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EARTH, OUR HOME! THE EARTH CHARTER 25+ YEARS ON...

“the transformation of the way we relate to the earth will of course involve new technologies, but the key changes will involve new ways of thinking about the relationship itself”
(*Al Gore*)¹

Looking around at the scorched wreckage of today’s international governmental polity, one may wonder how the Earth Charter even came into being.

Launched just over 25 years ago in 2000 at The Peace Palace in The Hague, Netherlands to great fanfare, it was eight years in the formulating, the work of the independent Earth Charter Commission. Its task was to produce a global consensus statement of principles for a sustainable Earth future. And an important fact is “the Earth Charter is a creed belonging not to governments but to the world’s people”.² (Copy of Earth Carter tabled)

So let me step back a bit... The idea for such a Charter originated in 1987 when Mikhail Gorbachev, Maurice Strong, Stephen Rockefeller, Wangari Maathai and many others envisioned the needs for an Earth Charter Community. Thus following numerous drafts and after considering the input of people from all regions of the world, the Earth Charter Commission came to consensus on what is known as The Earth Charter in March, 2000, at a meeting held at UNESCO headquarters in Paris on 29 June.

The Charter’s ‘Preamble’ commences:

“We stand at a critical moment in Earth’s history, a time when humanity must choose its future. As the world becomes increasingly interdependent and fragile, the future at once holds great peril and great promise. To move forward we must recognize that in the midst

¹ Quoted in Preston. *Ethics With or Without God*, 98

² Preston. *Ethics...*, 100

of a magnificent diversity of cultures and life forms we are one human family and one Earth community with a common destiny.”

It is unmistakably eco-centric but it also addresses concerns about social and economic justice. The document’s vision was shaped around four pillars and 16 principles (samples below only):

(i) Respect and Care for the Community of Life;

- Care for the community of life with understanding, compassion, and love.
- Build democratic societies that are just, participatory, sustainable, and peaceful.

(ii) Ecological Integrity;

- Protect and restore the integrity of Earth’s ecological systems, with special concern for biological diversity and the natural processes that sustain life
- Secure Earth’s bounty and beauty for present and future generations

(iii) Social and Economic Justice;

- Eradicate poverty as an ethical, social, and environmental imperative.
- Empower every human being with the education and resources to secure a sustainable livelihood, and provide social security and safety nets for those who are unable to support themselves.

(iv) Democracy, Nonviolence, and Peace...

- Promote a culture of tolerance, nonviolence, and peace.
- Demilitarize national security systems to the level of a nonprovocative defense posture, and convert military resources to peaceful purposes, including ecological restoration.
- Eliminate nuclear, biological, and toxic weapons and other weapons of mass destruction.

All these principles are now more important than ever. As Canadian theologian Heather Eaton says:

Deterioration of human and specifically gender rights, and intensifying violence in Ukraine, Iran, Syria, Sudan, and Haiti are alarming. The genocide in Gaza, the escalating tyranny of the United States, the realignment of geopolitical powers, and military expansions are remaking a world order based on conflict rather than cooperation.³

³ Eaton. “The Power of Hope”, 1

Meanwhile, ecological decline accelerates, social stress, insecurities, poverty and conflict continue. Anthropocentrism remains intractable. Realities that continue and must be faced honestly, with courage, and intelligence.

Meanwhile, oil, gas, and coal companies are spending large amounts of money with public relations firms to deliberately spread climate misinformation, including the creation of *astroturfing*—creating fake community groups to give the impression of widespread opposition to climate change and renewables. During 2023 COP28 (United Nations Climate Change Conference) in Dubai, United Arab Emirates—which attracted over 97,000 people—the fossil fuel industry made sure they had a few lobbyists present... 2,456 to be exact. An unprecedented presence! And more than the combined number of delegations from the ten (10) most climate vulnerable nations combined, underscoring how industry presence is dwarfing that of those on the frontlines of the crisis. Jumping forward... during COP30 in November last year (2025) in Brazil, when nearly 200 nations gathered “to respond to the scientific consensus that human-caused climate change is dangerously warming the planet, by some estimates around 1.3 degrees C since 1850”⁴ climate denialisms were again called out:

They attack institutions, they attack science and universities. Now it’s the moment to impose a new defeat to the denialisms... Climate change is not a threat of the future. It is already a tragedy of the present time.⁵

Let’s be clear: the greatest threat we face in curbing climate change is the burning of fossil fuels—oil, coal, natural gas—which makes up about 68% of global gas emissions. But COP30 failed. Their compromise deal, landed in overtime after two weeks of contentious negotiations: boost finance for poor countries coping with global warming but omitted any mention of the fossil fuels driving it!

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In the final section called ‘The Way Forward’ the Charter acknowledges this need. It says:

As never before in history, common destiny beckons us to seek a new beginning. Such renewal is the promise of these Earth Charter principles. To fulfill this promise, we must commit ourselves to adopt and promote the values and objectives of the Charter.

This requires a change of mind and heart. It requires a new sense of global interdependence and universal responsibility. We must imaginatively develop and apply the vision of a sustainable way of life locally, nationally, regionally, and globally.

⁴ King. “Global Ethical Stocktake...” (2025)

⁵ Brazil President Lula da Silva, 10 November 2025, in Belem, Brazil

As that final section indicates the task of reimagining global principles and governance is an ecological and ethical imperative, and well as a political necessity for a viable future. Earth beings in solidarity with Earth. An ethics of re-connection. In short: the Earth Charter affirms a planetary ethics for the Earth community. “When we become aware that we are immersed in this great Earth community”, Eaton again writes,

it evokes a spiritual awakening: planetary consciousness and conscience... It is to appreciate integral ecology: all in interconnected. There is no future without ecological integrity and stability.⁶

At its core the Earth Charter has a ‘spirituality’ feeling about it. Spirituality is not beliefs. “Spirituality,” suggests Eaton, “is like breathing, as intimate and as vital as breath. It is about desire, a zest for life, and the ability to feel awe and wonder”.⁷ Because... spiritualities come from the realm of insights rather than data. Experiencing the sacredness of some things (or possibly all things). The cultivating of this experiencing and the living out of its implications.⁸ Not a matter of intellectual satisfaction only, but a rediscovering the vocabulary of reverence. Dare I further suggest: a naturalistic mysticism! “The story of the universe is at once scientific, mythic, and mystical,” writes priest and ‘geologian’ Thomas Berry.

Our inner spiritual world cannot be activated without experience of the outer world of wonder for the mind, beauty for the imagination, and intimacy for the emotions.⁹

In like manner to Eaton and Berry, American humanist Unitarian theologian, David Bumbaugh, calls such ‘experiencing’ and ‘living’ as “a religious story in that it implies a broader ethic for our lives”. At a symposium in 2003 he went on to state:

To understand the human race as related in the most intimate of ways to all living things on this planet; to understand the earth not as the platform on which life exists, but as itself a living being, regulating its complex systems in such a way as to sustain ongoing life; to understand our own physical beings as a congeries of ancient living forms, quietly and unobtrusively contributing to our ongoing existence while pursuing their own mysterious imperatives; to understand ourselves as the incarnation of those same forces and substances and circumstances which produced galaxies and stars and planets is to enlarge our sense of responsibility and our definition of moral living. In light of this enlarged revelation, the ethic of the main-chance, the ethic of short-term benefit, the ethic of immediate gratification, the ethic of tribal values and ethnic identities so prevalent in our world are challenged in the most profound way and found in every case to be inadequate.¹⁰

⁶ Eaton. “The Power of Hope”, 4

⁷ Eaton. “The Power of Hope, 3

⁸ Stone. *Sacred Nature*, 76

⁹ Berry. *Selected Writings*, 72, 78

¹⁰ Bumbaugh, “Vocabulary of Reverence”, 7

We also need hope. Eaton again: “Hope is not naive optimism. Hope is a blend of anger and courage: anger at the way things are, and courage to change them”.¹¹ And where can we find hope? In the beauty of nature.

Trees and flowers blossom, bees pollinate, and animals have offspring: these are extraordinary feats of hope. The Earth is alive, and this nurtures hope. The Earth Charter provides visions, pathways, ethics and spiritual support. It can nurture the energy and hope for the future.¹²

But more than that... Our experience of the universe funds festive expression in the seasonal transformations: the brightness of summer, the lush colours of autumn, the wet and wind of winter, the exuberance of spring. “These are the ever-renewing moments of celebration on the universe.”¹³ Such moments not only enlarge the scope of living, but “sensitizes our feel for life and beautifies its quality”.¹⁴ In the end the universe can only be explained in terms of celebration. It is all an exuberant expression of existence itself.

As if echoing the famous Unitarian ‘exemplar of religion and art’, Von Ogdens Vogt’s constant pleas for beauty in religion, Canadian Eaton further suggests: “Perhaps we can add a medicinal dose of beauty to each day and see where that takes us.”¹⁵ While the Celtic wisdom of philosopher, mystic, poet, Irish bard “and the splendid, searching, openly ragged-around-the-edges human being”, John O’Donohue said:

If you ever see a twilight, with the incredible nuance and depth of colour that it has, if you look at the amazing choruses of waves that bear against a shoreline, if you look at the mystical shape of mountains, the voice of streams and rivers and the undomesticated wildness of certain wilderness places you will know that the imagination of the earth had created great beauty.¹⁶

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¹¹ Eaton. “The Power of Hope”, 4

¹² Eaton. “The Power of Hope”, 4

¹³ Berry. *Selected Writings*, 179

¹⁴ Meland. *Modern Man’s Worship*, 288

¹⁵ Eaton. “Forces of Nature”, 6

¹⁶ O’Donohue. *Walking in Wonder*, 70

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