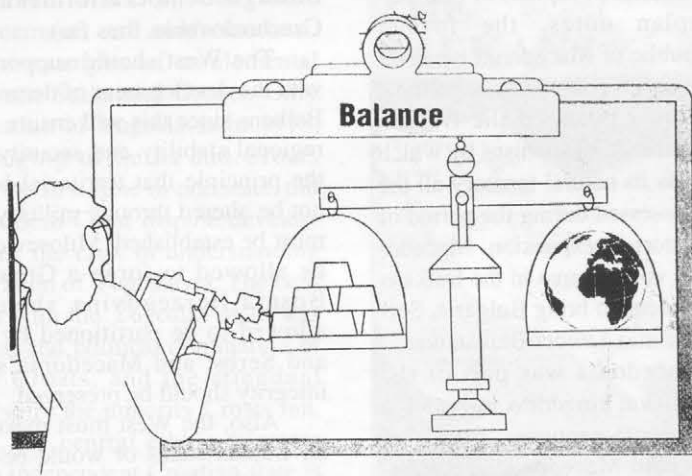


The Earth in Our Hands

Earth in the Balance: Ecology and the Human Spirit
by Al Gore. Plume, 1993. \$15.99.

“When President Bush welcomed an international conference on the global environment in the spring of 1990, his staff prepared materials [that contained a] graphic illustration of the administration’s approach to balancing short-term monetary gains against long-term environmental degradation.



[*Earth in the Balance*, p. 193]

“In this illustration, several bars of gold rested on one tray of the scale; on the other tray perched the entire earth and all its natural systems, seemingly with a weight and value roughly equivalent to the six bars of gold. Although several delegates from other countries commented privately that it seemed to be an ironic symbol of Bush’s approach to the crisis, the president and his staff seemed wholly oblivious to the absurdity of their willingness to place the entire earth in the balance.”

by Caryl Waggett

Earlier this year, Vice President Al Gore earned the Robert F. Kennedy book award for *Earth in the Balance: Ecology and the Human Spirit*. In it, Gore challenges individuals to confront the crisis of environmental degradation through personal activism. Arthur Schlesinger Jr. of the awards committee stated that “this powerful book is an elo-

quent early warning to us all to think and act anew if civilization is to escape destruction.” While critics have discounted the praise, arguing that any Vice President would receive the same, the acclaim legitimately belongs to the author. He has taken great personal risks to assert such a strong view in a political climate that responds unfavorably to strong statements in general and to action in particular.

The ‘Environmental Crisis’

At the heart of *Earth in the Balance*, Gore discusses the environmental crisis, but it is not the crisis that most of us are familiar with. While he refers to concrete dilemmas—the depleting ozone, greenhouse effect, water degradation, lower air quality, loss of arable land, and diminishing biodiversity—he points to these as symptoms of a larger problem. The true environmental crisis, he argues, lies in our mindset and how we relate to the earth. We have lost touch with the basic interactions of the natural world. Thus, the physical depletion of the ozone, while a grave reality, is not in and of itself the problem. It is the human attitudes towards the environment which allowed such a depletion to occur, that represent a crisis.

Gore asserts that the environmental crisis cannot be solved without addressing this core dilemma. We will never truly confront the problem of a disappearing ozone so long as we remain disassociated from natural cycles. If we keep the same mentality, other environmental problems will replace the ones that we try to solve.

Writes Gore: “In discussions of the greenhouse effect, I have actually heard adult scientists suggest placing billions of strips of tin foil in orbit to reflect enough incoming sunlight away from the earth to offset the larger amount of heat now being trapped in the atmosphere. I have heard still others seriously propose a massive program to fertilize the oceans with iron to stimulate the photosynthesis by plankton that might absorb some of the excess greenhouse gases we are producing.

“Both of these proposals spring from the impulse to manipulate nature in an effort to counteract the harmful results of an earlier manipulation of nature. We seem to make it easier to consider even

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hare-brained schemes like these than to consider the wisdom of those earlier manipulations which don't seem to have a healthy relationship to their context, for they are in the process of destroying it."

At the same time Gore shows how our lack of a unified understanding of the environmental problem has made lasting solutions impossible. "Many refuse to take [the environmental crisis] seriously simply because they have supreme confidence in our ability to cope with any challenge by defining it, gathering reams of information about it, breaking it down into manageable parts, and finally solving it.... We have encouraged our best thinkers to concentrate their talents not on understanding the whole but on analyzing smaller and smaller parts." By not focussing on the true problem, the necessity for change is less apparent.

Understanding the Crisis

On a more specific level, Gore defines the crisis as one where the earth is being changed in both geologic and evolutionary terms at historically unprecedented rates. Ecosystems, individual species, and natural cycles have no chance to reach a new equilibrium.

Until such a balance is arrived at, the ecosystem as a whole will suffer under enormous strain, the effects of which will domino throughout the natural world. Humans will have little time to react to the changes. Today, our inability to predict even small portions of the potential effects of global warming should leave us in a state of awe at the magnitude of ecological response that we unintentionally have set forth.

However, the term 'crisis' is often held at issue. Not all analysts would agree with Gore's vision of an earth in fatal disequilibrium. Most scientists would describe the earth as dynamic: continents shift; wetlands, prairies, forests, meadows all move through various stages of ecological succession; species evolve, adapt, and go extinct; ecosystems are not stagnant—coastal erosion and barrier beach formation are constantly in progress, topsoil erodes and causes sedimentation with attendant changes in the primary growth (plants, algae) and consumers (herbivores, carnivores and scavengers); weather patterns do exist, but erratic weather variations occur, from droughts to floods to tsunamis. If the

earth is changing already, why the fuss if humans are affecting changes as well?

Environmental philosophers continue to ponder the nature of the earth. Is it a delicate system, held lightly in balance by the interconnectedness of all living and non-living (nutrient cycles, water cycles, weather patterns) systems, where any changes can cause devastation to the system as a whole? Or is it a hearty, thriving system that can withstand almost any damages that an individual species can place upon it; a system that is so resilient that, although the individual components may vary, the system itself will not collapse and always find balance?

These two theories greatly affect an individual's response to environmental problems. Gore stands closer to the first interpretation. Many who subscribe to the second view claim that change alone does not define a crisis.



Vice President Al Gore, author of *Earth in the Balance*. [U.S. Embassy, Ottawa]

Gore is right to point out the philosophical roots of the environmental problem and to make people think in the longer term. But, his use of a geological time scale, and criticism of our ecological spirituality, leaves the debate up in the air. While it is true that these issues must be dealt with, there are also specific shorter-term problems directly affecting human welfare that must be addressed in order to ensure that a society will be around to undergo the more profound attitudinal transformations Gore desires—problems such as the lack of sanitation, inappropri-

ate management of hydroelectricity, increased cancer rates from overuse and misuse of pesticides and fertilizers, and unsafe drinking water, for example.

Personal Activism: Beyond the Idea of an Environmental Crisis

However, recognizing the scope of the "crisis" that we face—from the interaction of technological innovation and lack of foresight—is insufficient: the true challenge is one action. Throughout *Earth in the Balance*, Gore examines his own contradictions (using the air conditioner in his car while driving to a conference on global warming) and those of our society. Outside of ignoring the problem, there are two responses to the crisis: individuals can change their lifestyle, or they can keep the present lifestyle but change the manner in which that lifestyle is produced.

Gore calls for both. On one hand, individuals should change their lifestyles to conserve more, use less energy, have less reliance on fossil fuels, eat only local products that use a wider variety of non-toxic farming techniques, and move away from the basic economic concept that "more is better". On the other hand, these same individuals should preserve the American Dream ideal of a car and better material products while pursuing technological innovations that are more environmentally benign: solar and wind power versus coal and oil; electric cars; buying products that do not leach harmful chemicals into the earth.

In theory, these two concepts are not directly at odds. In reality, however, the simultaneous acceptance of both mechanisms has caused a split in public ability to respond to the crisis at hand. People are battling and searching within themselves for their own role. The two solutions makes action difficult and a response to this environmental crisis has been effectively paralyzed at both the individual and the larger governmental levels.

Gore's challenge to us, as individuals and as actors within larger organizations, is to take the risk of accepting change and to alter our ways of thinking and approaching the environmental problem to encompass the larger picture. The plea for a global environmental ethic by the Vice President—himself challenging and battling his own dreams and needs—is a resounding summons to action. ●