

Technology and the Healing of the Earth

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Of all the issues we are concerned with at present the most basic issue, in my estimation, is that of human-earth relations. A multitude of inter-human issues at the national and international levels also confront us; even at their worst we can probably survive them much better than we can survive the continued degradation of the earth in its basic life systems. The 20th century has eliminated the terror of the unknown darknesses of nature by devastating nature herself.

Our ultimate failure as humans is to become, not the crowning glory of the earth, but the instrument of its degradation. We have contaminated the air, the water, the soil; we have dammed the rivers, cut down the rain forests, destroyed animal habitat on an extensive scale. We have driven the great Blue Whale and a multitude of animals almost to extinction. We have caused the land to be eroded, the rain to be acid. We have killed the lakes as habitat for fish.

We are playing for high stakes, the beauty and grandeur and even the survival of the earth in its life-giving powers. From being admired and even worshiped as a mode of divine presence, the earth has become despoiled by the human presence in great urban population centers and in centers of industrial exploitation. We have also trivialized nature in vacation areas.

In this context we must ask what are the real gains for the human? The automobile, our urban centers, our space exploits, our communication skills? What have we gained? A set of once magnificent but now decaying infrastructures that exhaust our energies, our finances, and the resources of the earth itself. Whereas the infrastructures of nature constantly renew themselves from within, our infrastructures dissolve in the corrosive acids of the environment or break under the relentless strain imposed upon them.

Are we really moving into a wonderland so magnificent that it is worth such a destructive presence to the natural world? Is this the only way to survive, to provide the food and shelter and clothing and energy that we need? What further benefit is worth giving up the purity of the air we breathe, the refreshing water we drink, the life-giving soil in which our food is grown?

This critical view does not adequately recognize the great gains in human knowledge and the mitigation or elimination of many human miseries achieved by our new sciences and technologies. But over against these benefits we must inquire into the new and perhaps greater and more universal difficulties we are causing.