

Earth in Mind
David Orr

OK, so here are my notes on *Earth in Mind* in a quasi-narrative form. As with any synopsis, this is my own, filtered through my own biases. For those who are not able to get through the whole book, or only make it through parts, this should give you a sense of what the book is about and enough fodder to be able to discuss. For those who are able to make it through the whole book, I hope these aren't a total bastardization of Orr's ideas. Enough caveats and disclaimers.

Orr's main departure point is that we are in a planetary crisis where the very habitability of the earth is in question. This crisis is due to human values, perspectives, ideas and knowledge. Or in Orr's words, "our crisis is not fundamentally one of technology but one of mind, will and spirit" (p. 145).

He argues that a major part of our current ecological crisis stems from education. The dangers of education are:

- We educate students as if there is no planetary emergency
- We teach students to worry about making a living before the know who they are
- We teach students to be narrow technicians of knowledge who are morally sterile and who believe the world is divided into disciplines
- We deaden a natural sense of wonder for the natural world
- We fail to bond minds and nature
- We give students ignorant knowledge (knowledge without direction)

Orr says that "more of the same kind of education will only compound our problems" (p. 8) and that "It is not education, but education of a certain kind, that will save us" (p. 8). He then goes on to outline this new type of education, and offers suggestions for broad educational directions, the curriculum, what the campus should look like, and what he defines as characteristics of a whole person and the requirements of being ecologically intelligent.

Education

The central core of the new type of education should be environmental education with the following directions:

- Mastery of one's person
- Ensures that knowledge is well used
- Anticipates and pays attention to the effect of knowledge on people and communities
- Gets away from minute particulars into ideas wholly expressed
- The way of learning is as important as the content

The Curriculum

The curriculum should similarly be heavily focused on the environment, and also delivered in a way that takes advantage of a natural biophilia and that we learn best when we are actively and deeply involved and interested.

The points he hits the hardest are:

- Integration
- Immersion
- Agriculture as a part of learning
- Eco-regions as the center of the learning experience
- Addressing real problems and authentic community needs
- There is an irreducible body of knowledge that all students should have (how the earth works, regional natural history, human ecology, thermodynamics, earth's vital signs, restoration ecology, building ecologically resilient communities and economies)
- Students should be taught to develop the full range of human capacities and that they are citizens of the biotic community
- Students should be ecologically literate

The Campus

The context of education, where students learn, is as important as the content. To this end, Orr argues that the campus should reflect the same environmental bent and focus as the curriculum.

- The operations should be "alive" so that students can see where resources are used from investments to water use

- The architecture should lift the spirits and the imagination, fuel our intellect and remind us that we are citizens of ecological communities
- The campus should be designed to elevate our ecological IQ and enhance biodiversity and resilience

A Whole Person

Orr frequently brings up the idea of a “whole person” and adds descriptors of what this whole person looks like. The main ones are:

- Appreciates that body and mind are connected to the ecological and emotional context of the world
- Is an authentic citizen (p. 124)
- Finds a calling
- Uses their intelligence appropriately
- Is involved in service
- Is involved in creating (*Homo faber*)
- Does good work, is involved in communities, and lives with “enough”

Ecological Design Competence/Intelligence

Many of Orr’s arguments focus on creating an ecologically literate and intelligent public. He describes the characteristics of this ecological intelligence. They are as follows:

- Students of the natural world
- Practical competence to solve local problems
- Deep inquiry into the purpose and consequences of specific actions
- Have the ability to roll up your sleeves and get to work
- Integrate theoretical and experiential knowledge
- Make ecologically smarter things and people
- Recycle wastes
- Take advantage of free nature services
- Maximize resources and energy efficiency

The above considerations, directions, and approaches are necessary to create a future that focuses on community, and that ushers in what Orr calls and “Ecological Enlightenment” or a “Biophilia Revolution.” Orr then goes on to describe on what The Future needs to focus.

Community

The core to the future is strong and resilient communities. These are based on the following:

- Responsibility, Connectedness, Dignity, Imagination, and Participation
- Opportunities to do good work
- Mutual need and the understanding of the bonds that connect people to the natural world
- They root and grow earthly sensibilities

Ecological Enlightenment

In order for humans to experience a biophilia revolution we are going to need to appreciate and/or recover certain characteristics of our society:

- Recover a sense of place
- Recover childhood
- Bring biophilia into education
- Appreciate the economics of biophilia
- Create a new covenant with animals
- Appreciate the connection between biophilia and patriotism

The Future

The final essay of the book looks to what the future will be oriented. There are seven characters:

- The village and the community
- The sustainable farm
- Sustainable forestry
- Land and land ownership
- The green city

- Economies of place
- Transportation
- The region

There were several other provocative/evocative quotations I highlighted. They are:

“Those presuming to shape the minds that will shape the future must comprehend what the future requires of them.” (p. 127)

“The world has always needed a dangerous professorate.” (p. 103)

“...social stability seems to vary inversely to mental distance from fields and woods.” (p. 118)

“The ecological crisis, in short, is about what it means to be human. And if natural diversity is the wellspring of human intelligence, then the systematic destruction of nature inherent in contemporary technology and economies is a war against the very sources of mind.” (p. 140)

There is something pleasing about the language Orr uses throughout the book, specifically certain words that continually pop up. Individually, and collectively, these set a tone. Here are the ones I put down:

Heroism	Love	Intelligence	High Purpose
Wisdom	Virtue	Responsibility	Value
Good Sense	Silence	Humility	Holiness
Connectedness	Courtesy	Beauty	Celebration
Giving	Restoration	Obligation	Wildness
Mystery	Renewal	Gratitude	Charity
Skill	Citizenship	Duty	

Here are some discussion questions that come to mind:

- What would an education look like that really took “earth in mind”?
- Orr is saying that there needs to be a much higher level of environmental commitment amounting to a moral obligation. What do you think of this?
- If this crisis is one of will, how do we create a sense of urgency, when there is no perception of urgency?
- Orr outlines what amounts to a systematic redesign and rediscovery of education, but leaves our mention of “traditional” curricular elements such as language, math, History, et al., and even traditional school structure. What can we do about this? What should we do about this?
- In looking at the current economic crisis, there has been talk of everyone being “asleep at the wheel,” chanting things like, “How could this happen?” Well, it appears that we are wide awake at the wheel with the pending ecological crisis- we have heard thoughtful and deep analysis about this problem from science’s best thinkers for nearly 30 years, but we continue to do nothing. What does this say about us and about our possible future?

And that is what I have. More on Thursday night...