

The following reflection was offered by Brian Edward Brown for the Thomas Berry Forum for Ecological Dialogue in its Contemplative Ecologists Circle for July 21, 2022, based on the complete essay "Moments of Grace" in *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future* (pp.196-201):

Amidst the sociopolitical upheaval and humanitarian devastation of international war and its threatened intensification on the one hand, and from within the most alarming increase of domestic partisan rancor and civic alienation with its attendant cynicism on the other, we consider Thomas Berry's concluding essay in *The Great Work*.

Beyond those highly fraught conditions that fissure and roil the human species within its own consolidation, Berry probes more deeply into the norms and values of the human civilizational process and its institutions to expose their dangerous inadequacy in protecting Earth in its planetary integrity. While serving an indispensable function in human self-understanding and expression over some five millennia of their ascendancy, the cultural infrastructure of religion; education; law and governance; exchange and economics were nevertheless mute in resisting and have been complicit in their continued silence at the depredations to Earth from the commercial-industrial technocracy of the last several centuries. Of those failed civilizational processes from across the whole of human cultures, Berry writes of both finality and promise. "Those civilizations and cultures" he notes "that have governed our sense of the sacred and established our basic norms of reality and of value and designed the life disciplines of the peoples of Earth are terminating a major phase of their historical mission. The teaching and the energy they communicate are unequal to the task of guiding and inspiring the future. They cannot guide the great work that is before us. We will

never be able to function without these traditions. But these older traditions alone cannot fulfill the needs of the moment. That they have been unable to prevent and have not yet properly critiqued the present situation is evident. Something new is happening. A new vision and a new energy are coming into being." (p.198)

So it is then that from the present moment of profound human conflict and turmoil and the even more catastrophic ongoing threat to the planetary body, Thomas Berry yet speaks of a moment of grace, even a privileged moment. As such, this transitional moment has even now begun to unfold, bearing within itself the conditions for the further emergence of renewed creativity beyond the dangerous technocratic mindset so ruinous to Earth's flourishing. Since the central conceit of that failing destructive orientation is one of human exceptionalism and discontinuity with its exploitive domination over the natural world, grace arrives in the comprehensive story of cosmic wholeness and integrity.

From its initial plenitude, flaring forth in light and particle structures, through its subsequent transition into its incandescence as hundreds of billions of galaxies, the universe continued its transformations in the Milky Way. There it birthed from within its fullness the solar system within which Earth in its singular turn bore living cells from whose 4-billion-year combinations there blossomed the extraordinary array of sentient awareness in flora and fauna from among whom human consciousness still marvels, and may yet celebrate, the grace filled lineage from which it emerged. The seamless narrative of cosmic unfoldment across the immensities of space and time leaves no room for that misguided exceptionalism and pathologic disconnection in the technocratic mania of Earth's demise. Such is the grace of the universe story that it addresses the root of

human alienation and begins the healing recovery of a wayward human identity and its consequent derangement. Of that salutary process Berry writes: " We begin to understand our human identity with all the other modes of existence that constitute with us the single universe community. The one story includes us all. We are, everyone, cousins to one another. Every being is intimately present to and immediately influencing every other being. We see quite clearly that what happens to the nonhuman happens to the human. What happens to the outer world happens to the inner world. If the outer world is diminished in its grandeur, then the emotional, imaginative, intellectual and spiritual life of the human is diminished or extinguished. Without the soaring birds... forests...streams...flowering fields...and stars at night we become impoverished in all that makes us human." (p. 200)

But if the grace of the universe story lies within its capacity to restore the human to its fundamental communion with all its kindred of organic Earth, thereby reorienting the human to an ethic of protection and preservation rather than exploitation and consumption, is the grace sufficient to the enormity of the task? Given the harms already inflicted, the cousin species already lost and still dwindling and all the consequences of a planetary body severely overheating and already aflame, what of cosmic grace yet avails?

While recognition of the present gravity cannot be minimized as a powerful antidote to the inertia of prolonged cultural denial, the story of the universe further instructs and even more powerfully fortifies for the commitment ahead by attention to the manner in which it reveals its creativity throughout its long past.

In its telling the universe manifests itself through the consistency of transitional moments in which novelty and further enhancement emerge from the finality, even the destructiveness,

of previous conditions. So it is that the early particle and atomic structures persisting in their massive clouds for the first billion years of universe unfurling eventually collapsed upon themselves and, under the colossal compression of gravity, disappeared only to transfigure into the luminescence of those hundreds of billions of galaxies. Among them, in the Milky Way, the universe would continue to advance the conditions for further creative self-expression. In the thermodynamics of a supernova event, the relative persistence of an immense star is an initial function of the vast quantity of hydrogen and helium burning at its core. But inevitably as that fuel is consumed and even as the star is able to forge other elements within itself, its size steadily contracts and it is unable to resist the force of gravity, imploding on itself until its final outward explosion disperses its remaining mass into clouds of gas and whole new orders of elemental matter brought forth in that titanic shattering. Such is the graced creativity of the universe that in the very death of immense stars there remain the seeds for future possibilities to yet emerge. From supernova remnants and through the ever-present shaping of gravity, the universe would constellate itself into the further contours of the sun among whose eight orbiting planets the grace of living Earth would blossom. But even as its cellular expression became established and the marvel of photosynthesis began to enrich the early atmosphere with the density of oxygen, that very development became toxic and killed off the majority of non-photosynthetic cells. Yet, cosmic ingenuity, set within the pattern of its primordial particle emergence, on through its galactic, solar and planetary transitions, would delineate a whole new expression of animate possibility in the form of cell structures capable of ingesting oxygen and transforming it into an entirely novel source of energy for the subsequent development and sustenance of the ever more

complex life forms of yet further cosmic creativity in its Paleozoic, Mesozoic and Cenozoic expressions.

That fundamental tendency of the universe to fashion unexpected possibility from crisis, consolidated itself as life endured the severe diminishments of the five great extinctions of those first two epochs. From those catastrophic eliminations and perilous reductions among Earth's biosphere, the universe reiterated its narrative of drawing creativity from collapse. From the extinction events of the Paleozoic and Mesozoic the universe realized an ever more prolific expression in the marvels of the Cenozoic. But after 65 million years of unparalleled organic diversity, the commercial-industrial-extractive economy of the modern carbon burning human now threatens planetary cataclysm.

In such an extremity, what of cosmic grace avails? It might be said that the universe story has already begun to heal the rupture of that pernicious exceptionalism and restore human identity within the integral coherence of Earth. Beyond that corrective instruction the universe continues to retrieve creativity from disaster by dreaming, from within the restored human, a whole new order of dynamism and its graced availability in the solar, wind, geothermal and tidal energies of present possibility.

Thank you.

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