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**The Blue River Declaration:  
An Ethic of the Earth Creates a Concordance  
between Ecological and Ethical Principles**

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Aldo Leopold found it in the green fire shining in the eyes of a dying wolf. Thomas Berry found it in a meadow of white lilies. Rachel Carson found it in the darkness at the edge of pounding surf. Last fall, a gathering of twenty-four thinkers sought it in the green shadows of giant cedars that grow along Oregon's Blue River. What they were looking for was the moral meaning that follows from the interconnectedness of life. Centuries ago, a materialistic and mechanistic science argued that humans are separate from and superior to the rest of the world, which is an assortment of natural resources, commodities to be exploited for human gain. That worldview supported an anthropocentric, capitalist model of ethics that praised practices that maximize selected human interests. In that scientific and moral context, humankind found license to discount, degrade, and finally ransack the Earth, leaving the prospect of a scorched, storm-wracked, and dangerously depleted world.

By now, that science is outdated and largely abandoned. It has been replaced by a new ecological understanding of a planet characterized by emergent interacting communities of interdependent members, communities of which humans are fully part. The old science may be waning but the old ethic that it once supported remains. As the exploitation of the Earth grinds forward, the fracture between new science and old ethics has reached a climactic crisis, like tectonic plates that bind as they shift, building terrible force along fault lines that must, eventually, give way.

The work at hand, then, is to give life to a new ethic, an ethic that is fully in synchrony with, indeed inspired by, an ecological vision of the planet—that is, to give voice to the moral meanings of an interconnected

world, and to consider whether, to what extent, and in which ways such meanings might represent a spiritual, or religious, revolution.

Here are (1) the story of the group that gathered to write a statement of a new ethic, (2) the text of the Blue River Declaration that resulted, and (3) a forum to discuss its meaning and possible import.

### *The Blue River Quorum*

The Blue River Quorum was called for and organized by the Spring Creek Project for Ideas, Nature, and the Written Word at Oregon State University. As we began to plan, we paid close attention to the wisdom of those who had made a new planetary ethic their life work.

Aldo Leopold offered practical advice. '[N]othing so important as an ethic is ever "written"... [I]t evolved in the mind of a thinking community' (Leopold 1949: 225). Furthermore, just as the evolution of species requires a great variety of life forms and ways of living, all tested against hard experience, the evolution of ideas calls for the same diversity of ideas and the same time-tested wisdom. It made sense, then, that to jumpstart the evolution of an ethic, we would need to create a thinking community, and that it would need to be large and diverse. We began by inviting the participation of twenty-four of the nation's most creative philosophers, theologians, ecologists, hydrologists, poets, novelists, indigenous wisdom-keepers, and sociologists: 'Please join us in the forest to imagine into existence a new ethic for the turbulent future'. We assembled also a group of one hundred regional leaders, who would gather to read and ground-truth the document while it was still warm from the copy machine.

Thomas Berry offered what would be the philosophical center of our work: 'Our human ethics are derivative from the ecological imperative. The basic ethical norm is the well-being of the comprehensive community and the attainment of human well-being within that community' (1999: 105). We would not need to begin from scratch. Berry and others have the project well begun. The ideas we need are in the air, we believed. They are swirling around us; they are part of the ongoing work of the world. Our job is to bring them to the page and give them clear expression. We would address the three perennial ethical questions: What is our best understanding of the world? What is our best understanding of the nature of humankind? To what, then, shall we aspire, and what becomes morally unthinkable?

Rachel Carson gave us courage and a place to begin: 'Those who contemplate the beauty of the earth will find reserves of strength that will endure as long as life lasts' (1965: 87). We would gather in a beautiful,

thriving ecosystem, the ancient forest in the H.J. Andrews Research Forest on the Blue River in Oregon's Cascade Range. There, we would take time to listen to the forested mountains, which have wisdom of their own, and to listen to one another and the wisdoms we each brought. We would not waste time critiquing the old ethics. We all knew that Western culture had come to the end of a centuries-long experiment, testing whether civilizations based on a nexus of dualism, individualism, anthropocentrism, and capitalism could prosper and endure. Those experiments are over. We would pass them by and imagine the next thing. We would not engage in discussion-ending debates about 'the' right answer. We would understand instead that there are many ways of coming to know and much to be gained by seeing through many eyes.

Bringing twenty-four very different voices together into a coherent consensus document in the space of three days and three nights was a wild, exhilarating, terrifying experience. Here are a few glimpses of the process: As firelight touched the overhanging branches of the trees, a song of gratitude from a Potawatomi elder and one essential sentence from each person. From each of the disciplines, a seven-minute field report. In interdisciplinary and then discipline-based groups, discussion and drafting. Walking conversations. Fireside conversations. Re-writing of drafts, late into the night and again at breakfast. In light rain under towering Douglas-firs, an outpouring of ideas and then a long silence. Silence again, as we strained in the dark to hear the calls of spotted owls. Then, back in town, twenty-four thinkers approaching the microphone one after another to read the words of the Blue River Declaration. Roundtables of forest rangers, county commissioners, riverkeepers, historians, teachers, entrepreneurs, elders, preachers, parents—thinking and dreaming together.

Looking back on the process, it is clear that what made it work was the fact that, despite our differences, all the members of the Quorum shared a ferocious love of the world and a grief-powered determination to do what we could to create a tectonic shift toward worldviews worthy of the planet. In that spirit, we have offered...

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### *References*

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