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THOMAS BERRY: REFLECTIONS ON HIS LIFE AND THOUGHT

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TEILHARD STUDIES

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THOMAS BERRY: Reflections on His Life and Thought

John Grim and Mary Evelyn Tucker

Introduction

Thomas Berry was born November 9th, 1914 in Greensboro, North Carolina where he spent his early childhood and where he returned when he was 80. It was there that he died peacefully on June 1, 2009. Named William Nathan after his father, he was the third child of thirteen of which four siblings remain. He entered the Passionist Order in high school and, upon ordination, he took the name Thomas after Thomas Aquinas whose writings he admired, especially the *Summa Theologica*.¹

After completing his doctorate from Catholic University with a thesis on Giambattista Vico, he studied in China from 1948 to 1949. There he met Theodore de Bary who was to become a life-long friend and one of the most renowned Asian scholars in the West. Along with his wife, Fanny de Bary, Ted was among Thomas's earliest supporters. During many an evening at their home in Tappan NY, Thomas and Ted would discuss the spiritual dimensions of the Asian classics, especially Confucianism. Fanny shared Thomas' interest in Teilhard and always arranged delicate spring flowers for the annual American Teilhard Association meetings in New York. At Columbia University, Ted established a groundbreaking Asian studies program highlighting the classical texts and the history of India, China, and Japan. He also founded an Asian Thought and Religion Seminar along with Thomas. Theirs was a rich and sustaining friendship at a time when few understood Thomas's keen interest in Asian religions. Thomas authored two books on Asian religions, *Buddhism* (1967) and *Religions of India* (1971).

From 1970 to 1995, Thomas directed the Riverdale Center of Religious Research along the Hudson River. From 1975 to 1987, he served as President of the American Teilhard Association. In 1978, Thomas initiated the *Teilhard Studies* series with his essay, "The New Story: Comments on the Origin, Identification and Transmission of Values." Here he called for the articulation of a new story of evolution and the emergence of life. The work of Teilhard de Chardin was a major inspiration for Thomas in developing his ideas for a universe story, especially Teilhard's feeling for the great sweep of evolution from lesser to greater complexity and consciousness.

Thomas was also an outspoken advocate for the environment. Early on, he called for the restitution of habitat for biodiversity, not simply as a conservation measure but in recognition of the intrinsic value of nature. His vision of a flourishing Earth community gave him an unparalleled drive. In fact, some of his most insightful work occurred after he was sixty years old. Even at the end, he encouraged Mary Evelyn, who was attending the first climate change conference at the Vatican in 2007, with the simple advice: speak up!

Thomas Berry as Scholar and Mentor

Thomas began his teaching at Seton Hall University in New Jersey from 1956 to 1961 and then taught from 1961 to 1965 at St. John's University on Long Island. In 1966, the Jesuit, Christopher Mooney, invited him to come to Fordham University to teach in the Theology Department. There he founded and, for more than a dozen years, directed the History of Religions program before retiring from teaching in 1979. This was the only program of its kind at any Catholic university in North America. During his tenure, he trained some twenty-five doctoral students, many of whom are presently teaching at major colleges and universities in the United States and Canada. Regrettably, however, the History of Religion program is no longer available at Fordham University.

Thomas was an anomaly in Fordham's Theology Department. He was neither a Jesuit, nor a theologian. Instead, he was trained in Western history and in the world's religions. However, since he was such a charismatic figure and an engaging speaker, the History of Religions program drew more students than any other section in the Theology department. Students came from around the country, some turning down admission to Religious Studies programs at Columbia or Yale to study with him. And what lively, dedicated students they were!

This is where we met in 1975—John coming from North Dakota and exploring Native American religions; Mary Evelyn recently returning from Japan and immersed in the Asian religious traditions. It was an exhilarating time for us as we gathered with other graduate students to study with this brilliant thinker and incomparable mentor. Having read widely in the world's religions and learned the languages needed to appreciate their ancient texts and commentaries, Thomas set a high bar for his students. We thrived on the challenges he presented to us: learn the textual language of at least one tradition, know the history of many, feel the bass notes of the spiritual wisdom of each tradition, and read widely in an interdisciplinary fashion so that the living context of a tradition might open up.

The Riverdale Center for Religious Research where he lived was a beautiful old Victorian house along the Hudson River just north of Manhattan. We would gather there under the spreading limbs of a four-hundred-year-old red oak and across from the two-hundred-million-year-old rock cliffs of the Palisades. There, for three decades, friendships were formed, talks were held, and lasting memories were made. From this Center, Thomas journeyed out in an increasingly global arc, speaking of his vision of the interdependence of the living Earth community.

His library at the Center reflected his passion for breadth and depth. Over the years, Thomas had collected some ten thousand books and now bedecked this rambling old house with his treasures. In the large front room the Latin Church Fathers faced the Greek philosophers and the Chinese sages, all in their original languages. The Sanskrit texts of the Hindu Classics were in the next room and Thomas initiated many of us into the *Bhagavad Gita* in Sanskrit before we read the other Indian texts. Some of his students wrote dissertations that were translations of these texts with original interpretive commentaries.

Not only did his library hold the classical scriptures of the Asian and Abrahamic religions; it was also filled with ethnographies and studies of indigenous peoples. Upstairs overlooking the Hudson was the American Indian room, stacked from floor to ceiling with books on the various tribes that populated the North American continent. This was John's favorite haunt, as the sun porch was Mary Evelyn's. There on the porch we would join Thomas for lunch or dinner. Music such as Beethoven's *Archduke Concerto* provided the background for our conversations that ranged from the state of the world to the state of Sung China, Heian Japan, or Moghul India.

Thomas's historical versatility was stunning—unmatched by any professor we have ever encountered, with the exception of his colleague, Ted de Bary. During the “Golden Year” from 1977 to 1978, when Mary Evelyn went on to Columbia to pursue her PhD in Confucianism with de Bary and John went to live with Thomas, we were the beneficiaries of these two brilliant minds. Over the years, Thomas introduced and officiated at the weddings of several of his students. So it was that, with Thomas presiding, John married Mary Evelyn in the midsummer of that golden year.

With this wedding and the completion of our doctorates, we set out on a three-decades-long journey with him—one that would stretch beyond our graduate years and into our teaching years. Thomas was with us throughout, including attending and speaking at many of the Harvard conferences we convened in the 1990s on religion and ecology. At the culminating conference in New York in 1998 at the American Museum of Natural History over 1000 people gathered to hear him speak. They would not let him leave the stage when the moderator indicated his time was up.

Thomas's appreciation for the wisdom of the world's religions was legendary. Well before interreligious dialogue became a topic for discussion, he was immersing himself in the texts and traditions of India, China, and Japan. His books on *Buddhism* and on the *Religions of India* are still in print from Columbia University Press. Following the Vatican II document *Nostrum Aetate* that spoke of the “rays of Truth” available from the world's religions, he observed that, indeed, these traditions held not just rays of truth but floods of illumination.

Poetic, insightful, and playful, Thomas moved through diverse religious traditions with a profound appreciation for their spiritual dynamics. We recall afternoons after class when a group of us would gather with him in the campus dining area or ratskellar. We would explore the Pali texts of Buddhism or the Sanskrit scriptures of Hinduism. We were intrigued by the enigmatic turn of the hexagrams in the Chinese *Book of Changes* (*I Ching*). More than once he guided us through the tossing of coins to build a hexagram from this classical text in response to a question. Rather than dwell on the divinatory dimension of the *I Ching*, however, he urged us on to deeper reflection on the poetic lines of the text. We still ponder the wisdom that one hexagram indicated—that in our driven, acquisitive world, “the small get by” (*hsiao kuo*). Perhaps, he noted, we may even move toward a world where Fritz Schumacher's notion, “Small is Beautiful,” may come to be realized, and “Nature's Economy” may be respected.

While those graduate school days focused on historical and textual developments in the world's religions, Thomas encouraged us also to explore the cosmology of religions. Under his guidance we related rituals, texts, teachings, and commentarial studies to the stories of creation

and metaphysical speculation about the world. We struggled to understand the history, anthropology, and sociology embedded in those stories. Thomas forged ahead articulating broad understandings of historical interactions and cultural relationships.

Gradually, we began to appreciate his interest in cosmology as that which orients humans to the universe and to nature itself. “With a story,” he would say, “people can endure catastrophe. And with a story they can gather the energies to change their lot.” For him the first place to look for story was in history. He began with Western history and later moved to Asian history. He was part of the early group of world historians seeking to define the contours of our human movement across the planet. He mused that the West was in search of a comprehensive story and cited historians such as Oswald Spengler, Arnold Toynbee, Christopher Dawson, and Eric Vogelin to give nuance to his views. He drew on the philosopher of history, Giambattista Vico, stitching his arguments together with a sense of the sweeping ages of human and Earth history. In Vico, he found a perspective on deep paradigmatic change in history so that human action could not be simply equated from age to age. It was because of his remarkable grasp of world history that he could eventually make the transition into evolutionary history.

In his classes he would grope for a thought, searching for a word that could capture the transition between the great ages of evolutionary time. And, then, he would cough. That cough became emblematic for us of his search for articulation—his looking for the words to move into a new and deeper understanding of our historical moment. Gradually Thomas connected his study of history and evolutionary cosmology to the environmental issues of our day. This came slowly, maturing like fine wine that carries the texture and taste of soils, sun, grapes, air, and aging.

Reaching into his own past in North Carolina, he recalled his boyhood experience of a summer meadow filled with white lilies. This experience began to define his commitment to preserve and protect such beauty. Increasingly he spoke of a deep affectivity and authenticity imparted by Earth itself in its biodiversity. It was in the early 1980s that these ideas coalesced in his term “Eozoic.” This was his way of marking the end of a geological era in which thousands of species were disappearing each year amidst the industrial-technological bubble of resource extraction. He observed that scientists were telling us that we are in the midst of an extinction period. Nothing this devastating had occurred since the dinosaurs went extinct sixty-five million years ago and the Cenozoic era began. But rather than leaving his audience in despair, he used the term Eozoic to name that emerging period in which humans would recover their creative orientation to the world.

He drew increasingly on the thought of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin for insight into the story of our times, namely, the emerging, evolutionary universe. Teilhard provided a large-scale vision of humans as situated within the vast context of cosmic evolution. He had a profound sense of the increasing complexity and consciousness of evolution from the molecular to the cellular, and from multi-cellular organisms to the explosion of diverse life forms. Teilhard’s major work titled *The Human Phenomenon* was for Thomas a powerful narration of universe emergence. While Teilhard saw his work as science, Thomas narrated it as a “new story.”

Rather than settling on Teilhard's insights, however, Thomas pushed beyond to explore the conjunction of cosmology and ecology. While appreciating Teilhard he also critiqued his optimistic view of "building the Earth" with new technologies and scientific discoveries. He balanced Teilhard's technological optimism with a strong sense of ecological realism—highlighting our current patterns of environmental degradation. He wanted us to see that in a geological instant we were diminishing life of ecosystems, rivers, and oceans. Our historical moment, he would observe, was as significant as the change implied in a geological era.

When flying back from an environmental conference in the Seychelle Islands, looking down over the Nile River at 30,000 feet, he realized that he was not a theologian, but rather a "geologist." With this term, he viewed himself as a human being who emerged out of eons of Earth's geological and biological evolution and was now reflecting on our world. This reflection was a way to reinvent the human at the species level.

This notion of reinventing the role of the human was enhanced when in 1982 Thomas met Brian Swimme who came to the Riverdale Center for a year of study. Coming from the Pacific Northwest and having earned a doctorate in mathematical cosmology at the University of Oregon, Brian was the ideal partner for collaboration. Thomas' years of study of world history and religions was paralleled by Brian's comprehensive study of evolutionary history. From an intense decade-long collaboration including research, lectures, and conferences there emerged in 1992 the jointly authored book, *The Universe Story*. This was the first time the history of evolution was told as a story in which humans have a critical role.

After Thomas retired from teaching at the age of 64, he began some of his most significant writing in the area of evolutionary cosmology in relation to the ecological crisis. *The Dream of the Earth* was published in 1988, *The Great Work* in 1999, *Evening Thoughts* in 2007, *The Christian Future and the Fate of Earth*, and *The Sacred Universe* in 2009. These books elaborated on the "new story" of our shared cosmological journey.

Story as Functional Cosmology

Thomas spoke frequently of our broken relationship with nature and the drift away from older traditional stories of creation. These breaks followed from the inability of contemporary scientific, religious, and philosophical narratives to locate humans in a meaningful relationship with Earth's ecosystems and their evolution over time. Ironically, as Thomas observed, the break with nature as well as with *mythos*, the storied magic of older cosmologies, occurred in the search for "progress" and in the turn towards empirical reasoning as the exclusive guide to reality. The ways in which the drives toward economic progress and the reliance on reason alone have undermined the human spirit have only now become clear. Berry wrote:

That these centuries of "progress" should now be ending in increasing stress for the human is a final evidence that what humans do to the outer world they do to their own interior world. As the natural world receded in its diversity and abundance, so the human finds itself impoverished in its economic resources, in its imaginative powers, in its human sensitivities, and in significant aspects of its intellectual intuitions.²

Thomas conjectures that, having constructed an industrialized world that is not sustainable, humans will eventually live among the ruins of a degraded natural world. In an effort to move us beyond our fixation with materialism that undermines our relationship with the natural world, Thomas spoke of a "functional cosmology." His concern was that we had lost emotional, affective connection with the processes of life embedded in the emergence of the cosmos itself. In the past, connection with these vital processes enabled a people and their cultural traditions to function so that they knew the deeper meaning of their life and work.

The transformative key for Thomas was story, namely, a narrative telling of our origins and our purpose. An origin story was, for Thomas, the shared dialogue about, and most accepted explanation of, reality. Narrated in ritual settings, engineered into the structures of cities, celebrated in daily food and drink, these traditional stories provide meaning and direction for people in everyday life. But having lost their grounding in the natural world upon which we depend, many of these stories stopped functioning in a vital manner. In effect, the stories and the institutions propagated by their values activated the belief that they were the world, that they were cosmologies in themselves.

For Thomas, then, contemporary humans are in between stories. That is, we have lost our connection to traditional cosmologies, and we have been unable to weave a functional cosmology from our collective scientific data. It is within this context that Thomas forged his career as an engaged cultural historian interested in articulating a new and functional cosmology.

Thomas' emphasis on the cultural transmission of coherence and meaning throughout history brought him to one of his most singular insights regarding the cosmological stories of a people:

It's all a question of story. We are in trouble just now because we do not have a good story. We are in between stories. The Old Story—the account of how the world came to be and how we fit into it—is not functioning properly, and we have not learned the New Story. The Old Story sustained us for a long period of time. It shaped our emotional attitudes, provided us with a life purpose, energized action. It consecrated suffering, integrated knowledge, guided education. We awoke in the morning and knew where we were.³

The coherence and meaning of time as expressed in a people's story responds to the efforts made by humans to define themselves.⁴ The discovery of a universe story is akin to the exhortatory quality of religious inspiration evident, for example, in Virgil's telling of the founding of Rome in the *Aeneid*. When a human community's collective story disintegrates, that community experiences a dislocation symbolized most acutely by the loss of human orientation with the natural world. In such moments the language of apocalypse may forestall cultural collapse. Apocalyptic language communicates the feeling of loss and the sense of impending doom while employing the exhortation needed to recover deeper relatedness to the Earth community. In the following passage, Berry draws on the exhortatory rhetoric of apocalypse within the context of the environmental crisis:

If the supreme disaster in the comprehensive story of the Earth is our present closing down of the major life systems of the planet, then the supreme need of our times is to

bring about a healing of the Earth through this mutually enhancing human presence to the Earth community. To achieve this mode of presence a new type of sensitivity is needed, a sensitivity that is something more than romantic attachment to some of the more brilliant manifestations of the natural world. A sensitivity that comprehends the larger patterns of nature, its severe demands as well as its delightful aspects, and is willing to see the human diminish so that other life forms might flourish.⁵

Just as apocalypse raises an alarm in order to provide a path for a community in distress, so Thomas spoke about environmental degradation as ultimately disastrous for the human community while, at the same time, he indicated a path forward. The apocalyptic tone in Berry's thought is prompted by his perception of humans as distancing themselves from the Earth community. He sensed that humans had lost their way of being integrated into a larger cosmology. He pointed toward religious and cultural cosmologies in which humans relate to their bioregions as their most immediate experience of place.

These healing cosmologies call for a sensitivity and affectivity to the larger patterns of life and death in the natural world. He described this affectivity not simply as an inner psychological state of the human, but as an historical shift that he later associated with the term, Ecozoic. By this term, he sought to delineate a time in which humans would willingly see themselves diminish so that the life of the planet might not only survive but actually flourish. He suggested that this called for a reinvention of the human at the species level. Central to such a reinvention was a historical understanding of who we are as a species.

The Critique of Modernity and the Environmental Crisis

As early as 1971 Berry reflected on our contemporary predicament:

Modern humans have become increasingly conscious of the agonies inherent in the human condition. Intellectual and mechanical progress has not cured them of the inner limitations to which they are subject. . . . Other peoples, knowing that they could do little to alter the human condition externally, built up a spiritual capacity to sustain themselves as they worked toward final triumph over this condition. Modern humans seek to remove the painful elements of their condition by the control exercised over the natural world and over the inner functioning of their own physical and psychic organism. But in neither case have they eliminated the personal agonies or the larger terrors inherent in their historical situation. In many ways the human has only aggravated life's tension while lowering the spiritual capacity to absorb the afflictions inseparable from existence as a human mammal.⁶

For Berry interior reflection brings a person to the limits and pathos of the human condition. A historical reading of the modern period also confronts one with the facile efforts of the human to transcend those limitations by means of applied science and technology. His recurring concern was to clarify the relationships of religions with the natural world as the place in which human communities encounter the divine. This commitment, he felt, was often blurred and confused by attempts to transcend the limits of the human condition, as well as by locating ultimate salvation beyond our lived existence. Understanding these historical expressions of transcendence in their

relationships with cosmology was a cardinal feature of his investigations. Yet the ways in which clusters of ideologies affirmed civilizational drives away from the natural world increasingly disturbed him. For example, during the sixteenth-century age of exploration, politics, religion, and economics became aligned. The rising authoritarian nation-states joined with a Christian missionary zeal for redemption out of this world and with a commercial drive toward resource extraction. These ideologies have continued into the contemporary period in the forms of nationalism, religious fundamentalism, and economic exploitation that extends the subversion of nature's economy.

Thomas' critique of modern culture targets its fixation on technologies and techniques of physical and psychological control as solutions for the anguish of the human condition. His historical search led him to rethink the nodes of connections between cultural imagination and the world of matter. His basic insights regarding human-Earth relations were often framed by readings in the cosmological texts of the world's religions. Over time, he drew increasingly from a range of religious scriptures, commentaries, and ethnographies of Eurasia, the Americas, and the peoples of the Pacific.

In addition, Berry noted the size and scale of the challenges we are facing as a species and as a planet. The urgency of the global environmental crisis is now well-documented, even if its many manifestations are not yet fully understood. Berry showed awareness of a variety of environmental problems: from climate change to pollution of air, soil, and water; from population growth and unbridled consumption to biodiversity loss. What is particularly remarkable is how early Berry understood the magnitude and complexity of these issues. While many ignored his warnings over thirty years ago, now, his insights about the religious character of the environmental crisis are considered prescient. His writings have a special relevance at this stage of our search for new and sustaining human-Earth relations. Indeed, in a tribute to Berry, noted theologian John Cobb observed, "No other writer in the ecological movement has had analogous effectiveness" in helping us realize the "radical uniqueness of this crisis."⁷

Berry's Calls for an Awakening and Exodus

Consistent with this spirit, Berry strongly challenged the world's religions to respond appropriately to this complex situation. First he raised penetrating questions regarding the lateness and laxity of the response from the major establishments of our time—educational, political, religious, and commercial. Above all he focused his critique on the religious establishments as the transmitters of ancient wisdom traditions that had been shaped by cosmological concerns that were embedded in human-nature interactions. Why have the religions been blind to the fate of the Earth? Is this because the desire for personal salvation from a flawed material world into a heavenly realm supersedes all other concerns? In other words, does the search for otherworldly rewards override commitment to this world? Has the material order of nature been devalued by religious transcendence? Have human-centered ethics been so all consuming that we now do not have an ethics which addresses such impending collective acts as ecocide and biocide? Did religions surrender their interest in natural theology and cosmology to science? These questions require further reflection, he suggested, before an adequate response to our situation can be formulated from out of any one religious tradition.

Indeed, Berry reopens a gateway for the religions to reform their traditions by drawing on the metaphor of "exodus" proposed by the historian, Eric Vogelin. Berry realized that the world's religions were being called to make an exodus passage from their traditional worldviews into the modern world. Like the first Exodus experience of the Jews out of Egypt, Berry called for a transition into modernity that religions have found so challenging. In critiquing the ineffectual response of religious institutions and seminaries to the environmental crisis, he also suggested that it is not too late. It is more important than ever that these institutions reflect on their cosmological depth and their past interactions with local bioregions as they become involved in current environmental issues. Having prepared themselves, religious practitioners and leaders alike can make their contributions—in universities, in seminaries, in religious settings, and in grassroots movements. This was part of the inspiration for the Harvard conference series on world religions and ecology as well as the ongoing work of the Forum on Religion and Ecology at Yale. (See www.yale.edu/religionandecology for details.)

Drawing on Berry's ideas, the Catholic Bishops of the Philippines issued in 1988 a pastoral letter on the environment entitled "What is Happening to Our Beautiful Land?" Two decades later, in December 2008, they published another statement listing the critical environmental problems their country was still facing and called for a moratorium on mining and logging. In February 2009, the Catholic Bishop of Alberta, Canada wrote a strong condemnation of the oil extraction from tar sands noting that such wide spread environmental destruction is morally reprehensible. Yet, it still appears that this extraction, the largest bio-engineering project in history is largely absent from consideration by the religions. Hopefully, these statements will be used as ethical calls to engage religious communities in further action on behalf of the environment.

Yet Berry also acknowledged that the promise inherent in the religions still has to be fully recognized and articulated. He spoke, for example, of the deep appreciation for the order and beauty of Creation contained in the Christian tradition ranging from the Psalms, the visionary prayers of Francis of Assisi, the cosmology of Thomas Aquinas in the medieval period, and the cosmological "seeing" of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin in the twentieth century.

A central influence on Thomas was Thomas Aquinas' cosmological emphasis on the participation of all reality in God's being. In addition, he was influenced by Aquinas' reworking of Aristotle's view that abstract concepts depend on specific existing material reality. This affirmation of matter also had its mystical side that Thomas described in terms taken directly from Aquinas, namely, the "cosmological dimension of every being." This mystical view traces back to the early Christian writers of the third century identified as Pseudo-Dionysian. They spoke of a form of ineffable knowing described as "divine rays of darkness." Aquinas's position, however, that all things go forth from God and return to God situates human knowing within the cosmological community of beings. Thus, Aquinas preserved the creative tension between an inner, immanent direction, or form, within matter itself and the transcendent cosmological source of the originating impulse of creation.

The Influence of Teilhard

Teilhard de Chardin clearly had an enduring influence on Thomas Berry. As a paleontologist Teilhard found himself drawn towards the vision of a unified evolutionary process in which the human participates in the ongoing developmental unfolding. Cosmic evolution was for Teilhard the most fitting historical context within which to understand any temporary occurrence, especially the horizon of human activity. He called humans to a deeper level of seeing into the great sweep of time in which we dwell.

In the opening passage of his major work, *The Human Phenomenon*, Teilhard observed:

Seeing. One could say that the whole of life lies in seeing—if not ultimately, at least essentially. To be more is to be more united—and this sums up and is the very conclusion of the work to follow. But unity grows, and we will affirm this again only if it is supported by an increase of consciousness of vision. That is probably why the history of the living world can be reduced to the elaboration of ever more perfect eyes at the heart of a cosmos where it is always possible to discern more. Are not the perfection of the animal and the supremacy of the thinking being measured by the penetration and power of synthesis of their glance? To try to see more and to see better is not, therefore, just a fantasy, curiosity, or a luxury. See or perish. This is the situation imposed on every element of the universe by the mysterious gift of existence. And thus, to a higher degree, this is the human condition.⁸

Berry appreciated the significant contribution of Teilhard's "consciousness of vision." He affirmed Teilhard's re-orientation of human consciousness within evolution rather than seeing consciousness as an aberrant development located within humans alone. Moreover, he took from Teilhard the powerful insight that the history of the human is the history of the cosmos, and that history is not finished in some past creation story, but has continued as cosmogenesis, an ongoing creative process.

Berry appreciated Teilhard's evolutionary awareness of the uniqueness of our moment as an awakening. Teilhard wrote:

In every age human beings have believed themselves to be at a "turning point of history." And as part of a rising spiral, to some extent they have been right. But at certain moments this impression of transformation is felt much more strongly—and is particularly justified. And it is not exaggerating the importance of our contemporary existences in the least for us to say that there is a fundamental change of course for the world under way in us, and it threatens to crush us. . . .

This Earth, billowing with factories, throbbing with enterprise, vibrating with hundreds of new radiations—this great organism ultimately only lives because of and for the sake of a new soul. Beneath the change of age there must lay a change of thought. . . .

Yet where are we to look for and locate this kind of renewing and subtle alteration, which without appreciably modifying our body has made new beings of us? Nowhere else but in a new intuition that totally alters the physiognomy of the universe in which we move—in other words, in an *awakening*.⁹

Teilhard's "new soul," his "change of thought," and the "awakening" contain the germs of the historical perspective that so preoccupied Thomas Berry. Here also is the sense of struggle with fundamental change even as it threatens to "crush" us. In elaborating the character of awakening, Thomas Berry has drawn out the inner workings of mythic forces and concomitant sensitivities that call for both individual and institutional change. Finally, Berry provided creative historical analysis to the new cosmology in ways that expand Teilhard's thought into ecological concerns.

In the spirit of the *Hymn of the Universe*, Berry notes as well the powerful reality of sacraments embodying the elements of nature and the liturgical cycle reflecting the great seasonal movements of Earth. In addition, there is promise in the emerging alliance of social justice and environmental justice. For Berry, these are all sources of transformation so that humans might respond more coherently to the growing environmental challenge.

However, Berry observed that our desire for action may require even deeper contemplation of the roots of these problems. This is why he pointed us toward the universe story as a comprehensive context for responding to our ecological role in the modern world—a world that is being ravaged by industrial production and extraction. For Thomas, universe emergence as the story of our time can evoke in humans awe, wonder, and humility. At the same time, as a functional cosmology, it can encourage the "great work" of ecological restoration and environmental education so needed in our times.

Conclusion

Since meeting Thomas Berry some 40 years ago we have become more aware of the many layers of his thinking that have organic continuity with one another. Among these layers the following can be noted: the play of texts, institutions, and personalities in the history of religions; the cultural-historical settings in which religions emerge and develop; the inherent and formative relationships of local bioregions and indigenous societies; the complex relations between and among the world's religions; cosmological expressions within the various religions; the awakening to our growing realization of the continuity of the human with the community of life; the evolutionary story as a functional cosmology for our multicultural planetary civilization.

As a storyteller Thomas Berry guided his students into the power and engagement of historical studies in religious cultures and civilizations. Like all storytellers, Thomas had an intuitive sense of his own rhetorical power; but unlike many storytellers he did not simply rely on emotional rhetoric or the large gesture. Drawing out his syllables in a laconic North Carolinian manner, he would calmly elucidate complex topics that truly excited him. This reflective style enabled him to ponder both the problematic story of our industrial age as well as the "new story," the recovery of human energy and reinvention of the human spirit.

Loving humor and fond of a trickster's play in the transformative character of life, Thomas was academically formed before the postmodern penchant for uncovering power dynamics and concealing rhetoric. Still, he was alert to interactions in which individuals participated in larger civilizations and cosmologies by active understanding, intuitive glimpses, and disciplined effort.

Story, then, for Thomas was not simply passive reception by a listener, but an engaged, participatory event in which the story was present and alive in the telling.

In all these reflections there remains the image of Thomas in his brown corduroy jacket, lecturing in public or in class, articulating with wonder, beauty, and creativity his dream of the Earth community fully embodied.

Notes

¹ Sections of this essay are adapted from the "Introduction" to Thomas Berry, *The Christian Future and the Fate of Earth* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009); and from *The Ecozoic: A Tribute to Thomas Berry*, published by the Center for Ecozoic Studies, 2009.

² Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry, *The Universe Story: From the Primordial Flaring Forth to the Ecozoic Era—A Celebration of the Unfolding of the Cosmos* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 242.

³ Thomas Berry, "The New Story: Comments on the Origin, Identification and Transmission of Values," *Teilhard Studies* 1 (Winter 1978).

⁴ While Thomas Berry's sense of reinvention owes much to the thought of Giambattista Vico (1668-1744), there are also parallel and contemporary conceptualizations in Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983); and Eric Hobsbawm and Terrence Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

⁵ Thomas Berry, "The Dream of the Earth: Our Way into the Future" in *The Dream of the Earth* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1988), 212.

⁶ Thomas Berry, *Religions of India* (Beverly Hills, CA: Benziger, 1971; New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 5.

⁷ John Cobb, preface to *The Christian Future and the Fate of Earth*, by Thomas Berry, eds. Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009), xi.

⁸ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Human Phenomenon*, trans. Sarah Appleton-Weber (Brighton, UK: Sussex Academic Press, 1999), 3.

⁹ *Ibid*, 148-9.

An Invitation

Membership in The American Teilhard Association is open to all who wish to join in our work of shaping a future worthy of the planet Earth, of ourselves and of our children.

A brochure describing our purpose and programs will be sent in response to requests mailed to John Grim, 29 Spoke Drive, Woodbridge CT 06525. Interested parties can also e-mail tcmk@aya.yale.edu

Membership

Annual contribution (tax deductible):

Regular	\$35.00
Household	\$40.00
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Student, full time, under 30 years	\$10.00
Life membership	\$400.00

All members will receive annually two issues of *Teilhard Studies*, the Association's newsletter *Teilhard Perspective*, and notice of the Annual Meeting.

An Invitation to Authors

The editors of the *Teilhard Studies* invite and welcome papers that explore, develop, or put into practice Teilhard's vision. A preferred length is twenty-five double-spaced pages. Please send paper proposals or manuscripts to Kathleen Duffy, SSJ, Department of Physics, Chestnut Hill College, 9601 Germantown Avenue, Philadelphia, PA 19118, or kduffy@chc.edu.

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McCulloch, Winifred, *A Short History of the American Teilhard Association*. 1979.

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American Teilhard Association

THE AMERICAN TEILHARD ASSOCIATION is dedicated to these objectives:

1. A future worthy of the planet Earth in the full splendor of its evolutionary emergence.
2. A future worthy of the human community as a high expression and a mode of fulfillment of the earth's evolutionary process.
3. A future worthy of the generations that will succeed us.

Guided by the writings of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, the Association seeks to bring an encompassing perspective to this great task of shaping the well-being of the entire Earth community at a time when so many crises threaten it. Teilhard's vision of the sequential evolution of the universe from its origin to the human phenomenon can provide a firm and inspiring basis upon which to proceed. Now, for the first time, humanity is converging to a new unity in diversity that needs to be understood and facilitated. To help in this work, the Association, since its foundation in 1967, has sponsored annual conferences, a monthly lecture series, study groups, and a variety of publications.

* * *

“It's all a question of story. We are in trouble just now because we do not have a good story. We are in between stories. The Old Story—the account of how the world came to be and how we fit into it—is not functioning properly, and we have not learned the New Story. The Old Story sustained us for a long period of time. It shaped our emotional attitudes, provided us with a life purpose, energized action. It consecrated suffering, integrated knowledge, guided education. We awoke in the morning and knew where we were.”

—Thomas Berry

“Modern humans seek to remove the painful elements of their condition by the control exercised over the natural world and over the inner functioning of their own physical and psychic organism. But in neither case have they eliminated the personal agonies or the larger terrors inherent in their historical situation. In many ways the human has only aggravated life's tension while lowering the spiritual capacity to absorb the afflictions inseparable from existence as a human mammal.”

—Thomas Berry