

Evening Thoughts

Reflecting on Earth as Sacred Community

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Edited by Mary Evelyn Tucker

Sierra Club Books

San Francisco

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"The Epic of Evolution," in *The Epic of Evolution: Science and Religion in Dialogue*, ed. James Miller (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2004); "Evening Thoughts," *EarthLight* 39 (Fall 2000): 134–35; "Loneliness and Presence," in *Communion of Subjects*, ed. Kimberley Patton and Paul Waldau (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

Published by Sierra Club Books
85 Second Street, San Francisco, CA 94105
www.sierraclub.org/books

Produced and distributed by
University of California Press
Berkeley and Los Angeles, California
University of California Press, Ltd.
London, England
www.ucpress.edu

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Berry, Thomas

Evening thoughts : reflecting on Earth as sacred community / Thomas Berry ; edited by Mary Evelyn Tucker.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 1-57805-130-4 (alk. paper)

1. Human ecology—Philosophy. 2. Philosophy of nature. 3. Environmental degradation—Moral and ethical aspects. 4. Environmental ethics. 5. Environmental responsibility. I. Tucker, Mary Evelyn. II. Title.

GF21.B473 2006

304.2 — dc22

2005057585

Book and jacket design by Ingalls Design

Printed in the United States of America on New Leaf Ecobook 50 acid-free paper, which contains a minimum of 50 percent post-consumer waste, processed chlorine free. Of the balance, 25 percent is Forest Stewardship Council certified to contain no old-growth trees and to be pulped totally chlorine free.

First Edition

10 09 08 07

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

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Our Way into the Future: A Communion of Subjects

Since the appearance of *Silent Spring* by Rachel Carson in 1962, we have been reflecting on the tragic consequences of the plundering industrial society that we have brought into existence during these past few centuries. That we should have caused such damage to the entire functioning of the planet Earth in all its major biosystems is obviously the consequence of a deep cultural pathology.

Just as clearly, there is need for a deep cultural therapy if we are to proceed into the future with some assurance that we will not continue in this pathology or lapse into the same pathology at a later date. We still do not have such a critique of the past or a therapy for the present. Yet even without such evaluation of our current situation, we must proceed with the task of creating a viable future for ourselves and for the entire Earth community.

Two things are needed to guide our judgment and sustain our psychic energies for the challenges ahead: a certain alarm at what is happening at present and a fascination with the future available to us if only we respond creatively to the urgencies of the present. We are concerned here with the second of these requirements and wish especially to outline the conditions for entering a future that will lead to the larger fulfillment for which the entire planet, as well as ourselves, seems to be destined.

The first condition for achieving this objective is to realize that the universe is a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects.

The devastation of the planet can be seen as a direct consequence of the loss of this capacity for human presence to and reciprocity with the nonhuman world. This reached its most decisive moment in the seventeenth-century proposal of René Descartes that the universe is composed simply of “mind and mechanism.” In this single stroke, he devitalized the planet and all its living creatures, with the exception of the human.

The thousandfold voices of the natural world became inaudible to many humans. The mountains, rivers, wind, and sea all became mute insofar as humans were concerned. The forests were no longer the abode of an infinite number of spirit presences but were simply so many board feet of timber to be “harvested” as objects used for human benefit. Animals were no longer the companions of humans within the single community of existence. They were denied not only their inherent dignity but even their right to habitat.

As we recover our awareness of the universe as a communion of subjects, a new interior experience awakens within the human. The barriers disappear. An enlargement of soul takes place. The excitement evoked by natural phenomena is renewed. Dawn and sunset are once again transforming experiences, as are the sights, sounds, scents, tastes, and feel of the natural world about us—the surging sea, the sound of the wind, the brooding forests. All this could be continued in a never-ending list of experiences that have been lost to large segments of the human community in recent centuries—not because the phenomena do not surround us constantly, but because we have become locked into ourselves, as though large segments of the human mind have become paralyzed. It is no wonder that humans have devastated the planet so extensively. It was only a collection of objects to be used.

Associated with this attitude is the loss of realization that the planet Earth is a onetime endowment. Earth came into being at a moment that will never occur again. It was given a structure and a quantum of energy for its self-shaping processes whereby it could

bring forth all those remarkable geological formations and all those magnificent modes of life expression that we see around us. Earth was caught up in an inner dynamism that is overwhelming in its impact on human consciousness. These creations are set in a pattern destined for indefinite survival if only they are treated properly. If they are abused, if the life process is wantonly extinguished, then in the future the energies that brought about these life-forms that have been functioning throughout these past millennia in such a brilliant sequence of transformations will never again be available. The quantum of energy involved in their historical existence has been expended. Their unique wonder and beauty, the entrancement with life that they evoke, will have vanished.

Yet even with all the extinction that has taken place, there does exist a quantum of energy, available at the present moment, for creative movement from the terminal Cenozoic to the emergent Ecozoic. This energy, however, will be available only for a brief period. Such transformation moments arise in times of crisis that need resolution immediately. The time for action is passing. The devastation increases. The time is limited. The Great Work remains to be done. This is not a situation that can be remedied by trivial or painless means. A largeness of vision and a supreme dedication are needed.

Hope for such a renewal of the creative forces of the planet lies in a realization that the Earth is primary and that humans are derivative. That this dependence of the human on the integral functioning of the planet should be so obvious and yet so consistently denied and so extensively violated is beyond comprehension. The primacy of the Earth community applies to every mode of human activity: economics, education, law, medicine, and religion. The human is a subsystem of the Earth system. Thus the primary concern of humans must be to preserve the integrity of the Earth system. Only then can the human subsystem function with any efficacy. Yet no phase of human activity is so directly violated as this relation of the human to the Earth.

In the realm of jurisprudence, the English common law tradi-

tion, which has claimed such superiority in its conceptions of the dignity of the human, has little sense of the larger governing principles of the universe or the planet. The nonhuman world becomes property to be used by the human. What is needed is a governance and a jurisprudence founded in the supremacy of the already existing Earth governance of the planet as a single, yet differentiated, community. An interspecies jurisprudence is needed. The primary community is not the human community, it is the Earth community. Our primary obligations and allegiances are to this larger community.

Especially in religion, the human depends on the natural world, for it is the wonder and majesty of the universe that evokes the sense of the divine origin and sacred character of the universe. The universe is a mysterious reality. We can know only the marginal aspects of how the universe functions. The difficulty arises to some extent in written scriptures. Once the divine is perceived principally through written scriptures, then there is a tendency to believe that the natural world does not communicate the sense of the sacred except in some minor way. Scriptures can never replace our need for a natural world that we will esteem, by immediate experience, as the manifestation of the ultimate mysteries of existence itself. If the Earth is only a background or a collection of resources for the human, then the devastation presently taking place will continue.

Since the discovery of the universe as an evolutionary process, there is a special need to establish this new sense of the universe as a revelatory experience. Such experience activates a new mode of manifestation of the ultimate mysteries of the universe. Future generations will need to be religious within this context. Traditional scriptures will not be effective in awakening future generations to a sense of the sacred, as they have done in past generations. A radical new adaptation is taking place, a new awakening to the divine not only through the awesome qualities of the universe as experienced immediately but also through the immense story of the universe and its long series of transformations.

We need to establish rituals for celebrating these transformation moments that have enabled the universe and the planet Earth to develop over these past many years. This would involve celebrating the primordial moment of emergence of the universe and other transformation moments, such as the supernova collapse of the first generation of stars whereby the ninety-some elements needed for life and consciousness came into existence. We should especially celebrate that star out of which our own solar system was born and the various life-forms of Earth became possible.

The discovery of sexual reproduction upon which the evolutionary process depends so directly, the discovery of photosynthesis, of respiration, the emergence of life out of the sea and its venturing onto the land, the first trees, the flowering plants, the transition to the Cenozoic era, the emergence of the human: all these are sacred moments. To celebrate these occasions would renew our sense of the sacred character of the universe and the planet Earth.

The Earth will not function in the future in the same manner that it has functioned in the past. A decisive transformation has taken place. The human had nothing to say in the emergent period of the universe before the present. In the future, however, the human will be involved in almost everything that happens. We have passed over a threshold. We cannot make a blade of grass. Yet there is liable not to be a blade of grass in the future unless it is accepted, protected, and fostered by the human. Sometimes, too, there is a healing that can be brought about by human assistance.

Just now our modern world, with its scientific technologies, its industrial processes, and its commercial establishments, functions with amazing arrogance in its attitude toward the natural world. The human is seen as the supreme reality. Every other being is available for exploitation. The supreme law of economics calls for taking as much as possible of the Earth's resources to be processed, passed through the consumer economy as quickly as possible, and then deposited as residue on the waste heap. The greater the amount of

natural resources consumed in this manner, the greater the gross domestic product or the gross human product and the more successful the human enterprise is thought to be, although the final consequence of such an economic program is to turn the entire planet into a wasteland. Any sense of the sacred, any restraint in favor of maintaining the inner coherence and resplendence of the natural world, is considered an expression of an unendurable romanticism.

Yet the planet now exists in a more intricate relation with the human than ever before. The very devastation wrought by the human has brought about a new type of interdependence in human-Earth relationships. The new scientific controls over the natural world do not mean that the human can, as it were, direct the destiny of the planet or bring the planet into any context that the human wishes. The human can bring about extinction on a broad scale, but it cannot bring about life. It can only assist in some limited way in evoking life through the processes inherent in the Earth itself.

The ultimate goal of any renewal process must be to establish a mutually enhancing mode of human-Earth relations. This mutual enhancement can be achieved only within limits, since the human in some manner places stress upon Earth ecosystems. Nonetheless, this mutuality can make the gains and losses more proportional and acceptable within the context of the planetary community. The tensions within the life processes of the planet are, in their larger consequences, creative, not destructive, tensions.

This story of the universe now becomes the basic framework for education. This comprehensive context includes all education, from the earliest period of schooling through professional education. The story of the universe expresses a functional cosmology that needs to be taught at every level of education. To be educated is to know the story and the human role in the story. Through this story we come to know the manner whereby we ourselves came into being and the role we should be fulfilling in the story. Because our capacity to tell this story in its full dimensions in space and in its sequence of trans-

formations in time has been only recently attained, we are only now beginning to understand the story's significance.

If we respond to it properly, this story can guide us through the transition phase of our history from the terminal Cenozoic into the emerging Ecozoic. This new, emergent phase of Earth history can be defined as that period when humans would be present to the Earth in a mutually enhancing manner. This story evokes not only the guidance but also the psychic energy needed to carry out the sequence of transformations now required of us as we move into the future.

Throughout its vast extent in space and its long sequence of transformations in time, the universe constitutes a single multiform sequential celebratory event. Every being in the universe is intimately present to, and is influencing, every other being in the universe. Every being contributes to the magnificence of the whole. Because the universe is the only self-referent mode of being in the phenomenal world, it constitutes the norm of all reality and value. The universe is the only text without a context. Every particular mode of being is universe-referent, and its meaning is established only within this comprehensive setting. This is why this story of the universe, and especially of the planet Earth, is so important. Through our understanding of this story, our own role in the story is revealed. In this revelation lies our way into the future.