

Introduction

What's with the apples?

by Matthew Henry

I have found myself in the months of bringing this book to life constantly searching for ways to describe the project. Why so many contributors? What is its intention? Who is it for? What's it about? What's with the apples? Most of these questions have been asked in passing by old friends, new colleagues, and extended family members. More often than not the questions have been politely curious, and my answers, I presume: vaguely insubstantial. So I write now almost apologetically to all those who have been sincerely curious, to offer some of the story of this book, and hopefully answer along the way: why—all things considered—I think it's been worth my effort.

It was brought to my attention by a friend a little less than a year ago that 2008 would be the twenty-fifth anniversary of the publication of Matthew Fox's *Original Blessing*. Her hint was that someone should do something to mark the occasion. We were—as board members of Creation Spirituality Communities, Inc.—just as likely to do something about this as anyone. Yet exactly what form that something might take did not seem to be announcing itself, despite our shared yet uncommitted agreement. And it was left at that.

A few weeks later, this planted seed sprouted through into my conscious mind. As gifts of the imagination often do, the project arrived wrapped in countless layers of possibility and problem, yet with the enthusiasm sufficient to unwrap it anyway. The idea—as it burst into my mind—was to compose a new book in response to *Original Blessing*. Not for a moment did I have any thought of attempting this alone; it was to be a gift offered by many people, and this has become the most noticeable aspect of the book.

Why so many contributors?

I have long known and appreciated as one of Matthew Fox's students that his work has always embraced many voices. One could argue that it is one of the most distinctive features of Matthew's writings, and of the manner in which he teaches: hardly a paragraph flows from his pen or his mouth that does not call upon the wisdom of others. In the course of the project, I pursued this curiosity, and found (for example) that it was only on one page (p.215 in my edition) in *Original Blessing* that a whole page could be found without reference to the wisdom of another, and usually several others. And Matthew is not known for his footnotes; he is openly committed to sharing with his readers the sources of his insights. So to read or hear him is to dance with many partners, as he invites you with an almost ritual intonation of "Gandhi says . . . ," "Hildegarde

says . . . ,” “Jesus says . . . ,” “Starhawk says . . . ,” and so on. As much as the ideas of countless ancient and contemporary thinkers have become a part of his own thinking, Matthew is clearly committed to reminding us that he is a student of these many teachers. As a teacher himself, his commitment is to passing on what he has learned, and to do so without giving pride of place to his own voice.

To approach this book, then, without a compliment of many voices would be simply absurd. Likewise, to have steered this book into something primarily about Matthew would have missed the point. This is not a hagiography; Matthew has feet made of clay like the rest of us. We do have contributions that face Matthew directly, such as the portrait by Jennifer Hereth. We find others that move side by side in conversation with his work; still others cross Matthew’s path in exploring their ideas. And some of the voices in this book make no explicit reference at all to Matthew Fox. I think it’s an appropriate balance, for I do intend to point to Matthew’s incredible gifts as a teacher, but in the manner in which I think reflects his approach, that is, to not place him on a pedestal. In watching Matthew on many occasions, I am certain that his reluctance to be put in such a position is not a mark of modesty, as such, but a manifestation of his thinking: a radical equanimity. I have heard him address a conference of people with the conviction that each one of us is a version of Creation Spirituality.

Apart from simply “many contributors,” an equally essential characteristic would have to be a diversity of contributors: female and male, old and young, many faiths, scientists, people from several continents, widely-known and relatively anonymous, of varied race, diverse sexual identities, and unique creativities. We even have one contributor who knows no English (translated for us by Shana Henry, my linguistically-gifted wife). Some of this has been crafted deliberately, but much of it reflects the natural emergence of response to Matthew’s work. Had there been more time, I would have liked to gather some more voices to represent an even broader diversity. Nevertheless, I think that the diversity achieved across many categories serves not only to make for a rich collection, but also as an indicator of the breathtaking scope of Matthew Fox’s work. Just reading the biographical paragraphs at the end of the book would say something of truth and importance about how widely his work has reached.

The twenty-six themes in *Original Blessing* offered as good a template as anything for organizing the book. As the idea came to fullness in my imagination, I recognized that in addition to the left-brain responses of essayists, this book would be an inchoate effort without the right-brain gifts of poets, visual artists and storytellers. The twenty-six contributions I was going to seek tripled to seventy-eight: an essay, a poem, and a picture for each theme. Of course, while I appreciated the symmetry of this imagined model, I came to appreciate even more the places in the book where a contributor’s inspiration cracked the limitations of this scheme. As a result, we have many essays, poems and pictures, but also some songs, meditations, stories, several interviews, some hybrids of words and visual art, and—my personal favorite, categorically speaking—a recipe. It is ironic, as a songwriter, that I did not seek to include a CD of music with the book, since I have done *that* many times over, whereas editing a book is a new adventure for me. Perhaps the next edition.

What is the book's intention?

To say thank you. I am grateful to Matthew, for his courage and relentless commitment. I am thankful that although possessed of a rare and soaring intellect, he has been guided, too, by a generosity of heart and magnanimity of soul. I am appreciative of the chance to know Matthew personally, and so to know how very human—humble—humorous he is. Readers of Matthew's books will have likely heard many times the wisdom of Meister Eckhart, that *if the only prayer you say in your whole life is "thank you," that would suffice.* This book invites almost seventy people to say "thank you," from the depths of their creativity; and it points to countless others who offer their gratitude in myriad ways, usually lived

To accept an invitation. I discovered in the Introduction to *Original Blessing* that Matthew had written that each of the themes:

*is an unfinished meditation . . . I trust the reader to make connections and applications and to carry on the theological revisioning that must follow from this new (but ancient) vision."*¹

Finding these words from Matthew served as a proof-text, really, of what I already had known: Matthew Fox insists that each one of us must trust our creativity and give birth to the images given to us. That he perceives himself as one voice in an expansive choir is not news. In the same manner in which he consistently calls upon ancient sages, premodern mystics and postmodern activists, Matthew calls upon each of us to birth compassion. He reaches back into the past, around himself to his contemporaries, and forward to voices yet to emerge. I have known many students of Matthew's work who have taken this invitation seriously, and this book is merely a literal testimony to the empowerment inherent in his invitation—for those who have contributed, as well as the countless others who could have.

To pass it on. It is noteworthy that Matthew has invested himself most heavily in education. Whilst he has accomplished remarkable things in reinventing ritual and writing books, the container for his work has been education. From his Institute in Culture and Creation Spirituality in Chicago, to the westward move to Holy Names College in Oakland, Ca., and then to the establishment of the University of Creation Spirituality, Matthew has long invested his creativity, leadership and money into the cause of education. As I write, he is working with inner-city children in an education program he calls YELLAWE, based on his recent book, *The A.W.E. Project: Reinventing Education, Reinventing the Human.* To pass on the ideas of creation-centered spirituality has been Matthew's lifelong commitment. It was, ultimately, his refusal to walk away from his school that resulted in his Vatican-authored expulsion from the Dominican priesthood. This book honors that same intention of passing on these ideas, yet does so without even the hint of the risk that Matthew undertook in writing *Original Blessing.*

What is it about?

Inevitably, this book is somewhat about Matthew Fox. Primarily, though, it is about the ideas to which he has devoted his life, a set of theological convictions and philosophies collectively known as creation-centered spirituality, or simply, Creation Spirituality. The careful reader will note that some contributors to this book capitalize this term, as I have done, while others do not. I believe this reflects how the ideas take root for people differently. For some, Creation Spirituality is definitive and deserves status as a proper noun; for others it is perhaps more subtle and fits better without capitalization. Or possibly there are convictions altogether beyond my guessing. I have tried to respect those differences in pulling the pieces together.

Similarly, you will recognize spellings which reflect both US and English conventions. (As a dual citizen of the US and Australia, I have long since lost my capacity to consistently spell anything at all.) You should find “Earth” capitalized when it refers to our home planet (but not when it serves as a synonym for soil). I mention these things not by accident, but as a modeling of some important ideas in Creation Spirituality, including the valuing of diversity, the honoring of wisdom from different sources, and the recognition of the primacy of Earth. Another style choice in the book which embraces Creation Spirituality is that I have chosen in the “bylines” of the contributors to offer just the contributor’s name. Ordinations, doctoral degrees and other such things can be identified in the biographical paragraphs at the end of the book; but you are invited to embrace, for example, the writings of the undergraduate student Paul Morin with the same openness as those of Rabbi Sandy Eisenberg Sasso, Doctor of Ministry.

The term Creation Spirituality was named for Matthew Fox in 1967 by the French Theologian M.D. Chenu, with whom he studied at L’Institute Catholique in Paris. It is a spirituality that takes Creation (not Creationism) seriously. So is Creation Spirituality something that Matthew Fox created? *No*, and *Yes*. I’ve always found Matthew reluctant to attach his own name to the authoring of the ideas, so deep is his conviction that this tradition is ancient. My encounter of Matthew’s work could be described as having him show me around a magnificent building, which he has obviously constructed, all the while hearing him say “I didn’t build it. I didn’t design it.” I think Matthew is more likely to say that he found both the materials and the architecture lying dormant and dreadfully neglected. His capacity to pull it all together into a coherent (but never complete) whole continues to be not merely the task of assembling scattered ideas, but recognizing patterns and consistencies that transcend culture and history. If the ideas are the bricks, Matthew’s work has been as both bricklayer and mortar. To this work, he has lent the extraordinary power of both his mystical depth and intellectual breadth. Matthew would insist, I dare say, that each one of us creates those bricks and brings them together; and not one of us is excused from the responsibility of bringing to life the gifts within us. This book, by conversing with Matthew explicitly in some places, and by paying him no attention whatsoever in others, hopefully embraces both the *No* and *Yes* of Matthew’s role in Creation Spirituality.

This book is about *Original Blessing* (the book), and Original Blessing (the idea). The book is Matthew's most well-known book, has sold over 400,000 copies, and carries itself the subtitle of *A Primer in Creation Spirituality*. I don't presume that it is necessarily the most-enjoyed of his books, but its importance is foundational for all of his subsequent work.

The philosophy of Original Blessing is that fundamentally, all of creation is a blessing. The integral goodness of creation does not mean that sin, evil, suffering and despair do not exist; it means that the blessing is the bigger picture. It is most certainly, as Matthew writes it, a play on words with the non-biblical, post-Jesus concept of original sin, which so quickly paints humanity into the corner of only its weakest dimension. Far from this grim notion of inescapable human culpability that emerged from just one wisdom tradition, Original Blessing affirms that all is created as blessing—all is created as good (revisiting the first chapter of Genesis in the Bible will remind us of the same). Original Blessing is not a doctrine of just one wisdom tradition, nor does it affirm the blessedness of just one species. In the unfolding of the universe, we humans have barely just arrived, and it would be arrogantly anthropocentric to think ourselves either the best or worst thing that has happened. We are a continuation of the ongoing blessing of divine creativity. (I wonder if we shouldn't consider renaming the Big Bang as the Original Blessing; the Big Bang, after all, was an expression coined in jest and ridicule.) Original Blessing goes beyond being a mere corrective to original sin: it is a concept that resonates just as truly with people who have never heard of original sin. And many of those find the idea of original sin laughable. Blessing—and not sin—is our magnetic north.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel stated it most succinctly: "Just to be is a blessing; just to live is holy."² Heschel also said that humanity's sin is the failure to live properly what it is: a miracle.³ And where we have failed to live into the potential of our blessing, we have sown injustice and sorrow. Matthew Fox relates that Rabbi Zalman Schacter-Shalomi (a contributor to this book) says that there is more good than evil in the world—but only just. The challenge is to live the blessing such that all can say: "yes, just to be is a blessing." To respond appropriately (and to play with Heschel's words in reverse): A blessing is to be just. Beauty cries out to injustice—do we give our voices to this chorus?

The idea of Original Blessing is the key in which Creation Spirituality is composed. Therefore, when Matthew recently revisited a list of principles for Creation Spirituality, Original Blessing theology is evident throughout. This list of principles was revised over a period of several months by Alex Risley-Schroeder, J. Melvin Bricker, Susan Coppage Evans, Rick Kuykendall, Diane Wolverton, Matthew Fox and myself. It again reflects not only Matthew's willingness, but his insistence that others continually develop, work and play with the ideas he has uncovered, recovered and discovered.

Twelve Principles of Creation Spirituality

- 1. The Universe, and all within it, is fundamentally a blessing.**

Our relationship with the Universe fills us with awe.

- 2. In Creation, God is both immanent and transcendent. This is panentheism which is not theism (God out there) and not atheism (no God anywhere).**

We experience that the Divine is in all things and all things are in the Divine.

- 3. God is as much Mother as Father, as much Child as Parent, as much God in mystery as the God in history, as much beyond all words and images as in all forms and beings.**

We are liberated from the need to cling to God in one form or one literal name.

- 4. In our lives, it is through the work of spiritual practice that we find our deep and true selves.**

Through the arts of meditation and silence we cultivate a clarity of mind and move beyond fear into compassion and community.

- 5. Our inner work can be understood as a four-fold journey involving:**

- awe, delight, amazement (known as the *Via Positiva*)**
- uncertainty, darkness, suffering, letting go (*Via Negativa*)**
- birthing, creativity, passion (*Via Creativa*)**
- justice, healing, celebration (*Via Transformativa*)**

We weave through these paths like a spiral danced, not a ladder climbed.

- 6. Every one of us is a mystic.**

*We can enter the mystical as much through beauty (*Via Positiva*) as through contemplation and suffering (*Via Negativa*). We are born full of wonder and can recover it at any age.*

7. Every one of us is an artist.

Whatever the expression of our creativity, it is our prayer and praise (Via Creativa).

8. Every one of us is a prophet.

Our prophetic work is to interfere with all forms of injustice and that which interrupts authentic life (Via Transformativa).

9. Diversity is the nature of the Universe.

We rejoice in and courageously honor the rich diversity within the Cosmos and expressed among individuals and across multiple cultures, religions and ancestral traditions.

10. The basic work of God is compassion and we, who are all original blessings and sons and daughters of the Divine, are called to compassion.

We acknowledge our shared interdependence; we rejoice at one another's joys and grieve at one another's sorrows and labor to heal the causes of those sorrows.

11. There are many wells of faith and knowledge drawing from one underground river of Divine wisdom. The practice of honoring, learning and celebrating the wisdom collected from these wells is Deep Ecumenism.

We respect and embrace the wisdom and oneness that arises from the diverse wells of all the sacred traditions of the world.

12. Ecological justice is essential for the sustainability of life on Earth.

Ecology is the local expression of cosmology and so we commit to live in light of this value: to pass on the beauty and health of Creation to future generations.

How these principles have been embraced has varied. As I noted earlier, Matthew Fox has poured much of his work into educational institutions founded on these ideas both in content and pedagogy. The most recent of these institutions has changed dramatically in the past few years, essentially dropping Creation Spirituality from its name and from the core of its education. The institutional container that has long held these ideas is now gone. These principles now are most deliberately held by two organizations: Friends of Creation Spirituality (FCS), which has for many years been Matthew's own support base; and also Creation Spirituality Communities (CSC), a two-years-young non-profit organization committed to bringing Creation Spirituality to fruition in new and existing communities, wherever the seeds may take root. What various forms such communities take is limitless in diversity, and some imagining is done in an essay in this book by Susan Coppage Evans whose initial energy led to CSC's formation.

So perhaps the next home of these liberating principles is community, rather than school. Perhaps new schools will emerge. Another conviction of mine is that Creation Spirituality needs new voices in addition to Matthew's; hopefully the book models this in a small way. There are many people for whom Creation Spirituality is importantly resonant, but there are fewer for whom it is vibrantly explicit. If Creation Spirituality is to outlive Matthew Fox, it must find its home—explicitly—in many more voices, and in new and existing communities. My feeling, with this book in hand as merely evidence of what is already alive and growing, is that we are on the way.

What's with the apples?

Apples have managed to find a prominent place as a motif of this book. My copy of *Original Blessing* features a simple graphic of a red apple on its cover. It is an image which, as Gaston Bachelard would say, "has touched the depths before it stirs the surface."⁴ It echoes of wholeness, universality, simplicity, pleasure, and nourishment, and many more things. The whole apple supplants the image of the bitten apple, so long forced to serve as a symbol of original sin. This book borrows that simple, whole apple and adds a dimension: it's a real apple. It is enfleshed—just as this book represents the superabundance of voices bringing to life the ideas of *Original Blessing* in various ways. (In some imaginary world, every copy of this book would have a different, unique apple photograph blessing the cover.) In the apple I see a reminder of the Eastern insights that we share this existence: that we emerge, live, and somehow yield that life into a cycle of ongoing existence. I see also the "Western spiritual aim and ideal, which is, of living the life that is potential in *you* and was never in anyone else as a possibility."⁵ The voices in this book express a spirituality that is at once unique and universal; a bowl of apples.

From schools to communities . . . from an apple for the teacher to an apple of cosmic Eucharist. It is freely given, blessed, and shared. Take a bite—it's the best way to reach the seeds.

A final question asked of me as this book has approached completion: “Would you do it again?” I would. And not because it has been easy (which it hasn’t) or enjoyable (which it has, understatedly), but because if I was to do it again, it would emerge in different ways, with different people, other ideas, and surely even more gifts of beauty and inspiration. Anyone else beginning with the same premise would inevitably birth a very different and very beautiful book. It would have been a fascinating project, would it not, to have had someone else do another version of this at the same time?

Quite early on in the journey, a friend encouraged me immensely, in saying: “Besides bringing your children and your joy into the world this is going to be your next best contribution to enhancing the beauty of the world.” I think that so far in my life, he may be right; but I’m not done yet. Are you?

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Southern winter solstice, 2008

¹ Matthew Fox, 1983, *Original Blessing*, Bear & Company, pp. 27-28.

² Samuel H. Dresner, 2000, *I Asked for Wonder: A Spiritual Anthology of Abraham Joshua Heschel*, New York: Crossroad, p.65.

³ Ibid., p.43

⁴ Gaston Bachelard, 1969, *The Poetics of Space*, Beacon Press, Boston, p. xix.

⁵ Joseph Campbell, 1988, *The Power of Myth*, Doubleday, New York, p.151.

