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## Communicating care: An ecofeminist perspective

Marti Kheel

*Many people now recognize the critical role of communication in resolving inter-human conflicts. Yet few acknowledge that communication is equally important for our conflicts with the natural world. Within the human realm, we can engage in spoken or written dialogue as a means of conveying our personal interests, needs, and desires. But what happens outside the realm of humanity, where we do not speak the language of those with whom we interact? How do we engage in dialogues with earthworms, snails, and plants?*

In our postmodern age, the very suggestion that we should communicate with nature strikes many as bizarre. Yet, the refusal to recognize and listen to the multifarious messages emanating from the natural world lies at the heart of our environmental problems, creating the need for a radical reevaluation of our relationship to the earth and other living beings.

The field of ecofeminism offers important lessons in learning to listen to the diverse voices of nature and the repercussions of ignoring the voices of women and other marginalized humans. The ecofeminist notion of an ethic of care underscores the role of empathy as a vital link between humans and the rest of the natural world. Ecofeminists have also emphasized the importance of dialogue about how we define and express our feelings of empathy in concrete actions.

While there is no single philosophy of ecofeminism, certain major themes are common to the field. Ecofeminists have argued that the domination of women and nature has gone hand in hand in Western patriarchal society. Furthermore they argue that the devaluation of women and nature is connected to other forms of oppression, such as racism, classism, heterosexism, and speciesism. Underlying these forms of domination are a series of dualisms: rational/irrational, good/evil, sacred/profane, conscious/unconscious, autonomous/dependent, active/passive, culture/nature, positive/negative and male/female. In this dualistic worldview the sacred is relegated to a sky God who creates and rules over the earth.

Ecofeminists have shown how alternating expressions of these dualisms have contributed to the domination of women and nature. At times women and nature are viewed as evil beasts that must be subdued. Our myths, religions, and literature abound with mythical images of heroes killing female-imagined dragon monsters. Frequently, the slain beast is a former divinity from the earlier matrifocal world.

Tens of thousands and, according to some, millions of women were burned as witches because of their perceived association with the Devil. At other times, nature has been viewed as mysterious virgin whose secrets need to be penetrated by the tools of science. During the birth of modern science, 17th century scientists and philosopher Francis Bacon argued that science needed to forcibly wrest nature's secrets from her womb.

On other occasions nature is viewed as a nurturing Mother who freely offers her bounty to humans. According to historian of science Carolyn Merchant, the early Greek image of nature as a living, nurturing being functioned for centuries to restrain aggressive conduct toward the earth. However, the image of Mother Earth also held the seeds of an opposing view.

When Mother Nature seemingly withholds her bounty she becomes again a wild demonic force. During the rise of capitalism and the emergence of commercial and technological innovation, the passive aspect of the mother image was interpreted to mean that nature functioned like a machine, thereby furthering exploitative practices (Merchant, 1980).

To the extent that women and nature are viewed as mere 'matter' (a word that derives from the same root word as 'mother') they are treated as objects or property that exists to serve the needs of others. The practice of animal agriculture illustrates this view, whereby living beings are

reduced to mere factories for the production of flesh and other animal products. Similarly, women are often valued only for their ability to produce offspring for men. In both instances women and other-than-human animals are considered devoid of independent identity.

Although these alternating images of women and nature appear distinct, they share a common theme – the notion of women and nature as the ‘other,’ a symbol that opposes the masculine norm. The mid-20th century French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir first coined the term the ‘other’ to characterize women’s status under patriarchal society. Women according to this view are condemned to the realm of nature through such biological processes as pregnancy, menstruation, and childbirth. Men, by contrast, are able to transcend the realm of biological necessity through acts that entail risk and violence, such as hunting, fishing, and war.

As de Beauvoir famously wrote: ‘For it is not in giving life but in risking life that man is raised above the animal; that is why superiority has been accorded in humanity not to the sex that brings forth but to that which kills’ (de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 1974: 72). De Beauvoir’s analysis reveals that the very conception of ‘human being’ is gendered in patriarchal society; only men are viewed as full human subjects capable of transcending nature and attaining autonomy.

While de Beauvoir identified women as ‘the other’, a growing body of feminist literature suggests that it is *men’s* identities that have been constructed as the ‘other’ in patriarchal society. According to the psychological school of object relations theory, the maturation of young boys entails a process of constructing an identity that is not simply distinct from women, but diametrically opposed. Some theorists also suggest that men’s identities have been established not only through a negation of the female world, but through a negation of the entire realm of nature (Dinnerstein, 1976: 108).

This severing of connection to women and nature is illustrated in one of the most ubiquitous rites of passage into manhood – hunting. Through the taking of life the young boy symbolically severs his emotional ties with the female (animal) world, demonstrating his rebirth into the world of men. Significantly, the young male initiate is typically required to avoid women both before and after the hunt.

Given the masculine social conditioning that denies connection to others, it is not surprising that there are significant gender differences in attitudes toward nature. As social ecologist Stephen Kellert states, ‘male vs. female attitudes towards nature [are] dramatic,’ and ‘gender is among the most important demographic influences on attitudes towards animals in our society’ (Kellert, 1987: 365).

According to Kellert’s research:

‘Women voiced significantly greater opposition to laboratory experimentation, rodeos, use of leghold traps, killing of non-endangered animals for fur, and hunting for recreational and meat-gathering purposes. Males, in contrast, had significantly higher scores on the utilitarian and dominionistic attitude scales... [indicating] a greater tendency among males to derive personal satisfactions from the mastery and control of animals’ (Kellert, 1987: 366).

Not surprisingly, women also greatly outnumber men in the animal advocacy movement.

### **An ecofeminist ethic of care**

One of ecofeminism’s contributions is the awareness that the domination of external nature has also entailed the domination of our ‘internal nature’, including our instincts, intuitions, and feelings of empathy. Western religions and philosophies have taught that our bodies and emotions are untrustworthy sources of knowledge. Environmental advocates often perpetuate this devaluation of empathy. Nature ethicists search for the most potent theory that will compel

moral conduct toward nature, and environmental activists look to the rigors of science to convince others of their views.

Similarly, while the early (largely female) humane movement advocates called for kindness toward other-than-human animals, modern mainstream animal rights theorists have sought to base their arguments on abstract theories of obligations and rights. A holistic ecofeminist ethic, by contrast, recognizes that empathy is one of our most vital connections to the natural world. While science can provide important data about the requirements of particular species, it is empathy that helps us attune to the interests, needs, and desires of particular individual beings.

But clearly people perceive and express their experiences of empathy in distinct ways. It is, therefore, important that we engage in dialogue with others to assess our personal perspectives. But for genuine dialogue to occur we must clarify what we mean by the words we use in our conversations.

### Clarifying words

The language used to discuss environmental problems often obscures significant differences in perspective. A major source of confusion lies in the failure to distinguish between ‘care-taking’ for larger wholes and ‘caring for and about’ individual beings. The care-taking attitude toward nature is reflected in the Judeo-Christian notion of ‘dominion’ or ‘Stewardship.’ According to this idea, humans (or more particularly ‘Man’) is made in the image of God and entrusted by God with dominion over the natural world.

In recent years theologians have begun to reinterpret the notion of dominion, viewing it not as domination but rather as ‘care-taking’. While this is a praiseworthy endeavor, the notion of dominion can still readily lend itself to a hierarchical worldview which perceives humans as the apex of Creation, a chosen species managing the Earth – while sacrificing individual beings for the larger ‘good.’

The Biblical story of the Flood illustrates this distinction between care-taking and caring for and about individual beings. Following God’s commandment, Noah engages in a proto-conservation project, saving two of every animal species. After the Flood, however, Noah gives thanks to God by sacrificing some of the rescued animals. The perpetuation of the *species* was the divine plan, not the lives of the particular individuals who were saved.

In more recent years, Aldo Leopold’s writing perpetuated this focus on larger wholes over and above the wellbeing of individual beings. Leopold is widely acclaimed as the founder of environmental ethics and a new biocentric view of nature. In his famous *A Sand County Almanac*, he urged humans to see themselves not as conquerors of the natural world, but as citizens of a biotic community that was deserving of love and respect. He also asserted that, “A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise” (Leopold, 1968: 224-225).

In their praise of Leopold’s philosophy, environmentalists often overlook the fact that the integrity, stability and beauty of the natural world was enhanced, for Leopold, by hunting and killing animals. In fact, one of the primary reasons for his efforts to preserve wilderness was to provide an arena within which men could hunt.

Although hunters were major contributors to the conservation movement in the U.S, their motivation was not the preservation of animals in and of themselves, but rather the preservation of manhood and the pioneering tradition. Leopold’s acclaimed policies on game management entailed studying how to manipulate the reproductive capacity of animals with a view to producing sufficient quantities of animals to hunt. It is not an exaggeration to say that the modern conservation movement was founded on the notion of reproductive control.

Leopold’s philosophy demonstrates how words such as ‘love’, ‘respect’ and ‘protect’ often are used without understanding their concrete meaning in practice. Environmentalists seek to

'protect' the environment from toxic chemicals, while citing animal research to support their claims. Some proclaim their 'love' for nature while extolling the benefits of hunting. The use of aggregate terms to refer to other-than-human animals further contributes to the confusion. Hunters talk about saving 'the Wolf' while continuing to kill wolves.

Before we can institute policies that truly help the natural world we need greater linguistic precision. Do expressions of 'love' and 'respect' encompass individual beings or only abstract wholes such as 'species,' 'the land,' or 'the biotic community'?

### **The practice of care**

Ecofeminists have emphasized the importance of an ethic of care for the natural world. But what does care mean in practice and how is it attained? As a partial answer to these questions I offer the following thoughts. An ecofeminist ethic of care must include: 1) a narrative, contextual approach that investigates the roots of environmental problems with a view to removing the external and internal factors that block the growth of empathy; 2) acts of 'attention' that promote moral imagination and enhance empathy; 3) a focus on individual beings as well as larger wholes; 4) an embodied response that expresses our feelings for others through concrete actions, including the practice of veganism.

Just as holistic healing seeks to remove toxins from the body, a holistic ecofeminist ethic attempts to remove the emotional and conceptual blocks that prevent the growth of empathy. One significant conceptual barrier is the social conditioning into masculine identity, a form of selfhood established through a severing of connection to others. It is therefore imperative that we recognize and challenge the ways in which masculine identity is currently conceived, as well as the ways in which the media, schools, families, and organizations contribute to the existing masculine ideal.

Clearly conceptions of 'feminine' identity must also be challenged, including the notion that women's primary purpose in life is to serve the needs of others. The view of women as 'natural' care-takers not only harms women but also the larger natural world by reinforcing the view that Mother Nature will care for us despite the abuses we heap upon her. The reduction of women to the status of objects and symbols must similarly be challenged.

Ecofeminists have emphasized the ethical importance of the act of 'attention' in interactions with nature. Such an act enables us to hear the cries of nature not as an abstract moral obligation, but as a visceral response to particular situations. As a culture, we are suffering from a massive attention deficit disorder, failing to attend to the daily messages nature has been trying to convey.

The melting glaciers and icecaps, the floods, the hurricanes and other disasters are all forms of communication that we would do well to heed. They are telling us that nature has reached a limit and that we cannot continue to abuse the earth with impunity. But as we attune ourselves to these global messages we must not lose sight of the individual beings with whom we share the planet. Their cries too must be heard.

Postmodern theorists correctly remind us that there is no objective 'nature' or 'reality' that can be discerned through the exercise of 'reason.' Nonetheless, this does not warrant dismissing the attempt to understand nature's communications. Rather, it points to the vital importance of dialogue about what is being communicated. It also does not mean that we should ignore our somatic experiences. Ethics begins with our gut-level reactions to the things that we see, hear, and experience.

The senses that are so devalued in patriarchal society are critical parts of our communicative pathways. We might, for example, decide on an abstract plane that it is morally acceptable to eat meat, but if we were to see, hear, and smell the horrendous environment in which animals are raised and slaughtered for meat, we might conclude otherwise. If we feel horror or discomfort at

seeing their pain, we might question the ethics of indirectly supporting these practices through our financial and dietary choices.

Attentive listening entails understanding the larger context of our personal choices. The subject of global warming is finally receiving vital coverage in the news. Yet the connection to our personal lives is often omitted or obscured. Feminists frequently have said that the personal is political. The choices we make in our everyday lives have political ramifications. Nowhere is this more evident than in our choice about what to eat. The global impact of animal agriculture on environments and economies is indisputable.

According to an exhaustive 2006 United Nations FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization) report, the livestock industry is responsible for 18% of greenhouse gases worldwide, and is 'one of the top two or three most significant contributors to the most serious environmental problems, at every scale from local to global' (Steinfeld, 2006: xx-xxiii). Why then do so few people draw the obvious connection to diet? Why is vegetarianism (and veganism) still considered a personal lifestyle decision when it has such enormous global ramifications?

When most people think of global warming, they think of the effect of transportation and energy consumption on CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. However, animal agriculture, which produces CO<sub>2</sub> as well as the more harmful methane and nitrous oxide gases, causes more greenhouse gases than all forms of transportation combined. When the media does identify the link between global warming and the livestock industry, the focus tends to be on lifestyle choices such as driving less or changing light bulbs to CFCs. If the connection between factory farming and the environment is mentioned, the author is likely to discuss the benefits of grass-fed beef.

Few seem to question the feasibility of increasing the numbers of cattle on grazing land. Fewer still point to the obvious solution – to stop eating animal products. Al Gore's widely publicized film *An Inconvenient Truth* failed to even mention the 'v' word as an important action in preventing global warming. The impact of diet on the environment is the inconvenient truth that Gore and other environmentalists often fail to voice.

The power of the industrial meat complex contributes to the difficulty of promoting the message of vegetarianism in the media. Oprah Winfrey found out the hard way how difficult it is to challenge the dominant meat culture when she announced on nationwide television that she would never eat a hamburger again. A group of Texas cattle ranchers took immediate legal action, invoking an obscure Texas law that forbids libeling foods.

Oprah ultimately won the lawsuit, but the months-long controversy clearly took its toll and it was years before Oprah would even broach the topic of vegetarianism again. This year she finally returned to the issue, going on a three-week vegan cleanse. Despite raving about how it made her feel, she did not continue her vegan diet after it ended. One can only speculate whether the earlier lawsuit influenced her lack of resolve.

The connection between meat eating and masculine identity may also help explain the difficulty of bringing the message of veganism into public discourse. Meat has a long history of association with male dominance. Throughout the world, meat has been associated with class, race, gender, and power. During food shortages men are given a disproportionate amount of meat. Meat is typically associated with strength, aggression, virility, and sexual potency, functioning as a symbol of conquest over the natural world. Since vegetarian foods are associated with women, men who reject meat, the symbol of male power, are often thought to be effeminate.

Feminist author Adrienne Rich has argued that lies, secrecy, and silence perpetuate the abuse of women (1979). The same may be said for our treatment of other-than-human animals. Most people know little or nothing about the conditions of animals before they arrive at their dinner plate. Few, for example, know that calves on dairy farms are typically separated from their

mothers shortly after birth and that both mother and infant cry in anguish for days. Yet, their frantic attempts at communication fall on deaf ears.

It is imperative that the suffering of animals on farms be exposed and the wider impact of our dietary choices acknowledged. While the subject of animal products makes many people uncomfortable, we need to help one another out of our psychic numbing so we can make fully informed, embodied decisions about our food.

By not eating animal products (meat, dairy, eggs etc.) we have the opportunity to disengage from patriarchal forms of dominance and control. We can reclaim our colonized emotions and do something positive for other-than-human animals, the earth, and our personal health. We can overcome our communicative illiteracy and learn to care for and about the natural world, including its individual inhabitants.

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Marti Kheel is a prominent writer and activist in the areas of ecofeminism, animal advocacy, and environmental ethics and author of the recently published [Nature Ethics: An Ecofeminist Perspective](#). Her articles have been widely published in journals and anthologies both within the United States and abroad. She holds a doctorate from the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, where she is currently a visiting scholar.