

The following reflection was offered by Brian Edward Brown for the Thomas Berry Forum for Ecological Dialogue in its Contemplative Ecologists Circle for October 20, 2022, based on the complete essay "The Earth Community" in *The Dream of the Earth* pp.6-12.

Running throughout the corpus of some 70 essays, the thought of Thomas Berry resonates deeply with a principal organizational theme of Teilhard de Chardin's magisterial work, *The Human Phenomenon*. In its Prologue entitled "Seeing" Teilhard wrote: "One could say that the whole of life lies in seeing... To be more is to be more united... But unity grows... only if it is supported by an increase of consciousness, of vision. That is probably why the history of the living world can be reduced to the elaboration of ever more perfect eyes at the heart of a cosmos where it is always possible to discern more... To try to see more and to see better is not, therefore, just a fantasy, curiosity, or a luxury. See or perish. This is the situation imposed on every element of the universe by the mysterious gift of existence. And thus, to a higher degree, this is the human condition." (*The Human Phenomenon* p.3)

Significantly, Thomas Berry, with a comprehensive though critical appreciation of Teilhard's thought, directed his own consistent attention to that cosmic imperative: to see or to perish. In the second essay we consider tonight he addresses the myopic entrancement of the technocratic human with its fixation upon a consumerist wonder world in blind disregard of the living Earth community which it has progressively reduced to a waste world. Obscured by its own deadly self-infatuation, evidence of planetary ruination by the industrial human lies nevertheless in plain sight amidst acidified oceans; parched and shrinking freshwater bodies and disappearing glaciers; arid and desiccated soils; massive deforestations; extractive mining and its toxic residues; and everywhere, the pallid stillness and silence of extinction's finality. That grim toll continues to be counted in the comprehensive assessments consistently made on the health and well-being of planetary flora and fauna comprising the Red List of Threatened Species maintained by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature. Comprehensive in scope and sophistication of measurement, the List trains the attention of the unseeing human on the holocaust it sacrifices from among the other than human beings of Earth's biosphere. Of the formal assessments it has most recently conducted, the IUCN has supplemented its Red List to reflect 41% of amphibians; 13% of birds; 37% of sharks and rays; 33% of reef building corals; 27% of mammals; 69% of

cycadad plants; 21% of reptiles; 33% of conifers and 28% of selected crustaceans.

This magnitude of organic jeopardy was all the more amplified in the UN's 2019 report on worldwide biodiversity loss prepared by the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystems Services. Distinct from the Red List in being the first intergovernmental report of its kind prepared by 145 experts from 50 countries and with contributions from 310 additional authors, it concluded that some one million animal and plant species are now threatened with extinction, many within the coming decades. Additionally, the report identifies the principal human drivers of this fatal exaction. They consist of changes in land and sea use including agricultural expansion; deforestation; wetland and grassland loss and water extraction; overexploitation of ocean fish and other sea organisms; land, sea and river pollution and coastal development; climate change with its frequency and intensity of extreme weather events in fires, droughts, floods and sea level rise; a tenfold increase in marine plastic pollution affecting some 267 species of turtles, seabirds and ocean mammals; greenhouse gas emissions; untreated urban and rural waste; industrial mining, oil spills and toxic dumping; alien species currently interfering with 1/5 of the Earth's surface and their impact on native soils and ecosystem functions; and finally, the fact that in the last fifty years the human population has doubled, the global economy has grown nearly fourfold, and global trade has grown tenfold, together driving up the demands for energy and materials and their impact on the natural world with rising instability and conflict among human societies that demand their dwindling consumptive value.

If Thomas Berry explicitly relied on the authoritative Red List to indicate all that perishes in the anthropocentric gaze of the commercial-industrial human, he would have been no less attentive to the exact findings of the UN Intergovernmental report on biodiversity loss. But for the purposes of this second essay, Berry moves beyond an initial exposé of human harm to the planetary body to delve more deeply into the psychic core of its destructiveness. Consistent with its failure to see beyond that deadly self-inflated technocratic mastery over all other life forms and the ruins it continues to exact, there lies the human refusal to be bound by the law of self-restraint by which every being conforms to the limitations as well as the possibilities of every other being in the community of their shared ecosystem where each flourishes in the dynamic integrity of the whole.

Since the beauty of Earth manifests from within the extraordinary coherence of planetary waters, soils, atmosphere and the interwoven fabric of beings that inhabit them, the unrestrained human that diminishes such fullness reveals the depth of its derangement. "If we were truly moved by the beauty of the world about us," writes Berry "we would honor the Earth in a profound way. We would understand immediately and turn away with a certain horror from all those activities that violate the integrity of the planet. That we have not done so reveals that a disturbance exists at a more basic level of consciousness and upon a greater order of magnitude than we dare admit to ourselves or even think about. This unprecedented pathology is not merely in those more immediate forms of economic activity that have done such damage; it is even more deeply embedded in our cultural traditions, in our religious traditions, in our very language, in our entire value system." (*The Dream of the Earth* p. 10)

But if there has been this capitulation to the commercial-industrial mindset of the last centuries by the entire range of cultural processes through which the human creates meaning for itself and the world around it in religious belief and practice; law and governance; commerce and economy; and educational discipline and training; where lies the hope for the transformative liberation of a mutually enhancing human-Earth relationship away from the perilous present to the realization of a more creative future? It is perhaps appropriate here to recall once again Teilhard's affirmation and Berry's implicit endorsement of it "that the whole of life lies in seeing...[that] the history of the living world can be reduced to the elaboration of ever more perfect eyes at the heart of a cosmos where it is always possible to discern more.... To try to see more and to see better is...the situation imposed on every element of the universe by the mysterious gift of existence." (*The Human Phenomenon*, p. 3)

In the application of this rubric attention has thus far been directed to all that perishes in the myopic self-regard of the technocratic human. Yet there remains deep within that very psyche a mode of seeing itself not in dominance over, but called to full flourishing in communion with the universe in which it discovers its richest and most profound identity. "If we have a wonderful sense of the divine," writes Berry "it is because we live amid such awesome magnificence. If we have refinement of emotion and sensitivity, it is because of the delicacy, fragrance, and indescribable beauty of song and music and rhythmic movement in the world about us. If we grow in our life vigor, it is because the earthly community challenges us, forces us to struggle to survive, but in the end reveals itself as a benign

providence. But however benign, it must provide that absorbing drama of existence whereby we can experience the thrill of being alive in a fascinating and unending sequence of adventures. If we have powers of imagination, these are activated by the magic display of color and sound, of form and movement such as we observe in the clouds of the sky, the trees and bushes and flowers, waters and the wind, the singing birds, and the movement of the great blue whale through the sea. If we have words with which to speak and think and communicate, words for the inner experience of the divine, words for the intimacies of life, if we have words for telling stories to our children, words with which we can sing, it is again because of the impressions we have received from the varieties of beings about us." (*The Dream of the Earth* p.11)

So it is that even in the present extremity hope arises in the mutually enhancing seeing more and seeing better that holds the human-earth relationship in dynamic coincidence one with the other. Each sees itself and finds itself in the other. In the human, the cosmos, articulating itself as Earth, attains a measure, a glimpse, of its own horizons across the immensities of time and space, while in that same species, Earth realizes and celebrates its beauties, wonders, sensitivities and wisdom with which it yet defines and instructs the wayward human. The strength of their mutual seeing more and seeing better is held fast not by whim or happenstance, but "by the mysterious gift of existence" that even now binds them in their common journey towards the future that continues to beckon.

Thank you,

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