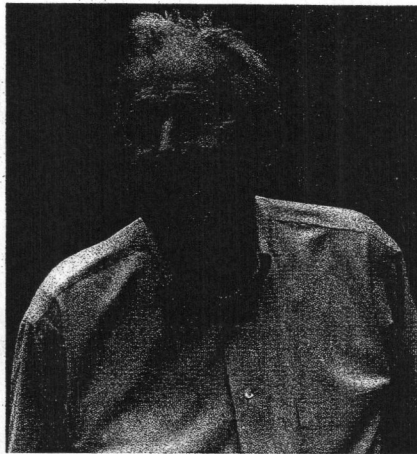


EARTH COMMUNITY

THOMAS BERRY

The human economy is a subsystem of the Earth economy.

Interview by Peter Reason



Thomas Berry

*Thomas Berry's book, **The Dream of the Earth**, has long been an inspiration to me. When I read his new book, **The Great Work**, which challenges us to search for a mutually enhancing relationship between people and the planet, I knew I wanted to meet him. I visited him at his home in the southern Appalachians, where he lives above an old stable block surrounded by the memorabilia of a life's work and the papers and books of a working scholar. We talked about the place of the human in the universe and how we can respond to the ecological crisis of our times.*

IN **THE GREAT WORK** you emphasize that human beings are integral to the planet and the universe. It seems to me that we have lost that sense of belonging; in our civilization the human being is seen as an addendum.

We've lost our deeper identity. Every being articulates, in a unique way, the universe in its comprehensive dimensions. Nothing is itself without everything else. Consciousness is pervasive: every being has some mode of consciousness, but consciousness is species specific. In other words, tree consciousness is different from insect consciousness, and the consciousness of an insect can be no good for a tree. Humans have their own mode of consciousness which enables the universe to reflect on itself. Rather than saying "humans know the universe" it would be better to say "the universe knows itself in humans".

Does this imply that the universe is a living being?

There is this sense of Gaia, the sense that the planet Earth is a living organism which has the capacity for self-regulation. But we must be a little bit careful about the use of the word "living" because the Earth has no DNA, the Earth has no reproduction capacities. The Earth is not a living being like a tree. The Earth is the *mother* of life. As the mother of life and having these capacities for

self-adjustment, it is in a sense a greater form of life than any particular form on the Earth.

And the universe is yet greater?

Yes, the universe is the great articulation of life that provides the Earth with its fullness.

So when you say the human activates this quality in the universe, we're bringing reflective knowing, while the trees and the ants are bringing other qualities?

Yes. St. Thomas Aquinas talked about why there are so many different things in the universe. Do we need all these things? His answer is that because the divine could not image itself forth in any one being, it created the great diversity of things, so that what was lacking in one would be supplied by the others and the whole universe *together* would participate in, and manifest, the divine more than any single being. So we have to be very clear that the human is not *the* purpose of the

Earth or *the* purpose of the universe. The whole universe together participates in the divine and manifests the divine. The universe is primary; the universe is the ultimate and noblest perfection in things.

In *The Great Work* you write "the journey of the universe is the journey of each individual being in the universe ... this ... is an exciting story that gives us our macrophase identity with the larger dimensions of meaning that we need. To identify the microphase of our being with the macrophase of our being is the quintessence of human fulfilment." What do you mean by that?

The primary meaning of the phrase *great work*, as I use it, is the great work of moving from a devastating presence on the planet to a benign presence. Because now we are acting on a macrophase scale, we are acting as no form of life ever acted before in our impact on the planet, except maybe microbes when they created the atmosphere. Brian Swimme says we have a microphase understanding of the universe trying to deal with the macrophase dimension of contemporary problems.

A child awakens to the universe: the mind of a child to a world of wonder, the imagination of a child to a world of beauty, the emotions of a child to a world of intimacy. It takes a *universe* to make a child, to educate a child; it takes a universe to *fulfil* a child. Sometimes you see children in an open field — they're cooped up so much, when they get a chance they just run. Where to? They run to the horizon. You have to chase after them to keep them from running into the river or somewhere. So the universe calls us forth into ourselves. That's the attraction. The universe is the greater self of every being in the universe. But it seems to be difficult for people in Western civilization to get the sense of being a component of this larger expression of being in the universe. We are educated to think of ourselves — even individually — as more impor-

tant than the whole universe.

But "component" is really the wrong word, isn't it? Elsewhere you write that "we are part of a community of subjects, rather than a collection of objects."

We are a component that brings a new dimension through conscious awareness. A dimension is not only a part but a part that changes everything. But that's the difficulty of the scientists. They get the physical dimension, but they can't get the psychic dimension. They talk about dualism. But it's not a dualism, it's a unity, it's two dimensions of one reality. There aren't two realities of the soul and the body; there are two dimensions of a single reality. Neither has existence without the other.

So your point is that the universe itself and every being in the universe have both phenomenal/noumenal and psychic/spiritual dimensions.

That's right; psychic/spiritual and physical/material.

And those co-exist as a single reality?

As a single reality. Where this shows up in a most basic way is in regard to the idea of a vital principle. The scientists deny this. They have a certain, almost pathological, aversion to accepting a vital principle. And it's strange because biology itself is about life yet there's no life principle recognized by the biologists. If you argue that DNA has a vast complexity of components which somehow act together in a synergistic way to produce the unity of an oak tree, well, you don't have an oak tree. All you have are these components. You have to have some unifying factor that enables this complexity to act in an organized structural form. St. Thomas said the form of the thing is the divine element in things. I call it Vital Life Principle.

In *The Great Work* you argue that, because we are out of touch with this sense of participation, we need to reinvent the human. You write that we need to do it in six ways: first, at a species level; second, with critical reflection; third, within the community of life systems; fourth, in a time developmental context; fifth, by means of stories; and sixth, by shared dream experience. Your first point is that we're not programmed

by instincts, we are self-creating cultural beings.

The human creates itself more than any other being. The reason is that we are genetically coded toward a further transgenetic cultural coding, whereby we become human. Now, that cultural coding we invent and that's why we have a Hindu world, a Buddhist world, a Confucian world — all these different traditions. All the thousands of cultural traditions, all the tribal peoples of the world, each creates their own language. A language is probably the finest of all human creations, for it brings together some understanding of the human and its relationship to the other components of the planet Earth.

Language brings forth a world.

Yes. Language creates a world, creates a form of being together with ethical codes and norms. We build a whole context in which a human being becomes human. Now the important thing is the connection between genetic coding and cultural coding: we just can't create a cultural coding with no guidance. Our genetic coding gives us some very basic guidance that shows up in all traditions through archetypal symbols, like the great mother, death and rebirth, the sacred centre.

The symbolism of the centre is where the natural world and the human world come together. It's our way of *situating* ourselves. It's why indigenous peoples like Native Americans are very conscious of the directions. I remember, when Lama Deer got up to speak at a conference he identified himself with the universe through the sacred pipe and with the sacred directions — east, west, south, north. So he situated himself in the universe before he'd do anything, before he'd say anything.

And you're also saying that not one of our human cultures is able to respond to the current threat; this is why you say we must reinvent ourselves at a species level? That's your second theme.

The thing that none of our traditions has is a sense of an emerging universe, passing through irreversible transformational episodes, moving from lesser to greater complexity and from lesser to greater consciousness. They all have a sense

of ever renewing seasonal cycles — what's born dies, what dies is born — but not of cosmogenesis.

By cosmogenesis you mean the evolution of the universe itself, which includes these great, irreversible moments in the history of the universe. One of which we are slap bang in the middle of, that we are creating ourselves. Your point is that no human culture has developed the capacity to see this, and that's the species level development that we need to make?

Yes. The only person who assimilated cosmogenesis in a significant way in a Christian context was Teilhard de Chardin. Teilhard was critiqued severely by the evolutionists, who argue that the universe isn't creative but is formed by random processes. But the geneticist Dobzhansky maintained that the universe was neither random nor determined but *creative*. When people create a work of art, they know and also they don't know. They know what they're after but they have to try out this and try out that and constantly reshape until they get a final form. But they recognize it once they have it. Musicians will know once they hear the melody, that's it. So, they know and they don't know. They're finding their way. So you say there's a certain random aspect to it in the sense that it's not predecided. This is the best way of understanding Teilhard. He said the evolution process was not fully determined but has a drift, a direction towards greater complexity, greater consciousness. Now how it's achieved is not preplanned; it's achieved by a certain amount of randomness, but it's not totally random because it does have a direction.

Your next theme in the reinvention of the human is that there must be a process of critical reflection. The shift to an ecozoic age — an age in which humans co-exist, in mutual benefit, with the planet — needs to be an intentional process.

It needs to be, in a certain sense, designed by humans — because if we don't begin to understand our proper role, we're going to just ruin the life process. Like now, we are reducing the planet to total devastation. So to get out of this we need to think our way through. For example, we need to see that our human technologies are coherent with Earth

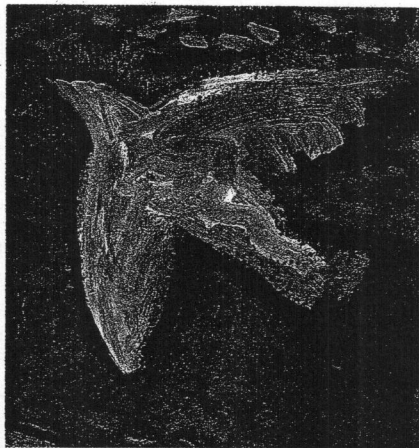
technologies so that they protect and advance the Earth's technologies in a positive way as regards the future of the planet, not simply as regards the future of just one life system. We can plant a certain number of trees for ever, or something like that, but that wouldn't do it. We have to follow the patterns of the natural world and let them take the lead. We need to respond to the way in which nature functions. We need an awareness of what we're doing in the light of what we know and we need the sensitivity to see when we are doing damage to nature and withdraw from it. For instance, we have to be careful in the development of food grains. Cross-breeding of plants is within the processes of nature: we can improve the grains of wheat or corn in that way. But to begin genetic engineering, getting into the DNA and selecting a DNA element from one species, inserting it into a completely different species, is working against natural patterns. Our cultures now have become pathological in so far as they are responding to industrial advance at the expense of the life systems of the planet.

Can we put the notion of critical reflection together with our earlier discussion about culture? It would seem that one of the things we're doing is destroying cultural diversity. That's right. That's an impoverishment of the total human process. There's a certain inevitability at the present time: if we aren't careful, globalization will lead ultimately to only a very few languages being functionally effective. We have to realize the wonder of language and the wonder of cultures. When the Europeans first got in touch with the Australian aboriginals they had great difficulty in accepting the fact that the aboriginals were human. They were a wandering people with no clothes, no homes, no things, living from day to day, only a couple of implements and almost no technologies. It was thought that they had no culture. But now we find that they have amazing explanations of the universe, what they call the Dreamings — highly elaborated explanations of how the contours of the land take shape, the powers that are bringing forth all the natural phenomenon. So they have a rich mental life, a rich artistic life, and a viable material life, and they have

language that is integral with their life process.

You say that we need to reinvent the human within the community of life systems and we need to recognize that other living forms have legal rights to flourish.

This is *the* most difficult thing for people to accept. The reality is the community of the Earth and that we must become a member of this Earth community. Now, through science we know much more about the Earth and about the universe than anybody ever knew. But no people were ever so estranged from the Earth or from the universe as we are. We have all the scientific formu-



las but no rapport, no sensitivity, no awareness of how life functions. That's why we just devastate everything. We destroy the economy of the planet in expectation that we're improving the human economy. We make the Earth toxic and then try to establish health regimes. You cannot have well humans on a sick planet — it's obvious. You cannot have a viable human economy and a non-viable Earth economy, because human economies are a subsystem of the Earth economy. Human health is a subsystem of the Earth's health. In every way the human is a subsystem of an Earth system. It's a sub-community of the Earth's community.

Your statements are so obvious but I can just hear politicians and journalists saying, "Well, Thomas Berry is clearly a bit off his head if he says things like that." It's very curious: what seems obvious to us sitting here is not obvious to our everyday world.

Well, it is obvious but we just choose

to ignore it because we are so hypnotized by our concern for the human that we just can't do anything else. That's why I said this type of a civilization is over. It is self-destructing. You can see it in civilizations of the past; at the height of their achievements they put themselves into an impasse and were destroyed. We face a similar predicament.

Are there not some hopeful signs in the extent to which solar energy is becoming available? The development of ecological economics and natural capitalism is another example.

My critique of the work on natural capitalism, ecological economics, solar energy and so forth is that they still have not made the mental adjustment. They are still in the technological area. Their thinking is not being built on intimate rapport with natural systems.

Natural capitalism sounds like a viable programme, but there's no talk about a community of mutuality where we learn to interact with the sun and with other living things as part of a community. If we don't have a sense of community, we won't have the psychic energy to carry it through. These ideas of natural capitalism will make demands on us. We will only be able to accept the demands if we have a psychic intimacy with the process that rewards us spiritually.

So the next theme you explore in reinventing the human is this notion of story.

Well, that is what Brian Swimme and I have introduced in *The Universe Story*. We need the story of the past and the dream of the future. The story explains to us how we got to where we are and the dream is our way of thinking into the future. The dream drives and guides the action. A child dreams its future; I dreamed my future very early and it's my dream that has been my basic guide to the whole of my life.

Part of this story is these irreversible moments in the evolution of the universe.

Yes, that's the most important part of the story. And to accept this as *sacred* story is also important. We've all been initiated into the mechanics of the story at least, through the scientific discoveries. So the under-

standing of the story as sacred story, giving us a deep insight into the mystery of the universe, is something that is urgent.

Your final theme is that these stories form part of a shared dream experience.

Yes, that's what a culture is. The dream identifies, to some extent, with the vision. The dream is the vision. I take it back as far as the prologue of St. John's Gospel where he says, in the beginning was the *logos*. I say, in the beginning was the dream and the dream was with God and the dream was God and through the dream all things were made. This is in *The Dream of the Earth*. What I'm talking about is not a human dream of the Earth but the dream that produced the Earth. Whatever else you can say about the universe, it's a fantastic reality: all the plants, life systems and the stars and the mystery of the oceans and all that. So that once you look at the extravagance of the universe and see in particular the planet Earth, it baffles intelligence but the imagination delights in it. It baffles intelligence but delights imagination — so that's the world of art.

So we can't encompass our world without wonder and beauty.

Scientists like E. O. Wilson expect that some day science will explain everything on physical principles.

Wilson will talk about spirit, about poetry, about the humanities; he'll talk about everything any of us will talk about. Only he will go back to the fact that physics will explain everything! Now, he's right in one sense, that you won't understand it without the understanding of the physics of the process, but he's totally wrong if he thinks understanding in the physical dimension is everything.

But isn't the physics taking us back to wonder? Wasn't it Wheeler who talked about the strangest thing in a strange universe?

The physics will accept the wonder, but most physicists will resist the idea of a non-material principle. All the laws of science are transmaterial. So it's the transmaterial aspect that is causing difficulty. When people figure out certain things with physical laws, they think they've understood it all, but they've only stated the dilemma of things.

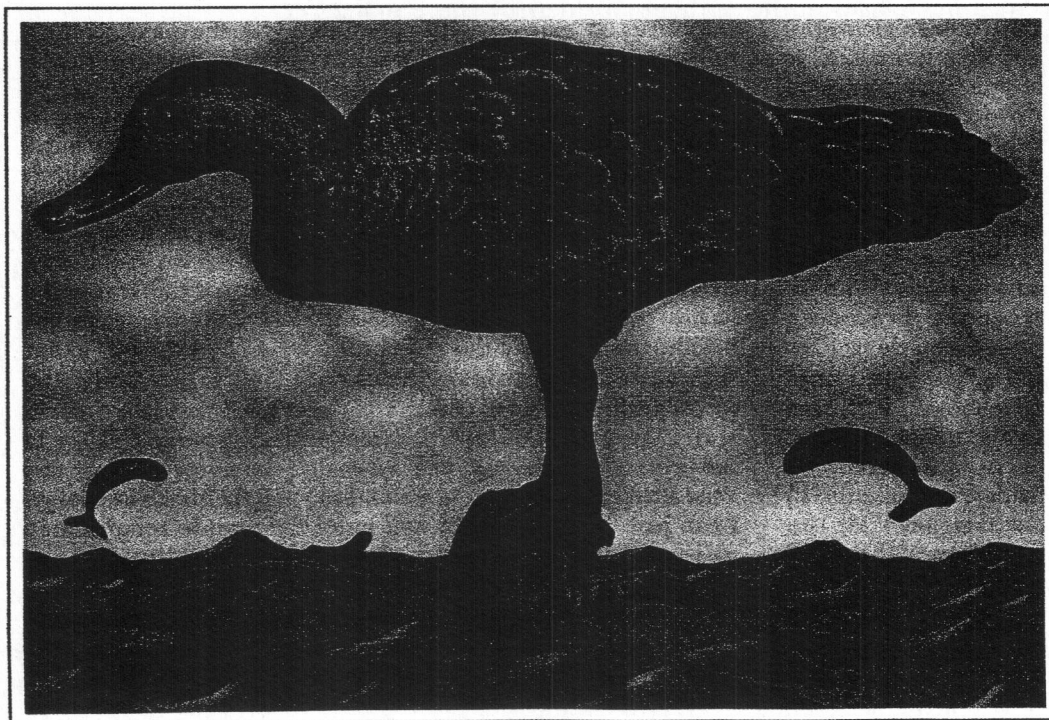
There seems to me to be a link between this notion of a shared dream experience and the expression of it through symbol and ceremony.

Well, the way we insert ourselves into the universe is through ceremonies. The book *Black Elk Speaks* is enormously important. I go back to it frequently, and particularly that second chapter in which he

describes the vision he had when he was nine or ten years old. That's the greatest vision of modern times and the most authentic. Black Elk sees the whole universe dancing, the trees and the flowers, everything dancing in a single coherent dance. Then the final epilogue of the book describes him as an old man, going back to the mountain that appeared in the vision. That's when he felt sadness. The hopes expressed in the vision had not been fulfilled. Things had got worse and worse for the indigenous people. The tree had not flowered. It's one of the most important books for me because my own thinking has correspondence with his vision.

We come into being at the most advanced stage of the Cenozoic Era because we couldn't exist in a less beautiful world. To bear the burden of intelligence and responsibility that we have, we need the solace of the natural world. Why are we so delighted with the dawn, the sunset, the song of the bird, the beauty of the flower? Every being is nourished both physically and psychically by other beings; nothing nourishes itself. ●

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