

# LIVING MTYH PODCAST

## *Episode 379 – Earth Day and the Origins of Gaia*

The first Earth Day event was well over 50 years ago, on April 22, 1970. At that time, it became the largest secular day of protest in the history of the world. Not long after that in 1972, the first articles on the Gaia hypothesis were published by the British chemist James Lovelock. Also known as the Gaia theory, or the Gaia paradigm, or the Gaia principle, Lovelock's writing posited that the earth and its biological systems behave as a single entity. The Gaia principle further proposes that living organisms interact with their inorganic surroundings on Earth to form a synergistic and self-regulating system that helps to maintain and perpetuate the conditions for life on the planet.

Not surprisingly, the Gaia theory has faced several forms of criticism from scientists who argue that the idea of life actively participating in shaping the environment for its own optimization does not align with evolution or with natural selection principles. The controversy continues on to this day. Yet in many ways, the Gaia principle is not so much a hypothesis as a perspective or an approach within which to pursue the science of life on a living planet, which is not the same as being on a planet that happens to have life on it. The simple but profound point is that life is not an afterthought on an already functioning planet, but rather that the living Earth is an integral part of the earth from the beginning.

As a scientist, Lovelock was not sure how to name his hypothesis or theory, and it was his neighbor William Golding, who wrote *The Lord of the Flies*, that suggested that the hypothesis should be named for Gaia, the ancient deity who personified the earth in Greek mythology. Some myths suggest that Gaia created herself out of primordial chaos. In other tales, Gaia was one of the primordial deities present at the dawn of creation. In those stories, the heavenly deities descended from Gaia's union with Ouranos, the God of the Sky. At other times, the ancient Greeks imagined that from Gaia's fertile womb came all of life, and that all living things must return to the body of Mother Earth after their lifespan is over. Thus, Gaia appears as both womb and tomb, so that the entire cycle of life and death exists within her embrace.

As the mother of all, Gaia excludes nothing from the totality of life. The sense of the feminine as the embodiment of both life and death is what is currently missing from the tension of opposites that manifests as the pro-life / pro-choice division. The spirit of Gaia as Earth and as mother of all has been split in the sense of culture versus nature, but also in the loss of understanding that the womb and the tomb are both part of the living spirit of life on Earth. On one level, Gaia is the Great Mother of all. On another level, she is also the common ground, the earth we tread upon, the soil we dig as both gardens and as cemeteries, so that it is the context that distinguishes between those two.

In the realm of myth, there are often older stories waiting to be discovered beneath the surface of better-known tales. This is especially true of Greek myths, which have been made more rational and orderly over time. Older versions tend to be more deeply tied to ancient roots of memory and imagination. And one way to find the threads that lead down and back to older and deeper mythic texts is to follow the meaning of key words back to the language roots.

Surprisingly, the name Gaia can be traced back to old roots in ancient India, where Gaya first appears in sacred texts written in Sanskrit. Sanskrit itself has been spoken for at least 5000 years before the coming of Christianity, and is considered by many to be the oldest human language. It appears to have inspired all European languages, and to have influenced most languages in the world. It appears that the Sanskrit title Gayatri was carried from India over to Europe by Mycenaean tribes, who first came to the island of Crete around 2000 BC.

The Sanskrit origins of Gaya reside in ancient texts known as the Vedas, and the word Veda translates as knowledge or understanding, but especially as sacred knowledge. The Sanskrit root vid relates to visionary, but it also appears in contemporary terms like video. Thus, Gayatri as goddess or deity appeared as the source of all knowledge and wisdom. At the same time, the original Vedas, in which Gaya appears, were in the form of hymns or chants before they were ever recorded and written down. In some myths, Gaya was known as the consort of Brahma, one of the earliest gods of creation. However, it was also said that Gaya or Gayatri was the source of Brahma's power to begin with, so that without her presence, Brahma would be unable to create or sustain life.

The potent ancient chant known as the Gayatri Mantra first appears in the Rig Veda, where it is named as the first chant or hymn to come forth from the root sound of om. And om was considered to be the original sound emitted from the very womb of the cosmos. So Gaia, in sound, in image, and then name has a long lineage, bringing with her echoes of the origins of life and signs of the hidden unity of the world. In that sense, there was something intuitive in the idea of using the term Gaia, the title Gaia, the name Gaia, in a modern attempt to revive the sense of the world being a living entity, and of life being secretly interconnected.

What we tend to learn from mythic stories is how the roots of human nature make us part of the ground of being and secretly connect us to the vital pulse of the living world, and to the deep roots of the living word, and the threads of what used to be known as great memory. The ancient sages understood the deep connections between knowledge and the spoken word, between wisdom and the song of life. And they knew that we as humans are always but one step or one song or one breath away from finding the center of ourselves. And that when we find the center of ourselves, we find the secret connection to the living song, and the breathing life of the earth, and also the cosmos. They also knew that because the center is also the beginning, we are always on the verge of tapping into the original resonance of the sound and the song of life, the echo and reverberations of which can lead to a renewal of life on Earth and throughout the world.

The word world itself has many meanings that go beyond the sense of the planet. World can refer to the hidden unity of relationships found amongst plants, amongst animals and human beings. It can also refer to the interrelatedness of the earth and the galaxy of the stars beyond it that extends all the way to the cosmos in general. In this old way of imagining life, and life on Earth, the great multiplicity of plants and animals and human beings also appears as a secret totality, a hidden unity of Earth with all the living bodies and souls that appear upon it. This underlying unity of soul and the relationship between the individual and the whole is what is trying to be rediscovered in the ideas of the Gaia principle, and also in the vertical imagination of a living world that involves creation ongoing.

One of the great and ancient systems of knowledge involved the practices of rites of passage, which would include a second birth that served to connect each soul to a second mother in the form of Mother Nature, or Mother Earth, or Gaia. In this imagination, nature itself, and the living Earth would become the bigger mother, or Great Mother, that can hold a person in ways in which they can find their own inner nature, and undergo both psychological and spiritual growth. Each one born is intended to grow into a greater life, a life that includes greater awareness and deeper consciousness. And that begins when a child becomes too big to be held by its mother and its family. At that point, the child becomes a temporary orphan. And another kind of birth is required for the new initiate to become a true child of the earth, and a genuine knower, who understands his or her inner nature, and is thereby secretly connected to the pulse of nature and the heart of the living Earth.

As models for transformation and continuous change, nature and the earth become the living texts through which we can awaken to our own inner nature, and the deep sense of self and soul that already understands the purpose and the aim of our unique life. Whereas mother was once the natural source of our comfort and nourishment, Mother Nature itself becomes the source of medicines and energies needed by the soul trying to transform into a more conscious and creative version of ourselves. This sense of a second mother involves the mother of deep memory, and also the milk of inspiration. And where the child once rested upon the eternal waters of the mother's womb, the initiate enters the river of great memory, which reaches all the way back to the mythical beginnings, but also flows forth towards the future as well.

As children of the living Earth, we are naturally inheritors of the energies of creation that reach all the way back to the beginning. But we are also vehicles through which creation tries to continue. Typically, in modern times we have lost the Earth as the supportive body of existence and as the ever-living source of creation. And that loss has left us psychically bereft and literally unsettled within ourselves. Having in a sense fallen out of the living story of creation, we can live in a greater and greater separation from the sense of meaning in life and become unable to function meaningfully. In such a bereft condition, it can be the agony of Gaia, the suffering of the Earth itself that tries to call each of us back to a sense of being secretly connected to the living world.

In the resonance of this old sense of Gaia as the living world, as the mother of life, Earth Day can become not just a symbolic reference to the origins of life and the stories of creation, it can also represent a time in which we respond to the call coming from the earth to bring back consciousness, of the interconnection of the elements of life and also a greater awareness that we are being asked to participate in the re-creation of life on Earth.

The word inspiration can simply mean to breathe, but it can also mean to be imbued with the great breadth of imagination. And as the womb behind the womb, Gaia appears as the archetypal energy that can connect the consciousness of each living soul to the creative energy of life on Earth. In this vertical imagination, each human being secretly shares in the eternal presence of being itself, each living soul becomes a part of the inspiration and the aspiration of life, and each person is continually invited to awaken to a greater sense of meaning and purpose in this world. Frail as we may feel, anxious as we may become, we are each and all woven and tied into the ongoing story of the world.

And just as the first Earth Day was the result of a scientific effort to reconnect to the sense of a living and interconnected world, other aspects of scientific research keep stumbling into what can be seen as the ancient memory of myths and imagination. Contemporary research into the depths of what we casually call our planet has revealed that the Earth hums, it resonates, it reverberates, it shivers and seems to sing endlessly. According to scientists and seismologists, it fosters a low pitched, ceaseless droning at a level too low to be simply heard by the human ear. This phenomenon has come to be known as the hum of the Earth. Scientists do not know what causes it yet. Researchers believe that the hum extends all the way down to the core of the Earth. They can prove that this hum goes all around the world, as its ultra-low frequencies have been recorded in Antarctica, and in Algeria, and also on the floor of the Indian Ocean. And whatever they might hypothesize about the origin of the hum of the earth, the result is a quiet revelation of a harmony of frequencies that resonate almost identically all over the globe. And this gives us one more way of understanding that we are all secretly connected to each other, and connected through the song of creation, through the hum of the earth and through the rhythm of life.

As sometimes conscious residents of the Earth, the original sound continually resonates through our bodies. And that original humming and vibrating, resounding and echoing through each of us resonates uniquely through each of us. In that sense, we are part of the hum of the Earth, which is part of the hymn of creation, which is part of the endless song of the cosmos, with each of us being a unique resonance of life trying to express its inner song of unity and continuance.

The seeming revelation of the hum of the Earth can also be imagined as going back to the ancient chants that were preserved in the Vedas, with the core hymn being simply the sound om as another version of the hum of the Earth, but also as the original core sound that gives birth to Gayatri, which becomes the sonic and imaginative representation of the life of Earth itself. What used to be known as the open secrets of life are trying to be rediscovered precisely and necessarily in these dark times when the world has become more and more divided. The imagination of Gaia in sound and image and name can bring with her echoes of the origin of the world that also can appear as the hum of the Earth, reaching modern ears listening through modern devices that can't help but reveal the sound of creation ongoing.

And even if it is not the aim of those using science to search for knowledge, the interconnectedness of life and the hidden unity that was originally expressed in the myths of creation, but also in ancient texts, like the Vedas can reverberate from the center of the living world, and resonate in the deep self of each person willing to open to knowledge, to wonder, and to the living presence of the earth.

The wholeness of the center of life keeps disappearing and must be sought for again and again. That's part of the history of the earth. And each time creation needs to renew life from the core of the Earth through all levels of both nature and human culture, Gaia can play again her essential archetypal role. In order to connect to this experience of Gaia as a genuine living presence, we need to connect with the core imagination that rests at the center of each of our hearts and souls. In doing that, we can tap deep inner resources that are not just reassuring to ourselves, but are also necessary for the healing and the renewal that the earth at this time needs. For in many ways, we are living in creation or re-

creation times again, and we need to reconnect to the ancient and recurring sense that the core dynamic of the cosmos exists as the mystery of life, death and renewal at all levels. And that includes at the level of human existence, human being and human learning. We need to reconnect to the original source of life both to restore the potential of our own lives, and to be able to reimagine, and envision the steps and the practices needed to help restore the balance and the potency and the healing of the Earth itself.

The Gayatri mantra is a tremendous and beautiful old hymn. It is also complicated and requires time and effort to learn it. At the same time, there are many chants and hymns about the living presence of the earth that can be found in traditions all over the face of the earth. And one such chant that I have learned comes from the Dagara people from Burkina Faso in West Africa. And one of the beauties and brilliances of this chant, that essentially means praise to the earth, gratitude for the gift of life in the presence of the living Earth, is that it appears in the form of one word. The Dagara word is Azima. And again, it means gratitude to the earth, to Mother Earth, to the living Earth, and for the gift of life that brings us into the song of creation and invites us to become part of the ongoing song no matter how we may be feeling in a given moment. The invitation is always there, and the inner resonance of the song is always open for us to join.