

# The Ecological Spirituality of Elizabeth Ann Seton

## Four Ecological Philosophers

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**Arne Naess** (1912-2009), a Norwegian philosopher and founder of the Deep Ecology Movement: “Human beings can perceive and care for the diversity of their surroundings. Our biological heritage allows us to delight in this intricate, living diversity. This ability to delight can be further perfected, facilitating a creative interaction with the immediate surroundings.” (Naess, *Ecology, Community, and Lifestyle*, 23) He emphasized that we all have the ability to delight in nature, though this innate ability has to be nurtured through appreciative experiences.

Naess further developed the platform of the Deep Ecology Movement based on the principle that all creation has the equal right to live and blossom: “This quality depends in part upon the deep pleasure and satisfaction we receive from close partnership with other forms of life.” (*Ibid.*, 28) Since we can control and sacrifice ourselves only when we love and find joy, it is imperative that we have direct experiences of nature as beautiful, and ultimately realize that nature is indispensable to our happiness.

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During her trip to Italy this appreciation of nature is vividly depicted in Elizabeth’s letter to Julia on 28 October 1803: “My Seton is daily getting better, and... little Ann and myself are well—If I dared indulge my Enthusiasm and describe as far as I could give them words my extravagant Enjoyment in gazing on the Ocean, and the rising and setting sun, and the moonlight Evenings, a quire of Paper would not contain what I should tell you—but one subject you will share with me which engages my whole Soul—the dear the tender the gracious love with which every moment has been marked in these my heavy hours of trial—” (2.3, “To Julia Scott,” *Collected Writings* 1:245)

**Anthony Weston**, proposed a new ‘**communicative ethics**’ repositioning the familiar one-species monologue to a multi-polar dialogue with the natural world. (Anthony Weston, “Multicentricism: A Manifesto,” *Environmental Ethics* 26:1, 2004, 38) He described a biotic community which is far more tolerant and inclusive. “The crucial thing is that humans must neither monopolize the picture entirely nor absent ourselves from it completely, but rather try to live in interaction, to create a space for genuine encounter as part of our ongoing reconstruction of our own lives and practices.” (Weston, “Before Environmental Ethics,” *Postmodern Environmental Ethics*, 237)

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Elizabeth’s Journal of the day after her arrival at Lazaretto quarantine: “The Matin Bells awakened my Soul to its most painful regrets and filled it with an agony of Sorrow which could not at first find relief even in prayer—In the little closet from whence there is a view of the Open Sea, and the beatings of the waves against the high rocks at the entrance of this Prison which throws them violently back and raises the white foam as high as its walls, I first came to my senses and reflected that I was offending my only Friend and resource in my misery and voluntarily shutting out from my Soul the only consolation it could receive—pleading for Mercy and Strength brought Peace—and with a cheerful countenance I asked William what we should do for Breakfast.” (*Collected Writings* 1:254. November 20 Sunday morning, 1803)

Elizabeth’s love of nature also extended to a concern for all creatures’ happiness, as seen in an anecdote she shared with Rebecca. “You would have enjoyed the last half hour past as much as I have—imagine a young robin in a cage, its mother on the top which she never left but to fetch it food, and the male chipping on a tree near it. Nelly was its owner and I *coaxed* her to make them happy and open the cage-door, and the moment it was done, out went the little one with both the old ones after it.” (1.123, *Collected Writings* 1:164)

## Elizabeth's Insight on Equity and Balance in Light of Bookchin's Social Ecology

**Murray Bookchin** (1921-2006) thought that the root of our ecological crisis is the concept of hierarchy: “By hierarchy, I mean the cultural, traditional and political system to which the terms class and state most appropriately refer.” (Murray Bookchin, *The Ecology of Freedom: The Emergence and Dissolution of Hierarchy*, 2005, 68) His social ecology attempts to overcome hierarchy in the human community first, thereby building a dynamic harmony wherein nature and humans live together in peace: “A distinct human natural community, the social as well as organic factors that interrelate to provide the basis for an ecologically rounded and balanced community.” (*Ibid.*, 87) In other words, the aim of social ecology is to achieve freedom in human society, which will naturally lead to our reconciliation with nature. Bookchin thought that in a true ecology of freedom, social freedom and natural freedom support each other. (*Ibid.*, 415)

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In a letter to Eliza Sadler on 6 October 1807, Elizabeth clearly articulated what might be considered a worldview of ecological balance. After writing about the illness of Anna, her sister Mary's miscarriage, her own tedious ague, her half-sister Helen's fever and tending to her, she states: “—Well dearest—so we go—the wheel goes round—precious inestimable privilege,—may [we look] up all the while—” (4.54, *Collected Wrings* 1:467) Elizabeth perceived that suffering, illness, and death are an inescapable lot for us, yet also precious privileges once we learn to bear them. The wheel of joy and suffering goes round with equity, maturing and transforming us.

**Aldo Leopold** (1887-1948), is the first contemporary scholar who raised the question of our “ecological conscience” toward the non-human and proposed a Land Ethic. “A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.” (*A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There*, 224-225) Leopold stated that moderation is the best virtue if we want to live ecologically. “It is well that the planting season comes only in spring, for moderation is best in all things, even shovels. During the other months you may watch the process of becoming a pine.” (*Ibid.*, 82) Leopold also wrote, “Conservation is a state of harmony between men and land.” (*Ibid.*, 207)

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On 3 August 1799, Elizabeth wrote to Rebecca Seton: “I have often told you my Rebecca that I had determined never again to allow myself the enjoyment of any affection beyond the bound of *moderation*—” (1.61, *CW*, 1:91) And, referencing moderation in another letter to Rebecca: “I make it a rule never to answer letters whilst under the influence of the first impression I receive from them.” (1.68, 2 October 1799, *Ibid.*, 1:100) Elizabeth was practicing what she had previously written to Eliza: “As I think the first point of Religion is cheerfulness and Harmony they who have these in view are certainly right.” (1.8, 8 February 1796, *Ibid.*, 1:8)

#### **Four constitutive characteristics of Elizabeth’s ecological spirituality:**

- 1. Nature as the space where Elizabeth encountered her friends and God;**
- 2. Nature as the source of consolation when she experienced suffering and abandonment;**
- 3. Her awareness of ecological balance;**
- 4. Her focus on the present, on moderation, and harmony.**