

The following reflection was offered by Brian Edward Brown for the Thomas Berry Forum for Ecological Dialogue in its Contemplative Ecology Circle for September 17, 2020, based on the selection from Berry's "The World of Wonder" in *The Sacred Universe* pp. 174-76 ("We need to begin to see the whole of this land....The communion that comes through these experiences of the wild, where we sense something present and daunting, stunning in its beauty, is beyond comprehension in its reality, but it points to the holy, the sacred.")

With these concluding paragraphs, Thomas Berry's essay *The World of Wonder* returns to the repeated questions of its opening sentences where Berry asks "What do we see?" "What do we see in the star filled night sky? What do we see when dawn lightens the horizon, or in the fading days of summer's end or autumn's cascades of falling leaves? What do we see?" And as we followed the progression of his thought these past months Berry quickly exposed the crucial failure to actually see, and thus reverence, the integrity and vibrancy of the natural world as the fatal flaw that has rendered the North American continent so vulnerable to the commercial - industrial onslaught that has persisted these last five centuries of its European occupation. So long have we regarded the lay of the land through the distortive lens of the colonizing optics of cultural exceptionalism, entitlement and exploitation that we have rendered ourselves functionally blind to the immense harm that we were, in fact, inflicting.

The tragedy of what has been lost and continues to degrade emerges, however indirectly, from Berry's evocative description of the continent's immensity and coherence across the expanse of its bioregional differentiations of mountain ranges, rivers and valleys, soils and woodlands, canyons and grasslands, Gulf shores and ocean coastlines. This wondrous topography and the biology it sustains, has all been made possible by the measured cadence of seasonal energies from within a stabilized global climate. But in the very panorama of the natural beauty and vitality to which Berry's words attend and celebrate, there is the somber gravity and foreboding of what has been lost and even now disappears. " The North American continent" Berry writes "will never again be what it once was. The manner in which we have devastated the continent has never before occurred.... [W]e have so intruded ourselves and debilitated the continent in its primordial powers that it can no longer proceed simply on its own.... [T]here will be little development of life here in the future if we do not protect and foster living forms of this continent. To do this a change must occur deep in our souls."

Significantly, the depth of Berry's transformation is not secured merely by contemplating the loveliness of landscape, but also by confronting its very death from human

heedlessness and plunder. If the eloquence and conservation commitments of Aldo Leopold were clarified and consolidated at his witness of the dying fire in the eyes of the sole wolf he had shot, how much more galvanized to preserve and protect planetary habitat might we yet experience at the millionfold species extinction now terminating the Cenozoic era of life's extraordinary flourishing? To see such devastation is to bear the heaviest of burdens, but it is also to dispose oneself at the deepest soul level of Berry's reference to that wild and sacred Creative Wisdom that may yet guide our rehabilitation towards a restorative future.

Such was that wild and sacred Creative Wisdom manifesting in the attraction of gravity at the universe's earliest emergence, holding the primordial particles from the chaos of mere dispersal that would have halted the galactic formations for the further expressions of cosmic unfolding. Such was that wild and sacred Creative Wisdom present in the thermodynamic implosion of the supernova within the Milky Way, forging new elements whose consolidation brought our solar system into being. Such was that wild and sacred Creative Wisdom that shaped the Earth and its placement with the sun whose energies would elicit from planetary waters, soils and atmosphere, the living cell whose complexification would manifest in the extraordinary diversity of beings among whom the human would eventually emerge to find its deepest fulfillment within their communion. It is that same wild and sacred Creative Wisdom, present through the turbulence of the perilous past, that awakens us to the harms we have wrought and the loss that we grieve, to nevertheless hearten us for the task we now assume.

Thank you.

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