

THE GREAT TURNING

© REV. DANA WORSNOP
ATKINSON MEMORIAL CHURCH
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READINGS

from the novel *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy

Once there were brook trout in the streams in the mountains. You could see them standing in the amber current where the white edges of their fins wimpled softly in the flow. They smelled of moss in your hand. Polished and muscular.... On their backs were vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a thing that could not be put back. Not be made right again. In the deep glens where they lived, all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery.

The Preamble to the Earth Charter 2000

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 of a magnificent diversity of cultures and life forms we are one human family and one Earth community with a common destiny. We must join together to bring forth a sustainable global society founded on respect for nature, universal human rights, economic justice, and a culture of peace. Towards this end, it is imperative that we, the peoples of Earth, declare our responsibility to one another, to the greater community of life, and to future generations.

SERMON

Cormac McCarthy's Pulitzer Prize winning novel *The Road* is a post-apocalyptic vision of what the world might be like after humans have done the worst we are capable of. The global disaster is never specified. A father and his son wander through a barren gray land where nothing grows, and the few people left scavenge for food and prey on each other. It is a bleak portrayal and yet not without human kindness and hope, although such goodness is desperately hard for the protagonists to see or believe in. The boy and his father follow the old roads – our roads – barely living, hiding from marauders who will do anything to anyone to survive. They seek to keep a flame of goodness alive, they seek to find other good people who they know exist but cannot find. It is grim and inexorable and beautiful.

Our reading this morning comes from the final words of the book, which gives nothing of the plot away, I assure you. It is clear throughout the book that this complete ecological disaster, this death of all living things on earth, is caused by humanity, by our refusal to heed the warnings, to quell our greed, hatred and fear. Even though there is human goodness still clinging to life in the boy even more than his father, there is no confident assurance that they – or goodness – can survive. McCarthy warns us that if we continue on our own present path, we too will reach a point past which we cannot turn back.

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In his book, *The Great Turning: from Empire to Earth Community*, David Korten also tells us that we are currently approaching that point beyond which we cannot turn back. He elucidates a sense that has been growing in me – and that I hear from many people – that it feels like we are at a significant turning point. That we are living in a critical time. Korten goes even further. He says we are at the edge of a new epoch in human history. He is hopeful that we will still be able to make this a Great Turning to a new sustainable way of being. Yet he is also fully aware that this could well become instead the Great Unraveling, into chaos and destruction. Korten is hopeful, but he says it is up to us.

Korten's is a sweeping book, a whirlwind retelling of human existence from pre-history to the present. A retelling that takes into account the oppressed and marginalized. It is, most decidedly, not the victor's tale of the past. Korten starts in prehistory when, he says, humans existed in a more egalitarian, cooperative state, often, but not always worshiping the Goddess.

Then about 5,000 years ago humanity shifted into the present epoch of Empire – a world view that sees life as hostile and competitive and humans as flawed and dangerous. Order is maintained through dominant hierarchies, and people compete, loving power more than life. Each individual must defend his or her own rights, and masculine energy is ascendant. (p. 32)

People operating from imperial consciousness “are often accomplished liars skilled in crafting moral arguments attuned to the morals and sensibilities of the persons whose loyalties they seek to manipulate. Unable to distinguish self-interest from collective interest, admit error, accept responsibility for the consequences of their actions, or feel guilt or remorse for harms caused, these individuals may be incapable of acknowledging even to themselves that they are engaged in deception. Truth becomes what they want it to be. Believing their own lies, they are able to lie with great sincerity.”

They “are easily identified by their inability to acknowledge their mistakes, ... and by their habitual scapegoating – projecting their own moral flaws onto perceived evil enemies to justify action out their fear and anger as a righteous mission.”

Now, I grant you that this book was published in 2006, and Korten had before him vivid examples of the excesses of Empire obviously before him. Still, isn't that a chilling picture?

Korten is not one who romanticizes the distant past. He is not telling us to harken back to a time when people worshiped the goddess and lived in harmony with nature. Yet he does note the irony that this pre-historical time saw all of the human inventions – the wheel, agriculture, metallurgy, etc. – that propelled us into that first epochal shift into Empire.

He writes, “The early human experience offers a powerful reminder that we humans are a complex species with an extraordinary range of possibilities. One of history's best kept secrets is the evidence that the most significant advances on the path to actualization of our distinctive humanity came during a period when human relationships with one another and Earth were in relative balance and people worshipped the nurturant power of the Goddess. The turn to Empire was in part a practical response to the need to bring order to relationships among strangers in the face of population growth.” (p. 107)

We are presently living within the framework of Empire – but we are coming to the end of its capacity to sustain itself. We have now too many people and too few resources. A shift is coming, but it is not clear whether we will turn to the good or whether we will disintegrate into chaos.

Korten is still very hopeful that we can make this Great Turning toward Earth Community. In contrast to Empire, this new world view sees life as supportive and cooperative, and humans as complex and full of possibilities. Order is maintained through partnership, and people cooperate, loving life more than power. The rights of all are defended and the world is more gender balanced. (p. 32)

Korten paints a bleak picture of the excesses of Empire, but points also to the ways things are already turning. We may yet begin to cooperate in community. We can live more sustainably and move through the world as if we are all connected.

Korten sees hopeful signs that we are moving – maturing as humans – beyond Empire. Korten sees a cultural development in a growing number of people who are able to see beyond their own experience. Such human cultural development begins with the ability to empathize and acknowledge that others might think differently. Maturity grows as people begin to see the possibility of creating inclusive, life-affirming societies that work for all, out of an understanding of the world as complex, interrelated and interdependent.

He quotes evolutionary biologist Elisabet Sahtouris:

Until the last half century before the new millennium, it did not occur to people that they could have anything to do with creating their world view. All throughout history, people thought the way they saw the world was the way the

world really *was* – in other, they saw *their* worldview as the *true* worldview and all others as mistaken and therefore false. (p.76)

Ironically, it seems that the most recent human inventions of Empire – the internet and global communication – are the tools that can help propel us into the next epoch. For we now have the capacity to be in direct and deep communication with people who think very differently. It's so much harder to sustain the us-them mentality necessary to maintain Empire. It is all too clear that *our* world view is not *the* only worldview.

I am heartened by signs of cooperation and partnership growing in people who in other times might well have sought to maximize their individual self-interest. In my neighborhood, we are going to create a cooperative garden. I have a side yard that could be RV parking if I had one, but mostly I try to ignore that it exists. Some saw it in its glory days this spring and were mightily impressed with the crop of dandelions I grew. It was indeed spectacular first as a shock of yellow and later as a field of white, round puff balls preparing to populate and take over the world.

But a few neighbors and I are going to transform it. We are going to do some farming together. This fall we will roto-till and lay in some good topsoil. Over the winter plotting and planning what we will grow. And at this time next yea, it may well be me – the girl who would not cook – who is harvesting a salad out of her own garden. I love this idea on so many levels. As a way to live closer to the land, to live more sustainably, to work cooperatively. I don't think my neighbors are thinking about this garden as part of a Great Turning of human history. They are looking rather and the changing nature of the world. They seek higher fuel and food costs. But they know that food and fuel cost more and won't be going back down anytime soon. Anytime at all. And so they are moved to cooperate. Kim next door is already doing research. Her husband Jeff will build a raised bed for lettuce. Jerry across the street has material to lay over to discourage weeds.

Korten writes: "The birthing of Earth Community begins with liberating the mind from the tyranny of the belief that there is no alternative to Empire. It moves forward as millions of people who glimpse possibilities long denied translate their deepening awareness into new practice." (p. 253)

Our neighborhood garden is such a small thing, but it is a glimpse of possibility. And the Great Turning, if it is to be, will be a series of many, many small acts and a few much grander ones.

Even now, Korten tells us, "Becoming more frugal in our use of resources has become a condition of human survival. To the alienated Imperial Consciousness that find meaning primarily in the addictions of Empire, this seems an almost unthinkable sacrifice. The more mature consciousness recognizes, however, that a turn to Earth Community is neither about self-sacrifice nor about renouncing technology or progress. It is about getting clear on our values, setting new priorities, redefining progress, and consuming less so that we may become more human and in the process experience the abundance of authentic relationships." (p. 298)

Even as I am fearful of the future, small things like a neighborhood garden, give me hope. The thing is, it seems pretty unlikely that we will know in our lifetimes whether humanity has made the Great Turning or descending into the Great Unraveling. Perhaps our children will, more likely their children or theirs. History's turnings are only clear through the lens of centuries. Many things may well have to get worse before they get better. In this election the forces of Empire may yet prevail. Even the candidates who seem to understand and want to be part of the Turning, so often use the language of Empire. Partly because it is the paradigm in which we live, partly because they have to, and partly because they still believe it. Yet there are political voices of hope.

We must do all we can to bring about Earth Community. Do all we can to turn us to the positive. Even to the naysayers, we must say – I'll go anyhow. We must do all we can to tell the world that we value life over power. We must let love guide us, for it is our great hope that we are building a new land, creating together a new world. All we do now is a supreme leap of faith in the possible.

We may yet be able to put things back, back into human balance. We may yet be able to make things right. We *can* be a part of the Great Turning. Perhaps only our grandchildren or great grandchildren will ever know whether the crises we face today led us toward the Turning or the Unraveling. Perhaps only they will know whether all our efforts are for the good, whether ours will be the small acts that facilitate the turning to Earth Community that we so fervently pray for. That we know is yet still possible. We must act from faith, knowing all we can do may not be enough, knowing we must do it anyhow.

May we keep faith.

And may our grandchildren and great grandchildren speak well of us.

Amen and Blessed be.