

Guided by Gaia

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
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When I first heard of the Gaia Hypothesis in the 1990s, as formulated by chemist James Lovelock and microbiologist Lynn Margulis, I was skeptical but respectful of the idea. I didn't rule it out. But neither did I feel confident that the Earth is a living single organism. Perhaps I was too caught up in scientific reductionism, and needed to have proof -- such as to sit down with Gaia herself. So I took note of the notion and kept on trying to save and heal Earth.

About this time, one small deliberate act regardless of the Gaia Hypothesis was that I stopped putting the article "the" in front of Earth, so as to use Earth as a name, or her name. Is it unscientific or childish for our home planet to have a personal-type name? If so, we probably need to be less "scientific" and more childish. Do you remember your childhood wonder when you were very young and noticed the trees' sound in the wind? I thought they were talking to me. Many years later I remembered this after forgetting it.

As an environmental activist most of my adult life, I have loved nature as I always had. But I could relate to being sufficiently unaware of threats to nature's health so as to find it easy to keep consuming products, burning fuel, wasting packaging, etc. Being one to care for and about Nature (capitalizing is my preference), I had always hated smog and exposure to pesticides, both of which I endured. From that stance I became a full-time environmental activist, so I was looking for any way to understand and overcome modern society's callous, short-sighted treatment of the planet's species and resources.

I increasingly found I could relate to Mother Earth, Mother Nature, and also (somewhat separately) the infinite universe. But my cultural conditioning, including being raised by atheist parents, and acquiring spiritual understanding catch-as-catch-can, kept the Earth's problems and ecological laws a somewhat disjointed (but beautiful) ball of wax for this student of Nature.

Activists commonly follow science with a deference to solid research, consensus and confirmation by the peer review process. They need to do this to be convincing and appeal to rational citizens. There are some activists (and many more citizens, per capita) who are not so cerebral, but they are better at using their intuition and heart to decide where to put their shoulder to the wheel. So the Gaia Hypothesis was a synthesis of the two varieties of activists and citizens, the cerebral or rational and those feeling through their hearts. All very nice, but so what? We had to simply get on with the job of protecting Earth and educating people so that they might appreciate Nature. Then they might act in their own self-interest for sustainability instead of short-term material gain, immediate self-gratification, or frivolity -- assuming they've got survival covered.

As an adventurous activist learning about science and society, particularly about natural systems and energy, I had let go of my life-long privilege and material security in order to find my path. I knew from my previous business career of helping Big Oil and government that one needed training, professionalism, connections and do hard work to keep current and stay in business. I figured that the same requirements would apply to creating a successful nonprofit institute, where I intended to establish a clearinghouse for energy information and policy with a conservation orientation.

What I found was that there was little funding for the naked truth about oil, energy alternatives, population size, and ecological health. So for years I just managed to keep our small group viable, with the help of many colleagues, volunteers, supporters and readers. As the next phase of lowered funding took hold -- a consequence of both 9-11's effect on environmental funding and of family difficulties involving my old oil information firm -- I managed to get by somehow. This served, unexpectedly, to connect me to Nature in a deeper way.

Years passed as I coped with a scaled-back standard of living, managing creatively to keep up my work despite needing to rely on the kindness of contacts, acquaintances and friends (not so much on family, which suffered from lack of unity and reduced resources). I started to notice that there was a kind of invisible safety net for me personally. No matter what

my changing situation was, involving very low income, uncertain but safe housing, having a laptop donated to me, meeting new friends and supporters, being recognized for my work, etc., I seemed to be rescued or aided by many an unexpected act. For example, my funds might get down to \$20 which which to buy food, postage stamps, and a subway ride. I worried how a bill due at the end of the week would be paid, so that our internet connection, for example, would stay on. But somehow it always worked out, day after day, weeks, months and years. I started to observe to friends, "I'm surfing my cosmic wave and haven't wiped out yet." After a few years of feeling this clearly, I began to integrate in my mind the sense of the universe and Nature as one, a sort of kind Earthly being.

Gaia's appreciation?

I had already suspected years before that things often "happened for a reason," as if we each needed to get somewhere in our lives. But as this seemed to intensify, I was having more than my share of good luck. Could Gaia -- assuming you believe she exists and that the globe we live on is not just a symbiotic jumble of beings, rocks, H2O, etc. -- be looking out for me? Another question coming to me, more frequently, was whether the Universe (Gaia) was deliberately helping me keep up my work and lifestyle instead of letting me starve or, as Bob Dylan sang in *Stuck Inside of Mobile*, be "caught without a ticket and be discovered beneath a truck"? I had to help myself by fostering good health and making new friends, and keeping alert, while listening to my intuition.

But could it even be something more: that Gaia appreciates my efforts for her and is rewarding me? Perhaps, but if so I definitely receive what Gaia thinks or knows I need, not what I may want. I have some unmet needs, I often think, but at other times I marvel at my good fortune on a path I chose. Partly, doing what I believe in and want to do keeps life interesting and fun. As Goethe said, "Whatever you can do, or dream you can do, begin it. Boldness has genius, power, and magic in it. Begin it now."

Healing Gaia and ourselves -- one and the same

I have been a healer for most of my life. (My main method is fasting, just water, for detoxification which raises immunity, rejuvenates, and produces greater happiness; a total, open-ended rest from modern stress is required.) This probably has made it easy for me to think in terms of healing our Earth and healing humanity -- rather than only healing an individual. As we know, a family needs to heal sometimes, as does a village. I feel that Gaia wants to heal and be healed. The Universe is kind, or else we would not be here. Our species might, at this rate, fall by the wayside in evolution's story, and go extinct; it would be part of evolution that governs all life forms. But if we do derail our species' longevity, we might not just thus "do Gaia a favor" and be "shaken off like a parasite or fever," but rather tip the favorable conditions for life on our special planet towards unprecedented mass extinction. If we tip climate change over to the Venus-variety runaway greenhouse effect, does Gaia die?

Back to my own story, as to how I came to be "guided by Gaia": after about six years of minimal nonprofit support that somehow did allow me to keep up CultureChange.org, participate in fighting the plastic plague, offer eco-songs, get across my petrocollapse message to key audiences, and raise the profile of Sail Transport Network, some significant funding materialized a few years ago. This allowed for a stronger effort to get the message out, work more closely with an expanding network of activists, and publish my autobiographical book *Songs of Petroleum*. But the better funding, as helpful as it was to be able to travel further and more often, for example, did not raise by much the basic public presence of Culture Change and its projects. And perhaps most relevant, for this essay's discussion, is that having significant money has always had little to do with how I happen to be feeling or how I am able to flow with the life force that I am a part of. I usually feel wonderful without money, without knowing where the next chunk may come from. My feeling that I am some kind of a "spiritual warrior" has increased over the last couple of decades. Yet, as Earth's life support systems start to ring alarm bells there is never any real peace.

In 2007 I had a dream wherein a female singer made clear, with joyous harmony and sweetness, that Earth could be healed if all the people sang together at once. I awoke extremely happy, and before the dream wore off I noted the song and some lyrics. This experience was powerful, and made me consider the strange possibility of an unproven, simple and magical cure for Gaia's and humanity's plight. Irrational! Unscientific! Whatever; I have since had a strong sense of Gaia's being feminine, loving and benign.

But Gaia, or Mother Earth, or Pachamama (in the Andes), can be said to be undergoing rape, and screaming in pain or to get our attention. My feeling this strongly a few days ago was confirmed in a new national interview with an activist/healer, Julia Butterfly, who taught quite a few people about the power of a tree over a decade ago:

"Nature is always communicating with us, but we've forgotten how to listen. I think that's why there are more and more natural disasters -- more severe tsunamis and earthquakes and storms and fires. All these disasters are nature talking louder and louder and louder, trying to get our attention."

- Julia Butterfly Hill, The Sun, April 2012, interviewed by Leslee Goodman

Julia lived just over two years in a 1,000 year old redwood. I knew from listening to her on the radio and talking on the telephone with her that she had a deep, rich connection to her special environment -- that of a huge ancient tree. She felt its protection, and somehow did not die from her physical vulnerability high in the branches. Pacific Lumber Company had tried to dislodge her, and thus kill her, by buzzing her with helicopters. (Oh, the privileges of private corporate property.) I had to allow that the tree-being and Julia were in a kind of constant communication of mutual respect. The other thing I learned from Julia's experience was that we can "evolve in reverse" -- I saw a picture of her using her clasped foot as a monkey would, so as to hold onto branches all the more safely. Living barefoot while using her muscles and her whole body on only the tree's terms had a physical effect. I believe Julia when she says the tree, Luna, taught her a lot in addition to protecting her.

I've always been a rational person, making fun of superstition and belief in the paranormal. I took pride in not bothering, until fairly recently, with "being in touch with myself." I later made less fun of any hard-to-confirm beliefs, however, after a couple of paranormal experiences and interesting revelations that I had in meditation. Yet I am ever more science-oriented than I was. Evidence and empiricism are everything. Understandably, when some facts or experiences don't fit with others' experience or their approved academic teachings, the label "unscientific" or "religious" may be dished out.

After all, just because a set of facts or events suggest a particular explanation or source, this does not mean there is no other reason or source for the facts or events. "Luck" is what one scientist (engineering) wanted to apply to my experiences and feelings about Gaia. Yet, was he himself being truly scientific when preferring to write it all off as "luck"?

Feeling more at one with the Universe and Earth is a healthy idea for everyone, I suggest, because it promotes a peaceful and non-isolating attitude and philosophy. If we go further and choose to honor the Mother Earth Goddess, as our foremothers and forefathers did for uncounted millennia before sky-god religions took over, we may feel better about ourselves. This can both turn off those of a more "rational" or monotheistic sky-god orientation, while attracting others: like-minded spiritual people (some "pagans") who become friends and perhaps join in a kind of tribe. Whatever the absolute truth of the Universe and its/her mysteries, if we could ever really know the whole, absolute truth, it would appear to be in our interest to align ourselves with Earth's fortunes and fate in any constructive way we might choose.

And who knows, maybe more visions of Gaia, or deference and reverence to her will, could then become so common to become universal. We may then have almost completed a big circle of thousands of years, and are about to regain our lost way.

Can it be bad to be guided by Gaia, or to imagine this for more than a moment? It doesn't have to be intolerant of Christianity, Judaism or Islam, but to coexist it would be helpful if those religions' adherents maximized their Earth-

stewardship aspects so as to be in partial accord, at least, with Gaia "worship." The coexistence of the Catholic Church superstructure over the ancient indigenous Pachamama worship that prevails today in Andean countries may be a model worth studying. From a scientific standpoint, though, it would be wise not to emulate it if the Church continues to discourage birth control and prevent any abortions.

Gaia, or God, if you will, may love us. But on a finite planet that must be shared with all life, there can be too much of a good thing. That's us: humanity.

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Further reading and listening:

Lovelock, James (1995). The Ages of Gaia: A Biography of Our Living Earth. New York: Norton. ISBN 0-393-31239-9

Singing the Earth into Harmony, Depaver Jan

Hill, Julia Butterfly (2000). The Legacy of Luna. HarperSanFrancisco. ISBN 0-06-251658-2