Humans bury not simply to achieve closure and effect a separation from the dead but also and above all to humanize the ground on which they build their worlds and found their histories.... As Homo sapiens we are born of our biological parents. As human beings we are born of the dead—of the regional ground they occupy, of the languages they inhabited, of the worlds they brought into being, of the many institutional, legal, cultural and psychological legacies that, through us, connect them to the unborn.

—Robert Pogge Harrison

In several recent Think Here essays, I have explored the linkage among Earth ethics (symbiotic ontology); ecological democracy and citizenship (symbiotic politics); the presence of the past; and its flip side, the future within the present (symbiotic time).

Earth ethics has to do with the ontological condition of interdependence and “symbiosis” (mutual flourishing) in the systems of life on Earth. Indeed, our planet is noteworthy for possessing geophysical conditions suitable for sustaining complex life forms and ecosystems. Moreover, some climate regimes in Earth history—such as the most recent millennia of the Holocene—have been characterized by large temperate zones and relatively stable climatic conditions. The time scale of human biological evolution is much longer, but it is fair to say that, socially and culturally, the Holocene has been the natural basis for the developmental flourishing of humanity. However, during the most recent century of the Holocene, human societies, technologies, and activities have begun to encroach on—and exceed—safe margins and tolerances set by planetary systems. Spurred by evidence of increased greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere and other evidence of climate change, human knowledge now possesses a substantial, if not complete, comprehension of how planetary systems operate and what they require of us to sustain the Holocenic climate that has been the cradle of humankind. The bough it rests on is about ready to break.

Earth ethics is based on an imperative of human responsibility to protect and promote natural systems so that symbiotic life is abundant and flourishes. Many other species possess agency—even conscious, intentional agency—and affect natural systems to varying degrees. But none have the capability for either sustaining or disrupting natural systems on a scale or scope matching ours. Consequently, the moral duty to promote flourishing life on Earth falls to us. Today human-kind is manifestly failing to live up to this responsibility; indeed, it is violating its moral debt to the planet at virtually every turn.

In symbiotic time, we engage in an ongoing learning process of historical and normative reinterpretation, correction, and atonement.

The human failure in this regard is a failure of will and of social, political, and economic institutional design. And those failures, in turn, are related to a cultural and spiritual failure of the moral imagination. Earth ethics examines the roots of that failure. In part, it does so in order to document and register a legacy indictment of our current behavior, normative self-deceptions, and institutional power structures. But principally, it does so in order to inspire and guide practices and movements for social change that will motivate human-kind to respect and stay within the limits of planetary systems—to stay bounded.

Ecological democracy develops a new moral imagination and a political morality comprised of norms of right recognition and right relationship among contemporaneous human individuals and societies, and between human and non-human beings and systems. These concepts and norms come alive and gain the ability to change human political will and motivation through
expression as social practices and social movements. Movements, by their very nature, tend to be focused and partisan. But democratic norms must be public. By that, I mean that the authority and legitimacy of the norms articulated in a living political morality or moral imagination come about through the discursive activity of deliberation in the public sphere, and in the decision-making processes undertaken by the institutions of governmental, non-governmental, and private corporate actors.

Ecological democracy is a form of governance that brings together the best available scientific knowledge—which describes and explains real environmental, social, and economic conditions—with the best available normative understanding—which prescribes change in the direction of ideal environmental, social, and economic conditions. Descriptive and explanatory knowledge is based on analytic reasoning and controlled observation; prescriptive and aspirational knowledge is based on open and inclusive processes of interpretation and justification involving arguments put forward by scholars and by the practical experience of individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds and diverse walks of life. I shall return to this point below.

Finally, **symbiotic time**. Intergenerational perspectives complement the stress on symbiotic ontology in Earth ethics and on symbiotic politics in ecological democracy. We recognize connections among humans and non-humans once alive but now no longer living, those now living, and those not yet alive who will live in the future. The domain of symbiotic time is a realm of memory and tradition. It is about recalling and reinterpreting cultural and moral foundations laid in the past. It is about seeing our responsibility to transmit or bequeath the cultural legacy of such values and institutions to those who have not yet had an opportunity to benefit from or improve upon them. And, finally, the domain of temporal symbiosis is a place of restoration and repair in the present, as we remember and honor those architects and laborers who laid the physical, social, cultural, and political infrastructure of our current way of life. In symbiotic time, we engage in an ongoing learning process of historical and normative reinterpretation, correction, and atonement.

**METAPHORS MORE THAN METAPHORS**

Perhaps this third face of interdependence is especially fecund at this moment in global history, when multiple normative and political challenges converge. The global pandemic of novel coronavirus has brought about an abrupt change in patterns of everyday life, akin in some ways to outbreaks of ethnic violence, civil war, and refugee crises that have tragically become recurring features of life in some areas of the world. But the outbreak of a highly contagious and dangerous disease did not spare affluent nations and globally has been rapidly and exceedingly disruptive, bringing in its wake a shocking death toll, widespread unemployment, economic loss, uncertainty, and fear. Worldwide, between 50 and 100 million perished in the influenza pandemic of 1918 and 675,000 died in the U.S. COVID-19 won’t match that, but it can’t truly be said that we are lucky.

By itself COVID-19 would be enough to justify consideration of symbiotic temporality. But two other legacy emergencies are breaking out all around us. One is popular outrage at racially motivated police violence and a heightened discernment of unjust disparities of health and social opportunities based on race, class, and gender. There is also a recognition that this racial inequality is not truly anathema, or simply a matter of psychological bigotry and prejudice of individuals, but is something deeply embedded in American life through the entrenched operations of our legal, financial, educational, economic, and political systems. These factors have combined to create a resurgence of social protests around the world. The other emergency, hovering as always in the background, is the urgent need for global measures to mitigate and prepare for serious global warming and climate change.

In sum, we enter the third decade of the twenty-first century faced with the prospect of frequent, widespread infectious disease outbreaks that seriously disrupt our key institutions and our
everyday lives. We are faced with the question of whether the legacy of massive economic and social inequality can be corrected by democratic government. And we realize that the increasingly clear and present danger of climate change will most likely exacerbate these other problems and cripple our institutional, economic, and political ability to cope with them.

There is an old joke about a memo that said: “This month’s meeting of Procrastinators Anonymous has been postponed.” That would be us. It is no joke.

We stand on a threshold beyond which the constitutive features of our economic, political, and moral ways of life will disintegrate, and the task of building them back better will consume and transform the politics and governance of the remainder of this century.\(^5\) Disintegration comes in many forms. COVID-19 and climate change stand at opposite ends of a spectrum. COVID-19 struck precipitously: the very existence of the mutation was only discovered around 2014, some papers were published, scientists continued to collect samples in bat caves, and virtually nothing was done politically except to cut funding for pandemic planning and monitoring. To be sure, the general problem of human contact with exotic species, land-use encroachment on ecological areas in which viral evolution is continuously occurring, and the likelihood of recurrent outbreaks of human infection from novel strains are well known among scientists.\(^6\) Global warming, on the other hand, has an insidious ability to hide in plain sight. Compelling evidence of greenhouse gas emissions and temperature rise has been available at least since the 1980s, but the direct effects were masked by gradual ecological changes and by structural procrastination in our global and national institutions and politics.

How do we come to grips with dangers that present themselves as sudden emergencies, or with those that are more stealthy until system feedback mechanisms and emergent properties of system transformation produce equally sudden and all-but-overwhelming consequences? The public health response to COVID-19 has been largely based on a grasp of the biological–social nexus of the disease. The social aspects, at least, are backward looking. From past pandemics, we know that proven containment methods involve widespread screening and diagnostic testing, closing down social gatherings and activities that involve close personal contact, quarantine of symptomatic and potentially infectious individuals for a period of time, procurement and distribution of safety equipment and lifesaving medical equipment, and development of new medications and preventive vaccines.

These measures are economically and socially disruptive, so steps must be taken to provide economic support for individuals, families, businesses, and the social and educational services provided by state and local governments. We understand these methods, but again, the problem is not a lack of scientific knowledge as much as the lack of political and ethical will. Pandemics are nightmares for capitalism, especially in societies unwilling to tolerate very large numbers of deaths. Social welfare state measures on a large scale are a necessary investment to bring both financial system collapse (as in the Great Recession of 2008 to 2010) and pandemic lethal infection under control.\(^7\)

Considerations such as these bring us back to the general point concerning symbiotic time. Living citizens in the present are not merely less successful, they are fundamentally incomplete without those who came before and who will come after. An exemplar of this from the classical Western literary tradition is Aeneas, who carried with him the ashes and relics that were tokens of the memory of the fallen political community of Troy. He must journey into the domain of the non-living in order to eventually serve the living, and in the underworld he encounters both the spirits of the dead and shades headed toward birth—both the past and the future.\(^8\)

Spirits and shades? The literary critic Michael Wood captures precisely what I am getting at here when he points out that a ghost is not “a figure who is entirely unreal, just one who has become a little faint, lacking in physical immediacy.
Perhaps someone who lives in the memory only, not an inconsiderable form of life after all. Or in possibility, a spirit from the future.” A bit later Wood continues:

The point perhaps concerns not so much the questioned reality of ghosts, or their undoubted persistence in the imagination, as the trouble they cause for reason. It is because they don’t exist in several important senses that they do exist in others. The distinction between the living and the dead matters; we can’t do without it. And yet there are so many ways of crossing the gap that the mythological migrations, the metaphors that are more than metaphors, are not likely to go away.9

Ecological democracy must be about counterfactual and aspirational practices... living in pursuit of the as if and the could be.

GENERATIONAL COVENANTS

At the heart of symbiotic time lies a metaphor that is more than metaphor. This is the notion of covenant, fundamental to ancient Judaism and pressed into service by Western political philosophy since the seventeenth century to authorize and validate the popular sovereignty of the civic republic. Often in theology and always, I think, in politics, the covenant that founds and grounds the republic also binds symbiotic time—past, present, and future. To take advantage of the double meaning, we can refer to the “generational covenant” of an ecological democracy. Some of the parties to this covenant, the dead, are no longer biologically embodied as organisms, but they are present and active in other ways: in archives, in ideas, in architectures and rituals of remembering, in the duties of memory and vows of keeping faith and trust. The unborn, also not organically present, are nonetheless members already of the community in imagined, subjunctive (as if) form. Their future lives and flourishing are entrusted to the ongoing political community of the living who strive toward the common good, within the accounting of which must be included our inheritance from the dead and the interests of the yet to be alive. As members already but not yet, the unborn exercise a pull of duty and concern that is symbiotically linked with the entrusted duties and care owed to dead members, and with the relational duties of recognition that living members owe one another in their current generation.

In modern secular materialism, these notions carry little persuasive force; their metaphoric meaning remains fabulous only. I am not here defending a spiritual or non-materialistic ontology in the notion of generational covenant, although others—especially those conversant with indigenous perspectives and narratives of myth and ritual—may do so.10 Here, however, I propose a different tack. It is to distinguish two modes of discourse and two interpretations of the covenant overseeing a symbiotic politics.

One mode of discourse takes shape in declarative formulation and provides propositional, “as is” meaning. The other mode of discourse takes shape in subjunctive formulation and provides counterfactual and aspirational “as if” or “could be” meaning. I submit that both declarative discourse and subjunctive discourse are valid modes of human interpretation and understanding; they simply operate in different registers of reason and logic.11 There is no need to rank them against some standard of evaluation such as knowledge or truth. The question for our purposes here is what contribution, if any, does subjunctive discourse make to our understanding of symbiotic being, symbiotic politics, and symbiotic time?

The second distinction I wish to introduce is between two goals or ends of political association in a republic or democracy. One end is transactional relationality and benefit. The other is transformational relationality and benefit. My reading of the intellectual history of the concept of covenant is that for the most part it has been associated in political theory with transformational relationality because the telos of the political association a covenant founds transcends mutual cooperation, deal making, and self-interest, which
are essentially transactional goals. Much more fundamentally, covenant encompasses growth in moral awareness, greater realization of the inherent potential of a species, and fuller human self-realization of each and all through life in a democratic culture and participation in common deliberation.

This is where my two distinctions come together. To do justice to the transformational ends of political association held together by covenant, it is necessary to engage in the conversation of subjunctive meaning and imagination. Ecological democracy must be about counterfactual and aspirational practices, having what John Dewey called the democratic faith of living in pursuit of the as if and the could be. The flourishing and resilience of both the natural and the cultural worlds can only be sustained by counterfactual vision and aspirational norms and ideals. The symbiotic being of the human makes this possible, and the generational covenant actualizes this possibility. A generational covenant makes places in space and time for recognition and care among the still living, the no longer living but extracorporeally active, and the not yet living, who exist as possibility or promise and are therefore present already in the activity of symbiotic politics.

It is important to stress that what I have in mind by the generational covenant, with its counterfactual “as if” thinking and its aspirational “could be” norms of justice and equality, is not something transcendent or eternal. It is something that each generation must avow anew and restore—and sometimes reject, abandon, and replace. Generational covenants mark us as relational, civic beings. And as humans are mortal, so is their relationality dynamic and mobile. Political communities—like other aspects of human life, such as the family, the household, and the personal life cycle of each individual—involves passages of entry, sojourning, and departure. But these passages should not be seen solely in terms of external estrangement versus internal belonging. Better to see them as transitions among various ways in which an enduring membership manifests itself naturally and culturally.

The covenantal challenge of our time and our future does not stand poised in front of a blank slate, nor does it require entirely unprecedented modes of theory and action. It is just that in our contemporary assumptions and attitudes, we have failed to remember so many and so much. Most crucially, we have failed to afford moral standing to those yet to come and what they potentially can do. The multiple crises of our historical moment can only be answered profoundly by an affirmation of symbiotic being, by the symbiotic politics of just recognition and parity of democratic power and respect, and by a consciousness of symbiotic time. The political thought and action we need for global health, global justice, and global political economy is a dialogue between present questions, future possibilities, and past insights and blind spots. This must be a critical, not hortatory, dialogue in which the presuppositions of our questions are scrutinized, future possibilities reimagined, and the archives of traditional ideals and modes of governance are ransacked to retrieve what is of enduring value and to avoid the moral mistakes of the past.

I have suggested that the idea of covenant—particularly what I am calling generational covenant—brings subjunctive discourse and transformational goals to the forefront of civic attention and learning. This is not to suggest that declarative as is thinking is absent from symbiotic politics and time. Nor is it to suggest that a generational covenant makes no room for transactional motivations and practices. I do think, however, that when positivism, empiricism, and a kind of transactional realism or realpolitik that celebrates political competition more than community comes to the fore, and when transactional solidarity and self-identity predominates, one is closer to what properly should be seen as a “contract” rather than a covenant. And of course, social contract political theories are one of the mainstays of Western political thought in the modern period and have been since roughly the seventeenth century. The idea of contract reinforces individualization, deracination, and autonomy. By contrast, a less atomistic participant figures into a covenant—one whose ongoing social interdependence
is embraced through the assumption and avowal of a perduring commitment. In short, a contract is a tool of successful doing; a covenant is a way of enhanced being.

Sustaining relational being among humans and intergenerational moral responsibility require us as citizens to acknowledge what the dead have done to make us possible—to learn from it, to draw strength from it, and to atone for it, especially in the fossil carbon era. Acknowledge the covenant with gratitude if the work of the past has been constructive; or with humility and correction if that work has been unjust and destructive. Further, to be kept psychologically and meaningfully vivid and vital, such covenantal responsibility requires ritual enactment as well as moral imagination. In the global capitalist world of commodification and monetization, the “as-is” mentality—the transactional individualism of contractual connections—is ascendant. How might the covenant of life and death be sustained so that it fosters a persistent yearning by the living to honor the dead and keep faith with the future?

The generational covenant gives essential norms of place and purpose to social and individual life, and there is reason to think, from evidence of burial practices in early sites of the genus *Homo*, that a sensibility and imagination named by this covenant are etched in the deep time of human relationality. The strengths of modern democracy bear this imprint; the shortcomings of modern democracy bear its effacement.

If our generation or the next fails to recover and carry forward the covenant between the living and the dead, we may risk undermining political systems that aspire to some measure of popular consent, relational solidarity, and mutual care and concern as aspirational facets of political life. That would be a profound civilizational and human loss. It would undermine our sense of rootedness and continuity. It would hobble our capability to interpret and reinterpret authority, freedom, and duty. I say both “interpret and re-interpret” deliberately here because it bears repeating that the generational covenant does not require a dogmatic, uncritical traditionalism—far from it. It is crucial to recognize that this notion of passing down from one generation to the next need not be understood as a kind of value-neutral conduit. The mere fact that some practice—chattel slavery, for example—was authorized and culturally sanctioned or “vested” by some governments, economic systems, or social and cultural status groups in the past does not mean that subsequent generations must venerate it or refrain from abolishing it simply for the sake of continuity, let alone for the sake of paying homage to the laws and customs of the past.

Sustaining relational being among humans and intergenerational moral responsibility require us as citizens to acknowledge what the dead have done to make us possible—to learn from it, to draw strength from it, and to atone for it, especially in the fossil carbon era.

We shall need subjunctive reason and imagination more than ever as we begin to experience large-scale climate shifts and Earth system changes. The concerns of future politics will have to pertain to systems and structures of power and authority, making them equitable and keeping them accountable. I hope that global political action to adapt to climate change and political action to mitigate social structural inequality and injustice are converging. I believe they can and will.

**The Here and Now of Solidarity: A Place to Take Place**

This notion of re-grounding democracy is an important point of contact between symbiotic time and the symbiotic discourse of democratic citizenship and political morality. At the heart of democratic discourse and society are relational practices of right recognition, by which I mean affirmations of the moral standing of others as persons who deserve equal dignity and care. One such practice of recognition is solidarity. In symbiotic time, positional solidarity among
contemporaneous persons is supplemented by temporal solidarity—recognition and affirmation of the moral standing of persons past and yet to come.

In American history, the violence and devastation of the Civil War in the nineteenth century was perhaps the most disruptive collective experience the country has ever had, but something of comparable magnitude may await us in the middle and end of the current century. From that era, we have an exemplar of symbiotic politics and a generational covenant converging in Abraham Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address of 1863. On that occasion, with a funeral oration at the new cemetery on the battlefield site, Lincoln “replanted” the ideal republic, setting the stage for the new kind of liberty and new emancipatory equality that would come with the abolition of slavery following the defeat of the Confederate forces. Had post-war Reconstruction been pursued and completed differently, perhaps the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth constitutional amendments would have achieved reconstructed liberty and equality for all—the generational covenant of which Lincoln spoke. The subjunctive would have been transformed into the declarative. As things are, that is still to be accomplished. Lincoln’s speech at Gettysburg is still being written and uttered. Unfinished civic work continues. The attempt in symbiotic time to keep faith with the Union dead and to extend solidarity and moral recognition to those generations yet to come has met with powerful resistance. And so the argument for an ethic of solidarity continues to be made. But that argument must be reinforced and sustained by an ethos of solidarity. This point has been made forcefully by political scientists Keith Banting and Will Kymlicka:

Solidarity refers to attitudes of mutual acceptance, cooperation and support in time of need. In the contemporary context of increasingly diverse societies, we are interested in a solidarity that transcends ethno-religious differences, operates at a societal scale, and has civic, democratic, and redistributive dimensions. Such an inclusive solidarity, we contend, is needed to sustain just institutions. Although considerable political conflict attended the emergence of the welfare state historically, just institutions cannot be built or sustained solely through strategic behavior and partisan contestation, or through unbounded humanitarianism.

At its heart solidarity involves a recognition of membership in a web of obligations to affirm, attend to, and deal fairly with others, buttressed by the expectation that they will fulfill their obligations of membership toward you in the same way. Extending such expectations across generations, both backward and forward, helps to strengthen and reassure contemporaneous expectation among members of the current generation.

The end of solidarity is to displace exploitative relationality and unjust exclusion by just relationality, recognition, and equal standing. Solidarity binds the living in a relationship of mutual well-being among all members of the association. This is a future the fallen Union soldiers furthered while they were alive and continue to support as their political membership and existence endure in new manifestations after their deaths—through the inspiration provided to current generations by the Gettysburg Address itself, for instance. This is the point of tangency between solidarity and the common good considered from an intergenerational standpoint. It is the political psychology and the moral ethos of each in all and all in each. It requires more than simply the words of the living; it also requires the words of the dead and the ritual recognitions by the living keeping faith with the dead and receiving the authority the dead pass down.

At Gettysburg, Lincoln planted ancestors to put the republic in place on the solid ground of a political morality still unfinished, on footings—in words that are also deeds—that will stand firm. In the name of the dead, he called upon the living to “highly resolve” that “government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.” Lincoln grounded the dead, by locating and naming freedom from oppression as a common good. And as Robert Pogge Harrison...
argues, this re-grounding happens not only in place but also in time:

Yet the most important place secured in Lincoln’s address is perhaps that of the nation’s time. Its hic does not only mark a geographical “here” but also a historical “now.”... America, in short, needs a place to take place historically.... That place is not only upon the earth... but also in the hearts of those who would assure... that the idea of America shall endure.19

The work of citizens entrusted with a covenant, not the labor of grave diggers and their shovels, is what mattered to Lincoln then, and it is also what matters—or should matter—to us now. It is important, however, to bear in mind that more private memorial moments—how we take our leave from and remember the dead—are also an important component of how we can renew and revitalize our symbiotic time. If the lives of the dead—those who fall in battle or are the victims of terror, violence, hate, or preventable disease—do not matter, then the worth of those living is not truly secure either. Solidarity thus contains a recognition that individual well-being and rights do not exist in a state of isolation, but rather inhabit an ecology of common flourishing that can neither be achieved nor fully enjoyed by individuals acting on their own.

Solidarity builds on historical memory and tradition. It also looks to the future. It feeds on the gratitude we feel when we remember the services and contributions by those who have lived before us, or when we have the moral imagination to foresee the contributions that subsequent generations will make and the necessary changes that future generations will demand. Solidarity begins with the recognition of reciprocal and symbiotic interdependence among members of a moral community; it intervenes in—interrupts—an ongoing community that is unjustly exclusionary and refuses to recognize the moral standing of some individuals and groups within it. Solidarity inherently leads us to view our own lives and agency as bound together with the rights, well-being, health, and dignity of others here and now; there and then; already, but not yet. This is precisely the outlook needed in this, our vulnerable, precarious, symbiotic time.

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NOTES
1. R.P. Harrison, The Dominion of the Dead (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), xi. My thinking has been influenced in many ways by this extraordinary book.


7. Many of the officials who took steps to rescue the global banking systems and large institutions in Europe and the United States were constantly aware of the mistakes leading up to the collapse of businesses in 1929 and the resulting decade of depression. See A. Tooze, Crashed: How a Decade of Financial Crises Changed the World (New York: Viking, 2018).


14. For example, see J. Hansen, Storms of My Grandchildren: The Truth about the Coming Climate Catastrophe and Our Last Chance to Save Humanity (New York: Bloomsbury, 2009). We now know that the climate prospects are even worse than was expected by scientists a decade ago.


18. I have used the text reprinted in G. Wills, Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words that Remade America (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 263.