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## How Wide is Your Empathy?

By Lee Bailey, Forest Home Chapel, Sermon July 6, 2014

**Scripture Lessons: Job 12:7-10; I Corinthians 4:6**

Many of us have long been concerned with the problems of Industrial Society's alienation from nature, and now we are even more concerned about how this alienation has led to our ecological crisis -- massive pollution, driving species into extinction, and global climate change. So I ask: what can our religions do about this? I am struck by the biblical passage from Ecclesiastes where Job says: "Ask the beasts and they will tell you, the birds, plants, and fish -- they know that the Lord has given us the breath of life, for all is in the hand of the Lord." This invites us to listen to the "Book of Nature" to discover more sacredness. I will discuss some scientific information, but it all points to a new spiritual awareness of Empathy.

Theologians such as Matthew Fox and Mary Daly have for decades been developing a creation spirituality and ethics, and now a wider circle of thinkers such as Jane Goodall and Jeremy Rifkin are writing about Empathy. Now the question is: how big is the circle of Empathy?

We are accustomed to Empathy for domesticated pets, but, like Noah, who rescued all the animals, can our circle of Empathy go wider? The photo on the cover of our bulletin today, of the close bond among traditionally aggressive animals points the way. They are called BLT, for Bear, Lion, Tiger. But why aren't they fighting each other to the death? They were acquired by a drug dealer in Atlanta when they were little cubs, and kept in a cage in his basement, where they bonded. Years later, when he was caught, his little zoo had grown up in cages, malnourished and sick. The police turned them over to the Noah's Ark animal rescue farm, where they were treated and have lived together. They are still bonded as best friends, snuggling together as if they never heard of aggression. Their

nuzzling together shows how their Empathy circle has enlarged to overcome their instinctive aggressiveness.

Empathy, rooted deep in our pre-verbal unconscious souls, cannot be adequately defined in words, but it is generally about bonding and relationships, with the ability to feel somewhat the feelings and thoughts of others, possibly leading to sympathy toward others. Empathy is an ancient animal instinct with an evolutionary development extending into humans, as Frans de Waal has shown. This instinct can be restrained by cognitive objectivity, or trampled by other instincts, such as aggression or greed. But religion and spirituality are very much about cultivating positive empathy -- caring family bonds, love for others, sympathy and compassion. Jesus took this to the challenging extreme of saying "Love your enemies." These three animals – BLT -- seem to have learned this lesson.

Humans experience Empathy when we see an infant and feel the urge to hold, comfort, and protect it. Without this strong instinct, parenting would be much harder. But as offspring grow up, parents should allow this bond to be decreased, so children can become independent. Of course Empathy can be stifled by negative experiences such as abuse or fighting, but it is clearly part of God's and nature's plan to propagate species.

How big is our circle of Empathy today? In many political movements we can see those who want to expand the circle of Empathy to those previously excluded, such as slaves, women, animals, and people of different skin colors and different tribe, ethnic, class, and cultural traditions. Democracy, education for all, the rise of the middle class, respect for gender differences, and all their associated issues is spreading and causing a lot of *conflict!* Why can't we just keep things the way they were, cut the Empathy talk, and assure a secure wealthy upper class of macho white men controlling the rest?

From a religious view, Empathy is part of the divine (the source of our existence), and it has over the ages enlarged and refined. Not all supposedly religious folks agree with this, such as those fearful, angry pseudo-Christians who would rather give guns to new members than embrace strangers. But there is a new Empathy movement underway, illustrated by the civil rights and gender equality movements. I believe that God is behind the plot to enlarge the circle, and is challenging us to make it happen, overcoming hostility, like BLT did. But there are opponents.

Now, given issues such as the crisis of climate change, it seems to me that we need to expand Empathy as fast as possible to the rest of nature. "Love your enemy" was Jesus' challenge to enlarge the circle of Empathy among his people. Now, without slowing other Empathy movements, or being defenseless, naïve victims, *can* we expand the circle of Empathy to include more people and creatures, and the rest of nature: mountains, oceans, soil, energy, the atmosphere, microbes, chemicals, and the cosmos?

For example, bees, you know, are being killed in massive numbers by widespread use of pesticides, and dangerously depriving basic food-producing plants from pollination. Biologists such as Ithaca's Sandra Steingraber argue that we cannot continue to deny and ignore the potentially cancer-causing chemicals in our air, food, and water from industrial factories that refuse to take responsibility and be empathetic for the impacts of their waste products. Can we expand our Empathy circle to include such problems?

One step on this path is to get detailed about the classic mystical insight that "we are all one." Some philosophers and scientists of the ecological type remind us that we are not outside nature, but we are IN nature. We have developed a scientific method of separating subjective personal feelings from objective facts. This is of course a valuable method. But

the expansion of this method to define the entire body of knowledge and existence is being called into question. I was once talking to a nurse friend who stressed that medical practice has to be rigorously objective. While I agreed in many ways, I asked “do you *care* about your patients?” Well, she retreated, “I guess the art of medicine is not *all* objective.” If Empathy such as caring is sacred and primordial, our alienation from nature is in question.

Think of our bones. They contain a lot of calcium for many bodily functions, and it is like the calcium carbonate in chalk and limestone, which is made mostly from ancient shellfish and coral. Iron is an essential component in the blood of many species. Carbon is an essential element in many life forms. But as a source of energy burned in coal and oil, giving off carbon dioxide, it has become a massive global threat to earth’s climate, holding in too much heat. We are IN the dynamic system of such elements, not outside.

In Genesis God said: “Let light shine out of darkness.” Cosmologists describe an incredibly large universe full of about 150 billion galaxies, each full of various stages of suns exploding or collapsing. Our local Sun is one massive, furiously hot thermonuclear explosion. How big? If you draw a one-inch diameter circle to represent the Earth, on that scale the Sun would be about nine feet in diameter. Our planet is blessed with being just the right distance from the Sun so that it is not too hot or too cold for our life systems. Mercury, the planet closest to the Sun, lacks an atmosphere, so daytime temperatures rise to an oven-hot 465 degrees Celsius, and nights plunge to minus 184 degrees C. Venus, closer to Earth, is covered with clouds of mostly carbon dioxide that hold in heat, and is hot enough (460 C) to melt lead (327 C). Out beyond Earth the average surface temperatures of the other planets is terribly cold.

Outer space is full of cancer-causing cosmic and solar radiation. Earth’s International Space Station orbits at about 200 miles high; humans venturing much higher would be exposed to dangerous radiation. Earth’s atmospheric gasses protect us from this deadly radiation. So we are held in a precious cocoon of cosmic safety, 78% nitrogen and 21% oxygen. This amount of oxygen is just right for Earth creatures to breathe. More oxygen would spread wildfires, and less would not supply enough for proper bodily functions. All this is a way of saying we should not take our Earth’s cosmic situation for granted, and would be wise to enlarge our circle of Empathy to care for our home nest in space, and not let it overheat.

The sun’s energy warming the Earth we see as the visible spectrum of light, essential to developing consciousness and visually-oriented humans. Imagine living in a constantly dark world, where thinking would be rather dull, as we stumbled around. Human life might be more like Homer Simpson or animals that have well-developed smell, such as dogs, and navigation, such as long-distance migrating birds and fish. Of course we should honor these species, and extend Empathy to their skills. Dogs, for example, smell hundreds of times better than we do, and can follow the track of a person merely from the dandruff we constantly shed.

Our internal bodies teem with tiny microorganisms such as helpful bacteria and fungi. We are not purely objective consciousness standing outside all these elements of life. We are in them, and they are in us. Although we can observe them and thankfully understand them scientifically to a valuable degree, we depend upon the huge numbers of microorganisms essential to life, in the plant world, and even in rocks.

We can in Empathy enjoy the beauty of garden plants, but can we extend Empathy to the *wider* community of elements and organisms of which our bodies are a part? Have

you thanked life's amazing digestive systems? Do you know that large tree roots underground feed their nearby young growing seedlings? Many plants connect underground with nearby plants and long strands of fungi that feed each other and send messages of distress. Should we allow clear-cutting for lumber that kills these systems and oxygen-producing trees? Even plowing for food damages the fragile soil basic to growth, even though there are non-plowing farming methods. Did you know that plants give off odors not just to attract pollenating insects, but also to repel certain hostile insects and to warn other plants of their presence? Plants communicate.

But herbicides and pesticides are absorbed by insects that are eaten by fish or worms, that are eaten by birds and mice, that are eaten by larger animals up the food chain that humans eat, with their increasingly concentrated doses of toxic pesticides. Nature is a complex inter-related system that includes us, not a set of static objects, as Rachel Carson showed in her famous *Silent Spring* book back in 1962.

Stones are not just dead matter. They hold many microorganisms, minerals, and elements basic to life. It may be that seeds of life even spread from planet to planet in meteors. We are one in the larger spiritual and scientific picture -- we are all related, bonded as part of the vast system of life and earthly existence. *Can* we expand our empathetic awareness to include this picture?

Just as cosmology teaches us to think on a huge macro scale of the time-space of about a hundred and fifty billion galaxies and light years, ecological sciences are urging us to think on a micro scale of tiny organisms. Both scales will help us expand our circles of understanding nature, philosophy and religious views with Empathy, and hopefully wind down the destructive forces of aggressive industrial pollution and exploitation.

For example, we cannot see the current irrelevance of the outdated Genesis command to have *dominion* over nature. Even the principle of *stewardship* has not been effective enough. We must move on to a principle of our *participation* in nature and feel more Empathy.

Wherever you are, you can pause and expand your circle of Empathy. What farmers' skills and work feeds you? What are the contents of the food you eat? Did animals suffer to make your food? Where did their waste go? Have you studied and thanked God's Earth system lately?

Can we expand our circles of the spirit of Empathy, broaden Jesus' challenge to "Love your enemy," and broaden the circle of Empathy to include more humans, animals, and nature as part of our religions, thus reducing our harmful impact? On a hot summer day, this is our challenge.