

The Million Hands of God

Thoughts on building a successful human society

By Marjorie Kelly

"There is only one way in which the tide can flow: the way of ever-increasing unification."

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, "The Planetization of Mankind," 1945, in *The Future of Man*.

"Life is difficult." These are the opening words of M. Scott Peck's book *The Road Less Traveled*, and they may be the wisest opening lines to any book ever written. They embody one of two enduring truths of human existence: that life is hard, and that things are getting better and better all the time.

This second fact is no less solid than the first, for as individuals and as a culture we do advance, we have advanced astonishingly far, and we will advance much farther still. It is this notion of progress I wish to dwell on here—a notion of building a genuinely successful human society. But all such talk must be wrapped in the knowledge that life is difficult, for anything less is a deception, and an invitation to cynicism and despair.

Let it be said clearly: We are entering a profoundly new time in the history of the world. With the Berlin Wall coming down overnight, with whole peoples rising up spontaneously to throw off dictatorships, with arsenals of nuclear weapons gathering dust—we are seeing, in our lifetime, the emergence of a new world order.

We take for granted today our capability for instantaneous, worldwide communication, our growing web of trade among nations with whom we formerly went to war. Yet silently, inexorably, an awareness grows that we live in one world; we are one people because we share one planet.

Nowhere is this growing solidarity more apparent than on issues of the environment—issues that by definition cut across all social and national lines. In a recent cover story, *Fortune* magazine declared environmentalism "not only the biggest business issue of the 1990s but a mainstream movement of massive worldwide force." It's a sign of the times, as *Fortune* noted, that CEOs like Richard Clarke of Pacific Gas & Electric now work with activists their companies once fought.

As I watch these extraordinary times unfold, I find myself recalling the vision of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, the Jesuit philosopher-priest and biologist, who in the wake of World War II wove a hopeful theory about the spiritual evolution of life. He saw

in the history of life a movement toward species with more sensitive and elaborate nervous systems—a "rising tide of consciousness" that took biological form, and culminated in human life. In humans, de Chardin believed, the growth of consciousness continued on a new plane, in the evolution of thought and human community. He maintained that matter at its lower levels is governed by forces of dispersal, but at higher levels is governed by a force of convergence—an inevitable movement toward unification.

As he wrote in *The Future of Man*, de Chardin foresaw an ultimate human system in which, "organically associated with one another (*more closely* than the cells of a single brain) we shall form in our entirety a single system, ultra-complex and, in consequence, ultra-centered." He foresaw a kind of "Ultra-Human" taking shape, a divine personality in which all humans would participate. He wrote:

"The greatest event in the history of the Earth, now taking place, may indeed be the gradual discovery, by those with eyes to see, not merely of Some Thing but of *Some One* at the peak created by the convergence of the evolving Universe upon itself."

What de Chardin foresaw, it seems to me, was very real, and is in fact happening in our time—in a form that is less mystical than it is physical and pragmatic. The "Some One" toward which we are evolving is the earth itself. We can see this today in the growing awareness of the planet as an entity—not simply the ground we live on, but a being in itself, the ultimate organism of which we are a part. And humans are not so much the crown of this creation as we are its servant. If trees might be seen as the lungs of the world, human beings are the hands.

Like de Chardin, I too see divinity abroad in the land—not just as a miraculous presence able to part the Red Sea, but as a sturdy human presence able to span any sea, with ships, or radio waves, or cables carrying information as waves of light. I see a divine presence able to make the blind see, as modern drugs have cured river blindness in Africa—a blind-

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ness so pervasive it had come to seem a natural part of aging.

Above or beneath it all, a different god is coming into our consciousness today—ever-present, all-embracing, and tangible: a loving god who gives oxygen to us all, who is stable and trustworthy, and like gravity, never lets us go. Rather than a distant patriarch to whom we owe homage, this god is flesh of our flesh, blood of our blood. She is not all-powerful and remote but present, capable of being wounded. And in wounding her we wound ourselves.

If human beings are the million hands of god, we have not yet learned how to handle our power. There are those among us who have run rampant with it, strip-mining, polluting rivers, destroying the landscape. Others would renounce such power, do away with it—but technology and modern civilization will not be banished, they can only be lived with intelligently.

Today there are growing numbers of individuals—in business, as in many professions—developing a vision of how we might live peacefully together as a people on one planet. In a moving talk January 30 before the Corporate Conservation Council, Monsanto CEO Richard Mahoney put forth his vision (*page 14*) of corporations as potential leaders in the movement toward sustainable development: development that doesn't destroy the earth but sustains it. He himself heads a corporation listed among the Toxic 500—the 500 greatest polluters in America—yet it is these corporations, he said, that have the resources, the skills, and the global reach to help humankind.

It is these corporations that today are experiencing “a revolution in environmental stewardship,” Mahoney said. At his company, it takes the form of the Monsanto Pledge—a commitment to reduce toxic releases, to manage all corporate grounds to benefit nature, to ensure groundwater safety, and to work for sustainable agriculture.

These are indeed extraordinary times we live in. We are entering an era in which ancient dreams of peace and prosperity might at last be fulfilled. And it is our task to realize the great secret of utopia: that life still is hard. And here on the threshold, it doesn't feel like utopia at all. It requires a conscious act of will to step back and *see* where we stand in history.

With the cynicism that is endemic today, it is difficult to take that step. Like Minnesotans in February, we fear a warm day is but a brief respite from the blizzard to follow. Having seen business people for so long as snake-oil salesmen, we find it hard to believe a new generation will use power for the good of society. Such cynicism is understandable, but it is



also dangerous. It can paralyze us when the world needs us to act.

We must recognize that the season has turned. The Berlin Wall came down in a single day. Corporations that once fought environmentalists now support them. We can read in such signs the beginning of a new order, as we might read in the first crocus the coming of spring. Something in the world has changed profoundly—a shift is underway as fundamental as the movement from winter to spring.

Life will still be hard, but things really are getting better and better all the time. Progress is real. The possibility of building a society that works—this too is real, and not in some distant, imaginary land, but here, on this earth, beneath these feet. Built with these hands. ☞

Even here on the threshold of a new era, it doesn't feel like utopia at all.