Earth Literacy?

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WHEN I SAY THAT I FACILITATE Earth Literacy—as I recently did at the Palm Beach Friends Meeting—the question often comes: What is Earth Literacy? In this article, I’d like to introduce QEW friends and readers to the concept and invite you to engage the question.

Let’s establish a simple framework and context for this exercise and get an idea of how we can think about literacies. Usually we think of literacy as language literacy, but the word literacy has come to be applied to many skill/knowledge areas. Now we have math literacy, computer literacy, science literacy, and others, including Earth Literacy. In all these literacies we have lexicon, skills, knowledge, outcomes, and ways to check on mastery. We also have some data about the consequences of illiteracy in these areas.

In language literacy, we have a universal measure that we expect a person to be able to read at the 6th grade level. For adult functional language literacy, one skill set would be that the person can read and accurately fill out job, loan, or other applications. We know the many consequences of illiteracy include higher crime and imprisonment.

In math literacy, we can expect a person to be able to perform basic mathematical functions (addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division) and apply those functions in real situations such as managing bank accounts, balancing a check book, and figuring simple and compounded interests.
There is a certain overlap with language literacy in that many arithmetic problems are framed within language and posed as what some of us came to know as word problems. This kind of overlap foreshadows the interconnectedness that is an essential understanding in Earth Literacy, too.

For computer literacy we might expect that a person could identify the essential functional parts of the computer—mouse, keyboard, monitor, etc.—and have basic understanding of files and folders. The person should be able to navigate the Internet, use basic software such as word processors, and work with email.

According to National Science Education Standards, scientific literacy is the knowledge and understanding of scientific concepts and processes required for personal decision making, participation in society, and economic productivity. It includes specific abilities such as logical reasoning and awareness of the nature and function of theories and scientific method. Science literacy helps the person distinguish between real and junk science and between fact and belief.

With this simple framework, ask yourself: What would it mean to me to be Earth Literate? Include the elements mentioned in the second paragraph. Other questions may arise as well, such as: What skills do I need? What language, terms, definitions are essential? What knowledge, sensibilities, and awareness do I need? What information is basic to be Earth Literate? What do I need to know about Earth and myself to be Earth Literate? Am I Earth Literate?

As you reflect on the questions, please write down your answers. This is a serious request for you to do a serious exercise which has deep value. Writing your answers is important because when we put our ideas in words, we commit to them and the exercise. It will also allow us to share our ideas more easily with others.

Many of us have been working in the enviro/earth-friendly/eco advocacy/support/activist field for awhile, sometimes in harmony, and sometimes at odds with each other and ourselves. Essentially we often have not come to agreement because we are not Earth Literate and often do not share even common language. The many definitions for “sustainability” floating around make the point.

My simplest definition for Earth Literacy, the elevator one I use is this: Earth Literacy begins with knowing and understanding the implications of the science story of the creation and the evolution of our Universe and Earth told with an infusion of spirituality. It doesn’t say it all but even then I have seen so many eyes glaze over. This is why I came to see in Palm Beach that our approach to the story needs to be basic, playful, deep, and engaging and not a “talking head” approach. I also realized that there is a deep fragmentation of science literacy which is undermining Earth Literacy.

I have become aware that our Western, European, Judeo-Christian dominance of U.S. culture, politics, and education is so profoundly infused with a specific narrative that almost everyone—religious or not—can give some rendition of the creation story as told in the Old Testament and Torah. This version of Earth’s creation seems better known and more deeply ingrained in our psyche, our culture, and our consciousness than the science story.

“So what!” you might exclaim, but it’s better if we ask, “So what?” because then we come back to the crux of not only what Earth Literacy is but why Earth Literacy is as important as any of the other literacies. The short answer is that being literate enables. It enables literate persons to make informed, better decisions, and take positive life-affirming actions toward maintaining right relationships, as global citizens, with and within Earth, and to join a progressive movement of continuously evolving and expanding their literacy. It is also important to remember that illiteracy comes with great costs and severe disadvantages. So, when you take time for your reflection, I invite you to list the costs of Earth Illiteracy as you see them.

Now, what do you want everyone to know about what it means to be Earth literate? What do you want your kids and grandkids and cousins to know? What do you want seven generations from now to know and to build on? Please send your ideas to my email: earthsibling@gmail.com. I will put them together and share what we have in common and thus, we can continue an ever deepening discussion of Earth Literacy. I will then share the working definition I have for Earth Literacy.
When exploring Earth Literacy in workshops, we explore these questions and get in touch with the bubbles from the Big Belch—bubbles, according to Cynthia Brown’s book, *Big History*, which were involved in the beginning of life on Earth. Isn’t that a magical idea—bubbles bouncing together got stuck on each other, and came together to form the essential cells that evolved into us!

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