EARTH AS SACRED COMMUNITY

Snowy owl

PHOTOGRAPH: VINCENT MUNIER/NATURE PICTURE LIBRARY

Peter Reason explores Thomas Berry's view of 'The Great Work'.

Evening Thoughts: Reflecting on Earth as Sacred Community
Thomas Berry
Sierra Club Books, US, £12.95

I HAD THE immense privilege of meeting Thomas Berry several years ago: I had been deeply influenced by his books *The Dream of the Earth* and *The Great Work*. The latter had just been published, and I went to see him on the pretext of writing a piece for *Resurgence* about the book (*Resurgence* 204). But my main motive for seeking to meet him was a feeling that here is a truly great teacher, one who brings both great learning and great wisdom to his perspective on our current predicament.

I was not mistaken. Berry welcomed me with immense generosity, meeting me at the airport and proposing immediately that we go for beer. We chatted about our religious background – his as a Catholic monk and priest, mine as an English nonconformist – gently getting to know each other.

I will never forget our encounter the following morning. We had agreed to meet for breakfast at my hotel, so early next day I found somewhere to sit outside and waited for him in the gentle sunshine. He arrived, sat down beside me and immediately launched into an account of the nature of the Universe. As we sat on this low wall outside the very ordinary Holiday Inn, he showed me that the Universe, and every being that derives from it, has a psychic-spiritual as well as a physical-material reality, an intangible inner form as well as a tangible physical structure, and that these two aspects must always go together and be understood together.

This means, as you will read in his books, that he sees the Universe as a community of subjects rather than a collection of objects. The place of the human is as a member of this community of beings in the Universe, and more immediately on the planet Earth. The Universe and the Earth are primary, the human and human affairs always derivative – yet we act as if to subordinate the entire planet to our own concerns. At the same time, the human activates one of the deepest dimensions of the Universe – its capacity to reflect on itself and celebrate itself through conscious self-awareness.

This book takes forward themes that Berry has developed through his life, in particular the links between religion, cultural history, scientific discovery and the story of the Universe unfolding over cosmic time. In some ways it repeats earlier writings, but it is none the worse for that because earlier insights are often expressed here more sharply and succinctly.

He looks the current devastation of the ecological communities on Earth squarely in the face, with no doubts about the utter seriousness of our situation. And he brings to us some

fundamental, if radical, bases for a way forward so that humans might live in mutual benefit with the rest of the Earth community. He discusses the petrochemical age, the nation-state, the legal issues for Earth survival, and other practical issues, while always considering these in the context of Earth as a sacred community. And he tells us, "Two things are needed to guide our judgment and sustain our psychic energies for the challenges ahead: a certain alarm at what is happening at present and a fascination with the future available to us if only we respond creatively to the urgencies of the present."

One last story: as we finished our conversation toward the end of a second day of exploration, Berry left me for a moment and went into his little office, returning with his copy of *Black Elk Speaks* – ancient, dog-eared, with yellow notelets sticking out in all directions. He opened it to the place where Black Elk describes his vision of a vast cosmic dance in which all beings participate, and said to me, "If you understand Black Elk's teaching you will understand mine: the continuity of the human with the natural world in a single creative community."

Peter Reason is Director of the Centre for Action Research in Professional Practice at the University of Bath.

LIFE IS WEALTH

Giles Chitty looks at the ambiguity in our decision-making process.

Freakonomics: A Rogue Economist Explores The Hidden Side of Everything
Steven D. Levitt & Stephen J. Dubner
Penguin Books, UK, 2006, £8.99

MOLLY'S PARENTS DO not allow her to play at Amy's house because, as well as having a swimming pool, her parents keep a gun. She is allowed to play at Imami's, where there is no gun. They feel they have made a wise decision in terms of their daughter's safety. However, in the US the child death rate through drowning in a swimming pool is one per 10,000 swimming pools each year, while one child per million guns is killed by a gun each year. That is 100 times more. How do we make decisions?

And how about this unintended consequence of legalised abortion: in 1973, Norma McCorvey's case came to the US Supreme Court, which then legalised abortion. A generation later, the US experienced the biggest crime drop in history. McCorvey was a poor, uneducated, unskilled, alcoholic, drug-using twenty-one-year-old, who had already given up two children for adoption. As a result of the Supreme Court decision, millions of poor, unmarried teenage mothers, for whom illegal abortions had been too risky, expensive or hard to get, could now get abortions. Decades of studies show that a child born into an adverse family environment is far more likely than other children to become a criminal. How rational are the neo-cons in even such mundane matters?

These are just two examples from *Freakonomics*, a critique of the way we analyse events and make decisions. The authors present a number of compelling case studies, of which the two above are examples, for the proposition that common sense, humanity and native wit lead to healthy outcomes congruent with our deeper aspirations. By contrast, analyses based on statistics which are adduced by small powerful groups with their own agendas tend to distort decision making in their favour, often to the disadvantage of the greater community. Such groups exploit the failure of the majority either to see or to take action against the destructive consequences of their actions for the community as a whole, whether local or global.

The authors, one an award-winning economist, the other a best-selling author and journalist with *The New York Times*, have produced a book that is by turns funny, scary, enraging and hopeful. They remind us of the complexity of life and the consequent need for balance that our very failure to fully understand all the factors or dynamics of a situation demands. Everything in their casuistic approach is well researched, with a detached attitude that values open-mindedness, thoroughness and common sense as well as the application of sound and sophisticated research tools.

The sick partiality of the field we have come to accept as economics is revealed, a partiality that serves to an obscene degree the short-term material greed of a powerful global minority at the long-term expense of the whole global community and its descendants, their own included. This minority have hijacked the all-important prerogative of deciding what we measure and how we measure it. In his 1992 Schumacher lecture, the late James Goldsmith pointed out that the standardisation of criteria and measures of progress and performance in the EU were discouraging the very diversity of qualities and cultures upon which Europe depends for its civilisation, resilience and progress. If we are to solve contemporary global problems, we must heed Einstein's dictum that this can only be done on a level other than that on which they were created. We also need to measure what really contributes to wellbeing, the subject of the New Economics Foundation's recent report, *The Happy Planet Index*, which has had close to one million hits on their website. It addresses the success or failure of countries in supporting a good life for their citizens, whilst respecting the environmental limits upon which all of our survival depends. *The Happy Planet Index* measures the ecological efficiency with which human wellbeing is delivered.

Freakonomics provides good crisp evidence for what, to billions of people, is obvious. In a recent issue of *Resurgence*, Andrew Simms reminded us of Ruskin's comment that there is no wealth but life. It is worth noting that Ruskin also said that a sufficiency is wealth, while an excess is 'illth'. Levitt and Dubner have given us a useful heuristic tool to keep us on the track of whole systems and a holistic approach to life, which could indeed help us live as if there is no wealth but life itself.

Giles Chitty is a partner in Holden and Partners, holistic financial advisers. <www.holden-partners.co.uk>.