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"We are now moving into a chapter in human history in which our choice is going to be, not between a whole world and a shredded up world, but between one world and no world. I believe the human race is going to choose life and good, not death and evil."

—Arnold Toynbee

Revisiting the Past

Why history is incomplete, and four things we’ve left out—the earth, the body, the feminine, and the unconscious.

"I hope I have jumped clear out of the 19th century into the 21st without having put my feet tangled in the 19th or the 20th," historian Arnold Toynbee boldly said. "I feel confident that the tradition of the past is also the wave of the future."

Historian Thomas Berry believes it’s time to take a even bolder jump—to re-examine history and start putting back some parts that we’ve let out, namely, the earth, the body, the feminine, and the unconscious. Why revising the past? Our impulse is a world that’s physically declining, says Berry. In our commitment to make progress at any cost, we fail to see the universe is limited by organic laws.

If history takes its lead from biology and begins to work with living systems, we will create an entirely new genre of the human. This will mean a whole new consciousness and a radical restructuring of our social organizations to support a living planet.

How likely is this? Very, in the wake of new scientific findings which provide new insights into the bond between the human, the heavens, and the earth.

Berry’s background is suited to such wide-ranging explorations. He’s a master of Chinese, Sanskrit, Pali and Oriental philosophy and a well-known lecturer on the idea of progress in Western thought. In the 1960s, he created the first program in the history of world religions at Fordham University and then founded the Center for Religious Research and the Center for Earth Studies, in New York, New York.

Two years ago, he stressed the United Nations to pass a "World Charter for Nature." This earth-centered manifesto warns that we must protect the present diversity of life forms or else lose contact with our own interior nature (see Tarrytown Letter 29, July 1983).

Berry is also president of the American Toltec Association which, this year, will host seminars on homoeogenisation, medical change, the journey symbol, and biogenetic engineering.

In addition, he has compiled 12 volumes of poetry and 22 volumes of outstanding reputation. Some titles: The Spirituality of the Earth, Creative Revolution, Religion and Ecology, Technology and the Future of the Nation-State, Tolhardt in the Ecological Age, The American Indian Future, and The Human Venture.

His most seminal thoughts are expressed in physicist Brian Swimme’s new book, The Universe in a Green Dragon Bean & Co., Santa Fe, New Mexico, 1985.

Berry’s view of history picks up where Toynbee’s left off, integrating all living systems, from the micro-organisms to the solar system, from planeta to planets. He’s really a cosmology, combining the human story with the story of the universe. It offers, all at once, a new creation myth, a new stage of the civilization process, and a new view of history. Tarrytown’s managing editor, Valerie Andreu, recently talked with Berry about his vision of the emerging human and our place in time.

Tarrytown: You say that we now have to reinvent the human and begin to question the whole civilization process. Why must we do this?
Berry: Because, to date, our history has been partial and incomplete. It has failed to make some important connections.

One of the most important things that’s happening now is the linking of the history of the human with the story of the earth, the story of life and the story of the universe. This is what we see in a new book called Cosmic Time. The author took a single square mile and wrote his history rather powerfully—starting 2 million years ago at the start of the Pleistocene age. He followed the development of all life forms on this piece of land from the Glacial period until now.

Tarrytown: What about our previous attempts to look at the larger sweep of history? How is this any different?
Berry: We have good studies of historic cycles all the way back to the Persians, but those bring us back to the beginning and over again. The problem is we can’t go back to virgin civilization: We have now entered irreversible time.

The great shock of the twentieth century was a work by Oswald Spengler called The Decline of the West. From the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries on, the essential word in the western vocabulary was progress; it was just incomprehensible to have a process of decline. What Spengler brought into focus was the fact that the West was, of course, in such a period. His basic model was the organic model: a period of birth, of creativity, of maturity and decay. He said once we enter the arc of decline, we try to slow it up by institutionalization. Yet this is merely a hardening of a civilization which can never be restored. The only thing to do is to sow the seeds of a new creative period.

Tarrytown: How does civilization change now that we’ve entered irreversible time?
Berry: Because we cannot return to the beginning, we have to rethink the role of the human on the earth. We frequently talk about ourselves as political, ethnic or religious entities. Yet we never think of ourselves as a species in a larger life community. This is our most important challenge now.

We also got the idea that civilization could exploit the resources of the planet endlessly, that there were no limits to what could be done. This comes from the Biblical idea that the earth is here for the service of humans and is supposed to do what we want it to, as opposed to humans trying to fit themselves into the dynamic of planetary life. The paleontologist Teilhard de Chardin saw through this and addressed this problem eloquently.

We have gone through a period of isolating ourselves and we are just discovering that we have no future, that we are extinguishing the conditions of life itself. If we want to stop this process, we must begin a new historical epoch where the human will enmesh itself in an integral relationship with the community of life, and larger patterns of development.

Tarrytown: Some historians believe this alienation began with the first calendars developed over five thousand years ago in Sumeria. As soon as we had a concept of the past and future, we began to lose connection with life itself.
Berry: At least this loss was mitigated during the agricultural period by the use of seasonal calendars. It wasn’t until the linear process was set forth and the idea of progress adopted in the industrial era, that the pressure really began to build. Our calendar today has much in common with the ancient Chinese calendar, which rewarded time in cultural and political periods. When there was a transition to a new season, a new calendar began, a new universe, and a new world. We see this
"For nearly two thousand years, we've dated time from a religious event. Now we're starting with the incarnation of the universe."

sensitive to the pre-rational—to the deep layers of reality that Jung discovered in his work on archetypes. He said that the archetypal world of the unconscious is our major determinant. Man is compelled to communicate with it determines our values and the significance of what we do.

The Chinese, and to some extent, the Japanese, work to cultivate this responsiveness. It is the task of education, and the task of a culture, too.

Tarrytown: In the West, we have lost touch with things that are already born in nature, here in the deeper layers of psyche. As a result, we're missing four important things from Western history: an awareness of the earth, of the body, of the feminine and the unconscious.

Berry: That's a very good analysis of our present predicament. With the feminine, goes our creativity, too. It's interesting to me that St. Thomas said a really competent intellectual has a very strong sense of the feminine and an extremely developed sense of touch.

Tarrytown: In anorexia—a fairly recent illness—we see the body hungering for sustenance and touch. The imaginative psychologist James Hillman has even talked about anorexic cities and towns which have lost their sense of life and meaning. More and more, we see people living out, in their own bodies, what's happening to the culture.

If the earth is becoming anorexic, why wouldn't our bodies reflect this? What we're seeing is a withdrawal from feminine creativity in a culture that has given us no images for regeneration.

In cancer, we see something else: the body fighting against itself, and the cancer is a reversal, a return to a primary unity.

Berry: This is a very good thing to talk about. The most profound approach to illness—of the body or the planet—is to look at our relationship with the larger life systems.

The problem is we are good with analytical processes but a disaster at synthesis. We even have two separate languages—one I call macrophase thinking, and the other morphology thinking. Primordial people were good at macrophase thinking and seeing the earth as an indivisible whole. Now, interestingly, so are certain modern scientists. This was clear at a recent conference in Amherst, Massachusetts which dealt with the earth as a living organism.

There James Lovelock (The Gaia Hypothesis) gave a very interesting talk on the way the earth keeps its homeostasis and adjusts to its own internal temperature. This is powerful evidence that the earth has a unifying principle.

The good news is that such studies are about to change biology the way Einstein changed physics. They are introducing a totally different perspective in our whole consciousness of the earth and the different living forms. There will be enormous consequences economically, culturally, religiously.

We will all have a sense of participating in a larger context. This is somewhat analogous to what Teilhard de Chardin called "ultra-personality.” He was talking about humans coming together to create the ultra-personal. But when you have a comprehensive bonding of all living systems, the earth's extraordinary genius and vitality comes out.

Tarrytown: How will this insight inspire the creation of a new Ecological Age? Berry: The Italian historian Vico had some extraordinary perceptions. He was aware that each era of transition has a language that will lead us back to life itself. He said that when a civilization grows away from the vigor of its mythic age, it comes into a barbarism of refinement. Then there has to be a recorso—a return to life.
Any culture which denigrates the feminine will not understand the sacrifice required to give birth to a new civilization.

Our age has often tended to reject the past instead of incorporating it. Look at the preponderance of different psychotherapies; how we struggle to move beyond the personal past into forgiveness and transcendence. Do we also need a way of revising our cultural past?

Berry: To do this, we must accept our shadow, as Jung insisted. We have to incorporate both the dark side of the personality and our use of technology to poison the biosphere. As Jung says, we grow on our pathologies. That is where the possibility for renewal lies.

Tarrytown: There’s one other exercise that may be helpful. That’s to go back and recount our first memories of nurturing. We could list those things that give humans a sense of Self and a sense of place if we are to build a sustainable culture. We could ask what do we carry with us genetically that enhances our well-being?

Berry: This would be a fascinating experience, requiring us to think more about the Hodgean process, about the dialectics of history.

We did something similar at a conference on Religion and the Earth in Canada. The organizers decided to expand meditation on the stations of the cross to consider the stations of the universe. Special places were identified where people could contemplate the wild and the center. We stood in one location where we could feel the waves and the winds and the vibrancy of nature. Then we went down to a marshland to experience the emergence of life, and the earth as a water world where everything has that freshness and feeling of luxurious growth. Finally we meditated on flowers and the emergence of higher life forms. If you look at seeds, and the concentrated life proteins in the grain, you see how humans received an enormous amount of sustenance. Without flowers, civilization never would have been born.

Tarrytown: Will a new vision of spirituality help us to write a new history of the earth?

Berry: Yes, but what we need to do is stop thinking in terms of redemption. We need to think instead of the liturgy of the universe. There is a violence here.

Anne DiRado perceives, that gives nature a richness of meaning. We are dealing with a sacred dimension where each being gives itself to another being for its own sustenance.

Tarrytown: So the universe embodies sacrifice.

Berry: Yes. I always think of supernovas as being a splendid example of the sacrificial moment. The star collapses upon itself, and in enormous heat, the universe disperses itself out into space. We are the partial realizations of the supernovas. We are the star dust, we are made from elements of which everything on earth takes shape. The supernovas did not disappear; they are continuing, and in us they have attained a new mode of expression.

The deepest sacrificial element, however, is the sacrifice required to give birth to a new human being or a new civilization. Sacrifice, in our ego-dominated society, is a terrifying thing. It means the pain of relinquishing with no vision of what’s to come on the other side.

Berry: That’s where the age of consumerism comes in. We try to get meaning by the endless process of consumption. Dealing with this will require a new genre of the human.

Tarrytown: We have always had some kind of movement, through the arts, to make us whole again. How can today’s artists find inspiration in the earth?

Berry: This brings us to Paul Winter’s Missig Gani, and back, in a sense, to Ilaydy’s Creativo onorto. In every age, these great mysteries are transposed into a new context. We also need more religious celebrations and regional renewal festivals.

Tarrytown: Tonybee says that in the next 30 years, Christians will become a repository of these new insights.

Berry: That’s very interesting. I think what Tonybee is talking about is a kind of mutual appropriation—a re-reading of all traditions in new forms. In that sense, they will survive in each other and there will be a mutual appreciation. The challenge, in the future, is to learn to keep the spiritual traditions creative and in touch with their intuitions, their deep spontaneity.

Tarrytown: What we need, then, is a new ritual of communion, one that will enable us to celebrate our diversity and then come together in a new form.

Berry: This is something like what’s happening with different psychological types. Jung said people were basically thinking, sensing, feeling or intuitive. When these different groups, or teams, or family groups, they each have to sacrifice some portion of their own individuality in order to speak a common language.

Berry: Yes. Each type has to let go in a certain sense—but their value lies in the fact that they are different, and each has something unique to contribute. History is the story of how we are working through this complex paradox.

Berry: This is made somewhat easier because scientists tell us there is a revolutionary aspect, a mystical aspect to the earth. This exists in a meta-context for all religions and all cultures.

Tarrytown: How does this translate to our economic life?

Berry: We are at a very critical moment in this country and this is where the new ecologies of the business world comes in. We are in a new period of the entrepreneur. Just look at Nasib’s Magazines, Drucker’s new look on management, and Peters’ Passion for Excellence.

Berry: This is not a meta-context, it’s a renewal of a hundred year old ideal that had its culmination in Carnegie and Ford. These people led us into a phase of conglomerates and transnationals. They view everything as an intensification of the consumer process, and have yet to understand the economics of the earth.

If you interpret a certain form of bacteria into an organism, you can create a new kind of animal, and then a crash. We are in a bloom phase with our current form of consumerism, and we are just about to crash. As we see it, we have a great conflict between the biocultural end of the economy and the entrepreneurial end of the economy.

The future lies in a new definition of management—something no longer based on planetary management. Quite simply, our motivation is to come together in a new form and keep the spiritual traditions creative and in touch with their intuitions, their deep spontaneity.

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Differenciation is key at this stage. The important thing is creative interaction with whatever exists. Not rationalized, conscious control of it. Thoreau says, “In wilderness is the preservation of the world.” St. Thomas says, “In differentiation is the perfection of the universe.”

Tarrytown: Where does our impulse to unify rightly belong?

Berry: Centered on the planet itself. The genius of the earth is that it hides its unity in favor of diversity. Ultimately each individual, starting from his or her own vantage point, has the responsibility to synthesize heaven, earth and humankind.

In the long run, this should result in a new vision of the professions. Our hope is to create a new history of the sciences and all disciplines. To create a sense of intimate participation with the universe and appreciate its deeper meaning.

So in biology, we will study to the total web of life systems, the role of the biosphere in the historical process, the deeper intelligibility of life itself. Life will have to be recognized, for the first time, as a spiritual process.

In commerce, we will have to understand the total range and nature of our economic enterprise. We must relate this to other phases of life and to the earth process. We must consider the mystical commensate that occurs when men exchange their goods with one another.

In medicine, we must see the relation of the individual to the earth as the primary systemic healing. We must honor the deeper significance of the healer, his mystical powers, his capacity to manifest the divine. In physics, we will find the total science of the world—the historical unfolding of the universe. This discipline will tell us the new story of life and will provide the new creation myth for all humanity.

The result of this envisioning is that each individual will be so completely woven into the life process that he is unattainable apart from this context.

Here is the true convergence, the true unity. It won’t come from a single analytic process that provides a new history of the universe. Each individual must venture deeper into himself and into the natural and we revivify the human, each of us will have to make our own cosmos.