

The following reflection was offered by Brian Edward Brown for the Thomas Berry Forum for Ecological Dialogue in its Contemplative Ecologists Circle for December 16, 2021, based on the complete essay “The Extractive Economy” in *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future* (pp. 136-149) :

Having traced the roots and progressive development of a deadly human oppression over Earth and the normalcy of its paradigm of domination and control, Thomas Berry indicts it as a severe transgression against the ontological Covenant of the universe. Denoting a reality both sacred and fundamentally binding, the covenantal nature of the universe addresses the primordial Mystery whence it arises and the intrinsic integrity of its yet unfolding expressions over its vastness of time and its immensity of space. Sharing a common ancestry in that first originative pulse of creativity some 13.8 billion years ago, the subsequent differentiation of forms that emerged as the universe gave shape to itself were all in bonded intimacy with each other, all substantiated the covenantal interdependence of the universe’s structural integrity.

Thus, it was that the early subatomic particles in their groups of bosons, leptons, mesons and baryons, each with their particular energy and movement, would converge in their appearance as vast clouds of hydrogen and helium atoms from whose compression, under the attractive creativity of gravity, the universe became luminous in it some 200 billion galaxies, each a unique constellation of its own billionfold stars. Then, within the thermodynamics of the Milky Way the universe continued its ontological covenant of remaining in intimate communion with itself even as it differentiated itself in remarkably novel self-expression. From the imploding body of a dying giant star the universe released titanic energy forging in that supernova event all of the gases and elements that would eventually coalesce as the sun and its eight orbiting bodies. Of those, it is Earth that held firm to the cosmic covenant which shaped its very structure and defined its precise movement around its solar star. Formed of the elemental matter drawn by gravity’s ever present guiding attraction, Earth emerged in that same pattern of universe self-manifestation that preceded it: the emergence of novelty from the integral, coherent interdependence of multiple prior differentiations. Thus, Earth would come alive as biosphere, come to awareness and consciousness as noosphere precisely in and through its communion with the Sun and with itself as hydrosphere, lithosphere and atmosphere.

Of this process Thomas Berry writes: “[T]he universe... does not exist as a vastly extended sameness. The universe exists in highly differentiated forms of expression. So too the planet Earth exists as a highly differentiated complex of life systems. The only security of any life expression on Earth is in the diversity of the comprehensive community of life. As soon as diversity diminishes the security for each life-form is weakened... these various forms of expression are so intimately related that nothing is itself without everything else. Nothing exists in isolation... These aspects of the universe constitute what I would refer to as the ontological covenant of the universe. I would also note that the planet Earth fulfills this covenant with special brilliance of expression by the manner in which its hundred-some elements are shaped into the five spheres of which it is composed... Each of these is further differentiated into the innumerable forms in which each finds expression. The wonder, of course, is the bonding into a single community of existence. Especially in the realm of living beings there is an absolute inter-dependence... Every animal form depends ultimately on plant forms that alone can transform the energy of the sun and the minerals

of Earth into the living substance needed for life nourishment of the entire animal world, including the human community. The well-being of the soil and the plants growing there must be a primary concern for humans. To disrupt this process is to break the Covenant of Earth and to imperil life. " (pp. 147-48)

That peril is now upon us in the looming catastrophe of a planetary climate collapse. Throughout the entirety of Earth's body its surface of water and land mass overheats in temperatures that both evaporate and scorch and everywhere threaten a once organic thriving with scarcity and extinction. If 13.8 billion years of cosmic creativity attained a magnificence on Earth over the past 65 million years, it did so through each species' fidelity to that Covenant of interdependence; each new expression of life, migrating into or born within an already established community of fauna and flora, persisted and flourished, adding its differentiated distinctness to the evolving creativity of the universe, only by adherence to the limitations and demands imposed upon its behavior and functioning by the larger community of organisms in which it sought belonging.

While the human species, over the majority of its historical development, may have largely observed, conformed to, and found fulfillment among life's bioregional communities where they settled and took up residence, all trace of fidelity to the Covenant of Earth was severely abrogated in these last centuries of the commercial-industrial-extractive enterprise. Multiple factors have combined in human disregard for the ultimate norm of Earth's interdependence: a feckless religious detachment; a philosophical reductionism; the deployment of mechanical, electrical and chemical technologies of massive manipulation and disruption; a jurisprudence of exclusively human self-regard; the mercantile commodification of the natural world as mere collection of resources for consumptive human exploitation and eventual discard; and the enormous concentration of corporate power in the fossil fuel economy of Earth's now most menacing and imminent threat.

Attention to each of these factors may identify an appropriate path forward. What is clear however, and what even now registers its dread, is the enormity of what lies ahead. A radical transformation of the collective human species presses the question of whence will come the psychic energy for such an undertaking, whence the enthusiastic resolve to counter anxiety and despair? In this December month of now approaching winter solstice, it is Earth itself in its fidelity to the ontological covenant of the universe from which it emerged that heartens for the trials of the future that has now arrived.

Turning in the precise pace of its diurnal axis with its consistent alternation of day and night, Earth simultaneously moves in its annual elliptical orbit around the Sun. In that graced passage of Earth's communion with its solar star, life blossomed and has flourished in the seasonal transitions of that great constancy. Too awesome and stunning a movement to go unobserved and uncelebrated, uncounted millennia of humans past have rejoiced and been renewed in equinox and solstice moments celebrating Earth's covenant with the Sun and knowing its journey to be their own. In this hour of darkest forgetfulness and deepest need, may the human retrieve its lost identity with and as Earth and know the psychic and physical energies that the Sun's beneficence may yet bestow.

Thank you,

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