

The following reflection was offered by Brian Edward Brown for The Thomas Berry Forum for Ecological Dialogue in its Contemplative Ecologists Circle for October 21, 2021, based on the complete essay

“The New Political Alignment” in *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future* (pp.107-116):

In the course of its historical development, the human species has come to varying degrees of self-understanding through its differentiation into multiple groupings of social affiliations along familial, tribal, clan, linguistic, ethnic, regional and national configurations. In each of these self-expressions, and consolidations among them, the human clarified certain meaning and value through the resolution of differences and tensions that might otherwise have restrained their coalescence in states of permanent isolation and fragmentation. It might be proposed then that through differences, tensions and resolutions, the human, from its earlier geographic extension throughout the planetary expanse, has come to a certain coordinated unification of itself around certain common concerns and values.

A notable expression of this collective capacity of the contemporary human to align itself across the otherwise disparate interests and tensions of their present constitution as sovereign, autonomous nation-states, across this diversity, there coalesced the Kunming Declaration of but one week ago on October 13th. In it, over 100 countries meeting under the auspices of the United Nations Convention on Biodiversity continued to address the issue entitled " Ecological Civilization: Building a Shared Future for All Life on Earth ". In that very phrasing there is the critical governmental recognition that the human civilizational movement towards the future will only be possible if it is inclusive and protective of Earth's fauna and flora, currently threatened with the approaching extinction of some one million species. The enormity of that loss and the gravity of its consequences for the further unraveling of life's planetary web informs the Declaration's reiteration that the primacy of biodiversity underpins every human endeavor including those 17 noble Sustainable Development Goals already recognized by the United Nations, including ending poverty and hunger, providing health and inclusive education, designing safe and resilient cities and ensuring universal decent work, among others. Without protecting and preserving those fundamental strata of dense and richly interdependent communities of plants and animals which, in the words of the Declaration " support all forms of life on Earth and underpin our human and planetary health and well-being, economic growth and sustainable development "--without such protection-- the human enterprise is severely jeopardized and simply not viable. Clearly noting the subsidiary nature of economic and financial prosperity to the priority of Earth's biodiversity, the Declaration stresses " that urgent and integrated action is needed, for transformative change across all sectors of the economy and all parts of society, through policy coherence at all levels of government, and realization of synergies at national level across relevant Conventions and multilateral organizations, to shape the future path for nature and people where biodiversity is conserved and used sustainably." The Declaration is clear about its status as but the framework for the demanding process to be continued in the spring of 2022 and beyond where it's signatory nations will have to substantiate in precise, measurable terms and times their more exact commitments to further prevent biodiversity loss and enhance its preservation and protection.

But in its urgency, its orientation towards the future and its call to radical transformation of the human in its domestic and international configurations to continue its unification and coalescence around living Earth, the

Kunming Declaration might be said to approach, if not exemplify, " The New Political Alignment " of Thomas Berry's essay. Its directionality towards the realization of an " Ecological Civilization " in which the human cultural process must be subsidiary to, and inclusive of, the integral biosphere resonates fully with Berry's oft repeated assertion throughout the whole of his written corpus, that the human is summoned to " The Great Work " of reinventing itself at the species level beyond its otherwise disparate linguistic, ethnic, regional and national allegiances as it shapes itself towards an emergent Ecozoic Era in which whole new modes of institutional expression in religion, governance, law, economics, education and the arts will be animated by an ethic of intimacy with, rather than plunderous exploitation of, the integral Earth body.

Where Thomas Berry advances beyond, even while fully supportive of the Kunming Declaration, is his trenchant critique of the developer mentality in its historic manifestation within the North American experience. From the start, the settler psyche betrayed its rapacity to the once thriving communities of beaver, deer, Atlantic cod, carrier pigeons and buffalo herds, all brought to extinction or it's very near brink even as the continent's magnificent stands of all manner of trees were ruthlessly and exhaustively felled. Severely depleting the continent's once rich biodiversity, the extractive mania of the mid-19th century onwards for gold and other minerals, as well as coal, petroleum, and natural gas, created unimaginable waste whose massive quantities were largely hidden by burial in land sites that quickly became toxic, dumped into streams and rivers and ceaselessly released into an ever more carbon and gaseously saturated atmosphere. The reckless destructiveness of the commercial-industrial-developer onslaught of the natural world was matched by the cunning artfulness with which it crafted an ever wider, ever more pervasive culture of consumption whose satisfaction came with planetary demise." The profoundly degraded ecological situation of the present " writes Berry " reveals a deadening or paralysis of some parts of human intelligence and also a suppression of human sensitivities.... In all these instances we can see a disposition towards biocide, the destruction of the life systems of the planet and geocide, the devastation of the planet itself, not only in its living creatures but in the integrity of the nonliving processes on which the living world depends." (pp. 115-16)

Nevertheless, it is from within this most dire condition of its own making that the human is able to retrieve and enliven its own deepest identity in communion with Earth and all its beings among whom it has been birthed and whose companionship it dares not further jeopardize. Berry writes " Physical degradation of the natural world is also the degradation of the interior world of the human... It is to lose the wonder and majesty, the poetry, music, and spiritual exultation evoked by such awesome experience of the deep mysteries of existence. It is a loss of soul... " (pp. 110-11) May the Kunming Declaration continue to broaden further political alignments and in its simple resolve to "strengthen biodiversity for meeting the needs of people " may that inestimable value to the human soul find full and ready acceptance.

Thank you,

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