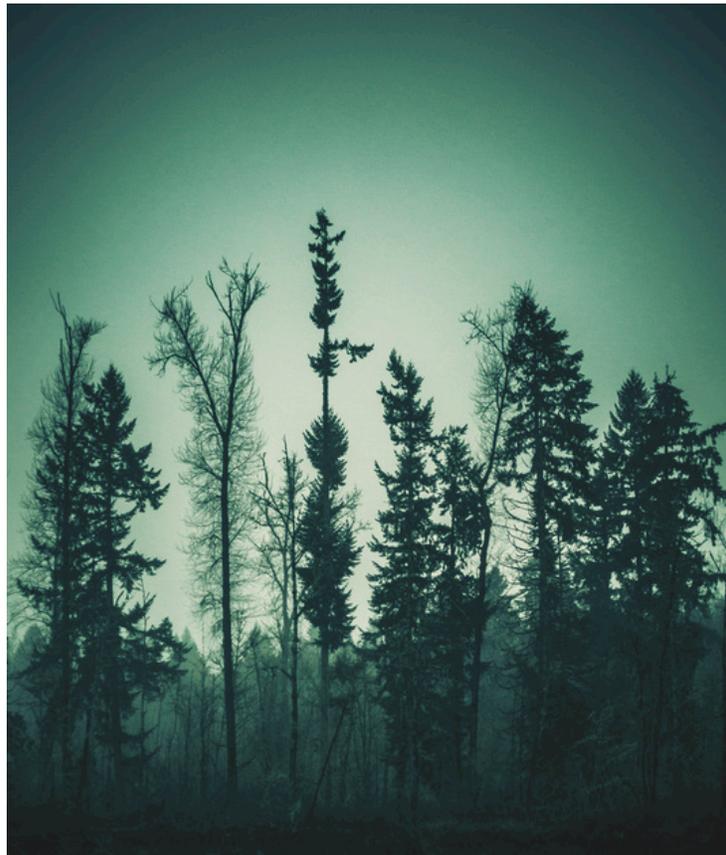


An Owl Economy: Tending the Tree of Life
Three Principles, Seven Tenets, and Twelve Questions
Draft prepared for the Women's Congress for Future Generations¹
Minneapolis, Minnesota
November, 2014

Once upon a time there was an old woman. Blind. Wise. Her reputation for wisdom is without peer and without question. Among her people she is both the law and its transgression. The honor she is paid and the awe in which she is held reach beyond her neighborhood to places far away; to the city where the intelligence of rural prophets is the source of much amusement. One day the woman is visited by some young people who seem to be bent on disproving her clairvoyance and showing her up for the fraud they believe she is. Their plan is simple: they enter her house and ask the one question the answer to which rides solely on her difference from them, a difference they regard as a profound disability: her blindness. They stand before her, and one of them says, "Old woman, I hold in my hand a bird. Tell me whether it is living or dead." She does not answer, and the question is repeated. "Is the bird I am holding living or dead?" Still she doesn't answer. She is blind and cannot see her visitors, let alone what is in their hands. She does not know their color, gender or homeland. She only knows their motive. The old woman's silence is so long, the young people have trouble holding their laughter. Finally she speaks and her voice is soft but stern. "I don't know", she says. "I don't know whether the bird you are holding is dead or alive, but what I do know is that it is in your hands. It is in your hands."²

Toni Morrison



¹ Prepared by Carolyn Raffensperger

² The story told throughout this document is excerpted from Toni Morrison's Nobel Prize acceptance speech.

http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1993/morrison-lecture.html

Photography credit: Brian James Roller – <http://briodiversity.zenfolio.com>

It is in our hands. The Bird, the Tree of Life in which it nests, the River. The Future. It is in our hands.

We have plundered the Tree of Life by what we name as “Economics”. We act as if mining, logging, drilling, and waste disposal, are required for the growth of the “economy” — our “way of life” — all the while forgetting that the soil, the trees, the waters, the air and the living things are actually required for life and community. Our bodies are fractals of the Earth: each one of our bodies is both representative of the whole Earth and a piece of the Earth. We are made of ocean water, the breath of plants, the ground from which we came and to which we will return. To destroy the ocean, the plants and the ground is to destroy ourselves and our children.

At present, our economic system does not account for the costs to the Earth of our mining, logging, fracking, computer-making, interest on retirement funds, disposing of toxic wastes or the ills that come from our disregard. It creates injustice in this generation and between generations. It shreds natural capital and steals from the future.

An archaeology of our economic language reveals ideas that come from nature. We speak of bears and bulls and loan sharks, rising tides, turbulence and nest eggs. But our economic policies no longer reflect the wisdom of using nature as model, mentor and measure.

We believe that we can institute policies that re-root our economics in the Earth, that honor the gifts of the natural world and that guide our relationships with each other and the Earth. We propose that the basis for our economic relationships with each other is better suited to the Owl, a symbol of wisdom, than the Bear and Bull which were selected for how they attacked their opponents.

The Owl economy is about relationships. It is about sharing, reciprocity, being a member of a community, taking care of the children of all species. It does not destroy the Tree of Life in which it makes its nest.

Three Principles at the heart of the Owl Economy:

- 1) The Earth is the source of our life and our economic activity.
- 2) The Commons, the cultural and natural heritage we share, are the foundation of economics. The Commons include air, water, wildlife, museums, the internet, roads, sidewalks, music and parks.
 - a. This presupposes a role of government as the trustee of the Commons and a guardian of the Earth.
 - b. Laws and rules governing economic systems must first protect the Commonwealth and the health of the Earth.
 - c. Concepts such as economic growth, which ignore the cost to the Commons or the Earth are evolutionary dead ends.
- 3) Justice within generations and justice between generations is usually marked by economic justice. Injustice is almost always an economic matter.

Seven Tenets that flow from the Principles:

- 1) Measure the Right Things: Currently we do not measure the health of the Commons or ecosystems. We *do* count pollution and disease as good for the economy.
- 2) Polluter Pays: The one who pollutes or damages the Commons shall be held responsible and pay for restoration.
- 3) No Debt to Future Generations without a Corresponding Asset: We cannot ask future generations to pay for our messes. We can share with them the costs of assets like parks, art, clean air and water.
- 4) Audit, Account for and Fund Commons Assets.
- 5) Giving To and Taking from the Earth Must be Characterized by Reciprocity: We take from the Earth and give back to the Earth. Just as our exhaled carbon dioxide is a gift to the plants, the exhaled oxygen of plants is a gift to us.
- 6) Speed and Scale of Human Activity Must Match the Earth's Speed and Scale.³
 - a. Society should not mine and disperse materials faster than they are returned to or regenerated by the Earth's crust (examples include oil, coal, minerals such as Phosphors and metals such as mercury and lead).
 - b. Society should not produce substances or introduce substances into the biosphere faster than they can be broken down by natural processes — if they can be broken down at all (examples of such substances include dioxins, DDT and PCBs).
 - c. Society should not encroach on natural systems faster than they can regenerate (for example, over-harvesting of trees or fish), or by other forms of ecosystem manipulation (for example, paving over fertile land or causing soil erosion).
- 7) Justice means everyone gets their share but no one takes more than their share. Commoners have equal access to the Commons. People are not denied access to the Commons because of skin color or gender or other arbitrary designations. Justice means we tend the Tree of Life for it actually holds the scales of justice.

³ These principles (a.b.c.) come from The Natural Step. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Natural_Step

Questions to help us find our way

(After the Blind Woman Speaks.....)

Nothing, no word follows her declaration of transfer. That silence is deep, deeper than the meaning available in the words she has spoken. It shivers, this silence, and the children, annoyed, fill it with language invented on the spot. "Is there no speech," they ask her, "no words you can give us that helps us break through your dossier of failures? Through the education you have just given us that is no education at all because we are paying close attention to what you have done as well as to what you have said? To the barrier you have erected between generosity and wisdom? "We have no bird in our hands, living or dead. We have only you and our important question... When questions and demands for answers burned so brightly you trembled with fury at not knowing? "Do we have to begin consciousness with a battle heroines and heroes like you have already fought and lost leaving us with nothing in our hands except what you have imagined is there? ...We have heard all our short lives that we have to be responsible. What could that possibly mean in the catastrophe this world has become; where, as a poet said, "nothing needs to be exposed since it is already barefaced." Our inheritance is an affront... How dare you talk to us of duty when we stand waist deep in the toxin of your past?"



- 1) What is the economy for?
- 2) What kind of economy would nurture the Tree of Life?
- 3) What is enough?
- 4) What is real savings?
- 5) What is real health care?
- 6) What is a just approach to interest on capital?
- 7) What price are you willing to take for your children's health or clean water? (the economy presumes we will sell anything for enough money.)
- 8) Should there be limits on income such as: the highest paid worker in a company shall not be paid more than 10 times what the lowest paid worker receives?
- 9) Should capital be limited geographically?
- 10) What are the principles that would guarantee that trade would be just?
- 11) What approach to taxes makes justice and protection of the Earth and the Commons more likely?
- 12) What questions are missing?

It's quiet again when the children finish speaking, until the woman breaks into the silence. "Finally", she says, "I trust you now. I trust you with the bird that is not in your hands because you have truly caught it. Look. How lovely it is, this thing we have done – together."