

Gimme that Ol' Time (Earth First!) Religion

Karen Pickett

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Imagine my surprise when I had PBS mumbling in the background as I made supper, and catching my attention came the words, “environmentalists... climate of hostility... but *why*,” said the narrator, “is Keith Hammer public enemy number one?” Well right there, I spilled my miso and let my stir-fry smoke as I went into the other room to see why PBS was mentioning Keith, who cruised over some white water with me years ago, who once occasionally draped himself in the EF! banner and who, for many years now, has been the director of the Swan View Coalition in Montana’s Flathead Valley. So why is Keith public enemy number one, as defined by northern Montana’s version of the wise use movement? When they finally cut to an interview with him, I realized that he threatens the dominant paradigm because, EF! aside, he is an uncompromising biocentrist. That concept/philosophy/approach is the same dominant paradigm threat to dominion-style Christianity, capitalism and corporate power that first brought the heat on Earth First! years ago.

Hmmm... biocentrism. No compromise in defense of whose mama? Now, what are the tenets of Earth First!? Gee, isn’t it direct action and nonviolence? In a word, no. Something has gotten lost in the shuffle of out with the old, in with the new. While we do have an unbroken record of nonviolence in our resistance to ecological mayhem (providing you don’t include vandalism in your definition of violence), and while that record has been useful and sometimes important to point to, it is not the underpinning of Earth First!.

Biocentrism is what sets us apart—or at least, it used to.

Have we evolved beyond our cheerleading for Aldo Leopold-style biocentrism and a concomitant focus on wilderness to a landscape where we are primarily fighting corporations on the globalization stage?

EF!’s initial focus had been on wilderness, not because we’re privileged and like pretty things, but because wilderness is where the last remnant populations of many fellow species are making their last stands—species from shiny salamanders to scaly prehistoric fish to the predators big enough to eat us humans (which is part of what defines wilderness). Wilderness is where we remember that we are a species of animal—not “just another” species, but one of tens of thousands in a wondrous biological web. Wilderness is a reflection of the wildness within us. When we stop recognizing the paramount importance of saving wilderness, we lose something in ourselves and in our ability to fight, to resist, to love, to steam with passion.

Howie Wolke called wilderness the “seething cauldron of evolution/’ It is important for the very fact that it is *not* a construct of our insane species. The journey of the salmon happens irrespective of human life, and without respect to others’ needs or to what is going on above the surface of the water. That I could only achieve such focus in my own work! For me, it’s not about the “wilderness” that has Sierra Clubbers bouncing down the trails with North Face, Adidas and Nalgene, but the wilderness that reflects our wildness. It’s about the places that are still home to those species that couldn’t care less whether *Homo sapiens* continues its journey on the blue-green sphere or not.



It's a valid argument that it is the privileged in society—either by race or chance economic circumstance or geography—who have the relative luxury of being able to campaign for wilderness. There is no doubt that we're never gonna make significant movement forward in our campaigns for change without some astute class analysis, leading us to change ourselves and our societal (and sub-cultural) constructs.



But that doesn't preclude the priority of wilderness, nor does it replace battles for the wild with corporate campaigns.

EF! has, in many ways, been absorbed into the anti-corporate globalization movement, and there is something that we bring to that table (or circle, as the case may be). We slide right into the direct-action scenarios with a high comfort level; we mesh with the pagan collective; we are part of the analysis that, by and large, takes a no-compromise stance. But the *higher value* item that we can bring to the table is the biocentric analysis—we can deepen the ecology.

Direct action—hell, everyone does direct action these days (you'll have to excuse me, as I live in the San Francisco Bay Area, and we have labor and anti-war demonstrators, human rights agitators, teachers, nurses and little old ladies out in the streets here). Looking at the evolution and growth of the progressive, anti-corporate globalization movement, it becomes clear that direct action is no longer the territory of Earth First!, Sea Shepherd or Greenpeace.

Sometimes, I wonder who the heck those people are, running around in the streets of Seattle/Miami/Cancun/New York/ Quebec with EF! t-shirts, why we don't have any local EF! newsletters when once there were a dozen at least, or why we don't have an EF! group in my bioregion.

Where *did* all the oldies (and goodies) go? The common excuse is that activism is for childless youngsters, before they start their family. But there are plenty of graying activists in some movements (e.g., Pacifica radio and anti-war), while the punks in black sweatshirts at EF! gatherings are saying, "Hey, you elders should step back and give the younger people a chance to talk," and, ☒What do older activists do, anyway, when you can no longer climb trees?" (I swear, this question was actually posed to me at the 2004 Round River Rendezvous). David Brower got more radical as he got older—right up until he departed this physical plane. Sounds like a plan to me.

Youth or graying maturity of participants aside, Earth First! has been the catalyst and last line of defense on many stages not because of a commitment to nonviolence or even because of direct action, *but because it is a movement that puts the Earth first*. That is deep ecology/biocentrism transformed into a succinct slogan. From taking on the dams taming wild rivers and the roads invading wild lands, to the battles over fire ecology and extinction threats to non-charismatic species, to the decidedly non-charismatic campaigns—like Cove/Mallard—that the anthropocentric 98 percent of the environmental movement abandoned because there wasn't a public interest (i.e., recreational) element, Earth First! was there. Because these species, those rocks, those rivers and the living, breathing Earth have at least as much right—on my misanthropic days (approximately 99 percent), Td say they have *more* right—to be taking up atmospheric space as *Homo sapiens*.

But even if I can now qualify for the American Association of Retired Persons (much to my horror), let's hope that biocentrism is not becoming a relic. What does Earth First! mean to *you*?

With no plans to "retire" from frontlines activism any time soon, KP plans to burn her AARP card on her next birthday.

The Ted K Archive

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