

## ***ECOFEMINISM AND SPIRITUALITY***

### **“Ecofeminist Cosmology” in Practice: Genesis Farm and the Embodiment of Sustainable Solutions**

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#### **Introduction**

That the physical and spiritual life of man is tied up with nature is another way of saying that nature is linked with itself, for man is part of nature.

—Karl Marx, 1844

The deepest crises experienced by any society are those moments of change when the story becomes inadequate for meeting the survival demands of a present situation. Such, it seems to me, is the situation we must deal with in this late twentieth century.

—Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth*

Perhaps the most poignant illustration of our current relationship to the Earth is Shel Silverstein’s children’s classic, *The Giving Tree*. In the beginning of the story, a boy and a tree love each other, the boy being content to merely climb and play in *her* branches. However, as the boy grows up, he loses interest in *her* and leaves, only to return as a man seeking *her* resources: selling *her* apples that *she* freely gives, then later *her* branches, and lastly *her* trunk. Each time the man comes asking *her* to give to him of *herself* so that he might have wealth and, *she* hopes, happiness. Finally, when the man is old, he comes and asks for more, but the tree has nothing left to give except for *her* stump upon which he sits, as he is tired. And the tree, so Silverstein says, “was happy.” Yet despite the presence of the man with the tree as a stump, the reader is left wondering how the tree can possibly be happy having so little left of *her* self. *Her* happiness, consequently, seems more like a human projection onto nature, a self-comforting thought that “mother nature” is “happy” to serve our needs. For American cultural historian and self-described “Earth scholar,” Father Thomas Berry, cultural stories such as this are central to our ecological and social crisis.

*The Giving Tree* has been challenged for its sexism—and indeed, it is in many ways an accurate portrayal of many individual men’s exploitative relationships to women. It is, however, an even more powerful metaphor for the exploitative Western capitalist patriarchal relationship to the Earth—the ultimate “giving tree.” This exploitation is based on what Berry identifies as our cultural “pathology,” a collective disorder “manifest in the arrogance with which we reject our role as an integral member of the Earth community in favor of a radical anthropocentric life attitude.” For Berry, just as for ecological feminist thinkers and activists, the development of the current cultural pathology is rooted in a system that at its core is “antifeminist, antihuman and anti-Earth” in that it promotes and praises oppressive hierarchical and profit-driven relationships in order to achieve its notions of progress. This “pathology” is highlighted in Al Gore’s 2006 film, *An Inconvenient Truth*, and numerous other sources. One example is the Union of Concerned Scientists’ recent report on global warming, which found that in order for the world to stay within the “prescribed atmospheric concentration limit,” the United States must cut its carbon emissions by at least 80 percent

below 2000 levels by 2050.”-Although the giving tree is reduced to a near-lifeless stump, the Earth fortunately is still continuing to sprout new growth. But this may not always be the case if global capitalism continues its profit-driven rampage.

Heather Eaton’s article, “Feminist or Functional Cosmology? Ecofeminist Musings on Thomas Berry’s Functional Cosmology,” explores Berry’s notion of a functional cosmology and questions some of its implications from an ecofeminist perspective. She concludes that functional cosmology and ecofeminism are “incomplete” alone, but that “[t]ogether these could be powerful allies in transforming the world, respecting the Earth, and honoring the holy.” Thus, my objective here is to support Eaton’s assertion that Berry’s functional cosmology and ecofeminism need each other. Further, I will propose that Genesis Farm, a 140-acre farm and Learning Center for the Earth in northern New Jersey founded by Dominican Sisters, is an example of “ecofeminist cosmology” in practice. As such, I want to show how through their holistic solutions to the growing ecological crisis of global capitalism, the Green Sisters at Genesis Farm, like others around the world, are embodying Eaton’s notion of an ecofeminist cosmology, demonstrating that not only could it play a part in “transforming the world, respecting the Earth and honoring the holy,” but that it already *is* doing this in a locally based, yet globally focused way.

In articulating the link between ecology and spirituality, Genesis Farm is part of an emerging trend within the world’s major religions that sees global warming and increased environmental destruction as, to quote Pope John Paul II in 1990, “a moral issue.” In taking this perspective to heart, Genesis Farm is a highly successful example of the movement among Roman Catholic sisters to integrate ecology—and in this particular case, Berry’s notion of a functional cosmology—into their spiritual practice.

Genesis Farm has been discussed in a number of books and articles, such as Sarah McFarland Taylor’s “Reinhabiting Religion: Green Sisters, Ecological Renewal, and the Biography of Religious Landscape,” her recent book, *Green Sisters: A Spiritual Ecology*, and Marjorie Hope and James Young’s *Voices of Hope in the Struggle to Save the Planet*. However, none of these works has explored in-depth the connections between ecofeminism, the Green Sisters, or Genesis Farm. Thus, I see this research as contributing a small but significant piece to the vast and multifaceted mosaic of ecofeminist scholarship, particularly those ecofeminist works that focus on the ways in which women around the world are putting solutions into practice. Furthermore, I argue that although ecofeminist spirituality (as in the celebration of Mother Earth/Goddess/the Divine Feminine) has been the branch of ecofeminism most critiqued by many social/ist ecofeminists for the “sin of essentialism,” it has been just such works that have been the most influential, not only to Berry, but also to the Green Sisters themselves, despite their connections with patriarchal Judeo-Christianity. In fact, it has been through their collective understanding of a living, life-giving planet that Green Sisters have within the Roman Catholic organizational structure reshaped their ministerial priorities and even reconfigured their conceptions of God. They have taken the writings of Thomas Berry, as well as the influences of ecofeminism and many other sources, and turned them into an ecologically based spiritual and material “call to action.”

### **Thomas Berry’s Functional Cosmology**

Since the 1970s, Thomas Berry's work, inspired by the French Jesuit paleontologist and theologian, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955), has been devoted to solving the ecological crisis. Berry sees this crisis as rooted in the lack of a "functional cosmology," an ecologically sound cultural narrative, or story, of how the Universe, the Earth, life, human life and human consciousness came to be. He argues that a functional cosmology is fundamental to dealing with the ecological crisis, because it would give us an ecologically sound direction for our future, moving us from a relationship of dominating and devastating the Earth to one that is mutually enhancing. It is a theme developed in his books, *The Dream of the Earth*, mentioned above, *The Universe Story*, co-authored with cosmologist Brian Swimme, and more recently, *The Great Work*.

Berry says that all human communities develop stories that create "the macro-context" for "personal and communal self-understanding." Creation stories, religions, mythologies, and even ideologies play such a role. Such beliefs in their myriad manifestations form, as Peter Berger argues, a society's "nomos" from which meaning is derived and actively maintained. Religion has been the most powerful and comprehensive nomos, serving to place humans in a divinely inspired Universe and translate some notion of the sacredness of the natural world. Western Christianity, the religion of the world's currently ruling elite is, as Lynn White argues, "the most anthropocentric religion in the world" and is used to provide Western society its moral authority to conquer nature and relegate environmental concerns to the secular realm. Thus, for White, since the roots of our ecological crisis are religious—or as Berry would say, cosmological, even before they are epistemological—then likewise our "response...must have a religious grounding."

Berry maintains that we must foster "a sense of the New Story of the Universe as the context for understanding the diversity and unity of religions ... in order to maintain their ultimate values and orientation towards reality yet also assist in the transformation to an ecological era." In other words, world religions must come together to not only rewrite our cultural "giving tree" story, but also put that new story into practice. We humans need to see ourselves not as the *sole* purpose of an inanimate Universe, but as merely one *part* of a vastly complex living Universe. Currently, Berry points out, "we think of the Earth more as the background for economic purposes or as the object of scientific research rather than as a world of wonder, magnificence, and mystery for the unending delight of the human mind and imagination."

Ecofeminist Rosemary Ruether finds fault in Berry's emphasis on "consciousness and culture" for not sufficiently recognizing the "socioeconomic, legal and political relations of humans to each other ... [and] to the air, water, land, plants and animals of the planet." Likewise, Eaton says Berry "does not deal with agency" nor say who is doing what to whom under a global capitalist system fueled by U.S. corporate and military hegemony. Eaton contends that "Without a sophisticated knowledge of how the dominant paradigm actually works, [Berry's] functional cosmology will not be enough to motivate or energize people for the immense transformation ahead."

Miriam MacGillis strongly disagrees with this critique, both in terms of her interpretation and application of Berry's work at Genesis Farm. For every aspect of Genesis Farm's structure—both physical and social—addresses and attempts to counter issues of domination and exploitation. MacGillis' work and that of many others through Genesis

Farm is not a direct confrontation of global capitalism; nevertheless, this inspiring model of progressive change clearly links consciousness and culture to material relations through its ecologically sustainable and spiritually based communal practices. As MacGillis describes it, “everything we do here in our ecological work stems from Berry’s clear articulation of the cosmological principles of differentiation, subjectivity and communion, and the implications [are] that these same values embedded in the Earth/Universe show up as the golden rule within the world’s cultures (including matricentric and patricentric perspectives).”

MacGillis’ personal promotion and individual interpretation of Berry’s “New Story” has been very influential within the Green Sisters movement, more so than Berry’s own speaking and writing has been. The spiritual branch of ecofeminism that sees the Earth as alive is very much in sync with Berry’s and Swimme’s view that the “fundamental role that we should be fulfilling—the role of enabling the Earth and the universe entire to reflect on and celebrate themselves and the deep mysteries they bear within them”—is one in which we are failing. This parallel is not coincidental. Berry’s work is strongly influenced by seminal North American ecofeminist writing, such as Susan Griffin’s *Woman and Nature* and Charlene Spretnak’s essay, “Ecofeminism: Our Roots and Flowering.” He states that these authors have “established the basis not only for a new historical period, but also for a new interpretation of history itself.” Thus, he believes the ecological feminist movement is “the greatest ally to his functional cosmology.” He calls for the “wisdom of women” to bring about what he refers to as the Ecozoic era, “the period when humans will be present to the planet as participating members of the comprehensive Earth community.” For Berry, as for many ecofeminists and the Green Sisters, this “women’s wisdom” harks back to an ancient cosmology rooted in “a creative and nurturing principle” that was the signature of the Goddess, independent of any male influence. Furthermore, for Berry, it is the ecological feminist movement that provides us with the means to move forward to a “postpatriarchal” era that he correlates with the “emerging ecological or ecofeminist period.” This is vital for Berry, since he defines patriarchy as “the deepest and most destructive level of determination in the Western perception of reality and value.” Thus, he says “the earth seems to be rising in defense of herself and her children after this long period of patriarchal domination.” Despite Eaton’s view that Berry’s critique of patriarchy and his analysis of ecological feminism lacks detail and thus that “he will not find many allies in the ecofeminist movement,” he has successfully inspired women religious thinkers to put their version of ecofeminism into practice within the context of his new cosmology. However, there are questions about how Berry’s admittedly “essentialist” notions of women’s wisdom play out for ecofeminism and for the Green Sisters associated with Genesis Farm.

### **Ecological Feminism**

In combining the social justice concerns of feminism with the environmental sustainability concerns of the environmental movement, ecofeminists attempt “to understand and resist the interrelated dominations of women and nature” through “analysis, critique, vision and praxis.” As Susan Griffin, an early and influential ecofeminist author, states: “From the beginning this movement involved personal transformation as part of a recognition of political circumstance,” directly linking the lived personal with the abstract political, the human with the natural, the local with the global. Ecofeminism is an historically grounded practice, and the diversity of voices within ecofeminism is so great, that, as Eaton points out, it is better “represented as a lens through which all disciplines are examined and

refocused” than as a discipline in its own right. Its practitioners range from housewives radicalized in fighting pollution in neighborhood or global contexts, to academics researching and writing in universities, to the spiritual and agricultural work of Green Sisters around the world. Unsurprisingly, such diversity inevitably leads to dissent.

According to Charlene Spretnak, three main paths led to ecofeminism. The first path was taken by women reacting to Marxist political theory, which, although strong on class oppression, was criticized by radical socialist and cultural feminists for its weak articulation of patriarchal relations and the exploitation of nature. A second path to ecofeminism was through nature-based religion, in particular the re-discovery of the ancient Earth Mother Goddess through such works as Merlin Stone’s *When God Was a Woman*, Starhawk’s *The Spiral Dance*, and Riane Eisler’s *The Chalice and the Blade*. The third path was through the liberal environmental movement that gained popularity globally, but which many women found to be lacking in a systemic analysis of both capitalism and patriarchy, leading them to critique both environmentalism and deep ecology. Yet despite these different paths, each conceptualization of ecofeminism addresses the notion that there is a unique connection between women and nature. At the same time, ecofeminists are aware that this culturally gendered connection has been a source of oppression for women in different ways, depending on their social, political, and economic positions. Thus, for poor women, the ideological connection of women to nature has served to rationalize their menial labors, while the Western association of racial hierarchies with nature has compounded the oppressions experienced by women of color. Yet despite the various layers of oppression, woman-nature links have been a source of empowerment through women’s embodied experiences in childbearing and nursing, as well as in the social, economic, and culturally reproductive labor that they do. Many women express this unique sense of power through the Goddess allusions found in women-centered spirituality.

Given that patriarchal narratives have used the association of women with nature as a form of gender diminishment, some readers of ecofeminism have objected to what they see as a political contradiction in this talk of a “special connection.” But in doing so, they fail to recognize the categorical difference between women’s material embeddedness in natural relations as distinct from capitalist patriarchal depictions or representations of that material relationship. Again, theorists and ecofeminists like Biehl who view ecofeminism as essentialist overlook the fact that *all* articulations of feminisms are fundamentally based on the conviction that gender identities and roles are socially constructed ideologies.

I have previously reviewed this debate in depth and have argued that it abounds in misrepresentations and superficial analyses. However, it is important to revisit it briefly here, for there is no doubt that Berry’s text—with its symbolic rather than material causes—does in many ways appear to be pre-feminist and essentialist. Nevertheless, his conception of a functional cosmology resonates strongly with the work of both Spretnak and Starhawk, who each use woman-spirit imagery and metaphor to make “story” out of daily experiences. What is most important is *not* the origin of this “special connection” but rather the ways in which it is articulated practically, such that women’s lives become daily testimonies—that is, “women’s wisdom” is not of “woman born” but of “woman made.”

To further this point, Taylor recognizes that the “recurrent prophetic narrative that a positive outcome for the Earth depends on the return of the wisdom that women

bear—because of their special connectedness to the Earth and their capacity for greater connectedness with others—finds ideal conditions for nurturance and growth within the Green Sisters movement.” In other words, through this nurturance, many women, including the Green Sisters—who believe that they *do* have a special connection with nature, the Earth, and the Universe—soon *create* one, because as MacGillis says “the very structure and function of the Earth/Universe as observed by science confirms this unity.” In this manner, ecofeminist theories, when put into practice-by Green Sisters, have real “material” consequences in terms of new ways of working with the Earth (ecological), with each other (sociological), and in modeling a future based on solidarity economies (politico-economic).

The influence of ecofeminism on Green Sisters is deeply significant. “Whether or not individual Green Sisters choose to identify themselves as feminist, ecofeminist, both or neither, the Green Sisters movement itself has foundationally benefited from the infrastructure, sensibilities, pathways for questioning, and language introduced into women’s congregations through both the renewal process and the women’s movement,” Taylor observes. Charlene Spretnak, who was the keynote speaker at the 2002 “Sisters of the Earth” conference, uses language and imagery that links women and their wisdom directly with the Earth, in a spiritual and transformative way. For example, she writes “Woman’s transformative wisdom and energy are absolutely necessary in the struggle for ecological sanity, peace and social justice.” It is just this kind of sentiment that has been held up as essentialist for its claim of women’s “special connection” to nature that is then seen as the reason behind Seager’s claim that “women are the backbone of virtually all environmental organizations in the United States.”

Two studies done between 1990 and 1993 in both the United States and Europe reveal that the link between women and environmental activism is *not* their biological role as women nor mothers but rather their “support [of] feminist goals” that makes them, as well as men who support feminist goals, “more likely to be concerned about the environment.” And although “women may be more likely than men to embrace feminist orientations or to even identify as feminist, this in no way means that men cannot do the same thing.” Thus, it is not an “essential” quality within women that brings them (and a growing number of men) to environmental activism; rather it is “that feminism exposes one to an alternative analysis of environmental problems” that makes them *willing* to create a “special connection.” Within the traditionally male-dominated Roman Catholic Church, it should therefore be no surprise that it is religious women, open to and inspired by feminism, who are *living* and thus *leading* the way to sustainable solutions, thereby actively creating their own “special connections” to the Earth as well as to each other.

The notion that for the Green Sisters and many other ecofeminists, the fulfillment of their woman-centered spiritual inspiration is manifest in their materially ecological practices is supported by Rosemary Ruether’s conceptualization of “ecofeminist theology.” Ruether rejects the primarily Western cultural ideology of dualism, as in “soul and body,” good and evil, right and wrong, human and nature. Likewise, as Vandana Shiva affirms, it is logically impossible to essentialize anything, since all entities are interconnected. Such relational thinking promotes fluidity between identities, subjects and objects; it characterizes most Eastern and Indigenous People’s philosophies; and it is central to Berry’s and Swimme’s conception of the Universe as a dynamic living totality. In fact, as Swimme argues in his

essay, “How to Heal a Lobotomy” in *Renewing the World*, a seminal collection of early ecofeminist writing,

nothing is more obvious than Spretnak’s assertion that weaving is a fundamental dynamic of this Universe. Picture it: From a single fireball the galaxies and stars were all woven ... Our lives in truth are nothing less than a further unfurling of this primordial ordering activity.

Swimme’s objective is to humor the scientific community’s continual failure to see the *whole* beyond its fixation with analysis, computation, and categorization. Therefore, he proposes “we learn to interpret the data provided by the fragmented scientific mind within the holistic poetic vision alive in ecofeminism.” Ruether argues that what is needed to inspire such “a new global consciousness” as a means of addressing our current ecological crisis is not just one version of ecofeminism but rather “a plurality of ecofeminist perspectives [that] must arise from many cultural backgrounds,”—including Genesis Farm. As Miriam MacGillis states,

During the 25 years of Genesis Farm, I see women emerging as a vital force for life ... because they are choosing to *be* that vital force. I’m not excluding men, rather I see it as a capacity we all have as in the feminine and the masculine, and it is a case of which aspect we nurture or suppress in any culture at any particular time.

In other words, she recognizes the need for both balance and unity by being a steadfast force of the “feminine” present within the “masculine” Roman Catholic hierarchy.

### **Genesis Farm and the Earth Literacy Center**

Genesis Farm was left as an inheritance to the Dominican Sisters of Caldwell, New Jersey in 1978. Sister Miriam Therese MacGillis, founded the project in 1980, inspired by the work of Father Thomas Berry. MacGillis had come from ten years of social justice and peace work and says she “was used to being engaged in ... major issues, such as world hunger and what was happening to farmers around the world [as a result of the] corporate takeover of our food system.” From the beginning, she visualized Genesis Farm as a “farm and reflection center” that would address these issues locally and globally. MacGillis states that it was to be a place to “experiment in ‘re-inhabiting’ these 140 acres in the Delaware Valley, a center where the search for alternative global systems, global spirituality, simplicity of life, land, stewardship and sustainable, ecological agriculture all come together.” And that is exactly what it has become, a place where she and others have developed “viable models, practical plans, and concrete tools for applying the philosophical insights of Thomas Berry’s work.” In short, MacGillis says, Genesis Farm has become a place where “the two primary dimensions of our work ... learning and agriculture” are put into daily practice.

The learning side of the operation is facilitated by the Earth Literacy Center, which was established in 1990 to offer programs “to awaken our capacity to ‘read’ the book of the natural world and to ‘hear’ the voices of its community life.” Its programs and workshops are “designed to help us experience ourselves as a dimension *of* the Earth, and to expand our conception of *self* to include our *Earth self*, our *Universe self*, as one single reality.” The goal of the Earth Literacy Center is to inspire and teach individuals and groups how to become a

part of this great work, by seeing themselves—humans—as part of nature. It has an extensive library, teaching center and accommodations for up to nine long-term guests. Furthermore, a twelve-week Earth Literacy program is available at Genesis Farm for 15 graduate credits through a linkage with the Florida-based St. Thomas University or 10 credits at St. Mary of the Woods College in Indiana. Thus, following Berry’s call for a “new ecological role for colleges,” Genesis Farm has helped to bring the work of Earth Literacy to universities.

In addition to the teaching side of Genesis Farm, there is, of course, the farming side—“sacred agriculture”—which, MacGillis emphasizes, is done “with a deep spiritual commitment and love.” Genesis Farm employs Rudolf Steiner’s biodynamic method, which requires “preparing the seed with reverence, sowing [it] according to cosmic forces like the alignment of the stars, and setting the seed out in terms of ‘companion planting.’” Genesis Farm also engages in “the exploration of the Earth as a self-nourishing organism,” “through microbes, nutrients, water and sunlight” which are, as Berry asserts, the growers of the food, as opposed to farmers who only enter into that prior process. This approach recognizes the Earth as “a *living being* whose activities are to *nourish, govern, learn, heal, regenerate and transform itself.*” It is also a way to engage with “the mystery at the heart of human existence that open[s] up and draw[s] us into the sacramental aspect of our lives through the most ordinary and familiar ways.”

Genesis Farm puts this concept into practice in the community with a Community Supported Garden (CSG, also known by its more common acronym, CSA, or Community Supported Agriculture). The CSA is incorporated separately, though it is consistent with the mission of Genesis Farm. More than 300 families are members, which enables them to participate in securing the economic viability of the farm as pre-paid “share-holders” in its seasonal production. They are also welcome to plant and harvest some crops, as well as tend the plants and help with other cooperative activities. The farm is part of the Foodshed Alliance of the Ridge and Valley, “a grassroots effort to sustain farmers, agricultural lands, and [a] rural way of life in the Ridge and Valley area of Northwestern New Jersey, ... enabl[ing] farmers to make a viable living and stay on the land.” Thus, bucking national economic and social trends, Genesis Farm serves a twofold purpose: being politically active in teaching members of the community, and also feeding, nurturing and supporting them.

Genesis Farm’s “conscious effort in healing and restoring the Earth’s life support systems” reinforces a positive, harmonious, respectful relationship with the existing bioregion as well as the planet at large. This dedication manifests in concrete ways, such as putting the farm’s community lands into land trusts, using solar panels and composting toilets, and constructing some buildings with straw bales and mud. It is also expressed in spiritually symbolic ways by observing Celtic planting rituals, recognizing sacred pagan holidays, and by “honoring the wisdom and practices of the Native American Peoples who once occupied the land by celebrating the sacred seasonal times of the solstices and equinoxes, as well as central moments in the sacred traditions of most religions.”

In addition, MacGillis created a cosmic walk, that “like the stations of the cross, invites the walker to engage in a contemplation ‘pilgrimage.’” In this case, the focus is to “reflect on the birth of the Universe through significant stages of its emergence into Earth, into life, and into the present moment.” The walk begins with reciting Berry’s adaptation of

the first lines of the Gospel of John: “In the beginning was the dream ... Through the dream all things came to be ...” The walker takes a candle, which signifies the dawning of the universe 13.7 billion years ago. The walker then proceeds to follow a spiral rope, which symbolizes the time-line of the universe, passing through cosmic events like the emergence of the solar system 5 billion years ago; of oxygen 2 billion years ago; the first birds, 180 million years ago; modern Homo sapiens, 40,000 years ago; and the splitting of the atom, 50 years ago. And at each point the walker lights a vigil candle. MacGillis’ intention is for the walk to help people experience “the awesomeness of the time-space of the Universe,” something that is often beyond intellectual understanding.

The commitment to honor the spiritual “threads of the Earth’s diverse religions” at Genesis Farm reflects MacGillis’ belief that the solution to our ecological crisis does not lie in “one version [of truth] or the other; it’s the wisdom of them all that gives us perspective.” She elaborates on this by pointing out that with all the new

insight provided by our scientific discovery of deep time and deep space, we need to change our response ... There is no one way that has a single wisdom or a single answer of how to proceed into the future ... No one has all the truth to the exclusion of the others.

The openness displayed at Genesis Farm to other religions, philosophies, beliefs, and “wisdoms,” challenges most people’s perception of traditional church doctrine. However, according to MacGillis, it reflects the lesser known yet “immense work in ecumenism and interfaith dialogue” that has been going on since the Second Ecumenical Council of the Vatican, or Vatican II, 1962-65, which advocated restoring unity between all Christians and opening dialog with the modern world. In 1965, His Holiness Pope Paul VI stated that “in [the Church’s] task of promoting unity and love among men, indeed among nations, she considers above all in this declaration what men have in common and what draws them to fellowship.” In this vein, Genesis Farm’s inclusion of a multiplicity of faiths is also central to the Church’s ethos of “promoting unity and love” and includes all sentient and non-sentient beings. Thus, not surprisingly, when I asked MacGillis about her views on ecofeminism, she responded by saying that ecofeminism was part of “the wisdom of them all,” indicating that for her, one theoretical perspective is not enough.

Perhaps the best testimony to the success of Genesis Farm is the extent to which it has inspired other sisters to embark on their own part of “the great work.” Sister Margaret Galiardi recounts that she began her “foray into this experience of Earth cosmology and the Universe story through reading and studying the works of Thomas Berry and Miriam MacGillis.” After years of study, she went on a vision quest, which gave her what she refers to as “Earth-based spirituality.” For Galiardi, this combination of Earth literacy with Earth spirituality produces an understanding of the “experience of oneness.” As she puts it:

We know the story of the Universe empirically; the mystics knew it intuitively. The new cosmology doesn’t wipe out all the different religious traditions rather it opens up the depth of meaning.

For Galiardi, the idea of “opening up the depth of meaning” is very much linked with finding connections between “the feminine, the Earth, ecofeminism, and the new

cosmology.” Prior to this discovery, Galiardi says that she “experienced a sense of alienation within myself, within my own body and realiz[ed] that I wanted a piece of my soul back.” It was “like coming out of a certain kind of amnesia to recover, if you will, [and] the recovery was the discovery of a much bigger God.” Thus, through her connection with the Earth, the sacred feminine, ecofeminism, and the new functional cosmology, Galiardi found what she had been looking for.

When people ask her why she doesn’t leave the church with its patriarchal hierarchy, she says “I am not going to leave it to them,” expressing that she feels it is the role and responsibility of women like herself and MacGillis to transform the institutional church into being more ecologically conscious and thus more committed to bringing forth “this message.” However, she recognizes the need to still “fly under the radar,” because “the work is too important to risk misunderstanding by those within the institutional church who have not had the opportunity to study all of this more clearly.”

Another sister influenced by the work of Berry, MacGillis and Genesis Farm is Patricia Siemen, the director of the Center for Earth Jurisprudence (CEJ), which is co-sponsored by the law schools of both St. Thomas University and Barry University in Florida. Siemen’s journey into Earth literacy came out of her involvement with social justice, exposure to the writings of Berry, as well as time spent at Genesis Farm and the Sophia Center at Holy Names University in Oakland. Siemen told me:

I was so focused on human injustices that I never considered the linkages between systems of domination and the anthropocentric way of being human. My movement into Earth literacy, eco-justice and ecofeminism from a cosmological perspective is for me a continuation of my own evolution of consciousness.

Her shift of consciousness has entailed a major shift in her understanding of

who the mystery of God is, and what and who belongs to “the community of life.” Realizing that inclusive community means including all the other species and kinds—sentient and non-sentient together. Realizing that there is a holy or Divine Mystery beyond the Universe.

Such an evolution of consciousness differs from traditional Catholic doctrine. For Siemen it is her Adrian Dominican congregation “of vowed women religious” who live collectively and in the spirit of Jesus that keeps her most connected and committed to her Catholic roots. Like Galiardi, she also recognizes the need to make the connections of her ministry to that of the deep essence of the Gospel and to do her part in the great work.

Siemen says “ecofeminism opened my world to a larger sense of the Earth community and the critiques that ecofeminists offer. Seeing the parallel in the domination of women and the domination of Earth opened my eyes to other linkages.” However, she sees limits in what ecofeminism offers:

While the ecofeminist lens is important, we also need a cosmological perspective that recognizes that we humans are just one part of this larger whole, the larger Earth community. I’m not sure ecofeminism includes the concept that all beings have a certain purpose to fulfill.

Like MacGillis, Siemen views ecofeminism as just one perspective and calls for an emphasis on “the wisdom of them all.” However, for many ecofeminists, the notion of a plural living Universe is central, as Starhawk illustrates:

Living with the knowledge that the cosmos is alive causes us to do something. That is, when we start to understand that the Earth is alive, she calls us to act to preserve her life. When we understand that everything is interconnected, we are called to a politics and set of actions that come from compassion, from the ability to literally feel with all living beings on the Earth. That feeling is ground upon which we can build community and come together and take action and find direction.

And this, in fact, is exactly what Genesis Farm has done: developed a direction, built community, come together, and taken action in a manner that is simultaneously spiritual, political, and material, in that it is created on the understanding that “everything is interconnected.”

What is perhaps most significant for Sisters Galiardi and Siemen is that as a result of their exposures to ecofeminism, Berry’s and Swimme’s *The Universe Story*, and teachings from MacGillis and the Earth Literacy Center, their concepts of “our story” have dramatically expanded, as have their spiritual practices, and more fundamentally, their concept of God. Thus, all three sisters, MacGillis, Galiardi, and Siemen, have moved beyond “categories” into what MacGillis describes as a “more inclusive cosmology, which draws from the wisdom of science, the wisdom of classical religions, the wisdom of women, and the wisdom of indigenous peoples,” which Berry writes about in both *The Fourfold Wisdom* and *The Great Work*. Taken together, it is these fourfold wisdoms that give rise to these Green Sisters’ ecologically based daily practices, which are an articulation of an ecofeminist cosmology. Thus as Berry recognizes, it is from new stories that new actions begin. MacGillis characterizes it this way:

If religious leaders could look with open eyes at the revelations of what God has been up to all these billion years, they’d realize the images they use to convey the mysteries of their traditions are not large enough. That’s why I believe the new cosmology is so important.

## Conclusion

In her essay “The Evolution of an Ecofeminist,” Julia Scofield Russell writes:

As we transform ourselves, we transform our world. Not later. Now. Simultaneously. How can this be so? The practice of the politics of lifestyle springs from an understanding of how things actually happen rather than a linear, cause-and-effect model. As we align ourselves with the regenerative powers of the Earth and the evolutionary thrust of our species, we tap abilities beyond the ordinary.

This is an excellent description of Genesis Farm and what it and the Green Sisters have accomplished by being “aligned” with the regenerative powers of the Earth, by enacting Berry’s call for a new story, and by incorporating key aspects of ecofeminism. As a result, Genesis Farm embodies Eaton’s call for an “ecofeminist cosmology” that is integrated with Berry’s “functional cosmology.” It is, as MacGillis recognizes, “a fledgling experiment ... a

small spark that creates other sparks and lights within people who are searching for new visions and meanings as they strive to choose life.” And by choosing life, we can hope that many more of us will “dream,” will get off our giving-tree stump, and work collectively towards rewriting and living a new cultural story. As MacGillis states, “We ... [can] no longer propagandize the lie of separation,” but rather live the truth that all is one. Moreover, we can no longer propagandize the lie that there is nothing to be done, but rather, as shown by Genesis Farm, live the truth that there is everything to be done and done, ‘Not later. Now!’

And I said to the almond tree:  
‘Sister, speak to me of God!’  
And the almond tree blossomed.