

The following reflection was offered by Brian Edward Brown for The Thomas Berry Forum for Ecological Dialogue in its Contemplative Ecologists Circle for October 15, 2020, based on the selection from Berry's "Loneliness and Presence" in *Evening Thoughts: Reflecting on Earth as Sacred Community* pp.33-42 (" At the time of his treaty with the European settlers in 1854, Chief Seattle of the Squamish tribe along the North Pacific coast is reported to have said that when the last animals will have perished, 'humans would die of loneliness' ....Our longing to experience the sight and presence of wilderness creatures seems to indicate that already we are beginning to experience the loneliness of which Chief Seattle warned.")

Just weeks after the September 2020 United Nations Summit on Biodiversity, the October 4th culmination of the Season of Creation on the feast of St. Francis, and the most recent celebration this week of indigenous Peoples Day, we gather this evening to hear Thomas Berry's invocation of the laconic prophecy attributed to Chief Seattle that when animals will have perished from the Earth, humans would die of loneliness.

The catastrophic impact of human living that defines the present sixth mass extinction in Earth history was the enormity that informed the entire corpus of Berry's writings. But if there is unfathomable harm inflicted on the planetary body in the ongoing disappearance of its fauna and flora, it is not Berry's intent to exactly chronicle the devastation. The "loneliness" in the title of tonight's essay may well haunt the present and future of the human condition on a desolate Earth, but its darkness yields to Berry's exposition of the title's other word "presence" which is at the heart of cosmic hopefulness.

At every level of its unfolding process, the universe, in the plenitude of its differentiated expressions, attests to the capacity for communion which in turn is a function of presence as a constitutive mode of all things in the universe, properly understood as a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects. From its primordial conception on the sub - atomic particle level through its billionfold galactic formations with their solar and planetary shaping dynamics, advancing to its most elaborate articulations of sentient awareness on Earth, the universe is a psychic-spiritual as well as a physical-material reality. It is from within the depths of that psychic-spiritual dimension, that profound subjectivity which defines each being within the universe, that communion is realized. And it is in the intimacy of communion with the natural world that the human experiences its deepest meaning and fulfillment." Indeed " writes Berry "we cannot be truly ourselves in any adequate manner without all our companion beings throughout Earth... Even beyond Earth, we have an intimate presence to the universe in its comprehensive reality." This sense of bonded kinship with all beings as one's relatives elicits a

profound exuberance and vitality that finds creative expression in the ritual and ceremonial experiences within the broad array of indigenous cultures. Such enactments of solidarity with the universe community may well be the source of a powerful resilience in the face of the yet ongoing colonial dispossession, marginalization and suppression of native peoples throughout the globe.

By contrast, there is neither communion, nor intimacy, nor celebration in the commercial-industrial orientation that has assaulted the Earth in the last centuries of Western civilization. It has reduced the planetary body to a mere collection of objects, consigned as just so much exploitable, commodified resources for the satisfaction of insatiable consumptive desires. Entranced with its own technological mastery, this culture of domination has severely impoverished and threatened the viability of immense millionfold populations of species of fauna and flora. But in its deadly process of mass extinction now upon us, the consumptive human confronts the desolation and loneliness of its own making and chief Seattle's warning.

While a sense of hopelessness and paralysis may overwhelm human consciousness at this extremity of its own isolation, Thomas Berry would yet speak of the possibility of recovering our inherent capacity for inner presence to other modes of being. Precisely because it is an innate disposition, a fundamental, even definitive genetic inclination towards communion, we may be guided by our longing for fulfillment, past the hollow sterility of our artificial contrivances, to the abundance that only the universe may bestow. "We are ourselves" writes Berry "only to the extent of our unity with the universe to which we belong and in which alone we discover our fulfillment... We might remember that the reality of our own existence can be validated only in the context of honoring the larger communication that the material world offers us in terms of wonder for the mind, beauty for the imagination and intimacy for the emotions."

Thank you.

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