



# Gaia Theory

Model and Metaphor  
for the 21st Century

## A Story of the Land

A nervous and tense silence hung in the air of the great meeting hall like a heavy load at the end of a frayed rope. Muscles twitched like fibers snapping. The glitter of the massive crystal chandeliers and gold-inlay walls seemed only to add to the strained aura. Then, slowly, a buzz of whispers arose, followed by steadily raised voices. The voices became louder, some angrier, and within seconds general hysteria ensued. The chairman rapped hard with the gavel, trying to regain order. Leaders and representatives of the world's economic powerhouses were astonished and confused and were groping for a way to respond to the odd proposal they had just heard.

My, my! All this uproar on the heels of quiet words offered by such an unassuming man! One would have thought that news of a stock market crash or declaration of war was rippling through the crowd, such was the din.

"This is out of line," harumphed a European economics professor. "We are here to discuss serious matters." "Waste of time," muttered a North American secretary of state. The leader of a small Asian country simply paced nervously behind his chair. All this because precisely at a moment of impasse in this great caucus, the man from Eastern Europe had taken the floor and made a most unusual request. It took five minutes for the commotion to abate.

"Did I hear you correctly, sir," asked the chairman, as he pushed his glasses back up on his sweaty nose, "that you would like to tell this esteemed gathering a story?" This time a muffled laugh broke the silence, colored with disdain. There was a pause and then a "yes."

"Yes sir . . . with your indulgence. The situation we find ourselves in begs reflection . . . a self-examination. We must consider where our roots and meaning lie and build a new foundation for those who will follow us. There is a saying found in many parts of the world . . . 'We do not inherit the Earth from our ancestors; we borrow it from our children.' We must give careful consideration to our place in this world and what we will leave for our children. An often neglected, yet powerful way to do this is through stories . . . stories of our lands." He quickly scanned the room and said "And so, yes . . . yes, I do want to tell a story."

Examine ourselves? Roots and meaning? Stories of our lands? Never had such nonsense been uttered in front of this distinguished group! But nothing could stop the odd sequence of events that had produced this moment. Nothing else had worked all afternoon, and the thin man at the podium looked down upon the crowd with penetrating eyes that were softly demanding the

attentions of those present. The American secretary of state coughed insistently, as if attempting to change the mood, but no organized effort could be mounted to remove the man at the lectern. And so he continued.

"When I was a child," he began, "I lived in a farming area famous for its sugar beets and potatoes. Root crops. Crops which lived and grew intimately in and with the soil. We depended on successful harvests for our health and, in those days, our very survival. Our lives were dependent on farming and the best farmers were the ones with a wisdom that went beyond mere knowledge. The farmer had to love the soil, to understand the seasons and weather, the insects and diseases..."

At first, the crowd sat slackjawed at the absurdity of a story about root crops at an economic conference. But it was, after all, a story, and they listened. The representatives from Ireland and Indonesia could relate to root crops, and a number of others were vaguely comforted by the use of the word "wisdom." It seemed to be in short supply these days. One could almost detect a collective sigh arising from the audience.

The Eastern European continued. He wove a grand tale about the farmlands in which he had grown up and about how his grandfather had rescued the town from almost certain starvation because of his understanding of potato pests. It was the year after the Great War, and had their crop failed, it would have spelled doom for the village. There would have been no surplus in neighboring towns. Heads nodded in response. Many in the room had fought in that war or had directly experienced its hardships. The story was coming alive in the hearts of those in the room. The plot became richer as it captured the feelings and emotions of the world that emerged from World War II. The world had rid itself of an evil force, was fast developing new inventions and farming methods, and was swept up in a wave of optimism rarely equaled. For many countries it was a new renaissance; a new awakening. And in the process, many fell asleep to what was happening to the land.

People were becoming completely absorbed as the tale twisted and turned through the years. Here they sat, 50 years into the "new awakening," hopelessly deadlocked on how to bring success to the world economies. And the Earth was showing signs of the strain created by past successes. Almost 6 billion people where there had been 2 billion . . . stupendous, unparalleled wealth coexisting with massive starvation and misery . . . The Earth was being eaten alive, as it were, by a malignant human cancer. The tale was almost too sad to bear.

But it was still a story, and the teller's eyes reflected optimism once more as their burning brightness gave way to what might even have been called a twinkle. He was telling of the lands from which many had come; lands which held hometowns and relatives, hills and rivers and trees, and great mysteries. As he spoke, more than one pair of eyes became slightly misty and more than one heart felt a tug from an unidentifiable something. And gradually the story of individual lands became a story of the land. It was a story of the Earth which then blossomed into a song of hope. The air in the room was brittle. All attention was trained on the Eastern European. How he had gotten them to this point was itself a mystery. Why, here was a dignified and powerful collection of more than 200 men and a few women, and they sat biting their lower lips like children listening to a ghost story.

How could people remain hopeful when what the modern world did best was to homogenize, grow and consume, and there were no alternate visions? Almost in a whisper, the man continued. "I am hopeful because I see many peoples around the world returning in many different ways to a story about the land which is an ancient story. It is the story of the Earth as a living being.

"Indigenous peoples around the world have, for ages, recognized and celebrated a living planet in their mythology. And even we in the modern Western culture have not lost it altogether. It is preserved in the feelings that arise within us when we eat good food or view a beautiful landscape, and in our language with phrases such as 'Mother Earth.' Scientists are calling this ancient concept the Gaia theory, and there is strong and mounting scientific evidence that our Earth as a whole behaves as if it were one giant organism. A living, breathing being from which we take our life and breath."

That a simple story about root crops should have progressed to this point might have puzzled someone viewing the performance on TV. But to those in the great meeting hall who had been captivated - albeit reluctantly - by the living, breathing human being in their midst, new chords were being struck. A deeply buried awareness was rising to the surface. They were hearing things which just an hour before would have caused indignation and scorn, but which were now hopeful and beautiful.

The speaker took a deep breath as if gathering strength for the last leg of a great journey home. His shoulders rose and fell and his long exhalation traveled as a wind through the hall. His eyes roamed the room and seemed to make contact with every person. The story of the land was coming full circle.

"This new, yet ancient story gives us eyes to see that we are parts of a greater whole. Our destiny is not dependent merely on what we do for ourselves but also on what we do for the Earth. If we endanger her, she will dispense with us in the interests of a higher value - Life itself. What makes this story so inspiring? One simple thing: it reminds us of what we have long suspected, of what we have long projected into our forgotten myths and what perhaps has always lain dormant within us. That is, the awareness of our being anchored in the Earth and the universe, the awareness that we are not alone nor here for ourselves alone, but that we are an integral part of something greater than ourselves."\*

This was the calm before the last storm of his powerful story. The thin man stood more erect and then leaned out over the podium. "Ladies and gentlemen, it is we, the world's leaders and economists, who are among the last holdouts to the wisdom of this great, ancient story." He paused as if to let this statement sink in fully. "Yes, we are the last holdouts. And if we can muster the necessary time and effort - indeed, the courage - to consider what this story means, we can usher in hope for future generations that will follow us on this tiny planet.

"I invite you to help tell this story."

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\* This story, while fictitious, is inspired by a speech given by Vaclav Havel, President of the Czech Republic, at Independence Hall on July 4, 1994, on the occasion of his being presented the Philadelphia Liberty Medal. The paragraph noted by the asterisk is a very close paraphrase of a portion of Mr. Havel's speech. His entire speech can be found in the July 8, 1994, New York Times OP-ED section.

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