



**BOOK EXTRACT**

**Extract from**

***What is Green Spirituality?***

**First title in the low-cost GreenSpirit Book Series**

**Edited by Marian Van Eyk McCain**

## **What on Earth is GreenSpirit?**

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I am often asked, “What is GreenSpirit?” and find it difficult to answer. The first challenge I face is the word ‘green’ itself, which conjures up a cauldron of conflicting images.

The Green Man of forests, pubs and traffic lights. The greenhorn, green-behind-the-ears novice. The agonised green-with-envy person at another’s perceived better fortune. The overindulgent reveller turning ‘green around the gills’ after a night out on the town. Those ubiquitous greenies lobbying on behalf of the environment. The verdant lushness of Spring. The safety of Basra’s Green Zone. The green belt as opposed to the brown one. The 17th of March, when faces, drinks and even waterways turn green in honour of St. Patrick, apostle of the Emerald Isle. Putting greens on golf courses, except in the Australian outback where they are black. Green mould that tells us, if our noses don’t, that the cheese is getting past its use-by date. The Green Berets and Green Jackets among the ranks of our armed forces. The colour itself and its subtle variations. A green planet before flowers introduced other colours. I could go on...

There was a time when we specified what we meant. Our spirituality was described as ‘creation centred.’ Though a bit of a tongue-twister, the phrase conveyed what it said. Until, that is, ‘Creationism’ (a literal interpretation of the Biblical accounts of creation) reared its ugly head and spread its toxic tentacles. The waters became muddied. Even those from whom we would have expected greater discernment began lumping us both in the same basket. So we retreated and opted for ‘GreenSpirit’ instead, which, it must be said, has a more appealing ring to it, even if it is hard to describe.

This brings me to the second term, the word ‘Spirit.’ For many, this suggests an otherworldly dimension that is both distinct from and opposed to the material world which we inhabit. I was brought up in a religious tradition that sought fulfilment in a life hereafter, not this one. Yet paradoxically, being rooted in creation, our spirituality is integrally materialistic. The Ash Wednesday ritual of daubing ash on foreheads, while chanting “Remember you are earth and unto earth you will return,” reminds us of our origin and destiny in created reality. There is no duality between matter and spirit, except in some minds. All matter is inspirited. Where else, except from creation, do we find symbols and derive rituals that inspire and nurture our spirits? Beltane, the Pagan festival of Spring, exuberantly celebrates this union of spirit and matter. When I ask other ‘greenspirits’ for their views on green spirituality, their answers vary widely. But one thread that links them all is our embeddedness in the natural world.

“In the natural world,” writes Thomas Berry, “we discover the mysterious power whence all things come into being.” He goes on to suggest that we leave our bibles on their shelves for twenty years and learn instead to read the scriptures of Nature. For the natural world is the sacred community into which we are born, by which we are nourished and from which we find wisdom.

I grew up in a city, loved it and could not imagine anywhere better. It was my choice of career on leaving school that changed all that. Suddenly I found myself isolated for long periods of time in the middle of the vast Bog of Allen in the Irish midlands. The forests and lakes, rivers and skies, fauna and flora, unique to this geographical region, began slowly to infiltrate my awareness. Almost unconsciously, I found myself going for walks in the countryside, discovering an enchanting and exhilarating environment. I realised then I had fallen in love with a magical universe that was gifted to me at birth. I experience each day now as a new awakening. I go to sleep at night anticipating a dawn of more fascinating and thrilling discoveries. I feel truly blessed.

I even get excited by things like bluebells which once I scarcely noticed. Recently, tipped off by a friend, I discovered The Hollies, a nearby wood, aglow with the subdued colours and perfumed by the subtle scent of bluebell clusters.

It is awesome to reflect that the arrival of flowers like these started the revolution of the Cenozoic Age, which witnessed the most prolific flourishing of life forms on this planet. And sad to realise that we are living in its terminal phase, due largely to human intervention.

For me, GreenSpirit is about love and gratitude. Seeing the world as blessing, learning to love it and seeking to share it with others. The longer I live, the more I realise how privileged I am to be here. Every moment is a ‘*Carpe diem!*’ moment to be seized. Berry was asked in an interview if he practised meditation. With a chuckle he replied that he probably did not do so formally. Then added that he had a dream life and a waking life that went on simultaneously. I find this encouraging. I do have my sacred space—a rustic bench by a quiet pond in the countryside. I go there in my imagination whenever I need to. There I can relax, tune in to an inner wisdom and connect to the real world. The rest of the time I fluctuate between different states of consciousness as required to survive!

But there is more to GreenSpirit. I find Matthew Fox’s Four Paths of Creation Spirituality a helpful compass. The first path, *Via Positiva*, can be described as the state of being in love with life. This is fundamental to my efforts to address the current environmental crisis. Love is, after all, the prime motivator. Because I feel passionate about our planet, I want to thrive with it, not perish. The second path, *Via Negativa*, points to how life’s travails are part of a progressive journey. A few years ago, I went through a bad patch and was hospitalised for four months. This turned out to be one of the greatest favours of my life. I emerged from the experience with batteries recharged and a fresh outlook. As part of Nature, we are not exempt from the cycle of dying and rising we observe around us in the changing seasons. The third path, *Via Creativa*, reveals our creative potential, the greatest expression of our divine nature and the most neglected. We ignore it at our peril. José Hobday, Native American and Franciscan nun, urges us to get green “by reaching in to the veins of all creation, to the arteries that pulse with a heart that is bigger than ours.” Finally, the fourth path, *Via Transformativa*, propels us into those transformative experiences that result from engaging with the world, rather than burying our heads in the sand. This is particularly poignant for me at the moment, as I attempt to connect with the land through growing food.

Perhaps, after all, the ‘green’ in GreenSpirit is the most apt expression of a spirituality for our time. Hildegard of Bingen urges us to get green in spirit. This recalls a period when early life on Planet Earth was running out of food. Out of this apparent crisis, creative cells invented the chlorophyll molecule which enabled them to capture light from the Sun and transform it into energy. Photosynthesis came to the rescue. A new partnership with the Sun provided the food and energy for life to prosper.

Is there a message of hope in this for a planet under assault and a people facing extinction? Early tribal societies faced environmental crises before by strengthening their inner world, not seeking to alter the outer. In one Native American creation story, Woman wakes up first to find Man asleep beside her and wonders how to wake him, while the Creator and Coyote watch from behind a tree. To their surprise, she decides to tickle him! As José Hobday once said: “Let’s find out what can make creation laugh instead of crying this acid rain all the time and shedding tears of destruction into the soil!”