



WONDER, RECIPROCITY AND RESPONSE: HOW HESCHEL'S DEPTH THEOLOGY PROVIDES GUIDANCE FOR ENVIRONMENTAL CHALLENGES

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ABSTRACT

Environmental challenges such as climate change, species extinction, and habitat fragmentation raise fundamental questions about human survival, meaning and purpose. Environmental and social activists, in living with these challenges navigate four existential tensions: the relationships between creation and extinction, hope and foreboding, wonder and indifference, faith and doubt.

Heschel's "depth theology" offers extraordinary insight into these psycho-spiritual questions. His notions of reverence, awe, wonder, reciprocity, and response provide activists and educators with remarkable spiritual support and guidance. This paper will explain why and how Heschel's work is vital for contemporary environmental thought.

The paper will be organized around various aphorisms and passages from Man is Not Alone, each providing guidance for personal and collective wisdom. These poetic, deeply philosophical aphorisms, serve as "mantras" of environmental awakening.

How I Came to Heschel

"To meditative minds the ineffable is cryptic, inarticulate: dots, marks of secret meaning, scattered hints, to be gathered, deciphered and formed into evidence; while in moments of insight the ineffable is a metaphor in a forgotten mother tongue." (75)

About twelve years ago, just as I was completing my first book, Ecological Identity, I met an intriguing rabbi (Steve Shaw) who was on a mission. He was determined to find environmentalists who were also Jewish, to gather them as a network, and to reacquaint them with aspects of Judaism they might have left behind.

One day, a package of books arrived in the mail, including the Tanakh, and other prayer books. Sandwiched between them was a copy of Samuel Dresner's collection of Heschel's aphorisms. I was immediately drawn to this volume, as Steve knew I would be.

The hardest part of writing a book is knowing how to begin it and then how to end it. I was struggling to find closure for Ecological Identity even though I knew there could be none. I discovered Heschel's beautiful and mysteriously poetic description of the ineffable. I now knew exactly how to end the book. I wished to convey that searching for ecological identity, the reflective awareness that links one's heart and mind to the biosphere required a lifelong engagement with the ineffable, and that such engagement ought to be at the root of environmental education, ecological citizenship, and spiritual growth.

Several years later I began working on a new project. I attended a conference on biodiversity at the National Academy of Sciences in Washington, D.C. Dozens of eminent ecologists and conservation biologists offered presentations describing the specific extinctions contributing to a catastrophic decline in biodiversity. I was struck at how these scientific narratives entailed stories of love and loss, and how the biodiversity challenge was both an ecological and spiritual issue. I was determined to reflect deeply on this challenge, to place it more broadly within the context of global environmental change, and then finally to consider the educational imperative implied by this challenge.

Simultaneously Steve Shaw was bringing me into various networks of environmentally concerned Jews. He arranged for me to join with a group of concerned scholars at the Jewish Theological Seminary. He introduced me to the fledgling organization COEJL (Coalition on Environment and Jewish Life). He invited me to take a hike on the Appalachian Trail with environmentalists and Jewish theologians, to be filmed as a one-hour television show. He brought me to several conferences of scientists and rabbis, culminating with participation at the Judaism and Ecology

conference at Harvard, organized by Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim. That is where I met Eilon Schwartz and Edward Kaplan, and it was ultimately what led me for the first time to Israel.

Sometime during that stretch, I discovered the great depth of Heschel's work. Prompted in part by Edward Kaplan's essay "Reverence and Responsibility: Abraham Joshua Heschel on Nature and the Self," the Heschel seeds that were planted earlier by Dresner's anthology, and my renewed interest in Judaism as a source for contemplating the spiritual challenges inherent in global environmental change, I was ready to more fully explore Heschel's work. Indeed, I recall asking Ed Kaplan where I should start and he suggested Man Is Not Alone. He also sent me a copy of his excellent book Holiness in Words.

As I read Man Is Not Alone and then God in Search of Man, followed by The Sabbath, Who is Man, sections of The Prophets, as well as Kaplan and Dresner's biography, I was reintroduced to Judaism in a remarkably fulfilling way. I realized that Heschel's work was extraordinarily helpful for understanding the broader spiritual context of global environmental change. Heschel's aphorisms reverberated in my awareness as meditative mantras:

"The aboriginal abyss of radical amazement"

"Indifference to the sublime wonder of living is the root cause of sin."

"Since there is a need for daily wonder there is a need for daily worship."

"Wonder is the state of our being asked."

"Faith is the fruit of a seed planted in the depth of a lifetime."

"A minimum of perception is a maximum of enigma."

I was delighted and challenged by the correspondence between Heschel's depth theology and the works of the great environmental thinkers I had been reading: Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, Rachel Carson, and Gary Snyder; and the stunning similarities with Thich Nhat Hanh's mindfulness meditation and socially engaged Buddhism. I knew, too, that these writers and my life long interest in Buddhism, the I Ching, and ecological thought prepared me for Heschel. I would not have been ready for Heschel's depth theology without my environmental pedigree and my overwhelmingly secular and ecumenical orientation.

I was immediately drawn to Heschel's phenomenological approach (his emphasis on direct experience) and his existential orientation (the impossibility of fully understanding the conditions of human existence). His rhetoric was filled with poetic resonance, metaphorical depth, and deeply layered meaning.

I was challenged by the relative orthodoxy of his Biblical interpretations and what seemed to be an extraordinary paradox for my own search for meaning. Could I justify faith in humanity without believing in God? Could I be enchanted by wonder and cultivate a reverence for life without a religious context? These questions, for me, remain largely unresolved.

However, Heschel's work served as a reminder to awaken, to find a space for wonder, to continue to contemplate issues of meaning and purpose, to dwell in the "aboriginal abyss" for as long as possible and have the faith and courage to do so.

I was fascinated at the convergence of Heschel's work with that of Rachel Carson's whose great, bestselling book of natural history, The Sea Around Us, an evocative testimony to wonder, was published the same year as Man Is Not Alone. The year 1951 was also one year removed from the year of my birth, written so close to my origins, and the earth that my generation was about to inherit.

Heschel and Carson are responding to devastating horrors and the threats of impending doom by writing testimonies to wonder. Both embody an ultimate faith in the human condition, one Biblically inspired, the other born from natural history observation and awareness. Fifty years later a new generation of environmental thinkers were grappling with similar issues. How might Heschel's wisdom, derived from Judaism, help us navigate these troubled environmental times. My second book, Bringing the Biosphere Home: Learning to Perceive Global Environmental Change, was an attempt to address that question.

So that is how I came to Heschel and Heschel is how I came back to Judaism and also how I arrive for the first time in Israel. I used this essay as an opportunity to reflect on Heschel, reapply his work to environmental thought, and to think about the various ways Heschel's work can inspire an environmental ethic for a sustainable future. I chose to organize this essay around Heschel's evocative aphorisms and passages, using them as a meditative tool, as an interpretive guide, as an experiential orientation.

Over the high Holy Days, I reread Man is Not Alone, entering pertinent passages in a notebook, one passage per page. Then as I would have time I would meditate on the passage and write a short commentary. Over the Thanksgiving break, I organized the passages into five linear themes and within each theme I created a sequential order for the passages. There is a linear chain of thought, but in the spirit of Heschel's work, I am intrigued at the numerous paths one could follow through this material. I conceive this as an emerging essay with an ephemeral linearity:

- The Planetary Challenge

- Wonder as the Root of Knowledge

- Wonder and Reciprocity

- The Need of Being Needed
- Faith as the Ultimate Response

I am trying to uncover Heschel's implicit environmental epistemology, inspired by a philosophy of wonder, exemplified through an emphasis on reciprocity and service, manifested through a practice of sustainable deeds.

I offer this without any special expertise about either Heschel or Judaism, but with a deep and abiding concern about the future of biodiversity and humanity's place in the biosphere, an aspiration to live a good life, exemplified through sustainable practice and ethical awareness.

THE PLANETARY CHALLENGE

“There are three aspects of nature which command man's attention: power, loveliness, and grandeur. Power he exploits, loveliness he enjoys, grandeur fills him with awe” (3)

How revealing and interesting that Heschel opens Man Is Not Alone with this comment. The essence of depth theology includes an environmental epistemology. Power lies within the realm of science and technology. Loveliness is communicated through the arts. Grandeur is the realm of philosophy and religion.

Heschel suggests that power unabated leads to destructive exploitation. Fueled by insatiable human needs, the misuse of power threatens planetary civilization. Power is mediated through appreciation. Loveliness enhances sensitivity and broadens aesthetic awareness. But loveliness is ephemeral and easily undermined by power. Grandeur transcends loveliness and trumps power. Grandeur points to that which is beyond the knowable, summoning the mystery of existence, alluding to the “aboriginal abyss of radical amazement.”

Recognizing, perceiving and ultimately responding to grandeur is the foundation of Heschel's depth theology and also at the core of contemporary environmentalism.

“The human species shows at times symptoms of being malignant and, if its growth remains unchecked, it may destroy the entire body for the sake of its expansion. In terms of astronomical time, our civilization is in its infancy. The expansion of human power has hardly begun, and what man is going to do with his power may either save or destroy the planet.” (209)

In 1951, Heschel observes the specter of unlimited economic growth, suggesting a metaphorical relationship between the human body and the biosphere (the planetary physiology). The concept of humanity as malignant is a commonly used metaphor for many environmentally concerned scientists. Heschel recognizes and warns that the human misuse of technological power (harnessing the force of nature) is unbridled, and if untempered will devastate the planet.

“Powerhouse, fantasy and department store make us familiar with the exploitation of nature for our benefit. And lured by familiarity, the invisible trap for the mind, we easily yield to the illusion that these things are rightfully at our disposal, and think little of the sun, the rainfall, the water courses, as sources by no means rightfully our own. It is only when we suddenly come up against things obviously beyond the scope of human domination or jurisdiction, such as mountains or oceans, or uncontrollable events like sudden death, earthquakes, or other catastrophes, that we are somewhat shaken out of our illusions.” (290)

Powerhouse (the energy infrastructure of the industrial world), factory (it's manufacturing base), department store (where human material needs are satisfied)—these places are the tangible manifestation of the marriage of needs and power. Our reliance on this industrial template becomes habitual (“lured by familiarity”) and filled with temptation. Indeed such habits of familiarity become an “invisible trap” as we lose touch with the earth that yields the goods. We feel as if we are entitled to the earth's bounty. The “invisible trap” represents our loss of ecological awareness, our false sense of empowerment, a dearth of appreciation and sensitivity. What we previously viewed as a common or even sacred is now an appropriation.

However, as Gary Snyder suggests, “nature bats last.” The power of nature will always override our technological illusions, presenting various unforeseen and unintended catastrophes. Does

Heschel envision and foresee that these catastrophes may soon be attributes to human negligence?

“The world is treated by us like a mighty oak from which children lap off twigs and boughs, while tourists carve their names into its bark.” (53)

Industrial civilization sees the tree as a powerhouse (use the wood as fuel, cut the tree down), a factory (package its limbs as furniture), and department store (make it your own by inscribing a monogram). We use the tree for our own purposes. We visit it so that we can say that we have done so. We transform it into our own image.

Would Heschel prefer that we hug the tree, to demonstrate our appreciation? On the contrary, Heschel eschewed nature worship as idolatry. Rather we reflect on the tree within the context of its existence, in its ecological and biospheric matrix, as the substrate of a deeper awareness of the sublime, and ultimately the divine.

Horrified by the discovery of man’s power to bring about the annihilation of organic life on this planet, we are today beginning to comprehend that the sense for the sacred is as vital to us as the light of the sun; that the enjoyment of beauty, provisions, and safety in civilized society depends upon man’s sense for the sacredness of life, upon his reverence for this spark of light in the darkness of selfishness; that once we permit this spark to be quenched, the darkness falls upon us like thunder. (146)

Similar to Rachel Carson (*The Sea Around Us*) Heschel suggests that it is a sense of the sacred that will prevent the “annihilation of organic life.” Similar to Alfred Schweitzer, E.O. Wilson and countless environmental scientists, Heschel knows that only a reverence for life will reverse the tide of its demise. Heschel’s theological challenge is synonymous and convergent with the environmentalist’s educational challenge—how to promote, prepare, and nurture such awareness. For Heschel this is the foundation of Jewish education. For Carson and Wilson it is the foundation of science education. Both paths lead to wonder, reverence, and an education for the sublime.

WONDER AT THE ROOT OF KNOWLEDGE

“As civilization advances, the sense of wonder almost necessarily declines. Such decline is an alarming symptom of our state of mind. Mankind will not perish for want of information; but only for want of appreciation. The beginning of our happiness lies in the understanding that life without wonder is not worth living. What we lack is not a will to believe but a will to wonder.” (37)

To cultivate reverence you must experience wonder. What does it mean to suggest that with the advance of civilization wonder declines? That direct experience is consumed? That we are no longer open to awe and mystery? That we are inextricably embedded in the pursuit of power?

Heschel implicitly attributes the sublimation of “appreciation” to the proliferation of “information.” A “will to wonder” is more important than a “will to believe.” Wonder is the condition that allows for the contemplation of the sublime. It is the prerequisite of appreciation and gratitude, the foundation of both scientific and spiritual inquiry. How then do you educate for wonder? This question is also essential for environmental education.

“How does it happen that I am using this pen and writing these lines? Who are we to scan the esoteric stars, to witness the settings of the sun, to have the service of the spring for our survival? How shall we ever reciprocate for breathing and thinking, for sight and hearing, for love and achievement? (39)

Here is a testimony to “radical amazement,” the mystery and miracle of perception, the awareness to have these thoughts and write them down, the overwhelming sense of the infinite, the ubiquitous and diurnal rhythm of a beautiful twilight, the splendid complexity of photosynthesis and the rhythms of the seasons.

Here, too, is the essence of Heschel’s challenge. We have the precious gift of human awareness.

How do we respond? The concept of reciprocation entails gratitude, action, and awareness.

“The ineffable inhabits the magnificent and the common, the grandiose and the tiny facts of reality alike. Some people sense this quality at distant intervals in extraordinary events, in every fold, in every nook: Day after day, hour after hour. (5)

Gary Snyder, one of the great North American poets and philosophers of twentieth century environmental thought writes in The Practice of the Wild that “the truly refined person takes great delight in the ordinary.” E.O Wilson, the great conservation biologist, in his essay “How to Raise a Naturalist” urges teachers and parents to allow children to explore the life that lives in the nooks and crannies. Indeed, much of environmental education promotes teaching the ecological awareness that links minute pools of life to the expansive biosphere, and to do so habitually, to find magnificence on the every day miracle of life on earth. Only when the learner discovers the ineffable in these quotidian moments will he or she come to revere the sacredness of life and the biosphere.

“Wonder rather than doubt is the root of knowledge.” (11)

Why are there trees at all? The scientist dissects and analyzes the tree. She describes its cellular structure, its biochemical processes, its evolutionary history, its ecological function, and its role in the biosphere. The artist sketches the tree, or photographs it, or writes a song about it, or uses it as the basis for a creative essay. In so doing, he encourages appreciation.

Both the scientist and the artist cultivate appreciation and in so doing magnify the mystery. Neither can answer the ultimate question—why are there trees at all? But they both bring us closer to the answer. The “why” seeks to provide answers to the unknowing that is at the foundation of human awareness, the original “why” leads you to the “aboriginal abyss of radical amazement.” We seek knowledge to resolve that craving. But first the craving must be there.

“As I enter the next second of my life while writing these lines, I am aware that to be swept by the enigma and to pause—rather than to flee and forget—is to love within the core.” (16)

Heschel urges us to dwell in the enigma. His sense of place leads to the infinite depths of such timeless dwelling. A pause starts with a glimpse of the sublime, spawned by wonder. How then

do you avoid the distraction of the next task? How do you elongate and amplify the pause? How do you meditate on it's meaning and live in its core?

In The Sea Around Us, Rachel Carson finds the enigma in the natural history of the oceans. Her sense of wonder leads to radical amazement. Read the last one hundred years of truly inspired North American nature writing, or even Charles Darwin, and you'll find the same impulse. The deeper the exploration of the natural world, the closer one approaches the sublime. The pause is the path. The aboriginal abyss is the destination.

“Everything hints at something that transcends it; the detail indicates the whole, the whole its idea, the idea its mysterious root. What appears to be a center is but a point on the periphery of another center. The totality of a thing is actual infinity.” (31)

The pause is a crossroads. Where do we go from here? In that pause you might contemplate the interrelationship of all things, what the ecologist may describe as interdependence, complexity or biodiversity. Ecologists also refer to variable scalar hierarchies, the idea that every phenomenon is lodged in a totality of processes that are scale dependent. You look to the scale above for context and meaning. You look at the scale below for causality and mechanism.

The Buddhists describe the networked intricacy of all phenomena as Indra's net. Each pause is a node in a network.

Whichever way you go (over, under, sideways, down) leads to the “mysterious root” of the infinite.

WONDER AND RECIPROCITY

“What fills us with radical amazement is not the relations in which everything is embedded but the fact that even the minimum of perception is a maximum of enigma.” (47) GSM

As magnificent as these interrelationships may be, as they engage our curiosity, our awareness,

our desire to know more, to uncover more depth and description, the thirst for knowledge will never answer our ultimate questions. The most astonishing “amazement” of all is that we can perceive the world. The great gift of human awareness is the depth of our perceptual capacities. This is the source of wonder and the heart of mystery—the contemplation, the glimpse, and the significance of this remarkable perceptual gift.

“The insights of wonder must be constantly kept alive. Since there is a need for daily wonder there is a need for daily worship.” (49) GSM

Heschel presents two challenges—remaining open to the insights of wonder and sustaining its perpetuation. How do you educate for wonder? This is a challenge both for the spiritual teacher and the environmental educator. For the spiritual teacher it’s sustaining daily worship—summoning prayer, cultivating habits of praise, supporting deeds of reciprocation and service. For the environmental educator it’s the daily routine of observing the natural world, not just to satisfy curiosity or to cultivate an aesthetic appreciation but to cultivate reverence for the biosphere and the life processes it supports. The core of the environmental concern is reverence for life. The “insight of wonder” generates such reverence.

“Indifference to the sublime wonder of living is the root cause of sin.” (43) GSM

The environmental educator strives to overcome indifference to wonder because such a lack of awareness and attention leads to entitlement, forgetfulness, distraction, denial, hard-heartedness, a lack of appreciation, a failure to revere life, and the destruction of biodiversity.

“Praise is our first answer to the wonder.”

Heschel presents both a spiritual epistemology of wonder and a practical, educational philosophy—a theory and a practice—informed by his “depth theology.” A deep inquiry into wonder goes beyond concepts, beyond linearity and ultimately is a glimpse (as unfathomable as it

may be) into the divine.

But how do you sustain wonder? How do you create the conditions that allow for the experience of wonder? And then what do you do with that experience?

The first response is gratitude, a sense of thankfulness, and gratefulness for the experience.

Gratitude and praise are simultaneous impulses. We compliment the magnificence of what we have experienced.

Ecological and evolutionary thought, earth system science, and Gaian approaches to the biosphere all praise the magnificence of biogeochemical cycles, tectonic systems, evolutionary pathways, biodiversity or “creation” as described by E.O. Wilson. Read any of the narrative texts of the great science writers and you will find ample testimonies of praise.

“Wonder is not a state of aesthetic enjoyment. Endless wonder is endless tension, a situation in which we are shocked at the inadequacy of our awe, at the weakness of our shock, as well as the state of being asked the ultimate question.”

“Endless wonder unlocks an innate sense of indebtedness. Within our awe there is no place for self-assertion.”

“Wonder is the state of our being asked.” (69)

Gratitude and praise require a response. Such a response engenders responsibility. Why is “endless wonder endless tension?” Our personal fulfillment requires that we answer this perennial human question—how do I resolve that tension?

The environmental educator emphasizes one’s indebtedness to the biosphere, to the remarkable ecological and evolutionary processes that yield human civilization. “Indebtedness” means to care for those processes. Such care is generated when “endless wonder unlocks an innate sense of indebtedness.” What does innate mean? That it’s nascent. Is such indebtedness an altruistic evolutionary impulse, a spiritual imperative—or both?

“Awareness of the divine that intrudes first as a sense of wonder gleaming through indifference, as a compulsion to be aware of the ineffable, grows, imperceptibly, like a hair, to uneasiness, anxiety, until it bristles with an unbearable concern that deprives us of complacency and peace of mind, forcing us to care for ends which we do not wish to care for, for ends which have no appeal to our personal interest.” (71)

The holy grail of environmental education is an understanding of what motivates people to care about the ecosystem, and then how you cultivate that ethic of care. Why should anyone care about biodiversity, habitat fragmentation, or climate destabilization? Why should anyone care about plants or animals that she or he has never seen or heard of? Why should anyone care about the state of the planet in fifty, one hundred, one thousand, or ten thousand years? Practical responses such as insuring the survival of the human species don’t go deep enough. They are merely economic forms of altruism—practical, but not enduring. Heschel suggests that awareness of the divine is the source of a more enduring spiritual altruism.

“Citizens of two realms, we all must sustain a dual allegiance: we sense the ineffable in one realm, we name and exploit reality in another. Between the two we set up a system of references, but we can never fill the gap. They are as far and as close to each other as time and calendar, as violin and melody, as life and what lies beyond the last breath.” (8)

This endless tension is implicit in the human condition, perhaps a tension that can never be completely resolved. As “citizens of two realms” we face a complex politics. On the one hand we are challenged by a spiritual imperative that can never be fully understood or analyzed, that goes to the deepest core of our living awareness. On the other hand we are physiological organisms that must live from day to day that must “name and exploit reality” in order to consume, survive, and procreate. They are irreconcilable systems of reference. Yet we must learn to navigate these realms and to do so in such a way that we can live in both worlds knowing that they cannot ever completely meet. Perhaps we gain guidance by acknowledging this dual allegiance, knowing that it can never be fully reconciled or transcended. We contemplate their modulation as we perceive and explore the ways that the two worlds inform each other.

“Most of our attention is given to the expedient, to that which is conducive to our advantage and

which would enable us to exploit the resources of our planet.”

We go out to meet the world not only by way of expediency but also by the way of wonder. In the first we accumulate information in order to dominate; in the second we deepen our appreciation in order to respond.”

Power is the language of expediency; poetry the language of wonder.” (36)

If we are compelled to both dominate and respond, then where is the middle ground? Can poetry temper power? Can appreciation contain expediency? Heschel implies that the world is out of balance. We yield too easily to expedience. That is the essence of the environmental critique as well.

Sustainability holds promise as the common ground between the two worlds. It proposes an ethic of care that balances wonder and expedience through a deep appreciation of the precarious balance of the biosphere, while respecting the human need to use materials and energy. This middle ground, this balance is the special responsibility of humanity in the twenty-first century.

THE NEED OF BEING NEEDED

“Needs, then are man’s system of communication with his inside and outside world. They report to his consciousness the necessities of living, but they also determine the aims he selects for planning and action. Things around him in the world often, though not always, remain outside his ken, until they become objects of his needs.”

“They are the crossroads of internal and external life. It is, therefore, through an analysis of needs that we should approach the problem of living.” (181)

Sustainability represents for the environmentalist what needs represents for depth theology. The common ground of both concepts is a crossover point for the practical meeting of religion and ecology. Thoreau’s great aspiration was to address the problem of needs from both an ecological and spiritual point of view. His suggestions regarding needs, virtue, character, and living the good life, are the nineteenth century foundation for environmental philosophy and psychology.

Thoreau's path of observing the natural world, living simply, and living a life of principle and meaning became a template for many generations of environmental thinkers.

Rampant consumerism easily overwhelms Thoreauvian aspirations. A penetrating environmental ethic inevitably entails a critique of consumerism. Ecological (green) living is at the core of environmental awareness. Environmentalists are often the object of public criticism, and sometimes scorn, because in addressing the problem of needs, they often suggest a solution of simple living.

That is why sustainability is such an interesting leading edge of environmentalism. Just as the problem of needs serves to balance man's internal and external life, so does sustainability seek to balance the human use of energy and resources with the bigger question of how to live in the biosphere, how to care for the great fellowship of beings.

Sustainability addresses ecological and economic efficiency (the external world) in relationship to individual and collective decisions about how we choose to live (the internal world) on the planet.

“Potential needs come and go, but one anxiety remains: am I needed?” (193)

Extending the sustainability metaphor, the most enduring need, the most “responsive” need, the most “timeless” need, the best balance of internal and external worlds is to establish a reciprocal relationship between them. A response conveys reciprocation. Heschel suggests that the vital and enduring need is “the need to be needed.” For Heschel, the reciprocal relationship is between God and man. For the sustainability advocate, the reciprocal relationship is between the human organism and the biosphere. To engage in this reciprocation requires a belief on God or identification with the biosphere. Can we say that both God and the biosphere need us? Do such beliefs and/or identifications begin to alleviate the overriding anxiety?

“What is the lasting in our own lives? What remains constant through all changes? The body grows and decays, the passions all flow down the stream of oblivion. What does a man, looking back on the threshold of death, consider lasting in all that has happened and passed? Is it our will to live? Our reflective concern? (203)

What is the lasting in your life? Is it knowing that you are making a difference, and if so, whom are you making a difference for? Is it promoting, projecting, or protecting a legacy, and if so, what is that legacy. What purpose does it serve? Is it the knowledge that you have lived your life well, and if so, how do you assess that?

Heschel suggests that the “lasting” is fulfilling your obligation to those who most need you. If it is God who needs you, how have you served him? If it is the biosphere that needs you, how have you served it? If it is your community or family, how have you served them? Being needed may be addressed in any of these ways and it is also contextual, changing with the circumstances of your time and place, your voice and contribution. For Heschel the most fulfilling need is to serve God. For E.O. Wilson it is to serve “creation” or his interpretation of biodiversity.

“Our needs are temporal, while our being needed is lasting.”

“But who is in need of man? Nature? Do the mountains stand in need of our poems? Would the stars fade away if astronomers ceased to exist? The earth can get along without the aid of the human species. Nature is replete with opportunity to satisfy all of our needs except one—the need of being needed.” (213)

From the very long, deep time perspective, the planet does not need humanity. We are late arrivals on the scene and we will one day be gone. Perhaps humans are merely an extraordinary geological and biological force, capable of causing a mass extinction, on the order of a crashing comet, or shifting continental plates, and after our impact, the planet will eventually be restored to the next wave of a flourishing biodiversity. But in the shorter-term time frame, on the order of hundreds of thousands of years, the biosphere needs a responsive humanity, to steward God’s creation (if that is how you conceive it), to “manage” for biodiversity, and to preserve the great fellowship of species. This is the ultimate planetary need (as described by E.O. Wilson). Humans

are needed by the biosphere to reverse the catastrophic changes they have unleashed.

“Judaism teaches us how even the gratification of animal needs can be an act of sanctification. The enjoyment of food may be a way of purification. Something of my soul may be drowned in a glass of water, when its content is gulped down as if nothing in the world mattered except my thirst.” (267)

Judaism is a theology of the common deed, of the trivialities of life, dealing not so much with the training for the exceptional as with the management of the trivial.” (271)

Here again Heschel meets Thoreau, in the common emphasis on the sanctification of daily life practices. Here, too, is where Judaism meets sustainability, in the profound awareness of eating food, drinking water, using the materials and energy of the earth, knowing where things come from, both spiritually and ecologically, and acknowledging gratitude through prayer. Daily wonder is openness to the miracle of sustaining life. Daily worship is a statement of gratitude and response.

FAITH AS THE ULTIMATE RESPONDS

“Gloom implies that man thinks he has a right to a better, more pleasing world. Gloom is a refusal, not an offer; a snub, not an appreciation; a retreat instead of a pursuit. Gloom’s roots are in pretentiousness, fastidiousness, and a disregard of the good.” (288)

At the end of the road, at the pinnacle of consumer society, at the highest rung of entitlement, ego, and selfishness, when you are finally stripped bare, you look in the mirror at a narcissistic reflection. You can never have enough. You can never be filled up. Things are never good enough. You think you have a right to a “better, more pleasing world.” You have refused the gift of human awareness; you have declined appreciation and gratitude. You have personalized your relationship to the world and you can’t see beyond your own needs.

Pretense is the triumph of authenticity. Fastidiousness is a misplaced emphasis on order, like rearranging the chairs on the Titanic. We are all subject to the dark, selfish shadow of gloom.

How do we prevent this condition from arising?

“How to live in a world pestered with lies and remain unpolluted, how not to be stricken with despair, not to flee but to fight and succeed in keeping the soul unsoiled and even aid in purifying the world?” (179)

How do you overcome foreboding, the nagging worry that something dreadful is about to happen? Hope is the antidote. Hope retains a purity of intention, gathering faith in the human prospect, a belief in the potential of goodness in the face of all that can go wrong.

How to overcome indifference, the uncaring selfishness that often pervades daily life, the dull routinization of making it through the day? Wonder is the antidote. Wonder retains the purity of radical amazement, the great delight in the ordinary, the appreciation for what is right in front of you, the reverence for life, the gratitude for perceptual awareness.

How to overcome doubt, the nagging worry that you are not good enough, or that there is no solution to your most vexing problem, or that you can't trust anyone? Faith is the antidote. Faith requires an unabiding commitment to service and selflessness, in praise of something beyond yourself, in recognition of the pause that provides you with a glimpse of the sublime. Faith recognizes the depth of goodness residing in your heart, and its collective expression throughout the history of humanity.

“Faith will come to him who Passionately yearns for ultimate meaning, who is alert to the sublime dignity of being, who is alive to the marvel of matter, to the unbelievable core within the known, evident, concrete.” (89)

Faith “will come” suggests that it is cumulative and subtle, gathered from the seeds of your life, cultivated and nurtured as a patient practice, a constant reminder, a routine of daily worship, a discipline, an openness, a growing awareness, an educational process. I am convinced that these qualities and attributes reflect the spirit of environmental educators, and it's resplendent in the text of contemporary nature writing, in service to restoring biodiversity and ecological integrity.

“Many of us are willing to embark upon any adventure, except to go into stillness and to wait, to

place all the wealth of wisdom in the secrecy of the soil, to sow our own soul for a seed in that tract of land allocated to every life which we call time—and to let the soul grow beyond itself. Faith is the fruit of a seed planted in the depth of a lifetime.” (88)

Faith is both a meditative practice (“to go into stillness”) and an observational awareness (“the wait”). The cultivation of faith occurs at the living moment when space and time converge. In this place you wait and contemplate eternity, from the awareness of the ever present now. It is a way to link your place on earth to the vastness of the biosphere and to do so through the cumulative practice of everyday life. The gardening metaphor neatly links Heschel’s depth theology with the environmental educator’s reflective practice.

“Memory is the soul’s witness to the capricious mind.” (162)

“That only is valuable in our experience which is worth remembering. Remembrance is the touchstone of all action.” (162)

“Recollection is a holy act: we sanctify the present by remembering the past.” (163)

“There is a slow and silent stream at the shore of human history.” (163)

I interpret memory, remembrance and recollection within two contexts, as the sanctification of goodness within the stream of human history, and in a broader ecological/evolutionary framework, as humanity’s connection to its deep ancestry, emerging from the evolving biosphere and the depths of planetary time—the evolutionary memory of the aboriginal abyss.

We have reached an ecological crossroads, a planetary tipping point. The “slow and silent stream at the shore of human history” represents the biosphere that sustains all life on the planet. The rising seas, the melting Arctic ice cap, the forces of climate destabilization are reminders that humans embody the collective memory of the biosphere. Our survival, and the survival of countless species depends on our ability to investigate that memory, and learn as much as we can about the ecological and evolutionary history of the planet, as preparation for practicing global stewardship. Such “remembrance” is a holy act for our times.

“There is a collective memory of God in the human spirit, and it is this memory of which we partake in our faith.” (161)

Is there also a collective memory of the biosphere in the human organism, a genetic inheritance, and a Pleistocene template, enhanced by our emerging cognition of the ecological significance of our species? Is it this memory that enables us to consider ancestry and legacy simultaneously, within a planetary context, summoning an ethic of care for the great fellowship of beings, the basis for human responsibility as global stewards? Is this how we now must think about faith?

“Reason is a coefficient of faith” (173)

There is a balance here. Reason and empiricism require acute, rigorous, experimental observation and analysis. Reason and empiricism have enabled us to determine that the earth is five and a half billion years old, not five and a half thousand.

“Faith is but a seed, while the deed is its growth or decay.” (176)

The deed is the manifestation of sustainable practice, the tangible reality of our faith. The deed is faith’s transmission from one individual to another, from one individual to the community and back again, from the individual and the community to the biosphere, from the individual and the biosphere to God and then back again.