

Environment is Everybody's Business

By FR. CHARLES BRANDT

INTRODUCTION

This article is taken from a talk given by **Father Charles Brandt**, priest of the Diocese of Victoria living as a hermit in the Comox Valley and working in the area of conservation. He was addressing a conference on business and the environment.

"WE ARE PART OF the earth, and it is part of us." This is the heart of **Chief Seattle's** prayer, a prayer respected and repeated by many who are deeply concerned with the environment and the earth.

Chief Seattle expresses a wisdom and a philosophy lost almost entirely to the west since the Renaissance. This unity of all beings, living and non-living, with three-fold levels of existence — body, soul, and spirit — we know as the perennial philosophy, a philosophy which prevailed until the Renaissance, and was embraced by all the great religions of the earth: Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Christianity, Islam, and especially the North American Indians.

Beginning in the 17th century this perennial philosophy, this ancient wisdom was rejected and a new understanding of the universe which we have been following since the last three centuries began to emerge. It began with René Descartes, continued with Francis Bacon, Galileo and Newton.

They came to look at the universe as a mechanical system without spirit or consciousness. This led to the industrial revolution. Man began to think of the earth and matter as something to be manipulated and controlled. This eventually led to the development of the atomic bomb and the tragic state of the environment today.

Today we stand on the brink of ecological destruction. Some feel that the environmental bomb has already been dropped. Others think that we have ten years to turn it all around.

Unless we regain the perennial philosophy, the sense and wonder of the unity of all things, we very probably won't come to grips with the terrible destruction that is taking place.

And this is happening in science, in quantum physics. Western science which was formerly closed to eastern wisdom and mysticism is opening itself in the most extraordinary way. We are, **Fritjof Capra** asserts in his *The Tao of Physics*, on the verge of a paradigm shift. A new vision of reality is penetrating the scientific world.

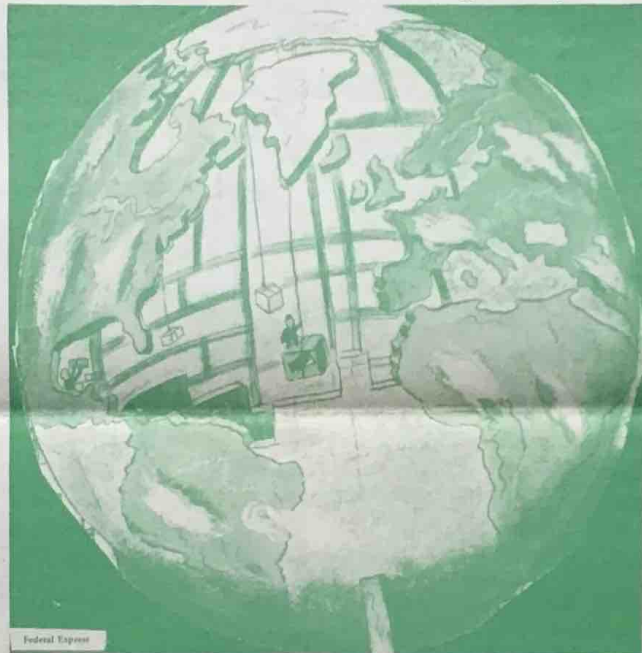
It has recently been discovered that the material universe is essentially a field of energies in which the parts can only be understood in relation to the whole. As **Capra** describes it, it is a complicated web of interdependent relationships. The universe is a great dance of energies of which we are a part.

If the Louvre or the National

Gallery had burned ten years ago we of course would have been appalled. There goes our heritage, our civilization. After all, museums are concerned with preserving our civilization. And at the same time, if the forests of Brazil had been burning, we perhaps would have said, "O hum".

But today as these forests disappear through burning we are becoming more aware that they too, along with our rivers, our mountains, our atmosphere, our forests — that all of these are part of our heritage and civilization. We can no longer separate the burning of a museum from the burning of the rain forests. They both are part of our heritage.

Many activists who rouse us to



Federal Express

the fact that our survival is at stake decry public apathy. They often assume, mistakenly, that people do not change because they lack information and that the main job of activists is to provide that missing information.

But the experience of despair suggests that such numbness and apathy does not stem from ignorance or indifference. On the contrary, most of us are aware of the destruction of our planet at the deepest level. But we do not face it, do not integrate it for fear of experiencing the despair that such information provokes. We fear it may overwhelm us.

Erich Fromm writes: "The doctrine that love for oneself is identical with selfishness and an alternative to love for others has pervaded theology, philosophy, and popular thought; the same doctrine has been rationalized in scientific language.

Fromm concerns himself solely with love of humans, but as "ecosophers" we find the notions of "care, respect, responsibility, knowledge" applicable to living beings in the wide sense.

Love of others and love of ourselves are not alternatives. On the contrary, an attitude of love towards themselves will be found in all those who are capable of loving others. Genuine love is an expression of productiveness and implies care, respect, responsibility, and knowledge. It is not an effect in the sense of being effected by somebody, but an active striving for the growth and happiness of the loved person, rooted in one's own capacity to love.

From the viewpoint of ecophilosophy, the point is this: "We need environmental ethics, but when people feel they unselfishly give up, even sacrifice, their interest in order to show love for nature, this is probably in the long run a treacherous basis for ecology. Through broader

We come to realize this unity through meditation, as we undergo a transformation of consciousness, and discover a deeper level of consciousness that more easily puts us in contact and union with all beings.

We must learn to listen to the earth, "to hear the sound of the earth weeping within us," advises poet **Thich Nhat Hanh**.

As **Thomas Berry** says the changes we are dealing with are changes on a geological and biological order of magnitude. The four great components of the earth — the landsphere, the watersphere, the airsphere, and the life sphere — are being decisively and permanently altered in their composition and their functioning by the more recent sphere, the mindsphere, altered, that is, in a deleterious, irreversible manner.

Our best procedure might be to consider that we need not a human answer to an earth problem, but an earth answer to an earth problem. The earth will solve its problems, and possibly our own, if we will let the earth function in its own ways. We need only listen to what the earth is telling us.

Listen to the Ancient Wisdom of our Native people and realize that to preserve their artifacts that we must preserve their spirit, their wisdom, their culture, their civilization and their rivers, mountains, oceans, animals and birds. Their artifacts flow out of their environment which moulded their culture and gave birth to their wisdom and spirit that gave birth to their artifacts which we display in our museums and galleries.

If we truly wish to preserve the native artifacts, we have to begin by preserving their land, their rivers, their mountains, sky, birds and animals. These are the basis of their culture and their heritage. From this flows the wisdom and spirit which created the artifacts that we house in our museums. If we don't preserve their environment, we will end up with artifacts housed in an artificial environment within our structures which in turn will eventually self-destruct.

We have been invited to share and witness their ritual dance in which they enter into communion with nature, the animals and birds. The dance brings us to a deeper realization of the unity of all beings and closer to the ancient perennial philosophy which the West lost at the Renaissance. So let us enter into the dance, the great dance of energies.

At a recent Zen conference in Kyoto, Japan, a westerner asked afterwards of the two Zen roshis, "I didn't quite get your theology or philosophy". One of the roshis looked at the other one, smiled and said, "We really don't have a theology or philosophy ... we just dance".

So let us enter into the great dance of energies, let us listen to the earth, and discover that unity of all beings.