The Great Teaching Work of Thomas Berry

By DAVID SCHENCK

Throughout his life and writings Thomas Berry was involved in a great work of teaching, one aspect of which was his well-known book, Great Work: Our Way into the Future. In an effort to situate himself in terms both of contemporary cultural life, and in the lineage of cultural historians, he came to speak of himself as a “geologian.” He was quite careful not to speak of himself as a philosopher or as a theologian.

Why is this important? I would argue that the coining of the term “geologian” had to do with acknowledging the primordial power and significance of thinking the earth and of the earth dreaming. No existing term could indicate the radical departure from our contemporary ways of thinking and understanding that taking the earth and that dreaming with ultimate seriousness would entail. For Berry cosmology is at once science and poetry, and most fundamentally, a matter of vision and myth and epic. A geologist might then fairly be considered a visionary for the earth.

In addition to being our contemporary, Berry is both behind us and ahead—a historian preserving the living core of wisdom traditions of human cultivation—and a visionary listening towards the future cultivation of human presence on and to the earth. There is no point in pretending that we know who might be counted as a geologian or what being one might mean. We will learn most if we keep the oddness of that notion at the forefront of our minds. We have the cosmologist, a seeming holdover from the past, and the geologist coming to us out of some unknown future.

As modern thinkers, we are trained with the methods and categories regnant in contemporary pedagogy and disciplines—the very habits of thought and perception that are, in fact, animating and justifying the devastation of the biosphere. But their logic, the logic of exclusion, “either/or” thinking, precludes the very possibility of any cosmology that is not simply a matter of mathematics or physics. Cosmology, as Berry understood it, is closer to poetry than it is to either philosophy or science. Poetic thinking, mythic method and figurative language provide alternatives to the linear logic of scientists, philosophers, and theologians. What would be considered a contradiction in the latter disciplines is an indicator of what we may call fecund recursion in cosmology.

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We need new means of cultivating ourselves if we are to live differently on the earth. Developing and telling the new story is one component of establishing such cultivation. But the grand sweep of the longed-for cultivation is found only in cosmology. The universe contains a mystery of presence. Cosmology presents this mystery in myth, ritual, and dream; in liturgy, poetry, and music; in wisdom literature and renewed philosophies and theologies; in the plastic arts of all kinds—painting, sculpture, architecture. Cosmology as liturgy; cosmology as celebration.
There is an immense question at the core of Berry’s great work of teaching: “How can humans enter the future with some responsible use of their creative freedom?” As if anticipating the very argument being made here, Berry notes that “there is a tendency to revert back to the traditional disciplines of past cultural developments.” But, he says, “the difficulty with this solution is that these humanistic and religious traditions themselves are largely responsible for the situation that has evolved.” He lists three critical inadequacies of these traditions: (1) “the placing of the divine as transcendent to the natural world”; (2) “the establishment of the human also as transcendent to the natural world”; (3) “the doctrine of an infrahistorical millennial age” (ET 67).

None of these criticisms of the classical traditions are especially novel, and their applicability to developments in Indo-European cultures is not easily disputed. When the divine is not only understood but lived as transcendent, the natural order, its laws and its beauties, inevitably are subordinated—Berry’s word here is “diminished.” And then, modeled on the divine transcendent, the humans, with their special relationship to the transcendent divine, are understood as transcending all the rest of the natural world. And, in particular, when this transcendence entails “sovereignty over,” the lived consequences are beyond comprehension. All nature is at the disposal of human beings, without regard to the intrinsic right to being of the nature things humans use. Finally, there is the sense that some future moment in history—the dynamics of which may be understood in terms of either a theology of history or a philosophy of history—will bring to fulfillment human being human and the natural order. All meaning, order, and beauty in the present time are then to be discounted when seen in the light of this privileged time to come.

But then, in one of those characteristic turns that mark his essays, Berry transforms this relatively academic-sounding list into deeply piercing insight into the inadequacy not just of our moral thinking, but of our very moral perception:

The inadequacy of the humanistic and religious past can be seen quite clearly from the ethical issue in its traditional context, where we perceive the evil of suicide and homicide, and especially the horror of genocide. Yet we have little objection to biocide or geocide. The very magnitude of such activities escapes us (ET 67-68).

We do not have enough imagination to even begin to grasp how dire our situation is—and just that is how dire it is. And only the new universe story, Berry is arguing, can offer the breadth of vision and the sense of the enormity of time necessary for re-imagining the moral life.

Berry next goes on to indicate that these failures of imagination and vision are to be found not only in the “humanistic-religious traditions,” but also in the practices and policies of our major institutions and professions.

All four—the political, religious, intellectual, and economic establishments—are failing in their basic purposes for the same reason. They all presume a radical discontinuity between the nonhuman and the human modes of being, with all the rights and all inherent values given to the human (GW 72).

Laid out here is the fundamental link Berry sees between our current political and economic situation and the major failures of our received wisdom traditions. The partitioning of the universe, the structures of transcendence and hierarchy that Berry sees as characteristic of the “humanistic-religious traditions,” unfold in this reading of the history of the modern world, into a lived order that prizes the human above all else, to the point of being willing to sacrifice all else for the sake of the human.

He summarizes his critique of our past and present resources and practices by speaking to the “demonic aspect” of and the “cunning” behind all our furious effort to re-make the earth for ourselves (ET 69). The dramatic term “demonic” urges us to recognize...
that the human is just now in the thrall of enormous powers well beyond ready comprehension, and well beyond the scope of any moral, social, or imaginative resources we have readily at hand. Or, in other words, it is because this distorted vision of the human in the world is the root dream of our modern culture that it has such overweening power. Which, in turn, means that the only commensurate power will be that of a vision rooted in, nourished by, dream. Not analysis, not policy, not wisdom literature—but dream (ET 68-69; see also DE 202-211).

Take it as given that human beings stand now as the major threat to the balance and order and survival of many dimensions of life and beauty on the earth. How and where, then, can we see the earth moving to heal itself in relation to human beings, and to heal human being as well? Or, put differently, what are the processes, agents, “mechanisms” involved in human efforts to heal the human community and to heal the community that is the earth? Another way of asking this question may be useful: If the new story, the new cosmology, is itself one creative manifestation of the human, how is the new story itself related to the earth’s creativity? That is, in very short form: How is cosmology renewed?

Given that ours is a time that human cultures stand in desperate need of renewal, we would expect to find that a critical component in the Great Work would be “constant reinterpretation” of such wisdom as we received, reinterpretation “in the light of new historical experiences.” My argument here is that Berry’s essays are themselves exemplars of such reinterpretations, as well as a call for massive efforts of reinterpretation on the part of communities all over the planet.

Yet the stark truth remains: We have as yet no living tradition cultivating people who can live on the earth. And unfortunately, tragically, in large part because of this, we are now rapidly approaching one of those decisive, pivotal moments, not just of history but in geology, as Berry argues. And that pivot is the moment beyond which nothing enormous enough can be done to reconcile human beings as a dominant species with the earth, nothing done to prevent the crashing culmination of the great extinction already well in motion all around us.

With this in mind one might then say that Berry’s own “Great Work” was the effort to found a new wisdom tradition drawing on the “Four Wisdoms” he expects to guide humanity in the twenty-first century: “the wisdom of indigenous peoples, the wisdom of women, the wisdom of the classical traditions, and the wisdom of science” (GW 176). Every piece of wisdom literature defines anew the tradition in which it lies. Thus, we may see that Berry’s essays at once identify—and call into being—the tradition into which they (will) fall. This sounds paradoxical but is actually the situation of all wisdom literature. It is just far more difficult to grasp in Berry’s case.

**THE EARTH, DREAMING**

There is tremendous emphasis on the importance of story in the presentation of the emergent cosmology in much of Berry’s writing. But story, cosmology as story, indeed, any and all forms of cosmology are cultural products that themselves result from the fantastic explosiveness at the point where culture meets gene, where gene spawns culture. As we have seen, Berry steadily insisted that all received wisdoms stand in need of a total renewal that can come about only by re-immersion in our genetic coding, the coding that lies under our cultural coding and brings it into being. We need something even deeper than cultural renewal—we need a renewal at the species level. This is the radical Berry, the wild Berry.

But there is one more decisive point lurking here: Human dream-space is where the gene talks to the brain. Human dream-space ought to be considered the crossover point from DNA to culture—from genetic coding to cultural coding. “We need to remember,” he writes, “that this process whereby we invent ourselves in these cultural modes is guided by visionary experience that comes to us in some trans-rational process from the inner shaping tendencies that we carry within us, often in revelatory dream experience” (DE 201).

Consider then that the process of assimilating the Dream, of fully receiving it into human being, will certainly include telling stories about the universe. Once the Dream is moving into culture, it is birthing cosmology—story, dance, ritual, poetry, pottery, painting.
Cultural coding is rooted in genetic coding; culture is rooted in dream. And the latter is so because it is in dream that genetic coding is shown to the conscious mind. It is the body that presents the earth to the mind in dreams.

Whales are the dream of the earth; maggots are; molten lava, coral reefs. We are but one part of the Dream, and our cultural coding but a very small part of that Dreaming. But we receive as best we can, we open as much as we can—and we respond as best we can. This is what we do—like cheetahs run and bees buzz. And so, yes, Dream and be Dreamt. Referring to his essay entitled "Dream of the Earth," Berry wrote:

In it I am concerned with the earth not as the object of some human dream, but with the earth itself and its inherent powers in bringing forth this marvelous display of beauty in such unending profusion, a display so overwhelming to human consciousness that we might very well speak of it as being dreamed into existence (DE xiv-v; my emphasis).

We are ourselves part of what the earth dreams—along with all else that lives and moves and stands and is. And next we have the human dreaming:

Our own dreams of a more viable mode of being for ourselves and for the planet Earth can only be distant expressions of this primordial source of the universe itself in its full extent in space and in the long sequence of its transformations in time (DE xv).

Our dreams are the dreams of a species, of individuals being themselves dreamt well on back, time-into-time, space-into-space. We then access and receive and are part of earth, dreaming.

Dreams, it is worth emphasizing, are received. They are not written or created. They can be invited; we can learn to take on stances or postures or practices that human experience through millennia have shown will open us—communities or individuals—to large dreams. Ultimately, though, it is a matter of receiving—which is to say, a gifting.

What, then, is the universe but a Dreaming infused with poetry? And a dreaming infinitely deeper than the human. And we bow to that. We must. And if we are true students of Thomas Berry it is this above all that we must learn.

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NOTES
1. T. Berry, Evening Thoughts (San Francisco, CA: Sierra Club Books, 2006), 66. Subsequent reference to this and other work by Berry will be noted by initials in the text as follows: Dream of the Earth (San Francisco, CA: Sierra Club Books, 1988), DE; Evening Thoughts, ET; Great Work: Our Way into the Future (New York: Bell Tower, 1999), GW; and Sacred Universe: Earth, Spirituality, and Religion in the Twenty-First Century (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), SU.
2. The entire essay entitled “The Fourfold Wisdom” (GW, 176-95) is of utmost importance for the argument I am making here.