

ILLUMINATION

JANUARY 2021

The following reflection was offered by Brian Edward Brown for The Thomas Berry Forum for Ecological Dialogue in its Contemplative Ecologists Circle for January 21, 2021, based on Berry's complete essay "The Great Work" in *The Great Work: Our Way Into the Future*, pp.1-11.

In the dire immediacy of the protracted COVID contagion on the one hand and the most intensely divisive civil unrest on the other, Thomas Berry directs our attention to the human past to orient us towards the global future. Easily dimmed by the preoccupation with those present matters of crisis, Earth's exigency is nevertheless paramount, and the contemporary human will be defined in its species identity by its responsiveness to the preservation and healing of planetary integrity. Such is the Great Work to which Earth's devastation summons us from the commercial-industrial-extractive processes to which we remain heirs and participants. Yet further, we have been born into a still persistent mode of consciousness, embodied in the political, economic, intellectual and religious establishments, a mentality which embraces the conceit of consciousness as the sole purview of the human, derogating the status of other-than-human beings as exploitable objects devoid of any inherent value to which some notion of natural right would have afforded protection against human onslaught. Depriving rights from all but itself, the human has plundered Earth with impunity. But in its constriction of juridic recognition for itself alone, it has not only ravaged the planetary body, but has excluded itself from that deepest sense of joy and fulfillment that arises from human continuity with, as Berry writes, the "single integral community of the Earth that includes all its component members whether human or other than human. In this community every being has its own role to fulfill, its own dignity, its inner spontaneity. Every being has its own voice. Every being declares itself to the entire universe. Every being enters into communion with other beings. This capacity for relatedness, for presence to other beings, for spontaneity in action, is a capacity possessed by every mode of being throughout the entire universe." (p. 4)

And so the pressing question, the definitive Great Work of the present is the realignment of the human from its destructive self - aggrandizement and estranged alienation, back into and within the dynamics of the cosmic-Earth process of its original emergence and integral identity. The enormity of the task is the singularity of the destructiveness that has been wreaked. No past generation has had, as Berry writes, "the power to plunder Earth in its deepest foundations, with awesome impact on its geobiological structure, its chemical constitution, and its living forms throughout the wide expanse of the land and in the far reaches of the sea." (p.3)

Yet the realignment of the human necessarily begins with the movement from the harms it has perpetrated on the one hand, even as it responds to the allure of the

beauty and wonder of what remains, on the other. From within that renewed and centered position the human is further disposed to draw indispensable psychic energy from its own past for the arduous movement into its future. Its own Great Work of planetary preservation and healing, immense and distinct, shares creative ancestry with earlier cultural achievements, earlier Great Works, from the multiple peoples and traditions which define its common species lineage. From across the wide range of their otherwise varied expressions and accomplishments, those forebears in the shared human venture may hearten and inspire contemporary descendants for the unique task they now assume.

Proximate in culture and time are those 19th-century geographers; ethnologists; philosophers; landscape artists; land preservationists; voices like Thoreau; Muir; Olmstead; the painters of the Hudson River School; the Audubon Society; Sierra Club; and Wilderness Society. Sensing the despoliation of the American continent by the commercial-industrial juggernaut, they each and collectively lent their Great Works, giving voice to the sacrality of Earth," a shrine " writes Berry " that fulfills some of the deepest emotional, imaginative and intellectual needs of the human soul." (p.6)

Critical strength and psychic resolve for the heaviness and uncertainty of what now must be borne comes further back in time and across cultures. The lustrous achievements, for example, of 12th and 13th century European art, architecture, literature and theology were evoked and attained their brilliance in response to the violence and cultural decline of the 6th through the 11th centuries preceding their flowering. Similarly, China's luminous expressions of Buddhist and Neo - Confucian thought of the T'ang and Sung dynasties followed upon the upheavals and disarray at the close of the earlier Han period. " We need to recall " writes Berry " that in these and in so many other instances the dark periods of history are the creative periods, for these are the times when new ideas, arts, and institutions can be brought into being at the most basic level." (p. 9)

From such a perspective, the looming shadows cast by the magnitude of the terminal phase of the Cenozoic are even now illumined to reveal the indistinct contours of the dawning Ecozoic. The work that has begun, the work to which we are each and together called, the work of reinventing and inhabiting the political, economic, intellectual and religious expressions for the preservation, healing and celebration of the integral Earth community - that work draws its greatness not alone from the possibilities and accomplishments of the human past, but from the very dynamics of universe creativity whence our primordial emergence, abiding wisdom and deepest fulfillment.

Thank you.

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