

PLACE, SPIRITUALITY AND ACTIVISM

By Jim Blackburn

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I am pleased to be here today at the Rothko Chapel to speak about place, spirituality and activism, three important elements in my life. Place is where we exist in space and time, our geologic, ecologic and anthropologic center. Spirituality is at once the ethereal essence of life and our moral connection with each other and other living and non-living things. And activism is to act – to be alive. When activism is undertaken in a manner that is supportive of place and spirituality, a powerful affirmation of life occurs.

Place may be the most important concept in environmental protection today. In the United States, we are extremely mobile. Terry Tempest Williams writes of a conversation with an executive from Proctor and Gamble regarding European and U.S. workers. In response to a question by Ms. Williams, this executive responded:

. . . People in Europe are not as willing to move for the company as they are in the States. You talk about living in one place, nobody in America knows where they're from; it's a known fact, the American workforce will work wherever you tell them to work. They'll move for a hundred-dollar raise. It's never about where one is from in the States, it's where one is going. (from Terry Tempest Williams, "A Tale of Two Minds" in Earth Letter, September, 2001).

In contrast to where you are going, "place" is where you are. And if we understand a place, we are more likely to care for it.

I live in a place called Houston. Houston is located on the Texas coastal plain that gently emerges from the Gulf of Mexico – a mud platform ascending slowly from the ocean’s grip, located between Louisiana and Mexico. Rainwater joins with the mud and establishes the base of life on the Texas coast. No rock, no mountains – just mud and water.

We get rain on the Texas coastal plain – bucketfuls of rain. The rain comes in from the Gulf, evaporating with the heat of the summer and powered by the counter-clockwise rotation of low-pressure systems that we name and fear. Allison, Beulah, Carla, Frances, Alicia, Claudette. One pictures the spirits of these storms, smiling nats that ride the storm clouds like metaphysical cowgirls, and now cowboys, unleashing torrents of rain that re-establish the region’s water meadows and saturated prairies and their water loving plant life. Lush, green, alive, literally teeming with life and primal energy. That’s the Upper Texas coast.

The rivers cut through the mud, forming bed and banks that enclose the normal flow. This incised channel – the bed and banks - is insufficient to contain the larger storm flows that spread out into the secondary river channel – the flood plain – as necessary to allow the water spirits to swim overland with the force of gravity. But do not be fooled for one second. The essence – the existence - of these waterways is not limited to their bed and banks, although our legal system pretends they are. It is part of the natural cycle that these rivers, creeks and bayous flow over land adjacent to them, often for days if not weeks, leaving behind the sediment that will grow the flood plain forests that provide visual relief within the flat, coastal plain. The Brazos, the

Trinity and the San Jacinto Rivers; Clear, Spring and Cypress Creeks; Buffalo and White Oak, Greens and Brays, Hunting and Halls and Sims and Carpenters Bayous, the haunts of water spirits.

Our coastal bays are water fingers, drowned river channels carved when the Gulf was 200 feet lower in elevation. Today, aided by the warming climate, the water fingers elongate, adding a centimeter this year, another next year and yet another the next year. A dynamic - a tension - exists at the interface of mud and water, forming brackish and salt marshes and nurturing living things. East Bay and Trinity Bay; San Jacinto, Burnett and Black Duck Bays, Galveston Bay, West Bay, Christmas, Bastrop and Drum Bays, Jones Creek and Cedar Lakes, the nurseries of the Gulf of Mexico. Here one finds shrimp and crabs, trout and redfish, and the microscopic plants and animals upon which the whole system relies – abundant with life and saltwater spirits.

The value of this coastal ecosystem is incredible and has never been appropriately established by our society. Robert Costanza, an environmental economist, has developed a peer-reviewed methodology for placing dollar value on important natural resources. Using his methodology, coastal bays, marshes and swamps are given dollar values based upon services that are provided by these ecosystems, including pollutant removal and primary productivity. Based on this methodology, the Galveston Bay system, its marshes, adjacent swamps and tidal flats are valued at over \$5 billion per year. These are free goods, a gift of ecological capital to me- to you- to us and to those who come after us. It is interesting and important to note that our community and our society do not know how to value that which is free – that which is without cost. Without cost is so often interpreted to

mean without value, which is not true. These gifts are valuable - we just don't value them.

The settlement called Houston was placed within this geologic and hydrologic energy – amidst an ecological crossroads of astounding diversity and uniqueness. The Houston region was, and continues to be, occupied by all manner of living things, from the long beaked wading birds of the coastal mud flats to the wintering snow geese of the Katy Prairie to the nesting songbirds of the floodplain forests. Esta ocupado. This region is occupied by other living things. It is prime habitat.

The diversity and magnitude of life in the Houston area should inspire awe in each of us, the collective “we” that I will sometimes refer to as “I-you-we” or “me-you-us”. There are at least eight different ecological systems within 60 miles of downtown Houston. Naturalists come from all over the world to bird-watch in the Houston region. Names such as High Island, the Bolivar Flats, Jones State Forest and the Great Texas Coastal Birding Trail are probably better known among European naturalists than by most citizens of the Houston area. Houston is searching for an image and refuses to see and recognize that which is truly unique and important about our region – our ecological systems. Paradise before us and most of us don't know it, much less value it.

I-you-we are blessed to live within the path of both the spring and fall migrations of countless bird species, including songbirds, wading-birds, waterfowl and hawks. The Bald Eagles hunt the Katy Prairie, their winter home, feasting on the plentiful snow geese. The songbirds come through in such numbers that they can be followed on radar, their

journey across the Gulf of Mexico from the Yucatan nothing less than Herculean - the stuff of myths. The hawks come down the rivers to the coast and turn right, heading for points south - hundreds and even thousands circling together with the wood storks in endless spirals in the fall afternoon sky. Our rivers are pathways, our forests are sanctuaries, our marshes and prairies are home to winter visitors and summer natives. Our bays are among the most productive natural systems in the world. By happenstance, I-you-we have come to live in an area that is sacred and essential to other living things, a key link in the continued survival of these species.

While birds and fish and butterflies and water loving plants historically have done well on the Texas coast, humans have come more recently and don't share well. The modern habitat of humans fails to reflect what nature knows – that all areas are not created equal. There is no reflection of our natural abundance in any of the land planning and development activities in and around Houston. Our mantra as a community has been expand and grow, with each new loop ring expanding the city like a cancer into the natural habitat. Loop 610, Beltway 8, Texas 6 and FM 1960, and next The Grand Parkway - ever expanding outward into the prime habitat areas. We have already developed much of the eastern portion of the Katy Prairie. We have destroyed much of the Brazos River bottomlands south of Sugarland. We have dug out and castrated most of our bayous. We have filled and covered literally thousands of water meadows, also known as wetlands. I-you-we are killing that which makes Houston truly unique. It had no dollar value and was paved.

The most tragic element of our razing of the natural system is that the decision to destroy these systems and the associated living things is not even seriously discussed or debated in the Houston region. We simply fill it, bulldoze it, rape it or kill it, without thought much less remorse. Ya no esta ocupado - no longer occupied - the folly of thoughtless destruction. As Rachel Carson said, how can we wage war on other living things and consider ourselves civilized. Reverence for life, at least the lives of non-human living things, is absent from Houston.

How and when did I-you-we decide to destroy all life forms in the path of Houston's expansion?

So, how are humans faring here in Houston? Any better than the animals and their habitat? Well, not much better, at least in some important ways. We seem to approach land development here without realizing that all of our streams and bayous flow back toward the center from which we are expanding. Houston started on Buffalo Bayou and White Oak Bayou and in the Harrisburg area and has spread to the north, west and south. We are expanding outward and dumping excess rainwater back on ourselves. We are literally soiling – flooding - our own homes.

In a tragic manner, we are not unlike those crazy economic development zealots in Corpus Christi, inviting the Navy to bomb their landscape in exchange for money. There, the plan was for the Navy to launch amphibious landings onto the beaches of the Padre Island National Seashore, cross the Laguna Madre and assault the Kennedy County ranchland with combined artillery and amphibious attacks. In exchange, the troops would be billeted for money in Corpus Christi.

Here, in Houston, I-you-we are flooded in exchange for developers, engineers, lawyers and contractors making money. I-you-we billet water, not troops, yet we don't even get paid for the service that we unwillingly render.

How many of you here have flooded? How many of you have watched the water rise to your door sill, stuffing anything that you could find into cracks and crevices to try to hold back the rising water? How many of you have recoiled in horror as the floodwater seeps under the sill, wetting the carpet despite your frantic efforts, and then rising relentlessly higher, covering the floor and moving up the walls? First you put the smaller items on the taller furniture, then you move whatever you can upstairs, if you are lucky enough to live in a two-story house. How many of you have been rescued through your attic vent by the fire department flood rescue squad? And how many of you have come back to silt and mud all over your dreams and hopes and aspirations?

It is not that we don't know that Houston floods. It flooded before we came here and it has been consistently flooding since we arrived. The coastal tides have often been five feet above sea level and have reached ten to fifteen feet above sea level on occasion. We've had over 40 inches of rain in 24 hours from Claudette in 1979 and we had from 12 to 24 inches in 24 hours during Allison. Our rivers and bayous consistently spill over their banks. And even as bad as Allison was, we have not seen our worst flood – one that combines excessive rainfall with really high tides.

We know these things. We know we can and do flood. I-you-we, however, have chosen to allow this information to be ignored and

misused in our development processes and in our city and county governance. The subject of flooding and flood planning simply does not compute. No comprendemos – we do not comprehend.

I have been a student of flooding in Harris County since I wrote a monograph titled “The Texas Law of Drainage With a Case Study of Harris County” in 1979. There is a fatal flaw in our thinking about flood control here. At least in part, Harris County government is responsible for the poor state of flood management in this county.

Harris County is the governmental entity with primary responsibility for flood control – the City of Houston does virtually nothing. Harris County allowed the Harris County Flood Control Water Supply Corporation to be formed in the 1980s for the purpose of constructing channels on Greens Bayou, among other things. These channels caused the flooding in 1989 and 1992 on lower Greens and were plugged after litigation. The White Oak Bayou flooding of 1998 was caused by the failure of the Flood Control District to construct the flood control improvements that were planned and promised to offset the impact of the runoff that Harris County allowed to be dumped into White Oak Bayou by allowing the development of 2500 acres without retention ponds. According to Steve Fitzgerald of the Flood Control District, the White Oak Bayou flood control improvements were not constructed because there was not enough money. Yet, even though these and other flood control improvements have not been constructed, Harris County just loaned Fort Bend County money to construct the Fort Bend County Tollway. That’s not right.

These Greens and White Oak flood events were not acts of God. They were caused by acts and omissions by Harris County – the

governmental entity charged with protecting us from flooding. Woodland Trails West, Woodland Oaks II, Woodland Trails North, Creekside Estates, Ted Burger Estates, portions of Jersey Village and White Oak Manor were flooded when they should not have been.

By what decision-making process did I-you-we agree to allow Harris County to increase runoff from new development into White Oak Bayou without constructing the necessary retention ponds or channel improvements that Harris County had promised to build, thereby flooding good, hard-working people who have never flooded before?

How did I-you-we make those choices?

Let's take a look at the campaign contributions to three of our county officials – County Judge Eckels and Commissioners Eversole and Lee. They are being paid literally hundreds of thousands of dollars in contributions by engineers, lawyers, developers, architects, and contractors. In the 1999-2000 reporting period, 50% of Judge Eckels's campaign contributions, representing over \$264,000, came from just over 100 individuals, firms and PACs. This same exact group of engineers, lawyers, contractors and developers also contributed to Commissioner Eversole's and Commissioner Lee's campaign funds in the same time periods. 50 % of Eversole's campaign contributions - \$606,000 - came from these exact same individuals, firms and PACs and 69% of Lee's campaign contributions – representing \$357,400 - came from those same individuals, firms and PACs.

The Top 15 contributors to County Judge Eckels and Commissioners Lee, Eversole and Radack for 1999 and 2000 are engineer Jon Strange, \$51,000; the Linebarger Heard Law Firm,

\$50,000; engineer Stephen Costello, \$47,500; engineer John Van De Wiele, \$46,000; engineers Turner, Collie and Braden PAC, \$45,000; engineer James Dannenbaum, \$44,000; engineer V.N. Vijayvergiya, \$43,000; architects Hermes and Reed PAC, \$40,500; engineer Wayne Klotz, \$40,000; the Mayor, Day Law Firm, \$38,000; WSBC Civil Engineers, Inc. PAC, \$38,000; engineer William E. Ferro, \$36,950; engineer Dionel E. Aviles, \$36,500; engineer Terry Cheng, \$36,500; engineer Chris Claunch, \$34,200; then Port of Houston Chair Ned S. Holmes, \$33,000; engineer D. Fred Martinez, \$33,000; and Morris Architects Civil Action Fund, \$32,700. Contributions to Commissioner Fonteno were not considered because he is retiring after he completes his four year term in 2002.

Interestingly, Judge Eckels spoke out against this system in his February, 1999, State of the County address. In this speech, he said “I ran a campaign promising honesty, integrity and hard work. Today I find myself immersed in a system that rewards none of the above.” Eckels continued, stating “It is easy to see how the public would question my motives, or the motives of any of us, when I can raise a million dollars for my campaign from the very people I am negotiating with for multimillion dollar contracts with Harris County. But that is how the system works. If I don’t raise hundreds of thousands of dollars from these folks, there is always some sorry SOB out there who will.” (Houston Chronicle, 02/09/99).

I recently heard a person talking about paying bribes in some third world country – about the rampant corruption down there. And then they expressed their self-satisfied opinion that we are lucky that we aren’t corrupt like that in Texas. We act like when the exchange of

money is legal – when the campaign donations are out front and registered – then there is no corruption. It’s okay and superior because we are, if nothing else, a nation of laws. When the floodwaters enter my home because the county commissioners court was influenced by legal contributions to build some project that took money away from community flood control to help some engineer or lawyer or developer, I should feel gratified that our system is not corrupt like it is in some third world country.

From a system standpoint, these contributions do worsen our flood problems in Harris County. The best flood control alternative for Houston – the one that really works – is to purchase land and set it aside for detention or retention ponding, such as Addicks and Barker Reservoirs. I am currently studying the effectiveness of encircling Houston with these flood control reservoirs and the preliminary results indicate that the use of these ponds could lead to substantial flood reductions on Clear Creek, White Oak, Greens and Cypress Creeks and maybe on Brays and Sims as well. However, the reality of such a solution is that very little engineering or construction work is required. Those political contributions cannot be repaid with these flood control reservoirs because there are insufficient design and construction fees.

This fact was confirmed in a recent conversation with a Harris County official who stated that he could not get the money to build retention ponds because the engineers, developers and lawyers demand and get roads and engineering construction projects. Our best flood control option is being passed over because of the reality of political contributions. That strikes me as more offensive than third world bribery.

I conclude that I-you-we are not being treated fairly with respect to flood control in Harris County.

The same conclusion can be reached regarding air pollution. Houston has been violating the national standard for ozone since it was set in the early 1970s. Ozone doesn't necessarily kill us, it simply debilitates us, particularly our children. Ozone decreases the efficiency of our lungs. It causes headaches, eye irritation, sinus trouble and makes asthma and lung problems worse. Other cities in the United States with serious ozone problems, such as Los Angeles, have made major commitments to ozone reduction but Houston lags behind, unwilling until recently to even consider asking our refineries and chemical companies and power plants to reduce their grandfathered emissions of nitrogen oxides. How did I-you-we choose to let these plants go unregulated – grandfathered – for so long?

With air pollution, the story gets worse. We live in the chemical and refining center of the United States and the world. Harris, Galveston and Brazoria Counties cover 3,513 square miles, representing 0.003% of the Earth's land area. However, these three counties produce 2.55% of the world's refined products, representing over 2 million barrels of oil refined per day. These three counties produce 11.5% of the world's acrylonitrile, 15% of the world's production of butadiene, 11.7% of the world's production of ethylene and 17% of the world's production of propylene. What does it mean to live in a relatively small place, on a global scale, where a significant portion of the world's chemical production and refining occurs?

Well, for one thing it means money. The acrylonitrile production is worth over \$340 million per year and the butadiene production is

worth over \$625 million. The ethylene production is worth \$4.8 billion per year and the propylene production is worth \$2.8 billion. This does not consider the value of any derivative products. This is just the spot market value as of August, 2001, of these four chemicals produced in Harris, Galveston and Brazoria Counties. Within the entire petrochemical complex, there are perhaps a hundred or more major products manufactured. These industries represent a lot of money and power and a lot of jobs.

This chemical and refining industry also means pollution. In 1998, approximately 25,000,000 pounds of toxic air pollution were reported as being released in Harris County. Harris County consistently ranks among the top counties in the U.S. for toxic air releases. The City of Houston commissioned a study by Sonoma Technology in 1999 that revealed that fine particle air pollution is present at dangerous concentrations in Houston. This study estimated that approximately 435 people per year die prematurely from this pollution.

Unfortunately, there is a virtual absence of studies of the health effects of air pollution in Houston. Houston has a world-class medical center but only a few isolated studies have been completed on health effects in Houston. Los Angeles has extensive health studies of its population, well funded and continuing over time. Harvard has studied many cities in the U.S. Yet the community with the third highest emissions of air toxics in the U.S., with the highest ozone readings some years and with high small particle levels has no recent epidemiological studies.

How did I-we-you choose for our community not to study the health effects of air pollution?

Actually, most air pollution issues in Houston are decided by the Houston Partnership, formerly the Houston Chamber of Commerce. From the late 70s to the early 80s, the Houston Chamber of Commerce invested millions of dollars in a study called the Houston Area Oxidant Study, trying to prove that ozone air pollution did not cause health problems. The Chamber and then the Partnership argued for years that grandfathered facilities should not be regulated and they recently opposed the adoption of a new federal standard on small particle air pollution, a particularly dangerous type of air pollution.

Shell, Lyondale, Texaco, Chevron, Conoco, and Exxon-Mobil are all very active in the Houston Partnership, with three of these companies on the executive committee. They are joined on the Executive Committee by Reliant Energy, Enron and El Paso, three major energy providers who are despised by many in California for their behavior during last year's energy crisis. Both the past and present Chair of the Port of Houston sit on this executive committee along with six bankers and several lawyers. Imagine, decisions regarding air quality in this city being controlled by the very industries that produce the 25,000,000 pounds of air toxics, along with their bankers and lawyers. They may be great capitalists but they lack something as arbiters of public health.

Why does Houston not have its own air quality management district – a special governmental regulatory program - such as Los Angeles has? Why don't we have the best possible research and

regulators working on these problems to help us and our children survive this pollution?

There is a group affiliated with the Houston Partnership – the Business Coalition for Clean Air (BCCA) – that is headed by Charles Duncan, who is also on the executive committee of the Partnership. Ansel Condray of Exxon, Steve Reeves of Shell and Vic Beghini of Marathon were key figures at the Partnership in the formation of the BCCA and in establishing their two-faced air quality strategy.

The BCCA was created to get industry’s message to the public. On the one hand, the BCCA is running advertisements on local television stations stating the value of clean air and how the Business Coalition is working for clean air. On the other hand, the Executive Committee of the Houston Partnership created an affiliated organization called the BCCA Appeals Group for the express purpose of filing suit against the state air quality agency, the TNRCC, for attempting to force industry to meet stringent air quality requirements. Jim Royer of Turner, Collie and Braden chaired the meeting where the formation of the BCCA litigation group was approved, and the resolution creating this BCCA litigation group was presented by Bruce LaBoon of the Locke, Liddell law firm who is now the President of the Partnership. The resolution creating the BCCA litigation group was passed unanimously by the Executive Committee of the Partnership.

The BCCA Appeals Group recently sued the TNRCC, causing, in my opinion, a major disruption in the ozone attainment process. The BCCA Appeals Group was attempting to alter the state’s plan to control ozone pollution in Houston. They were seeking to double the amount of nitrogen oxides that could be emitted by area industries. In my opinion,

this is just one more step in the process of saving money for industry at the expense of public health.

Why do I-you-we allow these so-called leaders to have any community respect after such a two-faced performance, pretending on the one hand to want clean air while suing the state government for acting on behalf of clean air?

I-you-we are being played for fools – or perhaps they know we lack spirit.

Of course, these are the same industries that are controlling the policy of the United States with regard to global warming, making the United States, the producer of over 25% of the greenhouse gases in the world, an outlaw in the eyes of the rest of the world. All of these corporations speak about corporate stewardship, but talk is cheap. When stewardship costs money, these corporations retreat into doublespeak. So, it is not surprising that they have failed to address the impacts of their air pollution in their own backyard and adopted a two-faced strategy that undermines public health.

I-you-we have no input into this Houston Partnership decision-making process. Esta cerrado – it is closed to you and me. As a result, we live with the air pollution dictates of the Houston Partnership, our ambient air – our breathable air - our very ability to live dictated by their profit making, their money lenders and their hired mouthpieces.

Houston is a town controlled by a group of good old boys – good old boys that take names and kick ass if you have the audacity to challenge them. I have been amazed at the absence of dialogue in this town – dialogue that would bring into sharp focus differing opinions about flooding, about air pollution control, about unneeded port

expansion and about spending money on new roads that are only useful for development rather than mobility. From this perspective, Houston is a very quiet place. *Es silencio.*

I believe that this silence is symptomatic of a loss of spirit in this community. I will talk later about the mechanism behind this silence but the silence is real. I am reminded of the CD by the rock group Pink Floyd called “The Wall” and the haunting question – “Hello, hello, hello, is there anybody in there? Just nod if you can hear me”. What an image – just nod if you can hear me. We are comfortably numb here in Houston – retreating behind our air-conditioned walls into Scotch-buffered numbness, failing to step forward and demand that which should be a right. Showing up at church on Sunday, getting absolution from last week’s sins and going back and doing it again without ever talking about that which is dysfunctional and defective within the community.

From my vantage point, our community seems spiritually empty, barren – like a shell washed up on the beach. No thing inside. No animus. All external corpus. Spirit gone.

I relate to this because I lost my spirit.

My spiritual rehabilitation occurred through the natural world. I sought and found the animus – the spirit, the life - in nature, first on the shores of Galveston Bay and then in the great bird migrations of the Texas coast. I remember being in Christmas Bay in the marsh, the best part of the Texas coast. It was fall and the first cool norther had come a week before and the summer heat was finally in retreat. The *Spartina* grass was flooded with the equinox tide and the periwinkle snails were visible above the water on the grass stalks. Every so often, a white

shrimp would hop out of the water and finger mullet would skitter down the marsh channel. The blue tip of a tailing redfish could be seen as lace rising from the water, lazily flipping to and fro. A flock of teal would buzz low across the marsh grass and white pelicans would glide across the surface with bills submerged, avian seiners of marsh fish.

This was a whole, a connected setting and I was within it, a part of it. It was a picture that included me. I was connecting with other living things and I was profoundly affected.

It came to me that I was participating in life – mine and that of other living things. Non human things. Birds. Plants. Fish. Shellfish. Even plankton and bacteria. The mud was alive, the water was alive, the plants were alive. This was no artificial construct, no legal abstraction. This was about living things and me and my spirit. I was connecting with life - with the ether that differentiates living and non-living things. I was experiencing something spiritual.

As I began to explore my new relationship with the natural system, I became interested in the manner in which traditional, institutionalized spirituality responded to the natural system and living things. Eastern religions have long viewed the relationship of humans and other living and non-living things in an inclusive fashion. I am no expert in these religions but I am very interested in them. I found that there was much to learn from the holistic concepts of Buddhism and the animism of Hinduism. I traveled to India and experienced trees and rocks that were local shrines. I saw reverence for life extended to non-humans, and encountered Ganesh and Haneman, religious figures that combine animal and human traits. I now can appreciate the nats of

Thailand and Myanmar, the animistic spirits of daily life, as well as a whole vista called animism.

I also became intrigued with western Christianity, the faith into which I was born and from which I had become estranged. Western Christianity historically subjugated other living things to humans based on the so-called mandate of dominion from Genesis 1:24 - domination of all things non-human – a concept inconsistent with my views.

My inquiries here led me to discover that Christian theology was a hotbed of revisionist thinking about humans and their relationship to the natural system. The previously held view of dominion - an unequal and harsh relationship - is no longer considered to be the Biblical mandate according to denominations representing about 90% of Christians. Indeed, the change in the religious theology over the last thirty years has been nothing less than revolutionary. Catholics and Baptists, Methodists and Presbyterians and Episcopaleans – all of these denominations and many others now explicitly recognize environmental and ecological concerns in their adopted resolutions and theology. This is different than the Baptist tradition in which I was raised and from which I had fled.

So what does this new theology mean? What are the implications of eco-theology? First, and perhaps most importantly, the basis now exists for an ethical relationship among humans as well as between humans and other living things. According to the Bible, God created the heavens, the Earth and all within it and it was good. Who are I-you-we to destroy that which God created and thought was good? If God asked Noah to save all of those animals from the flood, who are I-you-

we to destroy them when we do not require them for food? Reverence for life and living things is a key principle of this emerging theology.

Another aspect of this emerging eco-theology is stewardship, the concept that I-you-we have been given the role of trustees over the Creation and all within it, including each other as well as non-human living things. Stewardship comes from the Greek word *oikos*, which is also the root word of two other modern words – economics and ecology. The concept of fusing economics and ecology in our role as trustees is a fundamentally different view than the view that I-you-we are dominators and subjugators, destroyers. The importance of this change cannot be overstated. Under this concept, economic value is not the only value. Ecologic value is equally important. The free good now has value. The job of the steward – the trustee – is to realize both ecologic and traditional economic value – a problem that is not well understood today much less implemented.

Stewardship requires a commitment to principles and values – to ethics. We are trustees over important gifts – our communities and our Earth. We have a new mandate, a new relationship in a spiritual sense, one that may take us to a very different societal reality. Stewardship is a word with meaning and requires commitment – it is not a simple truism to be tossed out lightly and abandoned when it costs too many dollars. It is a commitment to be a keeper of the metaphorical house for ourselves and those who come after us.

This concept of stewardship can be contrasted with a short-term viewpoint that emphasizes a “take now and leave nothing for tomorrow or for future generations” philosophy. Calvin DeWitt, in his book *The Environment and the Christian*, has stated: “In the last several centuries,

we have chosen to redefine the long recognized vices of avarice and greed as virtues. . . Self interest, we now profess, is what brings the greatest good.” Stewardship vs. avarice and greed – the emerging spiritual battleground.

And there is the concept of ecological sin. If the creation is good and if it is destroyed in furtherance of avarice and greed, is it not a sin? Another author, Max Oeschlaeger, states that “Ecological sin . . . occurs when humans begin to think that they are God. It is when we think that we have divine power over the rest of creation that we are likely to crush it.” When we fail to act as stewards, we commit an ecological sin.

These concepts are not just true of our relationship to the ecological system, it is also true of our relation to each other. Environmental justice is also a part of this emerging theology, the concept that we must not pollute the Earth and harm other humans as well as the natural system. Environmental justice – the goal that all sectors of the community will be equally free of pollution – is an attempt to insure that the weak, the politically disenfranchised, do not receive more pollution, or more floodwaters, because they lack the power to defend themselves in the political process. In the context of flooding in Harris County, this concept relates directly to political contributions and economic power.

Interestingly, the secular concept of environmental justice came from research by the sociologist Robert Bullard, a professor at Texas Southern University who revealed racial discrimination patterns in landfill siting in Houston in the book, *Dumping on Dixie*. Today, environmental justice has meaning in both secular and religious settings and forms one of the cornerstones of modern eco-theology. I find it

interesting that no governmental or religious entity has asked for or undertaken an analysis of the pattern of toxic and small particle air pollution with regard to minority neighborhoods.

These and many more elements are being developed in the new Christian theology. However, for the most part, this eco-theology message and this environmental justice message are missing from the pulpits and sanctuaries, from the temples and the churches of Houston.

Why is it that I-you-we are not hearing these important theological concepts if we choose to attend church?

How did I-you-we decide that our spirituality was not to include reverence for other living things, pollution control and environmental justice?

Eco-theology and environmental justice have the potential to transform western Christianity. I don't know if they will, or not. It depends, at least in part, on whether or not the message is spoken. What I am sure of is that this spiritual mandate will emerge either within or outside of organized religion.

Ultimately, this form of spirituality is highly personal; it is experienced and felt. As my friend Hilmar Moore recently wrote:

“I do not believe in the spiritual world, I experience it. I don't need any book or preacher or philosophical proof. I have a primary experience.”

This form of spirituality does not require large edifices with early and late services. This form of spirituality is not just open for business on Sunday. It is lived.

On my own, I have found a type of spirituality that I was not taught. My spirituality is similar to that described by Terry Tempest Williams in the wonderful book of place and spirituality called *Refuge*:

I pray to the birds because I believe they will carry the messages of my heart upward. I pray to them because I believe in their existence, the way their songs begin and end each day – the invocations and benedictions of Earth. I pray to the birds because they remind me of what I love rather than what I fear. And at the end of my prayers, they teach me how to listen.

Or, to attempt to replicate her concept with my reality:

I pray to the migrating songbirds because their return restores my faith in another year. I cheer the orioles, the tanagers and the warblers because their hopeful journey reinforces my hopeful journey. And I applaud them when they cross the water onto land and fall to the Earth, safe again, both of us.

My spirituality is an encounter with an energy – an essence of life – that I find in Earth life forms. I wonder about it recurring, a phenomenon ruled by the laws of thermodynamics. Perhaps life energy is never destroyed but simply reappears in changed forms - a spiritual conservation of mass – of animus - concept. From that vantage point, it is easy to understand St. Francis of Assisi and the views of Dr. Albert Schweitzer in his writings about our ethical relationship with other living things.

Interestingly, the concept of a spiritual energy is consistent with the concept of the Holy Spirit of the Trinity of Christianity. Of God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit is, in many respects, the least well-developed concept. Modern Christianity has often overlooked this

third part of the Trinity that is pervasive and holistic. Rather than the Holy Ghost that we Baptist children giggled about, the Holy Spirit is an essence, a deification of animus. Our planet Earth is unique in the solar system. Based on our knowledge so far, it is the only planet with life, with animus. It is unique. Again, paradise before us and we don't know it, much less value it.

As I rediscovered my spirit, I became much more of a civic activist. Again, to quote Hilmar Moore:

“. . . the cutting edge of evolution is to experience oneself and others as spiritual beings, and to act out of this experience in a way that informs (brings forms to) culture, society and individual relationships; that demands compassion toward the earth and humanity; that forms, out of its being, a relationship with the spiritual world. This is the cutting edge of evolution, the evolution of consciousness.”

Think about it. The evolution of consciousness - spiritual beings acting to form culture – demanding compassion toward each other and the natural system – forming a relationship with the essence of life. Amen, brother.

My experience of the natural system caused a spiritual awakening in me and I felt the need to act to protect that ethereal essence – something that was vulnerable, otherwise was not protected. During the past spring migration, I saw a wonderful sight. I was walking along a road with friends, looking for migrating songbirds. We found a small grove of live oaks that had a small wetland area beneath it. As we were looking at warblers in the oaks, someone noticed a scarlet tanager sitting on a Palmetto frond just above the water. The bird was so

exhausted from its recent flight across the Gulf that it just sagged onto the leaf and let us walk within feet of it without moving. This bird was so tired that it had failed to shake the dust from its side where it had clearly lain on the sandy ground.

As I stood and watched this fragile bird, I realized that if we continue to destroy the natural system of the Texas coast, that bird will have no sanctuary, no stand of live oaks with a wetland beneath it. I also realized how that scarlet tanager epitomizes the population of Houston. I-you-we are as fragile and vulnerable as that tanager. However, there is a difference. We can act to protect ourselves, if we can only locate the spirit for the quest. The tanager cannot.

When the widening and deepening of the Houston Ship Channel was proposed in 1986, the threat to Galveston Bay galvanized me into action, spiritual action. When the Texas Copper smelter was proposed in the early 1990s, I felt the need to act to protect the Bay. I acted with regard to the proposed Westside Airport because of its threat to the Katy Prairie and against the proposed Grand Parkway because it will bring another band of concrete into our adjacent ecosystems and worsen our flooding. I have been compelled to oppose, once again, the Port of Houston and its proposed Bayport container port because of its threat to the bay.

I can remember a flood victim coming to my office and talking about how she now gets hives every time that she hears thunder. I have listened to phone calls from flood victims crying because they cannot sell their house – because they cannot escape. I have heard the engineers say in their self righteous manner that the flood was an act of

God when we both knew otherwise. And I committed to trying to do something about it.

I found that my spiritual self is affirmed by activism. Activism defines me in a positive manner to myself. I feel alive when I am acting in an attempt to protect that which has spiritual value to me. My spirit is oppressed by apathy and acceptance of greed and avarice as moral guides. If I succumb, if I build the wall and hide in scotch-buffered numbness, my spirit withers and disappears.

There is certainly a religious basis for activism. What exhibits activism better than Jesus throwing the money-lenders from the temple in Jerusalem - literally tossing greed and avarice from the temple which had been turned into a “den of robbers”. Those with money were charging those without for the privilege of coming into contact with hope, with God. And then a revolutionary walks in and throws out the money-lenders, the establishment. I would welcome the combined force of Jesus, the Goddess, Yahweh, Vishnu, Allah and Buddha to help us throw the moneylenders - the good old boys - from our coastal Temple.

The journey that I-you-we make is personal. We must each find our spiritual path. We must discover our own truths. I was raised by a patriotic father, a World War II marine who loves the United States. I was raised to trust our country. As a naïve young college student, I came face to face with the reality that my country was lying to me about the Vietnam war. It was one of the most staggering revelations that I have ever had. It was a defining moment in my life, a truth I was not predisposed to find. We must search for and find the truth - uncover it as a robin searches for worms— sticking our beaks under the leaves and

flipping them up to reveal what is hidden. That search for truth is at its center a spiritual quest.

The homes of 1200 citizens were ruined by the failure of Harris County to deliver adequate flood control on White Oak Bayou in 1998. There were over 30,000 homes flooded in Allison, their flooding often worsened, if not caused by, actions taken by our various governmental units. If Bayport container port is built, experts estimate that over 2500 homeowners eventually will be forced from their homes. If the Sonoma study is correct, 435 people will die prematurely each year and almost a 1000 of us, per year, will suffer major pulmonary illness that would not have occurred but for air pollution, not to mention the asthma and just feeling bad. These are not small impacts. These are major community traumas.

In Houston, we have a power elite that has and continues to subject us to serious misdeeds. I-you-we must put the actions of a bunch of good old boys who run this town into perspective. They do not deserve either our respect or our support. I-you-we deserve better. I – you - we have both the right and the duty to speak up about their misdeeds and cause them to change.

The power elite that run Houston are used to getting their way and they are serious about it. In this sense, Houston is town run by a gang of toughs. They take vengeance against those with the audacity to speak against them. They attempt to scare people into submission and silence. If you speak against their pet projects, they try to hurt you financially.

I will give a personal example of this economic sanction. I was a consultant to the City of Houston on a major air pollution study and I

was told by Al Callaway, a member of Mayor Brown’s staff, that I was dismissed from the air project because I was the leader of the opposition to the Port of Houston’s Bayport Project, a project that you will hear more about later. It was no coincidence that the City became concerned about my Bayport opposition. The then-chair of the Port of Houston Authority – Ned Holmes - was Mayor Brown’s campaign chairman. Two other clients have told me that they had been asked to either fire me or not hire me due to my opposition to the Port of Houston. Luckily for me, they declined, but the request that they fire me at least qualifies as attempted tyranny.

My experience is not unique. Many successful business people are afraid to speak out against bad projects in our region for fear of economic retribution. It is no surprise that the normal response to the suggestion of opposing the power elite controlling Houston is to question the wisdom of the person proposing opposition.

“What, are you kidding? I’ll lose business,” is a common refrain. Why should I-you-we be afraid to express our opinions? I-you-we must stop this economic blackballing?

It is wrong for some local kingpin to be able to affect your livelihood – to get you fired - because you speak your opinion?

What is different from this and many of the complaints of the founders of this country with King George of England?

When faced with the potential of some intrusive, damaging proposal favored by the Houston Partnership or the Port of Houston or even local industries, the common sentiment heard in community groups and gatherings is “Make the best deal you can. You can’t win”.

It is no wonder that so many of us are apathetic, for what is apathy if not numbness, the suppression of the spirit. This is spiritual oppression. This is why, in part, we build the wall.

What have I-you-we given up to have both spouses working, five cars, endless carpools and multiple toys for the young and old?

In our pursuit of material wealth, what Faustian bargain have we made?

What is the price that we pay for our silence?

Where is the animus – the spirit - that goes with the corpus – the body?

In 1998, the Port of Houston Authority announced that it intended to construct a 1000+ acre container port at Bayport, north of Seabrook on Galveston Bay. The Port has stated that it has no intention of dredging through Galveston Bay for a deeper channel for this port, yet the docks in the permit application are designed five feet deeper than the current channel. “Don’t worry”, they say, “we don’t intend to build it even though it’s on our permit application”. Yeah, sure.

Over 5000 trucks, one way, each day, will come down roads that were not designed to accommodate this traffic, worsening congestion and air pollution. But the port says “Don’t worry, it’s no problem. These 5000 extra 18-wheelers coming and going each day won’t disrupt your traffic or belch out unhealthy levels of diesel particles”. Yeah, sure.

The Port of Houston never talked with the several thousand people that live next to this site – people whose homes – whose habitat – will be destroyed, over time, no longer suitable for humans and their offspring. Hoy esta ocupado – manana, no mas. Today, occupied,

tomorrow, no more. Trust us they say. Yet, to trust them is to agree to the loss of your livelihood.

The tragic part of this story is that there is a private sector container port that is proposed in Texas City. That proposed port is well located and will cost taxpayers nothing and will serve the regional economy. Bayport, by contrast, will cost taxpayers \$1.2 billion. However, Bayport is not about regional economic growth – the Texas City alternative and the existing port infrastructure can handle that. Bayport is about the Commissioners of the Port of Houston Authority passing out \$1.2 billion in public money to engineers, lawyers and contractors. It is about Harris County contracts and contractors and engineering studies and bonds.

The Commissioners of the Port of Houston Authority are appointed, controlled by Harris County and to a lesser extent the City of Houston and their political contributors. The Port Commissioners have this money in their pocket that they can't wait to spend and there is no shortage of law firms and engineers and contractors waiting to receive that money. It is the county money cycle again.

Bayport is a corrupt project. Bayport is being built on avarice and greed, rather than on community need and well-being. The bonds to underwrite this Bayport project were sold to the public by a slick advertising campaign that showed jobs walking out of containers. Between \$1 and \$2 million was used on this advertising - paid for by the Port of Houston with public money. It was legal, however, because that ad did not ask us to vote for the bonds. These ads with jobs walking out of containers were run for a couple of months before the election with no mention of the election. Then, these same exact ads were used by a

private campaign group, composed of engineers, contractors and lawyers, who ran the same spot with the political message to vote for the bonds. That bond issue passed and now Harris County will spend \$1.2 billion of our tax money to subsidize a port that we do not need and that will destroy both residential and bay habitat. That is the power of avarice and greed. That is what we must throw out of our Temple.

This December, the Corps of Engineers will conduct a public hearing on the Bayport Environmental Impact Statement at the George R. Brown Convention Center. It is my hope that the public outcry about this Bayport project will be the largest that has ever been heard on the Gulf Coast of the United States. Bayport and the Port of Houston Authority epitomize good old boy politics and power. People are being ripped from their houses and the Port of Houston Authority could care less. The Port of Houston Authority attempts to economically hurt those who oppose them. The Port of Houston has been telling anyone who will listen in the Bay area that the citizen's can't win, that the Port cannot be stopped. It's a done deal. Make you best deal. Take our money. Go be good boys and girls.

To this I say bullshit. In December, we will meet these so-called community leaders head on - with spirit. We will at least demonstrate that we are alive – that many of the residents of Harris County are willing to fight for themselves and their community, for their very spirit. I hope you will join us for this spiritual encounter. It may prove to be a pivotal step in the rebirth of Houston.

And then there is the Grand Parkway. The Grand Parkway is proposed to be the next loop around Houston. The Grand Parkway has been pushed by Houston developers, lawyers and engineers for well

over a decade now. This is not a mobility project, although it is presented to us that way. This is a development project. The Harris County toll road authority could not build it as a toll road because the ridership projections were too low. The Texas Department of Transportation has refused to fund it so far because of the same reasons. Now, the goal of the good old boys is to get at least one-half of it identified as the NAFTA highway so that we can build it with federal money. The developers and engineers don't care where the money comes from – just get more money to build more to make more. More, more, more.

The Grand Parkway will have severe and substantial impacts to the natural habitats around Houston. It will destroy portions of the Columbia bottomlands along the Brazos River. The Grand Parkway will destroy portions of the Katy Prairie and aid land development in the winter home of the snow geese and bald eagles. This same prairie is upstream of the City of Houston and its development will cover thousands of acres of land with concrete, land that now holds rain water. The runoff from this development will become the floodwater that will envelop the residents of Buffalo Bayou. The Grand Parkway will also open up the floodplains of the San Jacinto River to development and will lead to destruction of that prime habitat. The Grand Parkway is not needed to help mobility. So how did I-you-we agree to undertake this project? Why don't we take a stand and stop it.

It is time for the flood victims of Harris County to rise up into a political unit. We must put a stop to the engineers, developers, lawyers and contractors who control county spending. We must demand and get the solutions and plans that will provide us with the best approach

to living with flooding in this town. If a promise is made to help an area, it must be kept. If people are told that a pond will be built to control flooding, then it should be built. No more lies. No more deceit. If we cannot be helped, tell us so that we can plan and act accordingly. Don't tell us flooding is controlled. It is not and will never be. We can only manage the flooding and plan for efficient responses and assistance and ultimately permanent evacuation of some areas.

A plan is being formulated to bring together those who have flooded in this community along with others who are interested in reforming flooding. Houston Conservation Voters, a PAC dedicated to addressing human and nature conservation, is proposing to bring people together from around Harris County to address these flood issues, along with Bayport and air pollution and conservation. Imagine, voters in Harris County uniting regardless of whether they are democrats or republicans, to elect candidates who are committed to addressing flooding, air pollution, port development and new highway construction in a manner that protects human rights and reflects concern about preserving our natural heritage. Now that – I submit – is spiritual and it is certainly activism.

In considering the current status of these issues in Houston – flooding, air pollution, Bayport, the Grand Parkway – it is worth pondering the extent to which our human rights are being trampled. The International Declaration on Human Rights and the Environment contains several specific principles. This declaration links human rights, an ecologically sound environment, sustainable development (stewardship) and peace. It states, in part:

All people have the right to a secure, healthy and ecologically sound environment.

All persons shall be free from discrimination in regard to actions and decisions that affect the environment.

All persons have the right to freedom from pollution, activities that adversely threaten human life.

All persons have the right to protection of the air. . . water. . . flora and fauna . . . and the essential processes and areas necessary to maintain biological diversity and ecosystems.

All persons have the right to adequate housing, land tenure and living conditions in a healthy and ecologically sound environment.

All persons have the right not be evicted from their homes or land for purpose of, or as a consequence of, decisions or actions affecting the environment, except in emergencies or due to a compelling purpose benefiting society as a whole and not attainable by other means.

All persons have the right to hold and express opinions and to disseminate ideas and information regarding the environment.

Based on these principles, human rights are being trampled in Houston, along with the lives and spirit of those of us who live here. Nature is also being trampled, a total absence of reverence for life and other living things. I-you-we must act to address these acts of spiritual oppression in order to save ourselves.

Now, this plea regarding human rights is not about helping others in some third world country – persons unknown to us being deprived of their human rights by some puppet government. This is about helping

me-you-us who live in Houston, Texas, helping us save the essence of our lives. This about spiritual reclamation through activism.

I have been fortunate. I found my spirit through the natural system, through exploring and attempting to incorporate reverence for life and a sense of place in my life. I have also found activism, as a means of expressing and acting upon the spirituality that is inherent in life.

I recommend activism to you and I hope that you find a spiritual path that is rewarding. And if you want to try a little activism, come to the George R. Brown convention center in December, or to the meetings on reclaiming control of the flooding issue. Come stare the good old boys in the face and feel flush with the activation of your essence – your spirit. And in the process, let’s make Houston a better place – for us humans as well as other living things. Thank you.