

The following reflection was offered by Brian Edward Brown for the Thomas Berry Forum for Ecological Dialogue in its Contemplative Ecologists Circle for May 19, 2022, based on the complete essay "The Fourfold Wisdom" in *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future* (pp.176-195)

Proceeding into the future, Earth's destiny must now be guided by the collective wisdom of the human from its most ancient to its more immediate. Two sources of such guidance from a settled past to a much more recent perspective is that of indigenous wisdom on the one hand and of observational science on the other. While highly distinctive in their temporal orientation and human responsiveness to Earth, they bear complementary insight and corrective repudiation to a dangerous discontinuity that has devastated the planetary body to its present ruination. In their complementary convergence, scientific exactitude and indigenous sensibility identify and celebrate animate Earth far beyond its economic consignment as mere inert resource for consumptive human desire and wanton despoliation.

In its historical proximity and profound reverberations within contemporary human thought, the wisdom of science reveals the extraordinary continuity of matter from its most primordial and simplest expression on the particle level through its ever more complex arrangements in galactic and planetary structures, on into its cohesive weave of Earth's lithosphere, hydrosphere and atmosphere to manifest its wondrous appearance and ever greater coherence among its extravagant diversity of living forms, become Earth's biosphere.

The wisdom of science, articulating matter's movement from the infinitesimal to the immense and from the simple to the complex, identifies the universe not as the fixity of discrete and disconnected forms, configurations independent and autonomous one from another, but rather, as the creative emergence of an integral whole whose plenitude as Earth is the extension of all that has preceded it over 13.8 billion years. Of this universe, unfolding from within itself in organic continuity through its interrelated sequence of transformations across the immensity of time Thomas Berry writes: " Awareness that the universe is more cosmogenesis than cosmos might be the greatest change in human consciousness that has taken place since the awakening of the human mind in the Paleolithic Period." (p.190 )

But the wisdom of science in the shift from cosmos to cosmogenesis is revolutionary not just in its conception of matter's integral coherence as it moves from simplicity to complexity. For in that very process matter moves from lesser forms of consciousness to greater modes of consciousness. In a statically conceived universe, consciousness tended to be the sole prerogative of the human which arrogated more and more

dominance to itself in the technocratic relegation of a world of inert objects, so much resource for exploitation and discard. It is the truly revolutionary wisdom of science in the shift from cosmos to cosmogenesis to restore consciousness as the innate disposition of the universe from its earliest expressions of self - organization on the particle, galactic and planetary expressions of matter's evolutionary emergence to its more explicit modes of awareness on the cellular and more complexly arranged organisms of Earth's fauna and flora. In this revived animation where cosmogenesis corrects the destructive fallacy of human exceptionalism among a deadened collection of disposable objects, the universe in the body of Earth reveals itself as the communion of subjects still awaiting human acknowledgment and appropriate responsiveness. On this critical issue the wisdom of science is relatively mute but may well be tutored by the complementary wisdom of indigenous traditions which never lost their intimacy and respect for the other – than - human beings whose presence, kinship and guidance were consistently recognized and invoked in the rich liturgical expressions of indigenous ceremonial life.

To be specific and avoid the error of over generalization one might consider the rite of "Crying for a Vision" found in the Lakota culture of the North American Plains and explained by the authoritative voice of Black Elk with whom Thomas Berry was well-versed. As in all of their principal ceremonies, this particular rite is preceded by a purification ceremony conducted in a sweat lodge whose simple circular structure represents the comprehensive inclusiveness of the entire cosmos and the full accompaniment of all beings who are formal participants with the human in every liturgical act of recognizing their communion with each other and with the Sacred Source of their shared existence. Of this symbolism and the subjectivity of all beings, Black Elk explains: " The willows which make the frame of the sweat lodge are set up in such a way that they mark the four quarters of the universe; thus, the whole lodge is the universe in an image, and the two-legged, four-legged, and the winged peoples, and all things of the world are contained within it, for all these peoples and things too must be purified before they can send a voice to Wakan-Tanka [The Great Spirit]." (*The Sacred Pipe*, p. 32)

It is significant that there may be multiple reasons for an individual to draw aside and spend 2 to 4 days of fasting on a secluded mountain in an intense mode of prayer. Among them, Black Elk notes that the individual may be of troubled mind as they anticipate some ordeal in the future for which they sought resilience for its endurance. But whatever particular reason the individual might have, there is always the paramount intention to deepen one's psychic bond with the community of all beings and to reaffirm their profound kinship with the subjectivity of those other-than-human beings

as one's relatives sharing their own distinctive value from that common Sacred Source from Whom all things derive their origin.

On this point Black Elk comments: " But perhaps the most important reason for this ritual is that it helps us to realize our oneness with all things, to know that all things are our relatives; and then in behalf of all things we pray to Wakan Tanka that He may give to us knowledge of Him who is the source of all things, yet greater than all things." (*The Sacred Pipe*, p. 46) .

Once on the mountain the ceremonial rubric continues to impress on the individual that while physically isolated they are far from alienated, for they are full participants in the vast cosmic community where every being is not only their relative, but where each being has been endowed with its own wisdom and energy which offers its inspiration and guidance to those who are attentive to its communion. Of this inherent capacity for the beings of the natural world to enhance human insight and understanding into the mystery of existence Black Elk explains: " All these people are important, for in their own way they are wise and can teach us two-leggeds much if we make ourselves humble before them... This will help you to understand in part how it is that we regard all created beings as sacred and important, for everything has a 'wochangi' or influence which can be given to us, through which we may gain a little more understanding if we are attentive." (*The Sacred Pipe* pp.58-59)

Tonight, as we have done so often in this circle, we gather in community to gropingly find our footing on the shifting body that is Earth. Of necessity, we take our stance there not from the splendor of some untrammelled vista, but with troubled minds and hearts at the devastation and loss of what has been wrought and the enormity of the restorative project yet ahead. In this perilous state it is nevertheless the wisdom of science and indigenous wisdom that may clarify our vision and hearten our resolve. In its integral coherence, cosmogenesis disposes the human as the yet unfolding expression of a universe - shaping creativity among whose communion of subjects both the human and the cosmos may yet find their mutual reciprocal fulfillment. In the Great Self of the universe the human discovers its deepest identity and realizes its most profound purpose. Correspondingly, in the human self the universe attains a measure of self-recognition and the celebration of itself in the fullness of its manifestations. "In this context" concludes Berry "we can feel secure in our efforts to fulfill the Great Work before us. The guidance, the inspiration, and the energy we need is available. The accomplishment of the Great Work is the task not simply of the human community but of the entire planet Earth. Even beyond Earth it is the Great Work of the universe itself." (p. 195)

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