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See also: Creationism and Creation Science; Malthus, Thomas Robert; Science; Scopes Trial.

Death and Afterlife in Robinson Jeffers and Edward Abbey

The poem "Vulture" by Robinson Jeffers expresses a religious perspective on death and afterlife that is pervasive in contemporary green spirituality. In it, Jeffers reflects on an occasion when, while lying on his back in a desert canyon in the Southwestern United States, he was once mistaken for carrion by a vulture.

Vulture

I had walked since dawn and lay down to rest on a bare hillside
Above the ocean. I saw through half-shut eyelids a vulture wheeling high up in heaven,
And presently it passed again, but lower and nearer, its orbit narrowing,
I understood then
That I was under inspection. I lay death-still and heard the flight feathers
Whistle above me and make their circle and come nearer . . .
. . . how beautiful he looked, gliding down
On those great sails; how beautiful he looked, veering away in the sea-light
over the precipice. I tell you solemnly
That I was sorry to have disappointed him. To be eaten by that beak and
become part of him, to share those wings and those eyes –
What a sublime end of one's body, what an enskyment; what a life after death.

Another author with a deep love of the desert was the novelist Edward Abbey. Abbey's reflections on death are reminiscent of Jeffers, whom he admired. For Abbey, an authentic death is unaccompanied by life-prolonging technology. It is when the body is left unpolluted so that it can properly reunite with and nurture the Earth. Reflecting on a tourist who died alone in the desert,

> he had good luck – I envy him the manner of his going: to die alone, on a rock under the sun at the brink of the unknown, like a wolf, like a great bird, seems to me very good fortune indeed. To die in the open, under the sky, far from the insolent interference of leech and priest, before this desert vastness opening like a window onto eternity – that surely was an overwhelming stroke of good luck . . . [Today], I think of the dead man under the juniper on the edge of the world, seeing him as the vulture would have seen him, far below and from a great distance. And I see myself through those cruel eyes . . . I feel myself sinking into the landscape, fixed in place like a stone, like a tree, a small motionless shape of vague outline, desert-colored, and with the wings of imagination look down at myself through the eyes of the bird, watching a human figure that becomes smaller, smaller in the receding landscape as the bird rises into the evening (1968: 186, 190).

In their own ways Jeffers and Abbey expressed their sense of belonging to a sacred Earth and a feeling of reverence toward the processes of life and death. In so doing they also rejected the prevalent monotheisms of their day, which obviate the fear of death through belief in supernatural rescue from it.

This kind of attitude, which sacralizes a natural death and views artifice in death as a desecrating act, can be found in a wide variety of contemporary green subcultures. It is expressed in conversation, poetry, art, and song. It has also been implemented through burial practices perceived to be natural. Before his death in 1989, for example, in his last act of desert consecration, Abbey arranged for his body, unpolluted by toxic embalming fluids, to be spirited away and illegally buried in his beloved, sacred desert. In death Abbey would nourish and return to his beloved and sacred desert landscape.

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Further Reading

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See also: Abbey, Edward; Black Mesa; Church of Euthanasia; Earth First! and the Earth Liberation Front; Green Death Movement; Jeffers, John Robinson; Radical Environmentalism.

Deep Ecology

Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess (b. 1912) coined the term "Deep Ecology" in 1972 to express the idea that nature has intrinsic value, namely, value apart from its usefulness to human beings, and that all life forms should be allowed to flourish and fulfill their evolutionary destinies. Naess invented the rubric to contrast such views with what he considered to be "shallow" environmentalism, namely, environmental concern rooted only in concern for humans. The term has since come to signify both its advocates' deeply felt spiritual connections to the Earth's living systems and ethical obligations to protect them, as well as the global environmental movement that bears its name. Moreover, some deep ecologists posit close connections between certain streams in world religions and deep ecology.

Naess and most deep ecologists, however, trace their perspective to personal experiences of connection to and wholeness in wild nature, experiences which are the ground of their intuitive, affective perception of the sacredness and interconnection of all life. Those who have experienced such a transformation of consciousness (experiencing what is sometimes called one's "ecological self" in these movements) view the self not as separate from and superior to all else, but rather as a small part of the entire cosmos. From such experience flows the conclusion that all life and even ecosystems themselves have inherent or intrinsic value – that is, value independently of whether they are useful to humans.

Although Naess coined the term, many deep ecologists credit the American ecologist Aldo Leopold with succinctly expressing such a deep ecological worldview in his now famous "Land Ethic" essay, which was published posthumously in *A Sand County Almanac* in 1948. Leopold argued that humans ought to act only in ways designed to protect the long-term flourishing of all ecosystems and each of their constituent parts.

Many deep ecologists call their perspective alternatively "ecocentrism" or "biocentrism" (to convey, respectively, an ecosystem-centered or life-centered value system). As importantly, they believe humans have so degraded the biosphere that its life-sustaining systems are breaking down. They trace this tragic situation to anthropocentrism (human-centeredness), which values nature exclusively in terms of its usefulness to humans. Anthropocentrism, in turn, is viewed as grounded in Western religion and philosophy, which many deep ecologists believe must be rejected (or a deep ecological transformation of consciousness within them must occur) if humans are to learn to live sustainably on the Earth.

Thus, many deep ecologists believe that only by "resacralizing" our perceptions of the natural world can we put ecosystems above narrow human interests and learn to live harmoniously with the natural world, thereby averting ecological catastrophe. It is a common perception within the deep ecology movement that the religions of indigenous cultures, the world's remnant and newly revitalized or invented pagan religions, and religions originating in Asia (especially Daoism, Buddhism, and Hinduism) provide superior grounds for ecological ethics, and greater ecological wisdom, than do Occidental religions. Theologians such as Matthew Fox and Thomas Berry, however, have shown that Western religions such as Christianity may be interpreted in ways largely compatible with the deep ecology movement.

Although Naess coined the umbrella term, which is now a catchphrase for most non-anthropocentric environmental ethics, a number of Americans were also criticizing anthropocentrism and laying the foundation for the movement's ideas at about the same time as Naess was coining the term. One crucial event early in deep ecology's evolution was the 1974 "Rights of Non-Human Nature" conference held at a college in Claremont, California. Inspired by Christopher Stone's influential 1972 law article (and subsequent book) *Should Trees Have Standing? – Toward Legal Rights for Natural Objects*, the conference drew many of those who would become the intellectual architects of deep ecology. These included George Sessions who, like Naess, drew on Spinoza's pantheism, later co-authoring *Deep Ecology* with Bill Devall; Gary Snyder, whose remarkable, Pulitzer prize-winning *Turtle Island* proclaimed the value of place-based spiritualities, indigenous cultures, and animistic perceptions, ideas that would become central within deep ecology subcultures; and the late Paul Shepard (d. 1996), who in *The Tender Carnivore and the Sacred Game*, and subsequent works such as *Nature and Madness* and the posthumously published *Coming Back to the Pleistocene*, argued that foraging societies were ecologically superior to and emotionally healthier than agricultural societies. Shepard and Snyder especially provided a cosmogony that explained humanity's fall from a pristine, natural paradise. Also extremely influential was Edward Abbey's *Desert Solitaire*, which viewed the desert as a sacred place uniquely able to evoke in people a proper, non-anthropocentric understanding of the value of nature. By the early 1970s the above figures put in place the intellectual foundations of deep ecology.