

The following reflection was offered by Brian Edward Brown for the Thomas Berry Forum for Ecological Dialogue in its Contemplative Ecologists Circle for February 17, 2022, based on the complete essay "Reinventing the Human" in *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future* (pp.159-65)

In a later version of the essay we consider tonight, Thomas Berry introduced its concise compendium of the requisites for human movement into the future by an equally trenchant expression of the fateful logic dictating their necessity and the direction for the movement's advance.

"The present human situation" writes Berry " can be described in three sentences: *In the 20th century the glory of the human has become the desolation of Earth. The desolation of Earth is becoming the destiny of the human. All human institutions, professions, programs and activities must now be judged primarily by the extent to which they inhibit, ignore or foster a mutually enhancing human-Earth relationship.*" (*The Christian Future and the Fate of Earth: Appendix p. 117*)

If in the self-infatuation of its technical prowess the human both ignored and inhibited its organic coherence with Earth, their inextricable destiny becomes nevertheless ever more palpable in what now threatens the human from its desolation of planetary waters, soils, disappearing biota and carbon saturated, climatically destabilizing atmosphere. The utter failure of the civilizational process, indeed its very capture by the techno mystique of human mastery and subjugation of the natural world, is as evident as the harms those cultural patterns perpetuate. Religious traditions insensitive and mutely devoid of celebrating the revelatory character of Earth as sacred community; mercantile economics reducing and deadening the vibrant energy transactions of waters, soils and their innumerable biota, into mere fungible commodities in a global consumerist market whose pricing mechanisms severely discount or completely devalue the animate cost to Earth's vitality; a jurisprudence and legal codes insensible to all but human harm, rendering defenseless and beyond the pale of its protections other – than - human sentience, subjugated and confined as mere property for the disposition of human possessory interests; an educational system more effective in preparing students to enter the techno--commercial-industrial complex eroding the planetary body, rather than fostering within them a comprehensive understanding of Earth in the integrity of its soils, waters, atmosphere, fauna and flora, cultivating the lifelong art of attending to the wisdom of Earth's tutelage and finding their deepest psychic fulfillment in preservative communion with its plenitude.

That stunted lack in the intellectual, imaginative and emotional capacities of the contemporary human is nevertheless therapeutically addressed at the level of story, the most fundamental and accessible vehicle for reeducating and reorienting human identity lost in the wayward destructiveness of its collective egocentricity. Addressing the universal receptivity to the question of origins and informed by critical reflection upon the exact precision of scientific empirical observation, the corrective story of the human emerges from within the birth of the cosmos itself some 13.8 billion years ago. The trajectory of this immense time-developmental process is the narrative of human identity, the biography of the species. "This constitutes" writes Berry "what might be called the cosmological-historical dimension... Our sense of who we are and what our role is must begin where the universe

begins. Not only does our physical shaping and our spiritual perception begin with the origin of the universe, so too does the formation of every being in the universe." (p. 162)

Grounding the human within the unfolding dynamics of the cosmos is both intellectually coherent and ethically instructive; as the human learns of the directionality and consistency of matter's emergence and complexification, it is simultaneously schooled in the fundamental values present at every phase of cosmic creativity which must now become the guiding principles for human movement into the future: differentiation, subjectivity and communion.

As the story begins, the universe differentiated itself into subatomic particle structures, each with their own particularity of movement and energy from whose interactions the universe bonded with itself to form the further differentiations of hydrogen and helium atoms, from whose unique chemical processes gravity's compression furthered the cosmic tendency towards communion in the massive incandescence of the galaxies. From within these yet more novel differentiations, each distinctive in mass, rotation and stellar composition, the universe advanced in spectacular combinations among their constitutive stars. In the Milky Way, even the shattered remnants of a supernova collapse witnessed the cosmic constancy of communion as the universe fashioned a solar system of differentiated planets in orbital concurrence around the sun.

In its turn, the extraordinary singularity of Earth as biosphere emerged as a function of its own delineations as hydrosphere, lithosphere, and atmosphere. Then, having birthed its initial appearance on the cellular level, the universe continued its billionfold long pattern of bonding with itself as organisms interacted with each other in ever more creative interdependencies, each lending its distinctive particularity to the well-being of others as together they responded to the possibilities and limitations of the bioregion they collectively inhabited. It is the refusal of living within those very limitations in collaborative interdependence with a communion of subjects among whose plenitude it appeared and through whose abundance it has been sustained, that the contemporary human has visited Earth with such desolation, now becoming its own fateful destiny. But if humanity is to move beyond this perilous impasse for both the planet and necessarily itself, it is unable to rely on those cultural codes that have become so problematic: those ritually bereft religious traditions; those exploitively consumptive economic systems; those narrowly confined and highly propertized legal frameworks; and those pedagogies illiterate in the idiom of organic Earth.

As already noted, these cultural codes, while mediating self-identity to the human, have themselves become entranced and ensnared by the conceit of human superiority through technical mastery over the natural world and become complicit in its ruination. So, the human must reach beyond those dysfunctional cultural codes to reinvent itself at the species level in whole new modalities of religious, economic, legal and educational modes of living within the planet, rather than coercing the planet to live within the human. "We need to reinvent the human at the species level" writes Berry "because the issues we are concerned with seem to be beyond the competence of our present cultural traditions... What is needed is something... to bring us back to the most fundamental aspect of the human: giving shape to ourselves... Radical new cultural forms are needed... We must find our primary source of guidance in the inherent tendencies of our genetic coding... derived from the larger community of the Earth and eventually from the universe itself." (p.160)

Returning then to its story, the universe reveals itself to be one of astounding creativity, bringing forth differentiated centers, each with their own definitive spontaneity, their own particular embodiment of the wisdom that drew them forth, incorporating them into the journey of cosmic unfoldment. For, each of those differentiated centers had the tendency to bond with other centers, from whose communion the universe fashioned whole new orders of further differentiated creativity. While not without hazards and setbacks, and only through dim, groping experimentation over the immensity of time, the wisdom of cosmogenesis, the wisdom of the universe giving shape to itself, remained consistent in the creative principles of differentiation, subjectivity and communion. From particles, to atoms, to galaxies and solar system, that wisdom on Earth was the genetic guidance in which cellular simplicity gave rise to the spectacular panorama of ever more complex life forms, all in constant communion with bioregional soils, waters, atmosphere and the rich communities of other plants and animals among whom they interacted as they shared their respective common habitats.

The human, in the derangement of its technocratic hubris and the errancy of its cultural codes is in need of urgent reinvention. It will be however, from the abiding primordial wisdom of the gene from which new biocentric religious, economic, legal, and educational norms will emerge, for it will be from that source that the human may yet retrieve itself as a differentiated center among all other living centers and rediscover its deepest fulfillment, not in their exploitation, but in their communion. That is the dream that draws us together; may our sharing tonight further inspire and consolidate its realization.

Thank you,

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