

The following reflection was offered by Brian Edward Brown for the Thomas Berry Forum for Ecological Dialogue in its Contemplative Ecologists Circle for January 20, 2022, based on the complete essay "The Petroleum Interval" in *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future* (pp. 150-58)

An interval may be generally understood as a period of time in which a particular condition persists; as such, it may be brief or protracted, but is essentially temporary. While the end of an interval may suggest a return to the state of affairs before the interval arose, a resumption of conditions before the interval's intervention, such an assumption cannot be made of the petroleum interval within the organic creativity of Earth. In the extraordinary brevity of its still persistent extraction and deployment by the human industrial process, petroleum has wrecked so severe a debilitation that there can be no return to the planetary plenitude of two centuries ago when petroleum began its fateful ascendancy. If once it seeped naturally into comparatively modest surface pools where it was widely used throughout a broad expanse of ancient human societies for caulking boats, sealing and water proofing baskets, offering light and heat and even serving for medicinal purposes, that benign phase of petroleum's history was minimized with the mid-19th century technology of drilling deep into Earth's depths, there to reveal and access petroleum's vast immensity. That achievement of human ingenuity was speedily complemented by chemical and engineering skills which advanced petroleum's refined application in the increased industrial mechanization of the late 19th and the entirety of the 20th century.

Of singular and lasting impact in the extraction of petroleum's largely liquid and viscous sequestration within Earth's interior, only to be transmuted and dispersed in its gaseous state into the planetary breath of Earth's atmosphere, was the invention of the internal combustion engine and the mass manufacture of automobiles. Combined with aviation, the automotive industry quickly became and remains the commercial sector driving petroleum's saturation and perilous suffocation of the planetary body. Additionally, petroleum has thoroughly transfigured Earth's land and water surface in the massive infrastructure of its extractive and refining processes, its extensive pipeline and rail transport systems, and the astounding network of its concrete and asphalt configurations for the road and highways carrying the billionfold cars which it currently fuels.

Beyond the allure of the mobility it promised, petroleum further insinuated itself in the human psyche by the ease, comfort and well-being which its synthetic transformations afforded. By one estimate upwards of 6000 products are petroleum derivative, from healthcare equipment to home furnishings; medications to computer and telecommunication devices; apparel to refrigerants; eyeglasses to toothpaste; herbicides, insecticides and fertilizer. In the profound engagement it has evoked from the human creative potential and its widespread and pervasive deployment from that venture into every aspect of physical culture, petroleum has beguiled human consciousness in the conceit of its own technical prowess and its disregard for the well-

being of the integral Earth community of its ultimate dependence. "The difficulty of the petroleum period" writes Thomas Berry "was that the well-being of the human was the final referent as regards reality and value. We could do so many things with petroleum that we began to have illusions concerning ourselves and our freedom to shape a world of our own that would challenge our dependence on nature. Everything on Earth, it seemed, got its value from its relation to the human. In reality the original design for Earth was for a planet that would be a triumph of diversity interacting with itself in a vast range of relationships. The well-being of each component part would be intimately related to the well-being of the other parts and to the well-being of the whole... Here is where the modern industrial world reveals itself as failing in its larger purposes even while it seems to accomplish so much. It has failed to align its own functioning with the functioning of the planetary forces on which it depends." (pp.156-57)

So it is that mesmerized and inflated by its alchemical wizardry with petroleum and its derivatives, the human of the last century and a half has suffered a form of attention disorder with its focus narrowly trained on its technologic-commercial-industrial pursuits, extracting and combusting petroleum at ever more prodigal rates with scant regard for its terrestrial and atmospheric consequences. Petroleum's steady displacement from the safety of Earth's interior to its vaporized accumulation as carbon dioxide; methane; nitrous oxide and fluorinated gases saturating Earth's outer filament of air, has become increasingly deadly in its overheating of the planet and the consequent climate collapse threatening the finely textured, exquisitely interdependent living membrane that is Earth's biosphere.

The exacting toll of massively extracted petroleum is ever more in clear sight in desiccating soils; withering and flammable grasses and vegetation; acidic and warming oceans with their bleaching coral reefs; evaporating glaciers and melting ice caps; magnifying and intensifying sea and aerial storms; and a millionfold disappearance of fauna and flora in the finality of extinction. Human limitation to live within the severe diminishment and instability of petroleum's still unfolding catastrophic costs is already apparent in the desperation of whole populations turned climate refugees and the socioeconomic and political tensions and conflicts foreshadowed as such mass migrations continue to swell and surge.

In this starkness of petroleum's destructiveness, speculation as to the exact length of its interval, measured by its final depletion from within the reserves of its currently remaining volume, is rendered moot by the present necessity of ending its regime. To wait for the decades of its ultimate exhaustion is to court disaster of unparalleled proportions that would overwhelm and nullify the very advances that petroleum may have previously fashioned. The entire human endeavor would be drastically diminished and degraded in the increasing dystopia of a planetary climate collapse. There is no question of the enormous, even sacrificial, efforts for the contemporary human to consolidate itself sufficiently at the species level and across all cultural and ideological divides to realize itself as that generation to definitively terminate petroleum's two

century interval, thus preventing its further lingering havoc and realigning humanity within the bonds of a decidedly altered, however resilient, planetary body.

As ever, the question persists of whence comes the wisdom and psychic determination for such an undertaking? Under petroleum's spell and its own vaunted mastery with its fabrications, the human may have forgotten its own authentic identity. It is nevertheless Earth itself, resonating from within the depths of its genetic presence to the human, now recalling their mutual coherence and reacting in horror and alarm to what has been perpetrated. From that inherently endowed communion, Earth instructs of its own limitations and the perilous consequences of their trespass. Importantly, from that same intimacy, Earth's fidelity remains constant in the singular and incomparable fulfillment it yet extends to the human mind and heart, beyond all technical contrivance, in the stunning beauty and intricacies of its animate sensuality in colors, textures, sounds, fragrances, contours and movements.

No less faithful is Earth's wisdom in the present exigency of humanity's resolve to end petroleum's wreckage and preserve the planetary body of its deepest and cherished identity. At one time in its early unfolding Earth creativity manifested in the sedimentary dynamics of consigning deep within itself the organic decay of algae and zooplankton bodies in their massiveness, so that their carbon sequestration would permit the chemistry of planetary atmosphere, water and soil to further combine in the precision that would allow life's ever more abundant complexity and flourishing. That very wisdom reappears now in Earth's human modality as it crafts and deploys the solar, wind, geothermal and tidal energy systems, complemented by reforestation, agriculture and animal husbandry practices, to ensure that petroleum's deadly interval becomes indeed, terminal.

Thank you,

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