
Planetary Spirituality and Berry Picking in Northern Cheyenne Country

A Personal Perspective by Marya Grathwohl



Marya Grathwohl, a Sister of Saint Francis, graduated from Marian College in Indiana, and earned masters degrees in Creation Spirituality at Mundelein, Chicago, and in Philosophy, Cosmology, and Consciousness at California Institute of Integral Studies in San Francisco. In 1974, she moved to the Crow and Northern Cheyenne Reservations in Montana, where she was adopted into a Crow family, and where she now lives at Prayer Lodge, a center serving Native American women. Passionate about changing human consciousness toward love for the planet, she is writing a book that integrates her transformative experiences with Crow and Northern Cheyenne peoples with insights from the 13.7-billion-year story of the Universe.

It's late summer in Northern Cheyenne country and the wild berries are ripening along streams and roadways, in draws and bowls in the mountains, anywhere moisture is caught and held by the contours of land. A quiet migration of families begins; quiet because almost nothing is as well-guarded as the location of berry patches where the fruits are known to be especially sweet and juicy and abundant. At berry-picking time private ownership of land surrenders to knowledge of sites passed from mother to daughter, remembered in detail by grandmothers whose faces are maps of wrinkles. Except for bushes growing near homes, berries belong to the whole community.

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"We're hoping to go picking tomorrow," Vonda, my Northern Cheyenne friend who has taken me as her sister, says. "Making syrup or puddings into the cold and early nights of winter will comfort my old bones." Next day I'm in the pickup bouncing along dirt tracks across pastures, through a dry streambed, and past the last house on this side of this mountain. Eventually we get there. How Vonda knows where there is baffles me, but here are the berries shining in sunlight.

My first time helping her, I am picking along with several grandchildren. As I reach for the blue-purple chokecherries, the familiar movements carry memories of helping my dad pick raspberries from his patch in the backyard of our Cincinnati home. "Don't miss any of them," he'd say, and thinking of mom's jellies, I didn't. I scrutinized every branch, looking for the biggest and brightest ones. Here in Northern Cheyenne country, I follow behind the children, stripping the branches bare. We're eating our share, too.

Suddenly Vonda is picking beside us. "Is everybody remembering what Grandma Nellie taught me?" she asks. Three children and one adult with purple lips all turn to her. "Grandma Nellie always told us to leave some of the best berries for the birds. And if you forgot to put your first big berries on the ground as an offering and a thank-you to Mother Earth and the rain, you can still do that, too."

We all stop and form a little circle among the bushes. Sifting through our buckets, we choose large berries and place them on the ground. "Hahó," we say, "thank you."

I turn back to the chokecherries, trying to pick and think differently. Grandma Nellie's sense of family somehow included birds. She and her rancher husband worked desperately to coax a dry, cold place in mountains to feed their family. Despite that, or maybe because of it, in her mind and heart she lived within a communion of life that included respect for the needs of birds, something she probably learned from her grandmother. Right here among chokecherries swinging in clusters from leafy branches in the twenty-first century, I feel myself in a circle of five generations of Northern Cheyenne women. Within this circle, I

suddenly see how my world defines everything that exists as resources for people only, and for development and profit. In the industrial world I grew up in, no wild creature was considered family. We never left the best raspberries for the birds. Or even thought that cutting down forested areas for housing destroyed others' homes.

In the Cincinnati Zoo is an exhibit that has no live animals. Instead, it houses photos and two stuffed and mounted birds, the last survivors of their species. Martha the passenger pigeon and Incas the Carolina parakeet lived in this building and died here, Martha on September 1, 1914, and Incas on February 21, 1918. At one time, Martha's species was the most abundant of all land birds, flying over the eastern half of an entire continent in flocks of billions that darkened the sky. The Carolina parakeet was our only native psittacine; it ate the cockleburrs that now plague our south-eastern fields. Today, the cerulean warbler, a blue and white songbird that was once easily spotted in deep eastern U.S. forests, has declined in population by 70 percent since 1966 due to forest degradation for logging and development.

Several years ago, the American Museum of Natural History took a poll of biologists, asking if we are in the middle of a mass species extinction. Seventy percent said yes. In numbers alone, that means fifty to one hundred species are vanishing every day, approximately 1,000 times faster than natural extinction rates; faster than at any time in the last sixty-five million years. Recently a report from eight of the foremost nature organizations indicates that one in eight plant species worldwide is imperiled; in the United States alone, one in three is endangered. Twenty-four percent of all mammals are endangered. Their diminishment and disappearance goes largely unnoticed by most of us. The magnitude of this loss of life is hard for me to grasp. I know that if current trends in species extinction continue, we may lose half of all Earth's plant and animal species within the next fifty years. But can I imagine that world, that threadbare communion of life? The tiny cerulean warbler's song may fall silent forever within my lifetime. Will I notice?

We can try to absorb these facts or maybe, in our grief, quietly tuck them away as distant tragedies. (When the Preuss' Red Colobus Monkey vanished several years ago, it seemed to make no real difference in my daily life.) But can we get a sense of how our powers of imagination, creativity, and love are diminished by their leaving? Can we feel how lonely we're becoming without them? Rachel Carson called the loneliness a "silent spring." And hearing her, our hearts felt the chill. We can imagine that silence, now. No raptors lifting on thermals over my home and I may forget how to dare a dream into reality. No prairie grass seeds flung against an autumn full moon and I will feel a loss of hope in my soul. Could we have imagined flight on a planet without birds? What is lost in the soul of a child who never sees a meadow of wildflowers?

When Grandma Nellie was picking berries with her grandmother, she didn't know what we now do: that all Earth's species emerged in an immense, slow dance from common ancestors who lived in the seas over three billion years ago. Over time, Earth's climates and continental movements and predator-prey relationships endowed seeds with power to survive drought and ice, shaped graceful bodies that could swim and fly, and cherished consciousness that kept wolf pups fed and created finely tuned musical instruments. Thanks to the achievements of modern science we in industrial societies now know what indigenous peoples have always known, that we inhabit one planetary home and all of us, all beings, are held as kin within the powers of deep relatedness. Darwin gave us revelation from Earth that gifts us with a most profound spiritual insight: We are all a communion.

Earth spins, circling a star, within a galaxy of about two hundred billion other stars. Pouring across the night sky with creamy beauty, the Milky Way is our familiar galactic home. Grandma Nellie's people called it Sky Road, a passage for spirit. Within just the last century have we learned that the Milky Way is one of one hundred billion galaxies, all streaming away from each other in a cosmic dance driven by primordial energy we call expansion. In all this grandeur we have yet to find another cerulean warbler or Colobus monkey.

The warbler's song began in the middle of a star whose fierce heat forged complex chemical elements from simpler elements forged in yet an earlier star. When the second-generation star exploded as a supernova, those elements were blown into neighboring space where another power, gravity, gathered them up over millennia into a planet. That planet would eventually shape from those elements the bones and lungs and muscles of a bird fiercely intent upon finding a mate. These same elements also formed the tuna salad you had for lunch, leaves yellowing and falling in aspen groves, fingers typing this paper, and the eyes and mind reading it. Our kinship line goes back, according to our most recent estimate, 13.7 billion years. The whole Universe is one body.

Walt Whitman intuited this when he said, "A leaf of grass is no less than the journeywork of the stars." Northern Cheyenne grandmothers forged their intuition of this long and profound communion into a moral ethic: Leave some of the best berries for your other relatives. And studying a cosmology of berries, I am finally learning it, too.

In the Cheyenne language there is no "it." There is no "he" or "she," either. Third person singular is indicated by words that specify, that speak of others respectfully as "thou." These words translate roughly into something like "this one, that one." I try to imagine living within this language. No it. Always I-thou; never I-it. No inanimate or soul-less beings. "Why should I have [soul] and not the camel?" asks another poet, Mary Oliver. "Come to think of it, what about the maple trees? What about the blue iris? What about all the little stones, sitting alone in the moonlight? What about roses, and lemons, and their shining leaves? What about the grass?" Grass!

When did soul begin in the Universe? Revering a Creator as intimate to the life process as my DNA, I seek spirit everywhere. In this Universe, hydrogen left alone, responsive to the powers of gravity, electromagnetism, and the nuclear forces, eventually turns into a human, awake to self, to soul. How can I have soul if hydrogen doesn't in some way, too?

What could awake to self, to all souled beings, mean for us today? Because of the reach of human powers into all the planetary and life systems, our decisions today determine which species will make it into the next century. In this century, we are planetary power comparable to climate and continental shift and the predator-prey relationship. This planetary power, which we have never before had, demands of us a planet-sized soul, a planetary spirituality, something very new and challenging and promising for industrialized societies. We have mentors: Walt and Mary and Grandma Nellie, Jesus who counted sparrows, Francis of Assisi who experienced all the others, even elements, as brother and sister.

Humans, I am convinced, are born from this planet hungry, not only for milk and comfort, but also for songs: songs of warblers, the alpha female wolf, water splashing clean over stones. Essence of soul, perhaps.

My dad comforted me as an infant on his shoulder, humming the chant of the Volga boatmen, and holding me near the singing canaries mom raised along with four daughters. Perhaps the Universe is also one great song, humming along in elements that bind us all, sounding haunting melodies that sear like ancient origin stories through grass and stones and bone. Picking chokecherries in a late summer sun, I have no idea, of course. I'll presume intuition. I only know I am leaving some of these best berries for birds, hoping that five generations from now there will still be songs in the nearby trees. And maybe even, in the continent's eastern forests, nesting cerulean warblers.

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