

The following reflection was offered by Brian Edward Brown for The Thomas Berry Forum for Ecological Dialogue in its Contemplative Ecologists Circle on February 16, 2023, based on the complete essay "The Ecological Age" in *The Dream of the Earth* pp.36-49:

As a cultural historian Thomas Berry understood the human to pass through four principal ages in its developmental presence within the evolving dynamics of Earth: its primordial tribal expression, its classical civilizational forms, its scientific-technological impact, and its currently emergent ecological age. Barely on the cusp of that fourth cultural moment, human consciousness gropes from the destructive confines of its entrancement with the scientific-technological age which preceded, and still remains, a dominant presence within the collective psyche. Held within the narrow and intense focus upon its artificially constructed world of wires, screens, algorithms and the extractive processes for their mass manufacture and increasingly varied consumer applications, technological consciousness diverts attention from the living world and the price exacted from it by the captivated and ever more consumptive human, still in pursuit of its destructive fascination. Of such a costly fixation Berry writes:" That is what needs to be explained – our entrancement with an industrially driven consumer society. Until we have explained this situation to ourselves, we will never break the spell that has seized us. We will continue to be subject to this fatal attraction. To bring about the closing down of the life systems of the planet on such an order of magnitude is obviously not something that originated yesterday or something that arises out of some trivial miscalculation, academic error, or ideology such as the Enlightenment, or even out of the industrial age itself. These are all symptoms and consequences of a vast turn in

human consciousness that originated deep in the origins of the human process itself.” (p.38)

That momentous shift began to delineate itself in Western consciousness in the scientific insights of the 16th and 17th centuries and continuing with the ever expansive industrial applications of the 18th century and on into the present. While there were distinctions in the material culture and social complexities that defined the differences between the first age of the primordial tribal human experience and that of the second age of the classical civilizational forms, they nevertheless shared a common sensibility of living within a vast cosmic and Earth community whose other-than-human beings were endowed with their own subjectivity and nobility who elicited a kinship relationship with the human and participated in the great seasonal celebrations in which the numinous creative reality continued to renew and sustain all things.

But this variously expressed, perennial interest in cultivating Earth as the nexus for the communion experience of the human, the natural world and the Sacred became increasingly less prominent as human consciousness entered into its fateful third age of fixated fascination with its own power over the physical energies, rather than the psychic depths of matter. Animated by a millennial drive to transform a growing common conception of nature as merest raw material into all manner of commercially designated consumer products, the technocratic human effectively loosened its identity with the body of Earth as it proceeded to ravage the planetary integrity of its waters, soils, atmosphere and the rich communities of its flora and fauna.

So vast has been the scope and depth of what has now been perpetrated that it is difficult to fathom how Earth could have brought forth, among its otherwise sublime manifestations, a

species so profoundly threatening to its own coherence and functional viability. But if it has risked its planetary vulnerability to the powers it has vested in the human, Earth has not left it without guidance in their deployment. Indeed, it is the wisdom of Earth itself that has begun to waken human consciousness to the devastation it has wrought and the anxiety it now registers from the commercial-industrial-technocratic age it has begun to critique and repudiate. Beyond this reactive wisdom that provides a salutary impulse from within its own depths, Earth further instructs in the simple beauty and psychic fulfillment the fourth, still emergent, ecological age promises.

The marvel that every being from the microscopic to the mammalian assumes its identity and pursues its functionality not in discrete self-derived isolation, but only and always, in dynamic interdependence upon the entire host of other beings who together share the particular ecosystem of soils, waters and atmosphere of their common respective habitation--that marvel of Earth's organic wisdom not only corrects the lifeless assumptions of the commercial-industrial-consumptive age that has so fixated human consciousness. If at the heart of its self-disclosure Earth's wisdom reveals itself as a communion experience of the most profound complexity throughout the whole of its planetary integrity, it births the human to find its deepest fulfillment within that same communion which is ultimately rooted in the very structure of the cosmos itself.

Ever instructive, Earth points beyond itself to the fundamental principles of universe creativity at every level of its emergent complexity: differentiation, subjectivity and communion. From its early appearance as sub-atomic particle structures, each with their own expressive mass, movement and charge, the basal inclination of the cosmos towards communion next manifested in

the novelty of hydrogen and helium. Differentiated in their respective chemical identities and from the particularity of their vast accumulation within the cloud like features of an ever expanding universe, these atoms, under the intense compression of gravity, shaped the further luminous communion events of cosmic unfolding in its hundreds of billions of galaxies. Each singular in size, surface brightness, the gaseous matter they organize, and the rotating velocity in which they turn and drift, each galaxy most notably embodies communion in the billionfold stars they variously contain and from whose largest stellar bodies further differentiation enriches the evolving density ever moving towards the future. When massive stars consume all of the hydrogen and helium fuel within their core they ultimately collapse on themselves and in the ensuing titanic supernova explosion forge and disperse whole new orders of elements, each with their own particular capacity for the structure and functioning of the non-sentient and sentient forms yet to appear in the cosmic becoming. Upon just such dispersal of supernova gas and elemental matter some 5 billion years ago in our local region of the Milky Way, the universe consolidated itself anew into the communion experience of the Sun and its eight orbiting planets among whose differentiated spheres Earth intensified cosmic intimacy in the dynamic interdependence of its waters, soils, and atmosphere to birth the extraordinary novelty of living cells. Over their several billion year interactions cellular complexity in turn brought forth organisms in which subjectivity became ever more vivid, the universe ever more aware, ever more conscious.

So it is that in the wisdom of the ecological age the universe rejects the reductive homogenization of the natural world as just so much inert, fungible resources for consumptive exploitation. In doing so it ratifies the long history of its self-emergence and the guiding pattern of its consistent creativity in differentiation,

subjectivity and communion. It thereby indicates to the wayward human that it realizes its true identity and deepest fulfillment only by recognizing and celebrating the subjective depth and interiority of the differentiated reality of all things that comprise the plenitude of the universe and its articulation as Earth. Of this wisdom and the corrective potency of the numinous communion it both reveals and to which it invites, Berry affirms: “ The ecological age fosters the deep awareness of the sacred presence within each reality of the universe. There is an awe and reverence due to the stars in the heavens, the sun and all heavenly bodies; to the seas and the continents; to all living forms of trees and flowers; to the myriad expressions of life in the sea; to the animals of the forests and the birds of the air. To wantonly destroy a living species is to silence forever a divine voice. Our primary need for the the various life forms of the planet is a psychic, rather than a physical, need. The ecological age seeks to establish and maintain this subjective identity, this authenticity at the heart of every being.... Only such a comprehensive vision can produce the commitment required to stop the world of exploitation, of manipulation, of violence so intense that it threatens to destroy not only the human city, but also the planet itself.” (pp.46-47)

The exact contours of the ecological age are only emerging in a groping manner as the human seeks to fashion new forms of cultural expression in ever more effective biocentric religion, education, law and commerce. In this great work the human will be energized for the enormity of the task by consistently recalling that in all its efforts it is ever the universe itself in its full creativity that yet continues its self-differentiation, now in the novel modes of viability for the preservation and protection of the communion of subjects that has ever defined its manifestation as Earth.

Thank you,

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