indigenous peoples have dominated and exploited nature.¹ Extractive industries in Peru, for example, are slowly corrupting the water sources of the *altiplano* (high plains) making it an inhospitable environment for a people who have lived there for centuries. Yet social protests by the Aymara and Quechua indigenous peoples and allies are criminalized. However solidarity is stronger, as indigenous peoples form a strong movement as Water Protectors knowing that *Mni Wicona* (Water is Life) and unite across the Americas, the world.² "Standing Rock is Everywhere."

1. Barbara Rossing in her keynote noted journalist Dahr Jamail's description: "Earth has a severe fever, and the global, industrial society built on growth, extraction, and colonialism is the cause."

2. In 2018, Yolanda Flores of DHUMA—(Derechos Humanos Y Medioambiente—Human Rights and the Environment) of Puno, Peru, participated in the Water is Life march in Washington, D.C. protesting the Dakota Pipeline.

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At a 2019 climate change conference, the Swedish youth activist Greta Thunberg connected with Lakota youth leader Tokata Iron Eyes who invited her to visit the Pine Ridge Lakota reservation in South Dakota, and jointly speak out in Rapid City, South Dakota, about climate change. They are sounding the bell to take action consistently, to not give in to the message that "it's too late." Rossing in her keynote underlines that "too late becomes another form of climate denial: both lead to inaction." Robin Wall Kimmerer strongly writes:

"Despair is paralysis. It robs us of agency. It blinds us to our own power and the power of the earth. Environmental despair is a poison every bit as destructive as the methylated mercury in the bottom of Onondaga Lake. But how can we submit to despair while the land is saying 'help'? Restoration is a powerful antidote to despair. Restoration offers concrete means by which humans can once again enter into positive, creative relationship with the more-than-human world, meeting responsibilities that are simultaneously material and spiritual. It's not enough to grieve. It's not enough to just stop doing bad things."³

3. Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and Teaching of Plants* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Milkweed Editions, 2013), 328.

During an Indigenous Theologies conference in Chiapas, Mexico, in January 2024, I learned that in 2014 the diocese initiated a Pastoral Coordination of *Madre Tierra* (Mother Earth) to focus on the rituals and spirituality, restorative earth practices, and defense of the earth practiced by indigenous peoples in the zone for centuries. “*Otro mundo es posible*”—“Another world is possible” is a common mantra in Latin America. Yet indigenous peoples affirm that “Another world already exists and her name is First Nations, Indigenous Peoples. Her mother is the earth, her father the sun, her house is the universe.”⁴

In Andean countries, the concept of *Suma Kawsay* (Quechua), *Suma Qamaña* (Aymara), *Buen Vivir* (Spanish)—which roughly translates Living Well in Harmony or Living in Plenitude—has been integrated into the constitutions of Ecuador and Bolivia. Valuing relationality, reciprocity, and connection—*Buen Vivir* focuses on how the elements of reality connect to each other in a harmonious way, and not infinite progress. Complementarity and cooperation, not accumulation, are valued. *Pachamama* (mother earth) has a limit yet can sustain abundant life. She has the capacity to rebound and restore.⁵

In Chicago, on the former footprint of a church building, St. James parish partnered with JustRoots Chicago to create a sustainable urban farm that provides organic produce for the food pantry and the southside community in the food desert, provides education and involvement about the earth’s abundance and how to care for her, where food comes from and how to grow it, creating lifegiving community in the process. Land acknowledgement recognizes the Council of the Three Fires, Kickapoo, Peoria, Kaskaskia and Myaamia peoples. This is a great example of a micro-initiative, “good trouble” for a healthy planet.

“Each of us comes from people who were once indigenous. We can reclaim our membership in the cultures of gratitude that formed our old relationships with the living earth. Gratitude is a powerful antidote to Windigo psychosis. A deep awareness of the gifts of the earth and of each other is medicine. It celebrates cultures of regenerative reciprocity, where wealth is understood to be having enough to share and riches are counted in mutually beneficial relationships. Besides, it makes us happy.

Gratitude for all the earth has given us lends us courage to turn and face the Windigo that stalks us...”⁶

Thank you, Dr. Rossing for helping us birth new stars, new hope with your keynote presentation “Kairos for Creation, Kairos for Mission: Hope for Our Common Home.”

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4. From a poster from Chiapas, Mexico.

5. Magdalena L. Trujillo, Ecuadorian economist specializing in feminist economics, solidarity economy and *suma kawsay*.

6. Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, 377.