

The following reflection was offered by Brian Edward Brown for the Thomas Berry Forum for Ecological Dialogue in its Contemplative Ecologists Circle for August 19, 2021, based on the complete essay "Ecological Geography" in *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future* (pp. 86-99).

At its heart Thomas Berry's essay on " Ecological Geography " addresses intimacy with the comprehensive integral Earth community in and through its multiplicity of bioregional particularities. Such intimacy with the richly differentiated expressions of organic Earth is a summons to the collective human species for the most thorough self-examination and consequent self-restraint in the commercial-industrial-consumptive rapacity that has progressively debilitated and dangerously destabilized the planetary body. Significantly, it is these three principles of an interdependent, holistic integration of Earth in its bioregional specificities and the most unambiguous attribution of mounting clear and present danger from the collective human failure of self-restraint in its persistent addiction to fossil fuels--these three principles feature prominently in the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change published on August 9th of last week. In its Headline Summary for Policymakers the Report notes soberly that " It is unequivocal that human influence has warmed the atmosphere, ocean and land... The scale of recent changes across the climate system... are unprecedented... Human induced climate change is already affecting many weather and climate extremes in every region across the globe... heat waves, heavy precipitation, droughts and tropical cyclones and in particular their attribution to human influence has strengthened... Global surface temperatures will continue to increase... during the 21st century unless deep reductions of carbon dioxide (CO₂) and other greenhouse gas emissions occur in the coming decades. "

But if there is a shared conceptualization of a bioregionally integrated Earth severely threatened by human activity, the IPCC Assessment details the physical evidence of the harm, while Thomas Berry elucidates the psychic failure of human self-restraint as the root cause of that harm.

As Earth, in the dynamic interaction of its lithosphere, hydrosphere and atmosphere manifested as biosphere and eventually blossomed in the profusion of its Cenozoic diversity, it consistently ensured its cohesive self-integration across the ever more complex flora and fauna which it birthed through the wisdom and discipline of the niche. Each being, as it entered into the organic tapestry of Earth's weave, was genetically endowed with the ability to live within the possibilities afforded by the dynamic combination of water, soil, atmosphere and the established plants and animal organisms of the respective bioregion where the newcomer emerged or into which it migrated. Each novel lifeform, either through the spontaneity of mutation or arrival from elsewhere, would assume its role and flourish in its niche only in its conformity to the limitations and demands, that is, the possibilities, imposed by the larger community of its future sustenance and thriving. To ignore those conditions, through an ill adaptive anatomy or excessive rates of nutrient consumption or generation of progeny, would be to jeopardize an organism's fit within, and ultimate rejection by, the community of its nonconformance.

But if Earth continued its prolific creativity and self-coherence through the delicate balancing and finality of niche compatibility, it eventually fashioned a profoundly ambiguous, if not dangerous, innovation in the human species with its capacity to elude the otherwise protective limitations of niche constraint " In some sense " writes Berry " the human refuses to accept any particular niche, for the basic function of a niche is to set limits to the activity of a species. In this sense the human refuses to accept limits imposed from without or even from within its own being.... Survival of any group of living beings in relation to other groups depends on the recognition of limits in the actions of each group. This law of limits is among the most basic of all cosmological, geological or biological laws.... Yet in the modern world this sense of limits imposed by the natural functioning of the universe has to some extent been overridden, at least in a temporary manner, by industrial processes created by humans." (pp. 91-2) The calamitous impact of such heedless disregard for boundaries and living within their salutary confines is the dire chronicle of the IPCC's Sixth Assessment.

To understand this deadly impasse is to note that among all its other living progeny, from the cellular to the more elaborate mammalian expressions, Earth endowed the human with the genetic wisdom to draw sustenance and flourish amidst planetary waters, soils, atmosphere and other living beings inhabiting them. The ability to engage the natural world as source of nutrition, to respond to it through all the sensory functions of the body, constructing meaning through the processes of emotional sensibility, imagination and ideation are the psychophysical and conceptual endowments of the human gene. But beyond these fundamental behavioral capacities, a singular feature of the human genetic code is its instruction to develop trans- genetic cultural codes whereby the human further invents and shapes itself in the array of languages; family and community formations; educational processes; exchange and economic systems; legal and governance structures; as well as religious symbolic and ritual expressions.

But if these cultural codes have afforded the human a creative framework for an essential self-definition and self-understanding among the diverse bioregional expressions of its pan- global presence, the complex and varying arrangements of religious, educational, commercial and legal constructs is not without ambiguity. For even as they respond to the directives of the gene and its primordial origin from within Earth, these cultural codes have the tendency to remove the human from an intimate immediacy with the planetary body. Caught up in the interests and exigencies of its own intraspecies affairs, the enculturated human lives at that much distance from Earth. Over time that psychic remove became ever more pronounced as scientific understanding and its technologic applications gained in ascendancy. Incrementally, every advance in power over the natural world inflated human self- regard even as it loosened the bonds of intimacy with Earth, rendered ever more vulnerable to an ever more virulent exploitation of an increasingly commercial-industrial-consumptive human whose cultural codes long capitulated to its sway. " Our entire industrial system " writes Berry " can be considered as an effort to escape from the constraints of the natural world. We have created an artificial context for our existence through mechanical invention and the extravagant use of energy. In this process we have so violated the norms of limitation [that] ... We no longer live within the organic, ever renewing world that is the natural context of our existence." (p.93)

Yet it is precisely their authentic viability and creativity from within the foundational wisdom of the gene that now awakens religion, education, economics and law to Earth's devastation and their own perilous capture. "However resistant to the restraints inherent in their nature" insists Berry " humans in the natural order of things belong to, are possessed by, and are subject to the geographical place where they reside." (pp.93-4) Responding to the bioregional particularities and disciplines of the waters, soil, atmosphere, flora and fauna that Earth extends in the respective places of their residence, the human may yet renew their fourfold cultural code by celebrating the sanctity, attending the wisdom, funding the renewable energies and protecting the integrity of that which, even now, so firmly holds them.

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