

# Living in the Machine Dream

*Toward a new myth for our time*

BY MARJORIE KELLY

*"It is provided in the essence of things that from any fruition of success no matter what, shall come forth something to make a greater struggle necessary."*

—WALT WHITMAN

I HAVE SOMETHING OF A WEAKNESS for old magazines, and this summer at an antique store up north I found a marvelous one—a special magazine supplement to *The New York Times* dated March 5, 1939, devoted exclusively to the 1939 New York World's Fair. The theme of the fair: The World of Tomorrow. It's a great item for browsing, seeing what Americans fifty years ago were looking forward to in the grand World of Tomorrow. For we are, after all, living in their magical tomorrowland. How does our era measure up? Have their bright and shining visions come to pass? A surprising number of them have—though from our vantage point fifty years hence, a good bit of the shine has been lost as well.

It's clear on every page that America in 1939 was a nation in love with the Machine, the term that encompassed all the promise of electricity, radio, and the automobile. Focused on its own dawning technological utopia, America was determinedly isolated from the rest of the world. For even as New York prepared for its World's Fair, Germany had already seized Austria and was moving to occupy Czechoslovakia—but the magazine made scant mention of it, in only one article out of a dozen.

With blinders of optimism in place, the New York World's Fair was abuzz with the amazing possibility—as an RCA ad put it—of “adding sight to radio service.” Television was just emerging from the laboratory, and America was alive with anticipation.

Even electricity was still so wondrous that the General Electric exhibit could be called the “House of Magic,” and GE's ad boasted that America was now a country “where one out of three homes has an electric refrigerator.”

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companies were heroes, and Du Pont displayed miracle products like rayon, “Celophane,” and nylon toothbrushes. Billowing smokestacks were pictured as proud symbols of “thriving factories.” And in an article on health, the surgeon general proclaimed that “The battle against tuberculosis is half won.”

Thumbing through these dream-filled pages leaves me feeling nostalgic, even sad, that the America of 1939 had such touching faith in technology—unaware that its probings into the subatomic world would result in the atom bomb, that its thriving factories would become sources of toxic waste, that the notion of a just war would be called into question by Vietnam.

There was much they failed to envision in their World of Tomorrow, enchanted as they were by TV and nylon toothbrushes. For the country was hell-bent down the road Western civilization had been traveling since the Industrial Revolution—hoping against hope that the next discoveries would usher in the final utopia of the Machine.

It was a simpler time in many ways, when enemies were manifestly evil and the tasks ahead were clear: to win the other half of the war against tuberculosis, to put refrigerators in the remaining two out of three homes.

But what we see here is more than a snapshot of 1939—it is the quintessential America, where our dreams have nearly always been Machine dreams: to lay railroads across the West, to put a man on the moon.

It is only in our time that our conception of progress has taken an abrupt turn—heading off in a wholly unexpected direction. While in the past we dreamed of bigger, faster, better technologies, today we ask a more difficult question: Can we turn aside? Can we stop the devastation that our wondrous machines have wrought?

Having spent the last century prying into the storehouse of nature's secrets, today we are groping for ways to respect her sacredness. It's as though we've been speeding down the highway only to find the inert ground beneath us suddenly coming alive, unexpectedly awakening. Somehow along our journey, even the subatomic world itself has dissolved. Quantum physics has left us with the eery knowledge that there are no building blocks of matter, only vibrational patterns in a single universal energy.

Other certainties have dissolved as well, as our theology has speculated on the “death of God,” our old enemy Japan has turned into a quasi-ally, and progressive idealism has foundered on the rocks of the failed socialist experiment.

Ours is a post-industrial, post-Newtonian, post-utopian world, where nearly all the Machine dreams of 1939 have been fulfilled, and we are left asking: What now?

ON MANY SIDES, the sense of it is overwhelming: The end of an age is at hand. We cannot overstate how profound a change is upon us. For the past 200 years, the futures we have imagined have been incremental changes from the present: We have been stage-coach drivers dreaming of locomotives. But the changes we face today are more fundamental.

If we could learn one lesson from 1939, it might be this: that the future we imagine is the future we get. With all its side-effects, intended or unintended. As we turn the corner today into an unknown future, wholly unlike any past we have known, we must be

careful to dream big enough, to dream deep enough. For what we dream, we will get.

We might start by letting go of our fixation on gadgetry and reaching deeper, into the buried dreams and longings of our culture—into the very myths that guide us, consciously or unconsciously.

The most basic change, I believe, must come at the level of theology. If something is indeed dying in our time, it may be not God himself but our conception of the divine order. There is something that doesn't sit right today, in the view of creation that gives man dominion over the Earth and all its creatures. In a sense we have finished with that theology—for in some cosmic irony, it is this vision from Genesis that has led to the environmental crises of our day. And those crises in uncanny ways mirror the Apocalypse prophesied in Revelation: where the creatures of the seas die, the sun burns us with its rays, and the waters are made bitter by "wormwood" (which in Ukrainian is the word for *chernobyl*). We have completed the movement, you might say, from Genesis to Revelation.

If we have taken our marching orders for thousands of years from this notion of having dominion over the Earth, the march today suddenly finds itself in disarray.

We are in need of a new myth. But we are, at the same time, a cynical people who no longer believe in myths.

If we seem lost, adrift in a world without the meaning it once had, it may be that we're in the time of silence before a new unfolding. The pause before a new breath is drawn.

For the answer we are seeking may be right beneath our feet. It may be here, in this profane and dishonored Earth, that we shall find our new ground of meaning.

The Earth does indeed seem to be coming alive in our time, like a divine being, awakening. If "divinity" seems an unfamiliar concept to associate with the Earth, let us think of the divine in the most simple and direct terms: as that source of creative power from which all life comes forth. As that from which we spring, and to which we return.

To honor the divinity of the Earth is not to supplant the divinity of God, but to see the two in a divine partnership—as the sun and the soil are partners in producing life. It may be that even God is not solitary, that he is partnered with a marvelous being different from but not inferior to him.

It may be, too, that humans are not alone at the pinnacle of creation, but are brothers and sisters to all that lives. We may



A Popular Science cover from the 1930s.

be not "on" the Earth but of it. For when we admit the truth of it, we see immediately that this is so. Could we see a time-lapse film of the rise of life on Earth, we might see an image of the clay itself rising, rising and singing: finding voice in us.

Many cultures through time have known the truth of our unity with the Earth, and in the time before machines, Western civilization knew it as well. In his book *The Rebirth of Nature: The Greening of Science and God* (Bantam Books, 1991), the British biochemist Rupert Sheldrake describes the "Green Man" often found carved into the cathedrals of ancient Europe: an image of a mass of greenery bearing the countenance of a human face, with eyes peering out between the fringes of leaves. It is an illuminating metaphor for the human condition, to imagine ourselves as leafy beings—as living pieces of the Earth, rooted here as surely as trees.

To imagine the Earth as divine, and us at one with it, is strikingly different from our old theology. It allows us to be close to the divine in a way that only the most holy were once close to God, for in the Earth we find a divinity who is not distant but fully present—even in the flesh of our own bodies. The divine is no longer something apart from and superior to us, but in us, as we are in her. We are not so much her children as her hands, literally part of her being.

If our old cosmology led us to aspire to perfection, perhaps a divinity of the Earth

will leave a spot for the lowly and the ordinary. Perhaps it can allow us to open our imagination to a future with room for trouble, evil, misfortune, and all the unpleasantness we keep wanting to banish from our tomorrows. The Earth, after all, is a divinity beneath our feet—where earthworms and excrement have their place, as surely as do cathedrals and hymns.

Having charted all the realms of the Earth, our next task may not be to colonize new worlds but to turn to a different terrain: not outer space but inner space. The inner landscape of emotions and relationship. We may have unlocked the mysteries of the atom, but we are still in the Stone Age in dealing with our own feelings. Mostly we "keep them inside"—and this may be the new storehouse of secrets we are called to explore.

Above all, bringing a sense of the divine here to this profane world may be a matter of rediscovering the sacredness of the ordinary—a sense that in many cultures was never lost. I think, for example, of the letter I recently received from my friend James Porter, a water quality engineer just back from India, where he is helping clean up the pollution of the Ganges River. He wrote movingly of the thousands who come to the river each morning for their *puja*, or worship—collecting holy water to share with the gods of the trees and animals who dwell along its banks.

On my wall I have the photo he sent—of an old woman standing waist deep in the Ganges, her hands uplifted as they cup the sacred water—and it gives me a sense of what she must feel, imbedded in a larger order that is as sacred as it is filthy and commonplace. I feel it as an ache sometimes, the absence of that feeling in my body: the sense that this place is holy, that my flesh with all its imperfections is sacred, that I am part of this sacred ground.

I may never journey to the Mississippi each morning for a *puja*, but I hope to find my own ways to celebrate the present. It can be something as simple as pausing in mid-task, as I did today, to hear the wind in the trees, or watch the sun on the leaves. Ultimately, it doesn't work to comprehend the sacredness of the Earth with our minds alone. A divinity of the tangible can only be experienced in tangible ways.

There is an Eastern philosophy that says there are five coverings to the soul, and that the final is bliss. Isn't that what it means to be one with the divine: to feel bliss? We don't need to rocket to the moon to find it. When I strip away my daily cares and fears, it's there, in my body, waiting. ☧