

LISTENING IN/*George Vukelich*

The Lively Darkness

Francis Hole is professor emeritus of soil science and geography at the UW-Madison, where he taught for 37 years until his retirement in 1983. Born in Muncie, Ind., in 1913, Hole grew up on the edge of the Earlham College campus, a "Quaker school" where his father taught geology for 40 years. His mother had been a professor of English and dean of women at another Quaker college in Wilmington, Ohio. Hole graduated from Earlham with a double major in biology and geology. He completed his M.A. in French at Haverford College, also a Quaker school, and his Ph.D. in geology and soil science at the UW-Madison. A lifelong Quaker, he was a conscientious objector during World War II and publicly opposed and protested the Vietnam War. Hole speaks of the soil as did the late Loren Eiseley—with knowledge and great love.



MORRY GASH

"The soil is the realm of lively darkness beneath our feet. Despite the fact that it's so close to us, we don't spend much time looking at it.

"It is wonderful in itself. It contains most of the animals of the world. Of course, we're talking about a lot of little animals: Mites and springtails and nematodes, but when you add up all the wild creatures underground, they're the silent majority.

"Also, the roots of the world's plants are in the realm of lively darkness, and they determine whether there will be any animal life aboveground—including humans.

"One reason we don't think about the lively darkness down there is that we consider ourselves people of the light, not people of the darkness.

"Another reason, I think, is that we humans have mixed feelings about the soil, and not all of them are pleasant. In the spring we delight in it, we just go crazy with the smell of it. We go to the seed store and the soil is wonderful then.

"But we can also be terrified by the soil because that's the place we go back to. There's a crazy idea in this country that if we pay the mortuary people enough we can prevent our return to the soil, but the fact is we go back there. Everything goes back there. Cities, civilizations, all go back to the soil—and that's scary.

"It's scary because the soil is a place where there's so much death and darkness. But it's also a place where there is life on such a huge scale we can't image it.

"I think we're afraid of the soil because we're not acquainted with ourselves. There's a lot inside ourselves that we don't want to look at either.

"I must tell you what Hans Jenny said about this. Hans Jenny was my guru. He grew up in Switzerland, came to the U.S. and became a citizen. He was a brilliant scientist—some called him the 'Einstein of Soil Science'—and even

Hole: 'As you discover the soil, you will discover yourself.'

though he's in his late 80s now, he's still regarded as the leading soil scientist in the world.

"Jenny says that we need to allow ourselves to be aware of—to let ourselves talk about—our emotional involvement in the soil.

"One of the ways we do that is to just think about the soil. Just think about the age of soil, the vastness of soil. Rocks that are two billion years old are part of the soil, as is the insect that died in the last instant.

"As you explore the soil, in the same process you are beginning to explore yourself, the deep roots in yourself that are as neglected as the soil is by human beings. As you discover the realm of lively darkness, you will discover yourself. You will also discover that there are some great sources of power and energy in that darkness.

"The reality is that the soil supports us while we are here, and the soil will, of course, outlast all of us.

"As soon as the pavement is over the soil, the soil begins to reclaim its realm. Sidewalks crack, weeds spring up in concrete. The soil is like a slow-motion ocean that gradually crumbles cities and takes them apart, eats up big trees when they fall, absorbs everything eventually, reclaims everything.

"The soil is also the realm of silence. We need to sit in that silence without radio or TV or any talking. In that silence, your soul touches the Great Soul. Silence is one of the major communications from the soil—and it is not dead." ■