

## Elements of Renewal: Fourfold Wisdom

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In *Our Common Future*, the United Nations' Brundtland report, the authors call for a "new ethic, which puts the relationship between humans and nature as a first priority."<sup>1</sup> The need to change industrial and post-industrial ways of life has been in public consciousness for more than three decades, but as a global community we are far behind acting on what we know and have known. It looks less and less likely we will avoid so changing the climate patterns of the world that life as we know it will be catastrophically transformed.

What does it mean to be in solidarity with all life on the planet, rather than just looking at local benefits? Life is connected on a cosmic scale, and we cannot pretend that things that affect others do not affect us. We live in a global/local age where the local is more noticeably connected to the global. The effects of our actions haunt us and our descendants, as those of our ancestors haunt us. We experience deep entanglement, delayed consequences that are hitting home for generations to come.

Any real transformation will have to be so profound that the lives we have come to take for granted must change, and we must become willing to let the rest of the world and cosmos truly *matter* to us. We have completely absorbed the logic of neoliberal economics, believing that what does not concern us directly and personally are "externalities" that somebody else must worry about. But "out of sight" ought not to mean "out of mind," and a "reductionist analysis" of the crises we are in will lead to "reductionist solutions."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in chapter 3 of *Our Common Future*, Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development, meeting in Gro Harlem Brundtland, Oslo, March 1987; <http://www.un-documents.net/ocf-03.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> Vandana Shiva, *Soil Not Oil: Environmental Justice in a Time of Climate Crisis* (Cambridge, Mass.: South End Press, 2008), 42.

I am proposing here a step forward in ecotheology, a move toward deeper practices of embodied ecospirituality, calling for a profound coherence of faith and practice. I am proposing that the conceptual framework of the classical four elements offers one way of moving toward practicing such embodied faith. I propose that the concepts of the elements can function in several ways: as heuristic devices, as a sacred geography, a sacred labyrinth of movements and connections, centering, decentering, re-enchanting how we see the world.

The elements are a useful sacred geography in an increasingly multireligious environment where we have to seek solidarity across religious difference to make a difference in our world, and to work on peaceful coexistence. The following represents a Christian theological approach for cooperation with other religious communities. The elements are a framework that can be found in many other traditions, a shared conceptuality that allows us to move beyond doctrinal differences, gaps in technology and development. They are ancient and deeply embedded in human thinking and sacred texts.

### *Living in an Elemental Economy*

The elements help us to envision an enlarged sense of divine economy on a larger scope than “economy” as it is often used in common parlance: a late capitalist reductionist framework that prioritizes and isolates profits and externalizes nature, elements, animals, even humans. We have been conditioned to understand the term “economy” in a rather narrow fashion, as referring to stock markets, profits involved in human consumption, consumer prices, financial markets and derivatives. News media may on occasion speak about employment concerns, hirings, firings, layoffs, buying power, and so forth. Some have called for a green economy that would include in its resource allocations a far greater range of factors having to do with the sustainable use of resources and the life quality of all life forms on the planet.

I define “economy” as resource allocation, management and distribution, the mapping of relationships of exchange, and the managing and just distribution of resources. “Divine economy” moves on a cosmic scale, referring to God’s involvement in the world as it relates to the cosmic workings of divinity in all aspects of planetary and human life. Looking at the world from a perspective of the divine economy means resisting the bifurcation of sacred and secular, material and spiritual, and seeing these exchanges as inseparable, as informing and expressing each other.

Some conventional uses of the term “divine economy” keep us tightly wound to anthropocentrism, however, which, as Ellen Armour contends, risks not only idolatry, but also keeps us “in thrall to modernity”<sup>3</sup> and to false dichotomies between faith and reason, nature and culture, world and humanity. Much of church ministry is solidly anthropocentric, and looks at environmental and economic issues only as they pertain to and have an impact on humans. This narrow scope of ministry proves too short-sighted to come to terms fully with the entangled global problems that are affecting us. It short-circuits the implications of our full embodiedness in this world.

The broader definition of “economy” means that our economic lives, our wheelings and dealings, our work lives and what we produce when we work, the structure of our workplaces and its finances, our personal credit, our mortgages, our investments and bank accounts, our debt, our stocks—all are deeply integrated with our spiritual lives, our daily practices and the way we live on the earth, our consumption, our trash, our sewage, our gardening projects, our food production and composting. How might we re-member, and trace the links between the symbolic and material?

Some aspects of Irenaean soteriology will not allow us to focus so narrowly on human salvation as if it were apart from heaven and earth. For Irenaeus, the world is not just a theater of glory, or a stage we can trash and then go elsewhere. We are committed to this world. There will not be a new one. This one will be remade and brought back to fullness, recapitulated. This view gives us a theological position that encourages deeper perception and conscious entanglement with the world. One way of entering deeper into such sacred entanglement is to pay attention to the elements of life.

Our lives are composed of and deeply entangled with the familiar cultural concepts of the four elements and would not be possible without them. Yet, we are culturally predisposed to use them with little honor or respect. The essential labor the elements perform goes generally unnoticed, yet we use them to establish hierarchies of power and representation. This hidden presence gives rise to unveiling the hidden economies, relationships of entanglement and exchange that move matter and spirit.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Ellen T. Armour, “Toward an Elemental Theology: A Constructive Proposal,” in *Theology That Matters: Ecology, Economy, and God*, ed. Darby Kathleen Ray (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2006), 48.

<sup>4</sup> Armour, “Elemental Theology,” 52.

We often talk about creation and our lives as a gift, a free gift, even. But with Dietrich Bonhoeffer I wonder whether this “cheap grace” of the gift without obligation, without commitment, responsibility, and consequences has not been a part of a theological mindset of enabling reckless abuse of the world around us. Such “free grace” is a theological problem, and therefore an ethical problem. A perversion of Martin Luther’s assertion that we cannot deserve God’s grace occurs when we think that this grace does not require a response and can simply be dismissed without consequences. Grace is valuable, expensive; it requires the whole of who we are as persons in community as a response; it involves an economy of reciprocity.

### *Elements Embodied*

Who does this body belong to? Do you feel it? It is yours too. And if I give it—give it back to you, keep it without appropriating it for yourself. And do not capitalise from its gains and losses with the first offer at the market rate. Keep it in its becoming. Be attentive, not tense. Remembering, without accumulating or making a profit.<sup>5</sup>

When the Yogi has full power over his body composed of the elements of earth, water, fire, air, and ether, then he obtains a new body of spiritual fire which is beyond illness, old age, and death.<sup>6</sup>

Our bodies are the site of many transactions, transformations, economies, and desires. They are sites also of sacred, divine exchanges, involved in material and spiritual entanglement at the same time. In a variety of biblical narratives that are part of Christian tradition, we see humans and God in constant renegotiation of this economy. And we see that the elements are involved in all resource allocations. This is complex: There is a relationship between our actions and the consequences—personal, communal, generational, intergenerational—but it is not so simple that we can apply a simplistic equation in which bad things happen to people who have done bad things. The Book of Job teaches us otherwise, teaches us that there may be other factors at play.

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<sup>5</sup> Luce Irigaray, *Elemental Passions* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 69.

<sup>6</sup> Krishna Yajur Veda, *Svetasvatara Upanishad* 2.12; quoted at [http://www.mountainman.com.au/aeon\\_faqs.htm](http://www.mountainman.com.au/aeon_faqs.htm).

In Deuteronomy, the covenant between God and Israel is sealed by the invocation of heaven and earth as legal witnesses to the contract:

I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the LORD your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the LORD swore to give your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. (Deut. 30:19–20)

Relationships of exchange and entanglement are woven throughout our history, in sacred and profane texts.

*Eucharistic Elements: Divine Economy and Relational Reciprocity*

Building on the shared conceptual vocabulary of the elements can help deepen awareness and action for specific facets of the natural world in the annual rhythms of the life of religious communities. For many Christians, the Eucharist represents and re-members profoundly transforming relationships in the divine economy. This symbolic shift, which many Christians celebrate as one of their primary sacraments, is potentially more disruptive to our lives in late capitalism than we may realize. We live with a measure of denial of the profundity of economic shifts it implies. Gifts of the people are brought to the altar, and we thank God for these gifts. They are redistributed as the food of life for us as we remember the divine economy and enter more fully into the relationships of the divine covenant between humans, God, and earth. This divine economy symbolizes at its best and broadest the cosmic exchange relationships between God, humans, and world. The world is not just a backdrop for a narrowly understood salvation history; it is deeply enmeshed in our bodies and souls and our dealings within the earth we know. Anglican theologian Sallie McFague has proposed to see the world as God's body where we live and move and have our being. But what does this mean beyond memorable liturgical poetry? What does it mean, beyond adoring incantations of Hildegard of Bingen's verses? How does this image become more embodied in our lives? How can we bring our spiritual traditions more alive by living more deeply into what their rituals and sacraments impel us to recognize? How are we going to realize fully

the deep connections between ecology and economy in each of the many un contemplated moves we make every day?

As humans, our sense and sensibility are profoundly informed by “the geography of place” in our lives<sup>7</sup>—where our bodies have access to, and where they do not, what is safe and what is not, what spirit a place has. Whether an urban subdivision or a mountain lake cottage, we all know how space both confines and opens us. We are “intimately connected to the land”<sup>8</sup> to which we belong, our spatial geography matters no matter what, and we have created spaces that can alienate or bring us closer to a respectful relationship with the elements. Some places are constructed in resistance and defiance of the natural space they have been created in. Others aim to fit into what is already there.

Estrangement from our natural environment is the cultural contest wherein violence against the earth is accepted and normalized. If we do not see earth as a guide to divine spirit, then we cannot see that the human spirit is violated, diminished when humans violate and destroy the natural environment.<sup>9</sup>

Violation and destruction, if it becomes too great, can turn into a pain that is “ultimately, insidiously, turning a generous life loving people into a people who no longer feel empathy for the world.” If we are being “consumed by our suffering,”<sup>10</sup> we become too desperate to act in hope. And yet, at the same time the signs of a “spatial revolution”<sup>11</sup> that manifests also as a “re-enchantment” of the world (in response to modernity) or a return of “reawakening of wonder”<sup>12</sup> is emerging in many places, and in different ways.

### *Recapturing Elements as “Sensible Transcendentals”: Fourfoldness as a Way of Describing Entanglement in the World*

Air dies giving birth  
to fire. Fire dies

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<sup>7</sup> bell hooks, *Belonging: A Culture of Place* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 9.

<sup>8</sup> Carol Lee Flinders, quoted in hooks, *Belonging*, 13.

<sup>9</sup> hooks, *Belonging*, 26.

<sup>10</sup> Alice Walker, *We Are The Ones We Have Been Waiting For*, as quoted in hooks, *Belonging*, 30.

<sup>11</sup> My translation of *Raumrevolution*; Carl Schmitt, *Land und Meer* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1942), 55.

<sup>12</sup> hooks, *Belonging*, 32.

giving birth to air. Water,  
 thus, is born of dying  
 earth, and earth of water.<sup>13</sup>

Irenaeus argues in *Against Heresies* that there are four gospels, no more, no less: “four like the points of the compass, four like the chief directions of the wind. The Church, spread all over the world, has in the gospels four pillars and four winds blowing wherever people live.”<sup>14</sup>

Indeed a deeper cosmic truth may be expressed. We are relearning from modern science what our ancestors knew deeply: We cannot continue to exist in denial of systemic, economic, religious, and personal interconnections without endangering life itself. Our complicity is both material and spiritual, including systemic disengagement, paralysis, and deep feelings of hopelessness. How might we address the need for communal action, given that many of us are members of marginal religious communities? We need each other, in ecumenical, intercultural, and interreligious cooperations. What is more, many Christians have multiple religious belongings. That is, they go to Sunday services, perhaps, but then to yoga; they read books on Buddhism, meditate, consult a shaman. Thinking through elements can provide a way into a comparative theological practice that enriches those who have a “home tradition” they find central and helps those who are less rooted and more eclectic to come to a deepened, more conscious thought and practice.

The elements are metaphors for living, expanding the boundaries of care. The elements are not anthropomorphic. Rather, they can “dramatically torque traditional Christian theism.”<sup>15</sup> An elemental theology, says Ellen Armour, “refocuses attention from an indivisible, disembodied-but-agential transcendence to a (more or less) visible, embodied, impersonal transcendence.”<sup>16</sup> The elements connect to some of the central Christian rituals, baptism and Eucharist, and are often employed as metaphors for experiences of divinity: a spirit wind, a fire of presence, a mountain of revelation, nourishing water from deep wells in the desert.

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<sup>13</sup> Heraclitus, *Fragments*, trans. Brooks Haxton (New York: Penguin Classics, 2001), fragment 25, p. 17.

<sup>14</sup> Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, II.11.8.

<sup>15</sup> Armour, “Elemental Theology,” 53.

<sup>16</sup> Armour, “Elemental Theology,” 54.

Water, air, fire, and earth are deeply imagined ways of exploring and comprehending the world within and around us. Oftentimes, the elements are conceived as distinct forces in the world that link all bodies, spiritually, economically, and ecologically, in a way that allows us to imagine a greater integration of our lives with all other lives. The elements are dynamic, not static. The hydrologic cycle, the Gulf Stream, the jet stream, the much slower movement of the earth crust, the flashing of light and fire: all speak of the dynamism, the aliveness of our world. Our own bodies are small-scale versions of these cycles, as “the network of waterways resembles the circulatory system of a body”<sup>17</sup>—another way in which we can remind ourselves of our deep cellular and vascular entanglement with these cycles. When these cycles are polluted and abused, we are abused.

A fifth element, a quintessence, creatively integrates the elements, binding them through a cosmic *Logos* that rhymes with and beyond reason toward fourfold wisdom. These are transcendentals we can sense, and unlike the elements on the periodic table, we can perceive them, experience and distinguish them more easily. The conceptual framework of the four elements is deeply rooted in human experience; they are the raw materials that hold potential for new connections to the Sacred.<sup>18</sup> These elements touch each of our lives, in different ways, whether we live in the desert, in the inner city, in a suburb, on a mountaintop, or near the beach. They capture the imagination of children and adults and of religio-cultural expressions across the world. While many new chemical “elements” have been discovered, Philip Ball argues, “there is nothing *obvious* about the elements,” their number, and their distinctions, which is perhaps the reason “some people would like to stick with earth, air, fire, and water. They are not the elements of chemistry, but they somehow resonate with how we interact with the world and with the effect that matter has on us.”<sup>19</sup>

Can we get over the self-focus that is at the forefront of some of our own religious traditions, that focus almost all of our rites, texts,

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<sup>17</sup> David Suzuki, *The Sacred Balance: Rediscovering Our Place in Nature* (Vancouver, Canada: Greystone Books, 1997), 88.

<sup>18</sup> Serene Jones and Paul Lakeland, *Constructive Theology: A Contemporary Approach* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 2005), 51–52. The term “sensible transcendental” is Luce Irigaray’s.

<sup>19</sup> Philip Ball, *The Elements: A Very Short Introduction*, Very Short Introductions (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 20.



and practices on God-human or human-human interactions? Can we remember the elements in our traditions, to give them back their rightful place in our own personal and global cosmos? Can we remember that our concerns, our desires, our needs and powers should not and cannot override those of other life forms if we want to live respectfully in this creation? What would it mean to enter into wonder about the elements and the life cycles they inform? Instead of brewing the next alchemical stew to turn some consumer product into the gold of profit, what would an alchemy of the elements for the re-integration of life forces look like?

### *Water*

The wall between [my lips] is porous. It allows passage. Of fluids.<sup>20</sup>

To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life. (Revelation 21:6)

In Genesis 1, “a wind from God swept over the face of the waters,” articulating the sense that water grounds life in our world. The salty waters below and the sweet waters above are separated, each forming their part in the water cycles. Thales of Miletus posited that water is the one grounding substance, the *prima materia*, or primal matter of the physical world.<sup>21</sup> The water in our blood allows it to carry nutrients for cells and organs, and to transport waste products to the kidneys.<sup>22</sup> Many myths of creation around the world talk about water as a major piece in the ordering of the world. Ocean and river floods also play a role in creating and disrupting life relations, and necessitate new covenants and arrangements. Water, like all elements, has creative and destructive qualities; it is revered and feared. Where water is rare, stories circulate about and around wells, where women draw water: Rebekah draws water for Isaac’s servant; a Samaritan woman draws water for Jesus and engages him in a challenging conversation. Thirst is slaked, temporarily, permanently, eternally. Feet

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<sup>20</sup> Irigaray, *Elemental Passions*, 66.

<sup>21</sup> Ball, *Elements*, 6.

<sup>22</sup> Robert Kandel, *Water from Heaven: The Story of Water from the Big Bang to the Rise of Civilization and Beyond* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 5.

are washed, heads are oiled, care is taken. Trees planted by the water are the righteous abiding by God's law.

Water rites are found in many cultures. Baptism is the one perhaps most familiar to Western Christians: Jesus' public ministry is inaugurated by John the Baptist's passing the mantle on to him, confirmed by a divine blessing in the form of a dove. An orthodox Christian reading, with a higher Christology, suggests a different angle: Jesus did not need to be legitimized or cleansed. Hence baptism was not what sanctified him. Rather, his immersion into the waters sanctifies them, such that Christ baptizes the cosmos by immersing himself in its waters.<sup>23</sup> When humans are baptized the symbolism of full immersion includes that of drowning, of passing through symbolic death to a new life, as Paul writes: "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?" (Rom. 6:3).

Arks carry human and animal survivors beyond a cataclysm into a new covenant with YHWH. Boats drawn out onto lakes catch fish. Some appear to walk on water, or have powers that still a storm. The descent of rain from the clouds is described in the Qur'an with the same words used to describe the manner in which revelation is given to the Prophet: when we perceive rain, we are presented with the spectacle of revelation itself. Human beings are like a drop set in a receptacle. The Qur'an is compared to a shoreless sea full of the overflowing words of God.<sup>24</sup> Water is central to rites of washing before entering into the mosque and sacred spaces. Bathing is an act that bathes the believer not only with water, but "with the innumerable waves of God's mercy, eternally succoring us."<sup>25</sup> The Tao Te Ching admonishes people to be like water, to pool where humans do not want to dwell, not avoiding life, but living it without avoiding the low places.<sup>26</sup> In Jewish traditions, water and time purify body and soul, in the *mikveh*. In many traditions, purification by water is needed, and revelation and divine power are associated with it—it is a "nexus point

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<sup>23</sup> Kallistos Ware, "A Sense of Wonder: The Inner Meaning of the Blessing of the Great Waters," *Parabola* 34, no. 2 (Summer 2009): 11.

<sup>24</sup> Enes Karic, "Words About Water: Muslim Wisdom about God's Gift to Humanity," *Parabola* 34, no. 2 (Summer 2009): 36.

<sup>25</sup> Karic, "Words About Water," 39.

<sup>26</sup> "The Dark Illumination of Sat Hon: A Taoist Master Talks About Transcending Life and Death," *Parabola* 34, no. 2 (Summer 2009): 51.

between heaven and earth.”<sup>27</sup> Taoism suggests *wu-wei*, going with the flow of waters that are too powerful for us to navigate, telling the story of a swimmer in whitewater who has learned to work with the water rather than drown trying to swim against it.<sup>28</sup>

When does water save, when destroy? And what is at stake as religious people ask these questions? The absence of water maims and kills. The powerful draw water that is needed by people downstream. Water is becoming scarce. Water, not oil, is becoming the most embattled element, drying up between three interrelated water crises: dwindling fresh water supplies, inequitable access to water, corporate control and selling of water.<sup>29</sup>

Canadian water activist Maude Barlow has suggested a “Blue Covenant” for an “alternative water future,” with three components: water conservation, water justice, and water democracy. The covenant would be global and comprehensive, so that “governments are required not only to provide clean water to their citizens as a public service, but they must also recognize that citizens of other countries have the right to water as well and to find peaceful solutions to water disputes between states.”<sup>30</sup> Water has a central place in religious iconography, ritual, and meaning-making. How can we honor the many ways in which water is a sacrament, a holy sense of water spiritually and materially?

### *Air*

Something in the wind has learned my name,  
and it's tellin' me that things are not the same.<sup>31</sup>

When we are born, we enter a world in which air is our primary element of sustenance: we are welcomed to “the world of air”<sup>32</sup> and

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<sup>27</sup> Geoffrey W. Dennis, “The Mirror of Heaven: The Many Meanings of Water in Judaism,” *Parabola* 34, no. 2 (Summer 2009): 67.

<sup>28</sup> Chuang Tzu, “The Swimmer,” *Parabola* 34, no. 2 (Summer 2009): 77.

<sup>29</sup> Suzuki, *Sacred Balance*, 104; Maude Barlow, *Blue Covenant: The Global Water Crisis and the Coming Battle for the Right to Water* (New York: The New Press, 2007), 142.

<sup>30</sup> Barlow, *Blue Covenant*, 156.

<sup>31</sup> From the lyrics to “Top of the World” by Richard Carpenter and John Bettis, © Almo Music Corporation & Hammer and Nails Music, Inc., 1972.

<sup>32</sup> Linda Hogan, *Dwellings: A Spiritual History of the Living World* (New York: Touchstone, 1995), 17.

start breathing. Yet it is easy to forget air as an element, as it seems invisible, intangible, intransigent. But hold your breath, and it is no longer the most forgettable element. Perhaps it is indeed easier to remember the “denser” elements, and lapse into the “forgetting of those elements that do not have the same density.” But, as with all human activity, “philosophy dies without air.” Without air there is no thinking; it is from air that “thought draws its subsistence.”<sup>33</sup> Even so, “Earth and water were obviously pulled downward by gravity. Fire was obviously weightless. But air was the problem child.”<sup>34</sup> But rather than being weightless and insubstantial, Evangelista Torricelli, who worked with Galileo at the end of his life, found that a “blanket of air” constantly “presses down on the planet beneath,” so that we live “submerged at the bottom of an ocean of air.”<sup>35</sup> Air intermingles with other gases, most of them invisible, giving rise to odor and unfortunate chemical reactions that affect temperature, climate, and weather. Chemical processes make oxygen that gives us energy as it reacts with our blood and nervous system, while other processes burn holes into ozone layers, or release CO<sub>2</sub> or methane at high levels. A Zuni prophecy features an “apocalyptic mass asphyxiation inflicted by an elemental atmosphere.”<sup>36</sup>

There is no life (we learn from the Hebrew scriptures) without breath. *Ruah*, the breath of the living, is how we know the *nefesh*, the soul of a human person, is still there. *Psyche* in the Greek likewise can designate “breath of life” or “soul” in an individual being, while *aer* designates the air of the atmosphere.<sup>37</sup> After the passing of the breath, we return to dust and water, the fire of our lives extinguished, at least for now. In Western history, air has often been associated with the transcendental, where the gods live, up high. Thus, air “remains the unthought resource of Being”<sup>38</sup> and its gift may lie in its unthinkability, its ungraspability by means of our hands. We embrace

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<sup>33</sup> Luce Irigaray, *The Forgetting of Air in Martin Heidegger*, trans. Mary Beth Mader (Austin, Tex.: University of Texas Press, 1999), 2, 5, 13.

<sup>34</sup> Gabrielle Walker, *An Ocean of Air: Why the Wind Blows and Other Mysteries of the Atmosphere* (Orlando, Fl.: Harvest/Harcourt, 2007), 5.

<sup>35</sup> Walker, *An Ocean of Air*, 11.

<sup>36</sup> Gregory Nagy, “As the World Runs Out of Breath: Metaphorical Perspectives and the Atmosphere in the Ancient World,” in *Earth, Air, Fire, Water: Humanistic Studies of the Environment*, ed. Jill Ker Conway, Kenneth Keniston, and Leo Marx (Amherst, Mass.: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999), 39.

<sup>37</sup> Nagy, “As the World Runs Out of Breath,” 40.

<sup>38</sup> Irigaray, *Forgetting*, 14.

it with our lungs and vessels, rather than hold it or own it. This is perhaps the ideal. But we know well that air pollution, oxygen tanks, and aircraft cabins put a different spin on this elemental reality.

Again, the elements interpenetrate each other in particular ways. Fire cannot burn without air, rain cannot fall without evaporation and without condensation. Air is a medium of travel and transformation in a particular way. The Spirit is dimmed and polluted when air is polluted. It is anything but merely a void, a space, a gap, a border, or a boundary.<sup>39</sup>

What would elemental justice look like here? How do we “re-discover the possibility of a relation to air?”<sup>40</sup> Forgetting it is treating it like a “free gift,” like an “external” in the neoliberal economy, to use and abuse, rather than to be treated with respect for its integral entangled presence within ourselves and our lives. When we mistreat the elements, we mistreat ourselves. There is no externality to them in these lives that we have; rather “interpenetration is a mode of being-there.”<sup>41</sup> What theology, what ethics, what spirituality, what pastoral ministry, what knowledge, what liturgy, what ritual can help mourn and re-member these forgotten elements? Can we speak the element that allows us to be heard as sound travels upon the airwaves, upon which Spirit so often travels?

### *Earth*

When we love the earth, we are able to love ourselves more fully. I believe this. The ancestors taught me it was so.<sup>42</sup>

Life on the land depends on water from the sky.<sup>43</sup>

Humans are earthlings, their bodies made out of soil, yet not without the other elements of water, and the breath of air, and the warmth of the sun. The term *adam* also contains the word *dam*, signifying blood.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Irigaray, *Forgetting*, 75.

<sup>40</sup> Irigaray, *Forgetting*, 29.

<sup>41</sup> Irigaray, *Forgetting*, 84.

<sup>42</sup> hooks, *Belonging*, 34.

<sup>43</sup> Kandel, *Water from Heaven*, 87.

<sup>44</sup> Ellen Bernstein, *The Splendor of Creation: A Biblical Ecology* (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 2005), 103.

The first man of the Bible is named Adam, from the Hebrew *adama*, meaning “earth,” or “soil.” The first woman . . . is Eve, from *hava*, meaning “living.” Together they make the eternal connections: life comes from the soil; the soil is alive.<sup>45</sup>

In this element, the other three unite—“air, water, and energy together create the vitality of the soil.”<sup>46</sup> The earth seems to us to be the solid element, that which is unshakable and grounds us. And yet its plates are constantly on the move. We are seeing anew the kind of devastation that earth-shaking can bring, especially if compounded with deforestation, systematic exploitation, and profound and constant economic disadvantage.

While catastrophic, swift climate change or global weirding of weather patterns and temperatures may not extinguish all life, but in fact be merely one period in the history of life on this planet, the turbulences climate change is causing will, at least for many humans and animals, be devastating and cause death and destruction, sometimes of species, sometimes of many members of species. It is affecting the balance of inanimate life forms and ecosystems. It is affecting the life systems of air, water, earth, and fire. We are like Noah, at the end of an era where we have wasted the inheritance of our descendants, who will curse us, our ignorance, and our unwillingness to change at a fundamental level our economic and ecological lives. There may be survivors, but life will be changed and in many ways diminished, until perhaps a new evolutionary jump occurs and new mutations will create a new diversity of species. But that will be many years after us. It may be as bad as that. But as religious people who understand ourselves as guardians, caretakers, or fellow creatures, not just as destroyers and consumers of the planet, we cannot allow ourselves to “eat and drink, for tomorrow we die” (1 Cor. 15:32) and pronounce “after us, the deluge” with callous indifference.

Vandana Shiva, an Indian nuclear physicist turned counter-globalization activist, proposed in her book *Soil Not Oil* that soil can be “a metaphor of decentralized and deep democracy” that teaches us “how to be earth citizens.” With the attention to and ownership of local soil, at least ideally, local communities have a say in what happens to their land and their lives.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Suzuki, *Sacred Balance*, 114.

<sup>46</sup> Suzuki, *Sacred Balance*, 119.

<sup>47</sup> Shiva, *Soil Not Oil*, 49.

*Fire*

Today and for much of the history of life on Earth, nearly all the energy comes from the Sun.<sup>48</sup>

In the beginning was darkness swathed in darkness;  
 All this was unmanifested water.  
 Whatever was, the One, coming into being,  
 Hidden by the Void,  
 Was generated by the power of Heat.<sup>49</sup>

Humans have domesticated fire, and have for millennia used it to clear brush on arable land, work with metals, render food edible and digestible, and make war. It might be argued from the myths of its origins in various cultures that the “quest for fire is a quest for power.”<sup>50</sup> Humans belong to a group of animals that are “homeothermic,” whose bodies maintain a constant temperature, like a house with central heating and cooling and a thermostat that adjusts the temperature to the conditions.<sup>51</sup> The fire of the sun and in the belly of the earth is the same fire we have within us. Fossil fuels store life energy from the ancient past, the energy of decaying life forms, a “once-only gift of ancient life-forms to an energy-hungry civilization” that releases again the energy stored within.<sup>52</sup>

Fire is a metaphor for power and energy. Getting to that energy has taken many forms in human history, and there have been many forms of energy we have desired. The direct impact of drilling for oil and oil production and transportation (which are often conveniently left out of the calculation) are only a small fraction of what threatens the earth habitat. The longer-range impact of global warming is also disproportionately affecting the Arctic and Alaska, thus rendering this space-time an important location for people all over the world to watch and learn from. Indigenous peoples, or better, people of the land, and the land they want to continue to belong to, are the miner’s canary, showing what happens when we disrupt our vital ties to the

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<sup>48</sup> Kandel, *Water from Heaven*, 44.

<sup>49</sup> From the Rig-Veda, as quoted in Suzuki, *Sacred Balance*, 156–157.

<sup>50</sup> Stephen J. Pyne, “Consumed by Either Fire or Fire: A Prolegomenon to Anthropogenic Fire,” in Conway, *Earth, Air, Fire, Water*, 80.

<sup>51</sup> Suzuki, *Sacred Balance*, 158.

<sup>52</sup> Suzuki, *Sacred Balance*, 174.

land to replace them with other forms of dependency and addictions. The Arctic “has been transformed into the planet’s chemical trash can, the final destination for toxic waste that originates thousands of miles away. Atmospheric and oceanic currents conspire to send industrial chemicals, pesticides, and power-plant emissions on a journey to the Far North.”<sup>53</sup>

The Arctic is a “wounded sacred”: it has sustaining and healing capacity along with its compromised and endangered integrity as “degraded but still glorious, wounded but still alive.”<sup>54</sup> The “wounded sacred” is as much worthy of our love, care, and action as the fantasy of pristine lands, untouched by human hand. Recognizing a place and a people as wounded and sacred denies us permission to continue bringing about such degradation. In fact, the “wounded sacred” calls us even more to change our ways, so the entire ecosystem, humans included, can survive and flourish. The wounded sacred are also the last small indigenous peoples holding out.

For contemporary consumer societies oil has the same sacramental quality. It is what makes this system work. That is, we have a cycle of elemental use that is severely out of balance. We need to look closely at the nexus of how theological questions and concerns are interwoven with the very fabric of this weave of life, and develop a vision for faith, thought, and practice. A theology of sacred elements would pay attention, prayer-like, to what is spiritually, economically, and ecologically at stake in this particular place.

Can Christians reconceive Christ as the cosmic fifth element that can tune, like the *Logos*, the elements that compose life into balance and right relationship? The divine economy of salvation then would be cosmic in the sense that Christ’s transformative, embodied presence is a catalyst to transform ourselves in response to this divine presence, this immanent transcendence.

### *The Quintessence: Fourfold Wisdom Folded with a Fifth*

In many traditions across the world, we find the four elements and also a fifth element. In the Graeco-Roman streams of tradition, the term for this fifth element is Aether.

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<sup>53</sup> Marla Cone, “Dozens of Words for Snow, None for Pollution,” *Ode* 3, no. 9 (November 2005): 47.

<sup>54</sup> Mark I. Wallace, *Finding God in the Singing River* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Augsburg Fortress, 2005), 145.



“There is the ether,” replied the other, “which we must regard as the stuff of which gods are made; for just as all mortal creatures inhale the air, so do immortal and divine natures inhale the ether.”<sup>55</sup>

Air and aether are thus distinguished in that *aer* designates the air we breathe, and observable winds and storms, while aether is that “vast immeasurable stretch of space that separates our mortal existence from the immortal existence of the gods.” Hence, for Greeks, air is the “element of immediacy,” and aether of “remoteness.”<sup>56</sup> The Greek word *anemos* (Latin: *animus*) means wind. The universe which these elements frame is a living creature as it engenders all things, of both genders.

In ancient India, influencing both Hindu and Buddhist thought, the fifth element can be conceived as Space, Idea, or Void, while in some forms of Buddhism other sensory categories can be added. In Vedic texts we hear of the body of the Yogi as an expression of this fifth function, spatial arrangement of energies. Vandana Shiva proposes rendering Shakti as energy, as “primordial power of creation, the self-organizing, self-renewing creative force of the universe in feminine form.” Shakti is the “personification of primordial energy,” the “source of all divine,” the “source and controller of all forces and potentialities of nature,” the “power inherent in all beings.”<sup>57</sup> Shakti “restores balance” and is “dependent on no-one, but interdependent with everything.”<sup>58</sup>

She links Shakti, in a bit of a surprising move, to a rather different text by Hildegard of Bingen, where we find these words: “I am the fiery life of the essence of God. I flame above the beauty of the fields; I shine in the waters, I burn in the sun, the moon, and the stars. And with the airy wind, I quicken all things vitally by an unseen, all-sustaining life.”<sup>59</sup> For Hildegard, whose theology is in many ways profoundly orthodox, but unusual in her insistence at the sacramental mirroring of micro- and macrocosmos, it is God’s unending plenitude of being that brings forth the multifariousness of creation. All that is created is profoundly entangled with each other and with God, in a mutual economy of give-and-take, a cycle through which all that is

<sup>55</sup> Flavius Philostratus, *The Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, 3.34.

<sup>56</sup> Nagy, “As the World Runs Out of Breath,” 41.

<sup>57</sup> Shiva, *Soil Not Oil*, 136.

<sup>58</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sv%C4%81tanrya>; <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shakti>.

<sup>59</sup> Shiva, *Soil Not Oil*, 136.

necessary for life and preservation is received and passed on.<sup>60</sup> *Viriditas*, or greening power, is for Hildegard a witness of the power and profound wisdom of God. It is the life force itself, which helps grow plants, animals, humans, and all the circulations of juices within and among them. Hildegard compares the rhythmic exchanges motivated by this force with the breathing in and out of air. Humans have a similarity with heaven and earth and therefore take up a position of mediator between God and creation. The Incarnate Word is the life principle of all creation.<sup>61</sup>

Hildegard's images will not help us overcome the profound anthropocentrism that is resident in the Christian tradition, as all elements are ultimately in the service of humanity, nor are they devoid of some strict hierarchies and dualisms. But they may help to ameliorate the narcissistic deformations of anthropocentrism that lead to disrespect and exploitation of the entangled elements, within and without. And Hildegard reminds us that after the disintegration of paradisaical harmony, human violence will pervert the elements so they will be infected and will infect with illness and pollution.<sup>62</sup> In *Causae et Curae*, she gives voice to the elements who say: "We cannot run our course anymore, according to our master's wishes. For with their bad deeds, humans turn us upside down like the wheel of a mill. We stink like pestilence and perish for hunger of justice fulfilled." This pollution in turn affects humanity, and eventually God cleanses the elements by visiting humanity with suffering until they change their ways.<sup>63</sup>

Canadian geneticist and environmentalist David Suzuki describes something like the fifth element as "the collective effect of living things themselves" that shapes and maintains the elements. Life then is "not a passive recipient of these elemental gifts but an active participant in creating and replenishing them."<sup>64</sup> In another chapter, Suzuki describes the importance of love as a key ingredient in our lives when basic needs are met: "Love is the defining gift that confers health and

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<sup>60</sup> Markus Enders, "Das Naturverständnis Hildegards von Bingen," in *Im Angesicht Gottes suche der Mensch sich selbst: Hildegard von Bingen (1098–1179)*, ed. Rainer Berndt (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2001), 462–463.

<sup>61</sup> Enders, "Das Naturverständnis Hildegards von Bingen," 463–464.

<sup>62</sup> Enders, "Das Naturverständnis Hildegards von Bingen," 483.

<sup>63</sup> Enders, "Das Naturverständnis Hildegards von Bingen," 484.

<sup>64</sup> Suzuki, *Sacred Balance*, 184.

humanity on each new human; it is the gift that passes on endlessly, given and given again by each generation to the next."<sup>65</sup>

The four elements exist each in a different state, one solid, one fluid, one gaseous, one ignited. For Mary Daly, quintessence is not a noun, but a verb. It a "misty quality," and means "realizing our own integrity," encouraging the fight for life on earth by tapping into memories of an "archaic past."<sup>66</sup> Quintessence is spirit that fills the universe and gives it life and vitality. It permeates all nature, unifies all living things, and is at the core of integrity and elemental connectedness of the universe.<sup>67</sup> Daly proposes that the Eucharist represents a quintessential female symbol of the integrity, harmony, vitality, and "luminous splendor" of the universe.<sup>68</sup> In other traditions quintessence is the fifth province of our minds, the ground and river from which all other four elements arise, the place of connection and communication that unifies the other elements.<sup>69</sup>

In the cult movie *The Fifth Element*, representational stones of the four elements have to be safeguarded, found, and aligned, for the Fifth Element, a divine being in human form, to destroy alien threats to life on earth.<sup>70</sup> But as the movie progresses, we learn that the sheer power of Lilo, the anthropomorphic Fifth Element, is not enough to prevent destruction. As she learns about the cruelty of humans toward each other (*homo homini lupus*), she despairs of whether humanity is worth saving, given that it continues to destroy itself. She does not see the purpose of protecting human lives full of violence and destruction of each other and of life. She resists fulfilling her purpose. The divine being is tired of human wars, and only the experience of love makes it vaguely possible to ward off destruction. Yet the ongoing problem of our self-destructive tendencies continues. We do not here need to list them; we know them all too well. What we still perhaps do not know is how to align ourselves with the elements in ways that avert destruction, ways that express love in action with all the elemental passion we can muster.

<sup>65</sup> Suzuki, *Sacred Balance*, 233.

<sup>66</sup> Mary Daly, *Quintessence: Realizing the Archaic Future* (Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press, 1998), 4.

<sup>67</sup> Daly, *Quintessence*, 11.

<sup>68</sup> Daly, *Quintessence*, 175.

<sup>69</sup> Daly, *Quintessence*, 180, 181, 186.

<sup>70</sup> *The Fifth Element* is a science fiction film directed by Luc Besson (1997).

Alchemy can be paraphrased as a search for power and energy, attempting to rearrange, recombine elemental components into literal and metaphorical gold, gold which gives access to power and to wealth and to understanding the secret weavings of the world. In the quest for this knowledge, the sacrality of the elements has often gotten lost, and gold as commercial value has remained. What would it take to re-enchant the elements and get them off the gold standard, to refuse to squeeze them to make ourselves rich, and instead re-entangle ourselves with the elements in different ways? Rebecca Solnit writes, "Hope just means another world might be possible, not promised, not guaranteed. Hope calls for action; action is impossible without her." Joy "doesn't betray but sustains activism."<sup>71</sup> If spirituality is a way of life, it embodies the joyful engagement with elemental economies and deeper and deeper involvement in them. It is a deeper joy than just a "feel-good" emotion. Rather, it is the joy of knowing that we are involved in reconnecting things and people, reconnecting with God and the world, no matter the likelihood of our success.

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<sup>71</sup> Rebecca Solnit, *Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities* (New York: Nation Books, 2004), 5, 17.