BIOREGIONALISM:
A Worldwide Movement Honors Local Culture and ‘Human-Scale’ Economies

Thomas Berry is an educator, environmentalist, activist and priest. He authored the United Nations World Charter for Nature and is a historian of the Hudson River Valley and creator of the Center for Earth Studies in Riverdale, New York. A founding father of the bioregional movement in the U.S.—and a worldwide advocate of small, self-sustaining systems—Berry recently talked with The Tarrytown Letter about the widespread effects of this new philosophy. Most radical is his belief that people don’t need nations at all—that bioregional groups, organized around geographic areas that have a sense of natural completeness, would make human settlements not only more livable but less vulnerable to war and poverty politics. Here is what he said:

Tarrytown: Bioregionalism is a new word for some—and an outdated one. Can you tell us what it means?
Berry: A bioregion is simply an identifiable geographic area whose life systems are self-contained, self-sustaining and self-renewing.

Tarrytown: Why is it important for us to recognize these systems?
Berry: First of all, we must start to look at the way the entire planet functions. It’s not limitless, and it’s not homogeneous. The planet expresses itself in scores of varied living systems. We have to be able to grasp these units of life. A bioregion, you might say, is a basic unit within the natural system of the earth.

Tarrytown: How can you identify a bioregion?
Berry: By its chief natural resource. You have rain forest systems, arctic systems, plains systems, coastal systems, mountain systems. Another way to define a bioregion is in terms of watersheds. Take the lower Hudson River basin from Troy to New York City; this is a “megasystem” with a large number of sub-systems, all bound together by the river.

Tarrytown: What’s unique about the Hudson River Valley as a bioregion?
Berry: For one thing, it’s a place where many systems meet. For instance, the Canadian vegetation meets with what’s called the Carolinian type. The River Valley is also one of the great migration paths. It’s a place of meeting, integration, interaction.

Tarrytown: How has the Hudson Valley bioregion changed through the course of history?
Berry: From the start it was extremely important in the setting of America. New York City grew importantly because of the Erie Canal. It enabled the river basin to be in contact with the center of the continent. But it also enabled the Hudson Valley to live by tapping other regions.

Central New York was once a grain-producing area up into the Mohawk Valley. But then the grain-growing sections moved out to Ohio, Indiana, Illinois because we could bring grains into the Atlantic trading system through the Hudson waterways. It was a gain in some ways, but it was also a loss of bioregional integrity because people no longer felt the discipline of self-sufficiency.

Tarrytown: What’s unique about the region?
Berry: A group of engineers was asked to set up a program of modernization in Mindanao—they recommended the build-
It's not bad people who are ruining the earth. It's good people. I'm including the traditional, humanistic tradition of the Western world!

**BERRY:** That's one of the most important things that are addressed by bioregionalism. To the extent that we destroy a culture or a species, or tamper with the balance of life in a given region, we're cutting ourselves off from important knowledge—every culture and every species contains terrain-related, information-bearing parts.

The great hope is that human sensitivity—with really competent insight into the biosphere—should help us to foster a renewal of life—and heal the natural world.

**Tarrytown:** How can we educate people to have this kind of sensitivity?

**BERRY:** The difficulty is in the choice—what we are going to try to integrate the human with the rhythms of the natural world. The beauty of the bioregional movement is that it sought to re-integrate the human being into a technological and manipulative world.

We have to ask: Why do we educate people? Currently we educate people for jobs in the technological world—and this world is presently in a phase of self-destruction.

It astonishes me that the educational establishments haven't the slightest idea of what's happening on the planet. There is no education for regional self-sufficiency or, for that matter, in values or life sustainability. There is a long way to go.

On a world level, we're enforcing this specialization on other cultures. How can a human being be halfway dried up of its diversity?

**Tarrytown:** The basic tenet of ecology is that a healthy ecosystem is based on diversity. Yet we have created a monoculture wherever we go, forcing different regions to specialize in order to sustain that monoculture.

**BERRY:** I'm not suggesting that we return to some primitive state. But we have to start recognizing that there is more to be done with many more people from so many perspectives. But we have to start thinking about building a new world.

**Tarrytown:** It seems difficult because there were so many people from so many components, but we have to re-integrate the human being into a technological and manipulative world.

**BERRY:** Right. Yet, unfortunately, our technological progress is irreversible: we've lost 4 billion tons of topsoil every year. We can't replace this by any scientific process.

The good news, however, is that there are some very positive approaches being taken, particularly the innovative work being done at the Catholic University of St. John the Divine. But we have to re-educate our urban renewal plans, our educational processes, our scientific education, our artistic and cultural education.

This is a powerful center for interpreting the earth and interacting with the environment. We're doing the best thing in bioregionalism is happening there.

They've already had speakers like Rene Dubos from the UN, and Nancy Todd from the New Alchemy Institute. Now they've signed a new series of talks with the National Geographic Society to introduce contemporary approaches to the Earth and our new path in the future.

Most of the nation's growth centers talk too much psychology and consciousness. They're not grounded in earth processes. It's time to move into the Earth Potential Movement.

**Tarrytown:** Another key issue is respect for the feminine—for values like receiving and nurturing. These virtues are important for the survival of the earth's biospheres. Our technological systems must be in dialogue with the feminine principle to survive.

**BERRY:** Yes, the philosopher and paleozoologist Thomas Hibbard in his new book, The Universe, The Phenomenon of Man acknowledged this. Teilhard said he never had a great development of his thought unless some feminine eye was fixed upon him.

I also think the recent bioregional meetings that are taking place are evidence of a new appreciation of the feminine. This year alone, we had the first North American Bioregional Congress, the Earth Futures conference of the regional Association of New England, and now the first Hudson-Orange Bioregional Congress. There is an entire series of talks giving more importance to what came out of these meetings.

**Tarrytown:** The first North American Congress was difficult because there were so many people from so many perspectives. But we have to start thinking about building a new world.

**BERRY:** Imagine being $200 billion overspent in a single year! In 1928, do you know what the total debt of this country was? $8 billion dollars. That's less than 60 years ago.

Part of the problem, too, is that environmentalism has reached an unproveable volume and intensity.

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suggest we no longer have the psychic urgency to move these on the same level we once did.

**BERRY:** I think the unsustainable of the industrial infrastructure is crucial. I suggest to some groups that it's financial slavery to try and keep up all the existing burdens, for example. If we really wanted to cross the river, just think how race it would be to take a ferry ride to the Battery every morning. We would be best off activating small-scale human solutions like solar cookers, lights, rail cars and ferries (see page 12).

**Tarrytown:** We seem to have developed a transportation infrastructure that helps us destroy our bioregions—and then requires us to exploit other bioregions for food and raw materials. Our finances can no longer keep up with the infrastructure we've created.

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