NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Spirituality is healthy

Rich Heffern | Jan. 13, 2010 NCR Today

Many pscyhologists and others in the health professions have recognized the vital contribution spirituality makes to mental and physical well-being. Fran Ferder, a Catholic sister with a long and active practice in psychotherapy, points out that the Genesis accounts in the Bible describe God as Energizer, Breath-Sharer, one who hovers, who breathes life into and wants to relate to all of creation. Those same qualities, Ferder notes, also describe people who are psychologically healthy and robust.

Such people behave in ways that give life to others. They attend to and want to relate with others in productive and meaningful ways. "When our lives most reflect the sacred pattern that brought us into being," Ferder writes, "perhaps then we are closest to the holy, and therefore the most whole and healthy." The longing for holiness and wholeness is also good mental hygiene, she concludes. Good spirituality is good mental health.

Just recently we have seen the emergence of an ecological concept of human health and sanity -- eco-psychology or re-earthing or shamanic counseling, it is variously called. Eco-psychology aks this question: Is it possible to be a healthy and sane human while living on a sick and dying planet?

An impetus for this linking together of ecology and mental health has been the popularity of the controversial Gaia Hypothesis. Developed by British biochemist James Lovelock and American biologist Lynn Margulis in the 1970s, this theory proposes that the Earth's life support systems, the biomass, play an active, intelligent role in preserving the conditions that guarantee the survival of life.

"On earth the environment has been made and monitored by life," writes Margulis, "as much as life has been made and influenced by the environment." The theory proposes that the biomass, in its long-term self regulation, exhibts "the behavior of a single organism, even a living creature." The ancient Greek name "Gaia," for the earth goddess, has been attached to this concept of a living biomass.

The image of Gaia, the Earth alive, captivates and enchants the imagination in a dramatic portrayal of ecological interdependence. Indeed, much of 20th-century science supports and extends this finding of interdependence -- that the cosmos is not an inert hierarchy but instead is a great web of interconnectedness. Our scientific view of the cosmos now pictures the universe as an epochs-old evolving partnership of physical and biological systems reaching back from our present condition to the birth of the universe, shrouded in mystery, the Big Bang.

"We have life and mind as fully at home in the universe as any of the countless physical systems from which they evolved," writes Theodore Roszak, a leading proponent of eco-psychology. "More hypothetically, we have the possibility that the self-regulating biosphere continues to 'speak' through the human consciousness, making its voice heard even within the framework of modern urban culture."

This suggests there is a direct, necessary and intimate link between each one of our human lives and the life of the planet, a notion that brings us to the vision quest of the Native American or to myth scholar Joseph Campbell's advice to follow our bliss. Campbell noted that when people follow their innate enthusiasms and loves through life, there is a commonly reported sense of being helped by hidden hands.

"Don't be afraid," Campbell advises, "and doors will open where you didn't know they were going to be. When you follow your bliss, you put yourself on a kind of hidden track that has been there all the time, waiting for you, and the life you ought to be living is the one you are living."

When we live an authentic life each of us is intimately in communion with the rest of creation, with all its travail, splendor and wisdom.

Source URL (retrieved on *07/26/2014 - 07:03*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/spirituality-healthy