

The following reflection was offered by Brian Edward Brown for the Thomas Berry Forum for Ecological Dialogue in its Contemplative Ecologists Circle for December 15, 2022, based on the complete essay “Human Presence” in *The Dream of the Earth* (pp. 13-23):

As the human gropes, however haltingly, towards a certain consolidation of itself from across its otherwise fragmented divisiveness as so many nation states, cultural ethnicities, belief traditions, linguistic groupings and varied economic exchange arrangements among others, it implicitly raises the question of its species presence to the body of Earth. That question of identity figured most recently in both the COP 27 UN Climate Change Conference concluded last month in Egypt and in the COP 15 UN Biodiversity Conference currently at its midpoint in Montréal.

In COP 27 the human continued to address its role in reliance on fossil fuels and the consequent climate catastrophe now unfolding. While much was left undone with much greater speed in need of the definitive termination of carbon emissions and the transition to renewable energy sources, the creation of a loss and damage fund recognized the equitable principle that those nations most responsible historically for the climate crisis, should compensate those who have been, and remain, most vulnerable to its multiple impacts. Even as the exact amounts and precise mechanisms for maintaining and consistently dispersing those funds have yet to be implemented, this measure of human coalescence in the face of planetary destruction continues to advance a species solidarity within the one Earth community.

Perhaps that movement of the human to actualize its common creative identity within the encompassing Earth body is all the more apparent in the COP 15 Biodiversity Conference, still in session, as it confronts the necessary steps that must be undertaken if any hope exists for the millionfold species of flora and fauna currently threatened with extinction. In addition to the havoc of climate disruption and loss of habitat, solutions will be sought to address

deforestation; intensive monoculture agribusiness practices; urban sprawl; over exploitation and harvesting of terrestrial animals and fish; plastic pollution of land and oceans; and permissive inattention to invasive species. In the process of the intense engagement and consistent resolve to respond to these issues of its collective responsibility for planetary viability, the human will continue to move beyond its fragmentation as so many isolated and discrete sociopolitical, economic, and cultural enclaves to actualize its deepest species identity within living Earth.

In its ancestral past the human experienced its intrinsic presence to the natural world as a basic harmony where each being had been endowed by a numinous creative reality with its own unique depth of subjectivity and wisdom for the well-being of the whole. The human discovered its deepest fulfillment as it assumed its place within and among the vast communion of subjects understood in terms of intimate kinship. As such, human self-cultivation expressed itself in the consistent acknowledgment of all one's relatives in the beings of the natural world and gratitude for the gift of their companionship and blessing. It is in this orientation that Thomas Berry listens to the otherwise quite distinctive cultural expressions of the Omaha peoples of the North American plains and that of the neo-Confucian tradition of China.

In the Omaha, the newborn begins its lifelong relationship with the universe through the tribal invocation of each being within the cosmic community and the repeated request: " Into your midst has come a new life. Consent ye, we implore! Make its path smooth..." (p.13)

Similarly, Chinese sensibility that conceived of the human as forming one body with all the myriad beings of existence is expressed in the Western Inscription of Chang Tsai which simply read as his constant reminder: "Heaven is my father and Earth is my mother and even such a small creature as I finds an intimate place in their midst. That which extends throughout the universe, I regard as my body and that which directs the universe I regard as my nature. All people are

my brothers and sisters, and all things are my companions." (pp. 14-15)

This intimate mode of human presence to and within the familial kinship bonds of cosmic cohesiveness defined the pattern within which it discovered its deepest meaning and most profound fulfillment. But if this distinctive mode of human self understanding in communion with the natural world has been millennial in its diverse expression, it is ending ruinously in these last centuries of the commercial-industrial-consumptive orientation of human domination in its progressive capture of consciousness.

Infatuated in the conceit of its own mechanisms by which it has reduced and relegated the planetary body to so much inert resources for exploitation and discard, human expression lacks all trace of the language of intimacy, courtesy and gratitude so beautifully phrased in the idiom of Omaha and neo-Confucian cultures. But if there is to be any healing of the devastation now so clearly in view, the retrieval and appropriation of that lost language of intimacy must discover its renewed amplification in the universe itself.

Revealing its identity not as a fixed and static entity but rather as a time-developmental process, the universe is a story of cosmic unfolding from its first manifestation some 13.8 billion years ago through its seamless emergence of ever more complex novel expressions, ever more intimate modes of presence to and within itself. Indeed, the inherent precision of the timing with which the universe expressed its creativity is the structural condition for that intimacy to appear at every level of its successive dynamic becoming. Had it expanded a fraction of a percent faster, the universe would have dispersed itself before any structures and their potential intimacy could have emerged. Conversely, had its rate of expansion been a fraction of a percent slower, the universe would have shaped itself into limited bonds before collapsing on itself in want of the necessary energy for further advance. Such then is the marvel of its exquisitely

timed self-expression that intimacy abounds throughout the entire expanse of cosmic creativity.

So then in its initial manifestation as sub-atomic particles the universe bonded with itself to bring forth hydrogen, helium and lithium atoms from whose gravitationally compressed intimacy the universe became present to itself in the trillions of galaxies of its novel luminescence. Then, even in the violence of its supernova implosions and consequent explosions within the Milky Way, the cosmos became present to itself in the structural intimacy of the Sun with its eight orbiting planets among whom Earth's interdependence as geosphere, hydrosphere and atmosphere brought forth an entirely singular expression of universe creativity in the biosphere. There, its living cells proliferated and combined in ever more diverse and complex arrangements in which the universe became ever more progressively present to itself in novel modes of awareness whose breadth and depth of understanding in human consciousness ultimately defined Earth's most recent expression as noosphere. There, tracing its integral lineage from that primordial emergence of space-time through the unbroken sequence of transitions from particle, atomic, galactic, solar and living planetary interactions from which it was birthed, human thought became the agency through which the universe not only recognizes itself as cosmic whole but celebrate itself and the numinous mystery of its ongoing manifestation.

For Thomas Berry the resonance of Omaha and neo-Confucian intimacy with the cosmos at the present time as well as the deliberative, practical formulations of COP27 and COP15 for the future, find their renewal and efficacy from within that structural intimacy of the universe to and within itself. He writes: "Thus we find a pervasive intimacy and compassionate quality in the very structure of the universe and of the Earth itself. Our own quest for a more intimate and benevolent human presence to the Earth in our times might reflect [those earlier] precedents. But even more, perhaps, we might consider our intimate and compassionate presence to the Earth as originating ultimately in the curvature of space as it is presented in modern

science. The entire Earth community is infolded in the compassionate curve whereby the universe bends inwardly in a manner sufficiently closed to hold all things together and yet remains sufficiently open so that compassion does not confine but fosters the creative process. This curve that finds its first expression in the physical bonding of the universe and later in the living process of the Earth finds its most intimate expression in human thought and affection, as well is in our art, music, and dance... This re-enchantment with the Earth as a living reality is the condition for our rescue of the Earth from the impending destruction that we are imposing upon it." (pp.20-21)

In such structural hopefulness then, we might yet hear again and join in ascent: "Heaven is my father and earth is my mother and even such a small creature as I find an intimate place in their midst. That which extends throughout the universe I regard as my body and that which directs the universe I regard as my nature. All peoples are my brothers and sisters, and all things are my companions."

Thank you,

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