

# Earth is a Proper Name

by Karen Kudebeh

I have listened to linguists over the years speak of our English language as it contrasts with many Indigenous languages. My takeaways are these:

- \* Language structures reality. You know what to focus on and what to ignore, depending on the language.
- \* The English language turns subjects into objects. It heavily depends on nouns AND those nouns are usually devoid of sensitivity to relationship. So it tends to make “its” out of things, including people. Instead of a subject-to-subject “I-Thou” relationship, the language upholds an “I-It” relationship.
- \* The English language takes us out of the present moment by insisting the speaker chose whether something happens in the past, in the present, or in the future, before even forming a sentence. Thus we continuously distinguish timeframes rather than relationships.

We all know that Western people are particularly good at separating things, including ourselves. Good at making hierarchies: distinctions, divisions, specializations, rationalizations and not so good at taking responsibility beyond ourselves or knowing we are part of the whole Community of Life. Knowing this, it’s important for us to do what we can—within the confines of “good English” – to have some workarounds: ones that remove some of the more damaging but powerful and subtle linguistic habits that erode relationship.

My personal unfavorite is use of the article “the” when preceding the proper name of Earth. I cringe every time I hear “the” separating us from our beloved Gaia/Source of Life/Blue-Green Jewel of the Universe. I have taken to consciously ignore “the” just to be able to hear what a speaker has to say. Some of the most passionate and Earth-honoring people I know habitually use this language – likely unaware of its impact. And, lest this be considered a trifling matter, please remember: **We ARE Earth**. In human form. The fact that we even have separate words to describe “human” and “Earth” already makes a distinction that some cultures don’t make. Consider the Pueblo peoples who speak Tewa. The word “Nang” refers to both human AND Earth. Same word. **We Are Earth** is a truth that is affirmed within the Tewa language itself.

In the early 2000’s, Michael Dowd and I became good friends and we discovered that we shared the same hyper-sensitivity to hearing “the” precede “Earth.” We went thru the ludicrous exercise of putting “the’ in front of the names of people we love and even in front of the other planets in our solar system. We don’t say “the Mars,” “the Jupiter,” “the Steve” or “the Connie” (the names of our respective mates.). And, because language works at the subconscious level, inattention to something seemingly innocuous allows for continuing objectification.

But don't take my word for it. Play around with phrases with and without the article "the" followed by "Earth." Feel the difference. One separates; the other connects. However, just to be clear: there are times when "the" would legitimately precede the word "earth." This is when earth is uncapitalized and refers to soil, or to the ground. But when used as a proper name, let's afford Earth the respect and honor that all "subjects with proper names" deserve.

But timing is, indeed, everything. Michael wrote a brilliant article on this very subject 30 years ago. Apparently it wasn't ready for prime time, then. But it is, now: no one who loves Earth can deny the multiple crises we face, caused largely because we still hold an illusion that we are separate.

<http://www.thegreatstory.org/Earthname.html>

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