

FOR THE LOVE OF LIFE

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Abstract

This article affirms Thomas Berry's description of our cultural predicament and the responses he offers in terms of the Universe Story and the 'great work'. After articulating aspects of this new story, the article proceeds to discuss the implications for a new politics and a new economy. The three elements of the 'great work' that of telling the story, the creation of a new politics and the creation of a new economy are essential to the transformation of society. Yet the political and economic transformation are dependent on real democracy, and all are in need of profound reform.

Keywords: Thomas Berry, *The Great Work*, the new story

By his constant rituals, trances, ecstasies, and "journeys," the tribal shaman ensures that the relation between human society and the larger society of beings is balanced and reciprocal, and that the village never takes more from the living land than it returns to it.

— David Abrams, *The Spell of the Sensuous*

In *Dream of the Earth*, Thomas Berry defined the foundation of the modern human crisis, our lack of a new story that gives meaning and purpose to our lives. In *The Universe Story* he teamed up with Brian Swimme to narrate such a story. In *The Great Work* he articulates a visions of the world the new story calls us to create.

It is a truly Great Work that lies before us. Violent climatic disasters, dying reefs, melting ice caps, the disappearance of once familiar birds, butterflies, and frogs, falling sperm counts, dropping water tables, collapsing fisheries—it is as if the earth itself is attempting to send us a message we cannot ignore. In 1992, more than 1600 senior scientists, including a majority of all living Nobel laureates in the sciences, heard the message and issued a *Warning to Humanity*: "human beings and the natural world are on a collision course . . . that may so alter the living world that it will be unable to sustain life in the manner that we know."

Dire messages come not only from the planet and Nobel laureates. The financial meltdown that recently swept through Asia, Russia, and Latin America tells of serious economic malfunction, as does evidence of extreme and rapidly growing economic inequality both

within and between countries and the extreme deprivation of more than a billion people. Similarly, high rates of divorce, teen suicide, imprisonment, random violence, and other signs of social breakdown signal an alarming disintegration in the fabric of society.

The message, as we cross the threshold of the Millennium, could scarcely be more clear. Humanity is experiencing a deepening environmental, economic, and social crisis. Rather than address the problem, those in positions of formal power point to encouraging short-term statistics on economic growth, rising stock prices, and employment expansion as proof that all is well. They seem not to realize that in the pursuit of money, we have forgotten how to live. Worse, we have created institutions that are destroying life to the sole end of making money.

Reduced to basics, our future hangs on a profound choice between life and money—or in the more biblical sense between God and Mammon. It should be the simplest of choices. Money is nothing but a number, an abstraction of no substance or intrinsic worth. Life is the foundation of all real wealth, the essence of our being, the breath of God, a miracle of creation.

The cause of our crisis is largely self-evident. Our economy is ruled by global corporations and financial institutions that measure success by the rate at which the life energies of people and the natural capital of the planet are being converted into money to inflate the financial assets of the already very wealthy. The essence of the task ahead, *The Great Work* described by Thomas Berry is both simple and profound. We must transform societies dedicated to the love of money into societies dedicated to the love of life—and we must do so quickly before environmental and social disintegration bring us to a point of no return.

By all indications, we cannot afford to wait for constructive leadership from the failed institutions of corporation and state. Our hope lies with the deep, but largely unnoticed, pressures for positive change that are building within global civil society. Much like the stress created by the shifting of tectonic plates deep within the earth before a great earthquake, these forces remain largely invisible. Yet much as geological forces burst forth to create violent earthquakes, we know that accumulating social forces can also burst forth with incredible transforming power. We experienced such forces at work a decade ago in the breakup of the Soviet Union, the dismantling of the Berlin Wall, and the end of apartheid in South Africa.

We, the people of planet Earth, face our moment of truth. Our future, indeed our very survival, depends on awakening and channeling these latent energies toward the creation of a life-affirming human civilization that embodies the values and inspiration of a *new story* given practical expression by a *new politics* and a *new economy*.

A New Story

The foundation of *The Great Work* is a new story of the miracle of cosmic creation narrated by the great story tellers of our time—such as Thomas Berry, Brian Swimme, Elisabet Sahtouris, Joanna Macy, Mae-Wan Ho, Lynn Margules, Matthew Fox, and others. Drawing data and inspiration from the leading edge of contemporary scientific and religious inquiry, the new story awakens us to the sacred wonder of a living cosmos embarked on a great journey of self-discovery.

The journey began 15 billion years ago when all the energy and mass of our known universe burst forth from a point smaller than the head of a pin and spread as dispersed energy particles, the stuff of creation, across the vastness of space. With the passing of time these particles, self-organized into atoms, which swirled into great clouds that eventually formed into galaxies, and coalesced into stars that grew, died, and were reborn as new stars, star systems, and planets. The cataclysmic energies unleashed by the births and deaths of billions of suns converted simple atoms into ever more complex atoms and molecules—at each step opening new possibilities for the growth and evolution of the whole.

More than 11 billion years later, at least one among the countless planets of the cosmos gave birth to tiny but enterprising living organisms that launched the planet's first great age of invention. They discovered the processes of fermentation, photosynthesis, and respiration that provided the building blocks for what was to follow. They learned to share their discoveries with one another through the exchange of genetic material and, in so doing, created the planet's first global communication system. With time they discovered how to join together in cooperative unions to create complex multi-celled organisms with capacities far beyond those of the individual cells of which they were composed. Our own bodies, composed of some 30 to 70 trillion individual living cells plus an even larger number of assorted beneficial bacteria and fungi, are an extraordinary example

of the complex consequences of this experimentation. Continuously experimenting, creating, building, life transformed the planet's very substance into a web of living beings of astonishing variety, beauty, awareness, and capacity for intelligent choice.

How different this unfolding epic is from the old story of the Newtonian scientific tradition that tells us matter is the only reality, life is an accident, consciousness is an illusion, and the cosmos is a clockwork defined by purely mechanical relationships, created and set in motion by a God who then left it to exhaust itself as its great spring winds down. This Newtonian story, which defined our view of ourselves and our potential throughout the industrial era, stripped life of meaning, mocked compassion as irrational, and left us with no moral purpose beyond seeking distractions from the terrible loneliness of our experience as conscious beings in a dead and uncaring cosmos. It gave us little reason to live, let alone to accept the responsibility of caring for one another and the living planet.

The new story calls us to re-examine our most basic understanding of the nature of reality. Its cosmic metaphor is not the machine, but the organism. Its irreducible building block is not a particle, but a thought. Rather than banishing the spiritual intelligence and energy we know as God to some distant place beyond our experience, it recognizes God as integral to all being.

The old story reduced life and consciousness to mere chance artifacts of material complexity. The new story recognizes life and consciousness as integral to the process of creation and even to the existence of matter itself. It suggests we were born to contribute to a great purpose in life's quest to know itself through a continuing unfolding toward ever greater complexity and competence.

Affirming many ancient religious insights, the new story reveals the wonder of life's extraordinary capacity for creative self-organization, infuses our lives with meaning and possibility, and evokes a love and reverence for the whole of life, the miracle of our living planet, and the creative potentials of each person. It calls us to accept responsibility for our presence on a living planet and to act as mindful stewards of God's creation.

The new story opens the way to healing the centuries old breach between science and religion that has left us with an artificial and often schizophrenic separation of our intellectual and spiritual lives—torn between a theology that denies the evidence of logic and observation and a science that denies our experience of consciousness and

spirit. It allows us to recognize sin as that which is destructive of life and the actualization of its potential. Equally it allows us to recognize our own capacity for goodness, compassion, and creative engagement in the unfolding drama of creation. And in revealing life's ability to self-organize with a mindfulness of both self and whole further affirms our potential to create truly democratic, self-organizing human societies that acknowledge and nurture our individual capacity to balance freedom with responsibility.

A New Politics

The new story calls us to a new politics dedicated to realizing democracy's promise of societies in which sovereignty—the right and power to govern—resides in and flows from mindful and informed people to the community and the state—expressing the values, needs, and creative aspirations of every person. A dream that traces back at least to the ancient Greek philosophers, it gains modern impetus from the reality of democracy's contemporary practice in societies in which the bureaucratized mega-institutions of state and corporation concentrate control of real power in the hands of a small economic and political elite.

The new politics recognizes that democracy is an act, not a possession, and therefore exists only as an active practice. It seeks not power over or power under, but power with—enhancing the choice-making opportunities and capacity of every member of the community to build the mutual power of the whole. It seeks to bring meaning and compassion to political life by rooting political practice in the living values of community and place—engaging the natural human desire to steward that which we value. The ideal of the new politics is the true and active political participation of all people in the decisions that affect their lives.

Finding inspiration in the participatory self-organizing processes of healthy natural systems, the new politics seeks to move society beyond contemporary forms of representative democracy that limit the majority to deciding which elite faction will hold political office for the next electoral period. Thus, unlike many political movements of the past, it does not focus on replacing one ruling elite with another—hopefully endowed with nobler values. Rather it seeks to awaken a civic-minded political consciousness, create an open political discourse toward the creation of an informed and constantly self-renewing

popular will, and transform the institutions of governance to facilitate the processes of orderly self-rule in an interdependent world.

While most of us still think of democracy primarily in terms of formal institutions, we have a rich contemporary experience with deeply democratic self-organizing processes that arise from the popular will of informed people. Compelling examples from the twentieth century include the independence movement that freed India from British rule, the civil rights movements that ended apartheid in the United States and South Africa, and the bloodless popular uprising that brought down the corrupt Marcos regime in the Philippines. We also have experience with the labor, civil rights, environmental, peace, and women's movements that have brought millions of people to a new level of political and spiritual consciousness and engaged them in radically participatory processes challenging the institutional status quo.

While most expressions of the new politics begin with protest, the more notable eventually turn to nurturing proactive processes that move society to greater awareness and capacity. These include labour initiatives that improve the rights and conditions of all working people; civil rights initiatives that raise consciousness of the inalienable rights and innate potentials of every person; environmental initiatives that call on us to rethink and reshape the relationships between human communities and the living planet; and women's initiatives that liberate both men and women from the confines of prejudice and arbitrarily defined roles. Each contributes to a larger transformation yet unfinished.

Ironically, the ultimate impetus to the creation of a new politics comes from global capitalism and its drive to establish a hegemonic system of world financial and corporate rule grounded in the perverse belief that the rights and interests of money properly take precedence over those of living beings. Mocking democracy and disregarding the interests of people and the planet at every hand, the institutions of money are provoking a global political awakening of people of every race, nationality, religion, and ethnic group—giving birth to a politics of solidarity that may hopefully take us beyond the more divisive identity politics that now fragments progressive movements.

The possibilities are revealed by the formation of broadly inclusive national movements that apply the self-organizing principles of the new politics to the work of national transformation in countries as

diverse as Canada, Chile, and the Philippines. In each instance these movements have become proactive in illuminating and experimenting with life-centered alternatives to rule by money—and in so doing are opening the way to a rethinking and restructuring of political institutions and creating a supportive context for a new economy.

A New Economy

Nowhere does a society more clearly reveal its true values than in the institutions and priorities that govern its economic life. In our case, our economic institutions reveal the extent to which we love money over life itself. As the new story awakens our love of life, we face the challenge of recreating our economies to life's service. In embracing this challenge, we do well to model our economics systems on the processes of healthy living eco-systems—which are place based, self-organizing, predominantly cooperative, and bear a striking resemblance to the ideal of the market economy.

The idea of market economies self organized by ordinary people in the pursuit of secure and satisfying livelihoods has long fired the imagination of those who value human freedom and self-rule. It is a great tragedy of our time that a massive consolidation of economic power in the hands of authoritarian states under communism and in the hands of authoritarian corporations under capitalism has moved us ever further from this ideal. With the fall of communism, capitalism's mega-corporations—with the backing of institutions such as the World Bank, the IMF, and the World Trade Organization—have accelerated their efforts to consolidate their control of the world's wealth. The resulting instability, insecurity, and outright destruction are pushing millions of people into an active search for economic alternatives that value equity, cooperation, stewardship, and the long-term well-being of the whole.

Many recruits to the creative task of inventing a new economy come from among those whom capitalism's relentless competition has marginalized or excluded. Others are one time winners who have come to realize that capitalism's rewards are hollow and its costs unconscionable. The financial meltdown that devastated the economies of Asia, Russia, and Latin American during 1997 and 1998 gave fair warning of what lies ahead for a world ruled by financial speculators whose only loyalty is to their own profits.

The key to capitalism's ability to concentrate economic power

beyond public accountability is the publicly traded, limited liability corporation—which is to economic life what monarchy once was to political life. We now find that political democracy cannot long survive without economic democracy. Just as there could be no political democracy under monarchy, there can be no economic democracy in an economy ruled by publicly traded, limited liability corporations. They must therefore join the institution of monarchy as historical relics of a less mature age.

The wise society favors economic structures that naturally and seamlessly align the self-interest of the individual with the broader community interest. This alignment follows most naturally when an economy is comprised of human-scale enterprises owned by real people who have a love for the community in which their enterprise is located and for the place on the earth where they live. While not eliminating the need for rules determined and enforced by democratic consensus, organizing an economy around local stakeholder owners minimizes the need for coercive public intervention in otherwise self-organizing processes. Because mindfulness and market principles are both defining features of the new economy, we might call it a mindful market economy.

While most economic needs, even in a modern economy, can be met by human-scale enterprises, many economic undertakings require larger scale coordination of resources. Where appropriate, this can be achieved by numbers of stakeholder owned, human-scale enterprises forming cooperative structures mutually owned by the participating enterprises. Notable examples include the manufacturing networks of Denmark and Northern Italy, and consumer cooperatives such as the Seikatsu Clubs in Japan.

The new economy holds forth the ideal that work—both paid and unpaid—can and should be widely shared and undertaken as a means of living and an act of creative contribution to the health and vitality of the community. Similarly, because the enterprises of the new economy are owned by local stakeholders who care about the place in which they live and work, it is natural for them to consciously accept a measure of responsibility for the general prosperity and well-being of community and society, even as they seek to provide a fair return to their workers and stakeholder owners.

Each of the three elements of the Great Work—the telling and retelling of the new story, the creation of a new politics, and the creation of a new economy—is essential to the whole we seek, yet

insufficient in itself. Without a supporting transformation in the political and economic institutions by which a society expresses itself, the new story remains only a story. Political democracy has little substance in the absence of economic democracy, yet economic democracy is unlikely to be achieved until we reform our politics and embrace a story that gives meaning to life beyond an eternal competition for material acquisition and consumption.

Together the new story, the new politics, and the new economy suggest key elements of a realizable vision for the human future consistent with both our survival and our actualization of yet untapped potentials. The realization of that vision will be a truly Great Work of, by, and for the world's people, for the vision—itsself a product of countless minds—is more like an abstract drawing than a blueprint. Thomas Berry has named the problem, given us the story, and outlined its implications. The rest is yet to be filled in through the creative contributions of billions of people possessed of a love of life, self-organizing to create a life-affirming, life-serving future for humanity.

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