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How to be a Good Ancestor

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Friday was Earth Day, an annual invitation to celebrate this beautiful planet and recommit to working for environmental protections and climate justice. Looking back, it is not a coincidence that the first Earth Day was held in 1970, fifteen months after an astronaut became the first human to take a color photo of our planet.

From our ordinary terrestrial perspective, we are accustomed to seeing the sunrise. But this photo was taken from a lunar orbit, and above the horizon line of moon's surface we humans got our first glimpse of what it's like to see "Earthrise." That December 1968 photograph has been described as "**the most influential environmental photograph ever taken**" ([Earthrise](#)).

The perspective of seeing the small blue marble of our planet shining in the inky blackness of space has the potential to shift our consciousness out of ego-centrism and tribalism. **That image alone has the potential to give us a deeper sense of ourselves as *Earthlings*.** It can open us to experiencing how deeply we are connected to one another and to all life on this planet.

And although we now know in retrospect just how powerful a photograph of the Earth from space can be, there was certainly no widespread awareness in advance. NASA's original plans for the Apollo 8 mission were hyper-focused on the Moon. Taking photos of the Earth was rated as the "lowest priority." But when the astronauts got to space, they found that they were "**immediately almost overcome by the thought**

that here we came all this way to the Moon, and yet the most significant thing we're seeing is our own home planet, the Earth" (Poole 2).

The cosmologist Carl Sagan later wrote it this way, in his book *Pale Blue Dot: A Vision of the Human Future in Space*:

Our posturings, our imagined self-importance, the delusions that we have some privileged position, are challenged by this point of pale light. Our planet is a lonely speck in the great enveloping cosmic dark.... There is no hint that help will come from elsewhere to save us from ourselves.... This distant image of our tiny world...underscores our responsibility to deal more kindly with one another, and to preserve and cherish the pale blue dot, the only home we've got. (191-192)

So, on this Earth Day Weekend, I want to invite us to spend some time reflecting on how we Earthlings might equip ourselves better for the long haul. How might we work together in coalition across our differences to act for ecological and climate justice, both for ourselves and for future generations.

To begin, I want to be sure to address the recently released Sixth IPCC report from the United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. The report brings together the latest research of 270 top scientists across 67 countries. The UN Secretary General summarized its findings in one sentence as **"an atlas of human suffering and a damning indictment of failed climate leadership"** (The New York Times).

Since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, **we humans have already increased global temperatures an average of 1.1 degrees Celsius** (or 2 degrees Fahrenheit) through a combination of burning coal, oil, and gas and cutting down forests. The consensus of expert climate scientists is that **an increase of 1.5°C is the threshold beyond which scientists say the likelihood of catastrophic climate impacts increases significantly.** But achieving that goal would require nations to all but eliminate their fossil-fuel emissions by 2050, and most are far off-track. The world is currently on

pace to warm somewhere between 2 degrees and 3 degrees Celsius this century. (The New York Times)

How might we think and act differently to co-create a more ecologically sustainable future?

In search of answers, I've read a few different books recently, and I want to highlight three. All are quite short and accessible. The first is *The Good Ancestor: How to Think Long-Term in a Short-Term World* by the philosopher Roman Krznaric. I love the idea of expanding our notion of ancestry to include not only the generations who came before us, but also the generations to come, for whom we are the ancestors.

There are so many ways in which we who are alive today are lifted up on the shoulder of giants who have come before. Our lives are so much better and easier due to the legions of inventors, activists, caregivers, and more who are among our ancestors in the broadest sense of the word. As the saying goes:

We drink from wells we did not dig.

We sit in the shade of trees we did not plant.

We profit from the sacrifice of persons we did not know.

There is no way to pay all that back, but we can *pay it forward* to future generations.

As we explored last week on Easter, the loss of an other-worldly focus on a heaven and hell in a "next world" does not have to be bad news. Instead, our Unitarian and Universalist ancestors were at the forefront of showing how life-giving it can be to focus on loving the hell out of *this world*.

The American pragmatist philosopher Richard Rorty wrote: "**willingness to endure suffering for the sake of future reward [is] transferable from individual rewards to social ones, from one's hope for paradise to one's hopes for one's grandchildren**" (Rorty Reader 85). Importantly Rorty's grandfather was Walter Rauschenbusch, who helped found the social gospel movement, which emphasized that Christianity should focus less on individual salvation and more on social justice. There was no way for Rorty to pay back his intellectual debts to his grandfather, who died more than a decade before he was born, but he could pay it forward by building on his grandfather's pathbreaking work.

Relatedly, have you ever done any quick calculation around ancestral mathematics? The exponential growth rate can be shocking. Consider that biologically for any one of us to be here means that each of us has:

1. 2 parents
2. 4 grandparents
3. 8 great-grandparents
4. 16 great-great-grandparents
5. 32 great-great-great grandparents
6. 64 great-great-great-great grandparents
7. 128 (*seventh-generation thinking*)
8. 512
9. 1024
10. 2048
11. 4096
12. 8192

By the time we reach the twelfth generation, we can be grateful for the 8,192 people who had to have sex for us to be here! More seriously:

“Think for a moment — How many struggles? How many battles? How many difficulties? How much sadness? How much happiness? How many love stories? How many expressions of hope for the future? — did your ancestors have to undergo for you to exist in this present moment?”

(Medium).

Since we’re still in a pandemic, let me share one poignant example of what ancestral “paying it forward” can look like. In 1955, Jonas Salk led a team of scientists in creating the first polio vaccine. And he chose not to patent his breakthrough. Instead, he said that what kept him going through the decade of painstaking research that made his discovery possible was his desire to “be of some help to humankind.” He later said that a primary question he often asked himself was “**Are we being good ancestors?**” (Krznaric 3)

As we try to avoid that 1.5°C limit, we need more people—more humans, more Earthlings—like Jonas Salk. But the vast majority of world leaders are failing on climate

change. As the nineteen-year-old activist Greta Thunberg said when she addressed the UN:

How dare you! You have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your empty words. And yet I'm one of the lucky ones. People are suffering. People are dying. Young people are starting to understand your betrayal. The eyes of all future generations are upon you. And if you choose to fail us I say we will never forgive you. Change is coming, whether you like it or not" (Malm, How to Blow Up a Pipeline 19).

And although we can begin by "being the change we want to see in the world," individual actions will never reach the scale required to impact climate change. We need to change our systems, structures, and institutions. You might say that we desperately need a Green New Deal (243).

And Krznaric lists six factors that tend to keep us overdosing on "short-term decision-making" and six antidotes that can help incline us toward "courageous long-term thinking" (6, 12):

<p>Tyranny of the clock [focusing on punching in and out each work day]</p>	<p>Deep-Time Humility “We are an eye blink in cosmic time”</p>
<p>Digital Distraction “hijacking of attention by technology”</p>	<p>Legacy Mindset “Be remembered well by posterity”</p>
<p>Political Presentism “myopic focus on next election”</p>	<p>Intergenerational Justice “Consider the seventh generation ahead”</p>
<p>Speculative Capitalism “volatile boom-bust financial markets”</p>	<p>Cathedral Thinking “Plan projects beyond a human lifetime”</p>
<p>Networked Uncertainty “Rise of global risk and contagion”</p>	<p>Holistic Forecasting “envision multiple pathways for civilization”</p>
<p>Perpetual Progress “Pursuit of endless economic growth”</p>	<p>Transcendent Goal "one-planet thriving”</p>

If you want the full details, I recommend Krznaric’s book, *The Good Ancestor*. But for our purposes, I will briefly say more about each of the long-term shifts we are trying to cultivate.

First, “**Deep Time Humility**”: In previous sermons, we’ve explored in-depth a few different analogies for deep time, so here’s a brief one: Imagine that the 13.8 billion year-old age of the universe is represented by the distance from your nose to the tip of your hand when held out straight in front of you. In this metaphor, a single stroke of a nail file on the tip of your middle finger would erase human history (49). This universe is

about a lot more than us human beings, and if we don't change course, we are imperiling our future. China, for example, is making some important commitments along these lines, including a 35-year plan for creating national parks, and investing in long-term seed banks to protect the biodiversity of plants (34). What truly long-term plans has our country committed to? And how confident are we that those plans won't shift with the political winds every four years?

Second, "**Legacy Mindset**": An essential question here is "How will people of the future remember us?" (57) As Jonas Salk experienced when he declined to patent his polio vaccine, it can be immensely meaningful to shift our motivation from just getting more money and more stuff, to leaving a legacy that will pay human dividends long after you are gone.

Third, **Intergenerational Justice**: Groucho Marx was pretty funny when he asked, "Why should I care about future generations? What have they ever done for me?" (71) But what we need to consider much more deeply is the Indigenous wisdom of the Apache Nation, inviting us to consider that, "**We do not inherit the land from our ancestors; we borrow it from our children**" (69).

This is another instance where it is helpful to hear Greta Thunberg:

The year 2078, I will celebrate my seventy-fifth birthday. If I have children, then maybe they will spend that day with me. Maybe they will ask about you. Maybe they will ask why you didn't do anything while there was still time to act. **You say you love your children above all else, and yet you are stealing their future in front of their very eyes** (71).

Even more pointedly, she told those gathered at the World Economic Forum in Davos: "**Our house is on fire. I don't want your hope, I want you to panic...and act**" (113). That resonates with our own UU conviction that we believe in deeds, not creeds, and that behavior is more believable than words alone.

Fourth, **Cathedral Thinking**: The medieval cathedrals were so grand that their construction spanned multiple generations of workers. Such long-term plans and actions often rise from the **Transcendent Goal** of working for something much larger

than our selves. As Wendell Berry wrote in his prophetic poem, "Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front":

Invest in the millennium. Plant sequoias.

Say that your main crop is the forest

that you did not plant,

that you will not live to harvest.

Say that the leaves are harvested

when they have rotted into the mold.

Call that profit. Prophecy such returns.

Put your faith in the two inches of humus

that will build under the trees

every thousand years.

Finally, **Holistic Forecasting**: we need to account for multiple factors in planning for the future, not focus on short-term profit as the only bottom line. Do you know about B-Corps? In contrast to many of our largest for-profit corporations, which are single-mindedly focused on maximizing shareholder value, B Corps are annually certified for "social and environmental performance." Why not require all corporations to be B Corps? A profit motive can still be one important factor in policy plans, but adding people and planet into the equation can give us a "triple-bottom line" of people, planet, and profit. (243).

As I move toward my conclusion, I would like to share two other books that may interest you, depending on your relationship to climate justice. First, if you are feeling burned out, you might appreciate Thich Nhat Hanh's book *Zen and the Art of Saving the Planet*. Hanh was a proponent of Engaged Buddhism. He taught that meditation was not merely about waking up individually, but also about living out of an awakened consciousness, with wisdom and compassion for the benefit for all sentient beings.

And related to the Buddhist teaching of the Middle Way, there are times when he would tell his students, "Don't just do something, *sit there*" (vii). Acting rashly without wisdom and compassion may well end up undermining the goals we seek. Sometimes we need to slow down, recenter, and recalibrate.

Other times, however, one of his closest students reports that:

There were days when the action was so pressing he'd remind us, with a gentle smile and a glint in his eye that, "There's no need to eat lunch. The human body can survive several days without food." And there were yet other days when seeing us working so hard we'd forgotten to eat, he quietly went into the kitchen himself to prepare us hot soup for dinner.

(viii)

Where are you in that mix on this Earth Day Weekend? Is it time to slow down and do some contemplating and recharging? Or is it time to skip lunch and take action? What is the next right action for you to take at the intersection of wisdom and compassion? Can you hear the voices of the generations to come? What are they asking of you? What is the Earth asking of you?

Along those lines, the final volume I will mention is the shortest and most radical of the books I read in preparation for this Earth Day: *How to Blow Up a Pipeline* by the activist Andreas Malm. It's a provocative meditation wrestling with whether the urgency of climate change calls us to engage in radical civil disobedience (20).

He is at most exploring the potential implication of destroying property in the work of climate justice. And he takes pains to be clear that he is against harming either humans or other animals (102). That being said, he challenges us to consider that many non-violent protests are simply large gatherings with speeches that amount to little more than "ritualized wishful thinking" (134). And he is increasingly convinced that more will be needed to disrupt business as usual (20).

Now to be clear, I don't have any plans to blow up pipelines. But Malm's book has made me think about what it may take to be the ancestors that future generations need us to be.

We are not getting a new heaven and a new Earth. *This* is our paradise planet. *This* is our blue boat home.