

The following reflection was offered by Brian Edward Brown for The Thomas Berry Forum For Ecological Dialogue in its Contemplative Ecologists Circle for April 15, 2021 based on Thomas Berry's complete essay "The North American Continent" in *The Great Work: Our Way Into the Future*, pp. 33-47:

In his essay on the North American continent, Thomas Berry continues to reflect on the dynamic creativity of the universe as it reached a critical, indeed dangerous, moment in its billionfold long self- emergence. The drama arose and still seeks resolution in two quite distinctive modes of consciousness within the human sphere of universe expression: that of the First Peoples who became indigenous to the continent on the one hand, and that of the much later European colonizers on the other.

Beginning some 16,000 years ago the First Peoples, migrating from Asia across the Bering Straits, settled among the vast expanse of the North American continent's land and water mass with its mountain ranges; prairies and grasslands; rivers and valleys; coastal shores and their adjacent plains; eastern forests; southern swamplands; western deserts and deep canyons. While the first two millennia of their presence had a severe impact on continental fauna, their succeeding generations conformed and adapted to a more sustainable living within the biological constraints imposed by the regional climate variations and the respective communities of plants and animals abiding therein. Over time it was their intimacy with those other-than-human beings among whom they dwelt that became so notable a feature of First Peoples sensibility and consciousness. Highly differentiated across the range of geographic locale and among the hundreds of languages they spoke and the cultural traditions and life ways they developed and observed, the Native Peoples nevertheless shared an attentiveness to the continent's communion of subjects whose wisdom and guidance gave zest and resilience for the rigors of life's journey.

One of the most impressive examples of such an orientation, such a mode of consciousness, may be found in the ceremony of the Omaha people upon presenting a newborn to the cosmic community that it might be blessed in traversing the four hills of childhood, youth, adulthood, old age and final return to the First Spirit:

" O you sun, moon and stars
All of you that move in the heavens,
I bid you hear me,
Into your midst has come a new life.
Consent, I implore, make its path smooth
That it may reach the brow of the first hill.
O ye winds, clouds, rains, mist,
All of you that move in the air,
I bid you hear me,
Into your midst has come a new life

Consent, I implore, make its path smooth
That it may reach the brow of the second hill.
O ye winds, valleys, rivers, lakes, trees, grasses,
All of you that belong to the earth,
I bid you hear me.
Into your midst has come a new life.
Consent, I implore, make its path smooth
That it may reach the brow of the third hill.
Birds, great and small, that fly in the air;
Animals, great and small, that dwell in the forest;
Insects that creep among the grasses and burrow in the ground;
I bid you hear me,
Into your midst has come a new life.
Consent, I implore, make its path smooth
That it may reach the brow of the fourth hill.
All of you in the heavens, all of you in the waters, all of you in the earth,
I bid you - all of you - to hear me.
Into your midst has come a new life.
Consent, consent,
All of you consent, I implore,
Make its path smooth that it may travel beyond the fourth hill."

(The Book of the Omaha: Literature of the Omaha People, pp.5-6)

Not only at birth, but consistently over the course of a lifetime through the richly varied ceremonialism of Native liturgies, human consciousness integrated and embedded itself within that encompassing community of subjects. In addition to more explicitly communal rituals, there were those, like the Lakota "Crying for a Vision" which afforded individual tribal members, through solitary mountaintop prayer, to intensify their relationship with all one's other- than - human relatives. "All these people are important "explains Black Elk the Oglala holy man " for in their own way they are wise and they can teach us two-leggeds much if we make ourselves humble before them... This will help you to understand in part how it is that we regard all created beings as sacred and important, for everything has a 'wochangi' or influence which can be given to us, through which we may gain a little more understanding if we are attentive." (The Sacred Pipe, pp.58-59). This profound receptivity to be tutored and enriched in intimacy with the

numinous dimensions of the North American continent's communion of subjects found no resonance in the colonizing mentality that overwhelmed its shores with the European onslaught.

In stark contrast to the cosmo-biocentric orientation of Native consciousness, the European mindset was fatally closed in upon, and captivated by, its own extreme anthropocentrism. Formed by the influence of the Greek humanist tradition; the primacy of the divine - human relationship in its Judeo-Christian tradition; the subordination of land to mere property with the human as sole bearer of rights in its legal tradition; and the maximization of profit through commercial - industrial exploitation of resources in its ascendant mercantile tradition; -- combined, all four cultural conceits defined a European mode of consciousness in the isolation of its own inflated self-absorptions with minimal regard for any inherent value in the commodified world of its conquest. "The insuperable difficulty" writes Thomas Berry "inhibiting any intimate rapport with the continent or its people was this European-derived anthropocentrism.... That is why the North American continent became completely vulnerable to the assault from the European peoples. To the European settlers the continent had no sacred dimension. It had no inherent rights. It had no way of escaping economic exploitation. The other component members of the continent could not be included with humans in an integral continental community. European presence was less occupation than predation." (p.45)

We now live in the aftermath and several centuries into continental - become - planetary ruination. Ours is the challenge to initiate concrete, practical choices and policies for the protection, preservation and healing of what remains. The determination and effort required will be immense, for the venture involves nothing less than the reinvention of the human at the globalized species level. We dare not assume the daunting task before us by our own devices alone, but turn in hope to the cosmic community that yet extends itself for the rebirth now upon us. And so we invoke:

"All of you in the heavens, all of you in the waters,
All of you in the earth,
We bid you - all of you - to hear us.
Into your midst has come a new life.
Consent, consent,
All of you consent, we implore,
Make its path smooth
That it may ascend this most arduous and steepest hill."

Thank you,

Brian Edward Brown, Ph.D., J.D.