

TERRA MORTIS

IS THE EARTH DYING? A JUNGIAN AND
INDIGENOUS VIEW

PART I: A FEW ROUGH BEASTS

MICHAEL OWEN



Western science, following Roger Bacon, believed man could force nature to reveal its secrets; the Sioux simply petitioned nature for friendship.

—Vine Deloria Jr.

If it keeps on raining, the levee's going to break

When the levee breaks, have no place to stay

Crying won't help you, praying won't do you no good

When the levee breaks, mama, you got to move, ooh

—Kansas Joe McCoy and Memphis Minnie, “When the Levee Breaks.”

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WHAT'S THIS ALL ABOUT?

A PREFACE

What follows is a collection of essays that I have written over the last thirty years and only recently have they wanted to come out of the writer's closet. Some are pretty much in their raw state, others have been scrubbed up a bit for polite company.

The planned Preface ended up being way too long and it pushed and bullied its way to the head of the queue and wanted to be promoted to First Chapter. But no, that would have completely messed up the pagination and the index had already been done. Heroically, I stood my ground and told it to stay in its lane. But I did offer the consolation of a fancy title, *What's This All About?* It seemed to settle down after that.

TO THINK THE UNTHINKABLE allows what does not have a home to find a home. Then it will not appear in matter the same way as it might have done. Perhaps.

It may be that this planet will die, is dying or has died—but we don't know it yet. She may right herself without help or interference from us. I hope so. Or if her life is in danger she will let her children die without sentiment so that she may live. However, all possible futures may not be open, we may have gone past a tipping point, and there may

not be enough time. God, Goodall and Attenborough won't save us. So I ask the reader to welcome, as an unknown guest, the immigrant possibility that the Earth will die. (But that's **NEGATIVE THINKING** you might say! I say, OK, no need to shout, if your positive thinking works so well, how come we're in this mess? Go on, give it a try). Maybe we can prevent it, forestall it, or make suitable funeral arrangements.

We've run out of planet. Humans have exhausted the gifts that the Earth provides. A whole 1.7 planet's worth. The Great Barrier Reef is dying. The great dying will gather pace until we hit rock bottom. Our grandchildren's children will be bereft, left only with dust and diesel.

The trees have nearly given up. The animals have done what they can. 9/11, the GFC and Covid have tried their best to warn us. Monotheism has abandoned the earth for heavenly rewards. Indigenous peoples are now only 5% of the world's population. 55% of the world's population lives in cities. And our relationship with beauty has been lost.

There are mountains and oceans of evidence about the perilous state of the planet. There's no need for more and we must ask, "What forces compel us to continue to deny the obvious?"—other than the obvious political and financial ones. We think we have time. Maybe we don't. So let's begin to make space within ourselves to entertain the thought that this planet of infinite beauty may die. Now stand back and watch the reactions, your own and others, to such a notion. Then read on.

If all this sounds too weighty and depressing, please read the chapters on hope and despair, or you could just think about the whole thing as a "thought-experiment". Failing that, let your grandchildren handle it.

Upbeat title, eh?

It's Latin for the death of the Earth. Is the Earth dying? Maybe. Is it already dead? Don't know. Ecological activism, reducing waste, and reports on climate change are all fiddling around the edges, slant ways of talking about what cannot be said. We are killing the being that gives us life and in twenty, fifty, a hundred or two hundred years this planet may no longer be able to support life. But there is little space in the collective

to think the unthinkable. The forces against—religious, financial, political, and psychological—are legion.

So these scribblings are about the spiritual and historical ancestors of this profound contempt for matter, the fallacy of optimism, and the psychological children (grief, nostalgia, melancholy, depression, suicide, and loss of memory) that have been born from this chronic, monotheistic, and possibly terminal, illness.

Possums

The only tragedy would be to not see it coming and get run over like a possum in the headlights. For those who live in remote places like the northern hemisphere, a possum is a nocturnal marsupial, about the size of a raccoon, that somehow crossed the Tasman from Australia and has taken up residence in the New Zealand bush. About 30 million of them. They breed like, er, possums, kill the indigenous forests, and enjoy standing, hypnotised, on the white line at night. Marsupial road kill.

Robust and thoughtful pessimism

A dose of robust and thoughtful pessimism is needed, not because it is the “truth” or more “right” but to compensate the mindless optimism that infects the collective. With optimism being so widespread (even Jane Goodall says there’s still time) it begs a swing to the opposite. I have no skin in this game—I would be glad if the Earth survived. But no-one seems to be thoughtful about the possibility that she will not. In the great democracy of ideas this one is an unwanted immigrant, with the exception of some science fiction writing and apocalyptic movies. (It seems that Hollywood, perversely, dreams for the collective). In other words, the possibility of her death has gone all denied, dissociated and unconscious.

Oh, they cry, he’s a pessimist! An acquaintance once said to me, “You’re a pessimist, you’re spewing doom and dread”. I thanked them for the compliment. It’s rubbish, they say! All this religiose talk about the end of the world. The apocalypse. The end is nigh. Been shouted about for 2000 years and hasn’t happened yet! But these opinions betray

the psychology of those who hold them. The outward-looking conquistadors, eyes on the horizon of possibility, manifest destiny, hey guys let's go to Mars, anything-is-possible folks—all these have reached their limit but don't know it yet. They will collapse into smallness—a land they never knew existed. We live on a finite planet.

Evidence

I have no scientific evidence, if that's what you might be looking for, for the notion that the Earth will die. On the other hand, there is no evidence that she will survive our new-kid-on-the-block occupation. And by the time any such scientific evidence arrives it will be stating the obvious and past its useful date. But I do know where the arrow is pointing. I also know that our collective short-sightedness, from denial or ignorance, only sees as far as climate change. The eye-opener might be when Phoenix and Las Vegas become unliveable.

Notwithstanding the forces and interests against such, I suppose if billions worked together then the ship could be turned around. But that degree of collective cooperation flies in the face of history or, if it does occur by force of circumstance, it may be too little, too late. In the meantime there is a blank space, open country, a vacuum, that is all the more influential by its absence, that has been uninhabited by thought or imagination. This book might fill that *terra nullius* that was so eagerly explored 300 years ago. Now, not so eager but reluctant, unwilling, or “We can't afford it”.

At some point the decline, long past reversible, will become obvious to collective consciousness. It will rise to the surface and become fast food at your favourite media restaurant. The deniers and sceptics and diggers and drillers will have passed away and we will think: “How did it come to this?” Heroic optimism will not save the day and the keening and wailing will begin. This planet may no longer give life or hold life.

Gnawing at the roots of monotheism

So there you have it. I have set the tone, stated my thesis, summarised the book, and got the possum off the road. Along the way I shall try my

best to sneer at the starry-eyed demon of optimism, evade the monster of denial, drown unsuspecting readers in melancholy, gnaw at the roots of monotheism, and generally try to paint a picture of the mess we're in. What follows is a long and winding, perhaps long-winded, riff on that sentence. None of this will kill you.

The tendrils of possibility, revolution, and disruption creep in from the outside the zeitgeist, never from the inside. New possibilities show up as an outlier, a group or party or movement that appears to drive social change. It's often overly chuffed with itself and devoted to X or Y but really it's an emerging archetype whose time has come and having its way with us (more on those later). The friction of the revolution always goes for the most vulnerable and flammable first—those with strong opinions and passionate views about everything; those who are as-yet unformed (adolescents and young adults); and those who are beholden to the collective (most of us).

Nothing worth defending

This book will have little to say about climate change, environmental action, or sustainability. These matters are more suited for a final chapter and we haven't reached the first chapter yet. So please do not assume I have a solution. The irritable reaching after fact and reason would interrupt a necessary suffering, a realisation of the full weight of our destructiveness. Then and only then might the collective turn to what it knows little of. The repair of the damage, if there will be such a thing, will have its own will and intention and needs to come in its own time.

If you are looking for solutions to the mess we are in—drop the book right now, step away and put your hands in the air! You are the kind of reader who will end up frustrated, full of opinions, and feel you have wasted your time and money. Yes, but what are we going to DO!, you say. If you are willing to suspend the urge to heroic action for just a while then read on at your own risk. Satisfaction is not guaranteed.

I don't care if what I am saying is true or not. The possible future I'm describing may come to pass or not. But read on anyway. I don't have much to lose. I am not an academic—I have no reputation to

uphold, no papers to publish. I am at a late stage of my professional career so I have no credibility to protect. And I like to think that I don't have any personal, political or religious beliefs that are really worth defending.

Saviours, meh!

An Earth that is alive and fertile and healthy is not the subject of this book. She has been doing that for five billion years without our help, thank you. Saviours, meh! She doesn't need them. A living future cannot be materialised until we feel the full weight of the condition we are in. Until that happens any assertion of hope and optimism remains false and insubstantial. We want a quick solution, cognitive-lite without the weight of experience, we want to sneak around the grief, the pain, the terrible choices, the humiliation, and the downsizing. But we may have overshot the tipping point and gone already past the point of no return. Even the best of ancient knowledge may not be able to save us.

Jung and the five faces of the aeon

Back in the early 1980s, I became acquainted with the *Xultun Tarot*, the first of the modern indigenous tarot decks, created by a New Zealand artist, Peter Balin. Some years after writing *Jung and the Moon Cycles* I turned my attention to writing *The Maya Book of Life: Understanding the Xultun Tarot*, a companion text for the deck. The ideas in both these books also form some of the strands of this book.

The Greek word *aion* translates to aeon in English meaning age, epoch or era. Jung published *Aion: Researches into the Phenomenology of the Self* when he was seventy-six and it was his last major work but one. In it, he wrote about the lifespan of the Christian epoch over the last two thousand years.

We can think of an aeon as having four different faces or aspects. The south face is the lifespan of the individual. This was the subject of *Jung and the Moon Cycles* where I put Jung's life on the Moon Cycles, an indigenous teaching about the lifespan development of an individual. The north face is about the lifespan of the group or the collective—this

was the subject of *The Maya Book of Life*. The west face is about the lifespan of human culture—which is the subject of this book. In the east is the history and lifespan of all cultures that have lived, are living, and will live, on this planet. I speak here not only of human cultures but also of the great societies, traditions, domains and nations of the winged ones, the crawlers, the four-leggeds, the spores, the bacteria, the minerals and the elements themselves. Modern science might call this evolution. The centre and fifth face is the lifespan of what reflects and gives life, blood and breath to all four faces—the Great Smoking Mirror, the Earth itself.

Spiritual dementia

Jung's work has been invaluable in helping me sketch the arc of this book. But his scope was Gnostic and alchemical, limited mostly to the last 2000 years, and he held (in part) a primitive view of “primitive” peoples. In the tradition of the Enlightenment and scientific progress—and he was frequently at pains to be scientific—he said that culture evolved from less differentiated to more differentiated, from less consciously human to more consciously human. As we shall see, alongside our apparent ascension to bigger and better things over the last, oh let's say, ten thousand years, there has been a complementary descension, a loss of consciousness, a gradual onset of spiritual dementia—a great forgetting about our place in the Great Circle of Life.

Jakkals pad

This is a wandering story and I beg of the reader's patience that I might take a *jakkals pad* (a jackal's path) to pass by what I have written in the past thirty or so years. This has been mostly for my own introverted amusement. I am encouraged by the story of the extroverted advertising executive who said, “Running a company without advertising is like winking at someone in the dark, you know what you are doing but no one else does.” The introvert, on the other hand, might think (but wouldn't say), “He just doesn't get it... that's the whole point!”

In writing I find that the thought-birds land somewhere, often

unexpectedly. They have an independent existence but I have the laptop. So it works for both of us and I begin to understand more of what I think and what I feel. I will jump around so do not expect any logical progression and well-reasoned arguments. I hope to be descriptive rather than inspirational. I'll venture to raise questions but not spoil them with answers. And I will try not to encourage you to take action.

Room at the Inn of Exaggeration

I have no idea if what I write is prediction, prophecy, fantasy, phantasy, or projection. I'd be happy with any of those. But there's enough hard evidence for me to flatten my understanding into words, pull out the bath plug, and release it into the wild. I'll talk about big things so please allow me lots of slack for hyperbole, exaggeration, drama and the like. The problem is big enough such that it cannot be overstated. So there is lots of room for inflation.

Jeremiads and prophecy

I will use informal language and speak plainly. If I appear sarcastic, judgemental and critical, it's because I am so. The sentimental correctness of being "non-judgemental" may hide its dishonest shadow—a lack of courage, a failure of nerve, an avoidance of conflict and guilt, the preening maintenance of neutrality, or the inability to speak clearly and directly about one's own shortcomings or those of another.

So I would like to speak of a massively denied emotional and physical reality. Let me be clear that this is not doomerism although some might think it to be so. This accusation is usually emitted by those who have not seen the magnitude of the problem, and who are overly friendly with optimism and denial.

Neither is this a jeremiad of which Wikipedia says: "A long literary work, in which the author bitterly laments the state of society and its morals in a serious tone of sustained invective, and always contains a prophecy of society's imminent downfall.... The jeremiad was a favourite literary device of the Puritans especially in sermons.... In contemporary usage, it is frequently pejorative, meant to suggest that

the tone of the text is excessively pessimistic and overwrought". Whew, I hope it's not like that—overwrought anyway.

The problem with writing about all this is that it's hard not to sound like prophecy. It's not. It's a best-guess extrapolation, informed by multiple sources—from indigenous knowledges, from observation, from what's obvious now, and what has been obvious for the last 50, 500 or 5,000 years—take your pick. I will wobble between the certainty of "will" and the uncertainty of "maybe". I would ask the reader to adapt accordingly. It's good practice for the future.

Global humiliation:

In some way, at some time, our global civilisation will experience a violent upheaval and be brought down to earth. There will be a reality check, a rude awakening, and things will be turned upside-down. This means the collapse of old values and beliefs, the destruction of long-established situations, the puncturing of inflation, the discarding of what has petrified, or the dismantling of towering ambition, pride and arrogance. What has been built brick by brick is destroyed in a flash and cultural norms and hopes are shattered. But perhaps, you say, this has been said before by Jeremiahs of all times and all cultures. But, I say, this is different. What is at risk is not just a culture, society, or religion, or even humankind, but the Earth itself.

Growth and coercion

The excesses of humankind are the cause of this great dying. We are a life form that has removed itself more than four paces from the community of life around us. We have fallen out of the Garden of Eden. There are two possible reactions to this state of affairs: The first is to ignore it, dismiss it, argue against it, or refuse to be aware of it. The second is to over-identify with it, to take it all-of-a-serious on one's shoulders and start a protest movement. This position is as arrogant as the first. It breeds all kinds of -isms, paint-throwing, lab-bombing, tree-hugging, cow-cuddling, marching, de-platforming, cancellation, direct action, and coercion-by-principles. Both reactions are unhelpful.

These two themes—bigness, giantism, expansion, inflation, growth and denial on the one hand, and guilt, over-responsibility, humiliation, and down-sizing on the other—are not obviously related but they do graze in the same paddock. They form the central theme of this book around which the rest twists and spirals.

Up until now, those who know better than I have softly and consistently discouraged the release of this book, repeatedly saying it's not time yet. But the pace has quickened and now it's time.

So I write, tentatively but with sufficient desire to feel that it is worth the effort, about the coming catastrophe that is already here. The apocalypse, demise, disaster, collapse, crisis—call it as you wish—which means that this planet we live on, that has sheltered us, that has given us life and death and beauty, may die.

Herding cats

If it has legs and heart this book will find its own way. I will follow. I have resisted the temptation to give more order to its contents than you see before you. More accurately, the book has resisted any order I have tried to impose on it. The chapters are a nuisance of cats, loosely herded, that I have written over the years—some recent, some over thirty years ago.

Lineage

I want to speak of some of the ancestors of this book to give it some lineage and continuity. It has sprung out of a wandering story that has been telling itself over the years, though not from a political standpoint or an “outrage” at “society” Although there is plenty to be outraged at, that hopeful pursuit is best left to adolescents or young adults whatever their age. Rather, it comes from knowing that this Earth and all its children are living, breathing, intentional beings. Yes, the planet breathes and has intent.

In New Zealand, Maori who speak on the marae introduce themselves by naming their waka (one of the seven canoes in which Maori came to Aotearoa, Land of the Long White Cloud), their maunga

(mountain), their awa (river), their iwi (tribe), their hapu (extended family), and their name. In a similar way I want to voice a genealogy for this book, just enough so you may know its whakapapa, hear its ancestors, see its face, and share its breath.

Way back, as a third-year zoology student, I had to specialise. Was it going to be animal behaviour and the dances of honey bees? Karl von Frisch had recently published his work on their language and I was also fascinated by Niko Tinbergen's work on animal instinct. Or was it to be palaeontology like my best mate Roger, later of the British Museum? Dissecting a primate forearm together for the comparative mammalian anatomy course was a hoot. But no, what got me was two things: ecology and evolution. My psyche chose history and nature.

Evolutionary studies, then. From 1931 to 1963, H G Cannon FRS (1897–1963) was head of department and Beyer Professor of Zoology at the University of Manchester. When I arrived the year after he passed, an air of embarrassment hung over Cannon's legacy, as he had believed in Lamarckism in contrast to the Darwinian zeitgeist of the time. Strangely, I still have Cannon's small book *Lamarck and Modern Genetics* which has survived in my library over many years and much travelling. Epigenetics and the intergenerational transmission of trauma have finally caught up with Lamarck.

The Darwinian banner is still carried by Richard Dawkins. At Oxford, Dawkins studied under A J Cain, an evolutionary biologist, who replaced Cannon as Professor shortly after I arrived at Manchester. Dawkins is the Donald Trump of evolutionary biology. Sometime after the majority of this book was written Trump became President. He is the hapless embodiment of the problem I write about and I shall refer to him for clarity, hilarity and immediacy of example.

As for ecology, no-one in the department was interested. It was all pseudoscorpions, mammalian anatomy, *Drosophila melanogaster* fruit flies, and *Cepaea nemoralis* snails. Ecology was a new and fluffy field far from the Victorian gravitas of taxonomy, embryology, and comparative anatomy. As a discipline, ecology only began to gather traction in the 1960s. In his 1963 book, *Ecology*, Eugene Odum said he had been inspired to "seek more harmonious relationships between man and nature."

As fortune would have it, on graduating I was offered a place in a Master's program studying the ecology and physiology of freshwater fish in the Duck Mountains northwest of Winnipeg—probably because I had done two years of physiology with the medical students unlike all my other fellow students who stuck with botany. But life had other plans for me. I was inevitably captured by my own ecology—the workings of my inner world with its anatomy, palaeontology, plants and predators, its ecology and evolution.

By turn of fate, I then worked for six years in an innovative residential treatment centre in Canada for “emotionally disturbed” children and adolescents. After that I went on to post-graduate studies at the University of Toronto. Guess where I learned the most about kids, others and myself!

My life has led me to walk two different but parallel paths over the years—psychotherapy and its overly scientific cousin, clinical psychology; and work with indigenous elders, medicine people, and sangomas. I continue to be deeply grateful for the presence of those ones who do not wish to be named.

Michael Owen
Tauranga and Maenam