

Chrysalis

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The Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World*

“We are touched by what we touch. We are shaped by what we shape. We are enhanced by what we enhance.”¹

~ Thomas Berry, *The Great Work*

“If we imagined that the between-space is just as charged with possibility as outer space, we might be more inclined to turn our attention to the fecund depths of our co-becoming with earthbound critters. What could turning our attention look like?²

~ Bayo Akomolafe, *These Wilds Beyond Our Fences*

Dear Reader,

Each day in our programs with children and the earth, we enter the between-space where the children are touched by what they touch, are shaped by what they shape, are enhanced by what they enhance. We “turn our attention to the fecund depths of our co-becoming with earthbound critters.”

We enter the between-space intentionally as a space that defies measurement and quantification. We enter the between-space to welcome intimacy and possibility.

Listen as we enter that space with Imer, a child from the Doris Henderson Newcomers School, which serves children new to America from all over the world. In the fall of 2017, our Director of Children’s Programs, Sandy Bisdee, was present to this moment of co-becoming.

“Imer came with a notebook and a pencil and sketched everything that he saw, in his own simple way. He noticed the moss-covered tree with reverence and with awe, the songs of birds singing all around, and the sweet aromas of spring on the breeze. Imer had a very loving presence. I found an old mussel shell in the shallow pond, rinsed it out, closed it and showed it to the children. Then I mimicked a bird coming down to pluck it open and eat what was inside. As I slowly opened the empty

¹ Thomas Berry, *The Great Work: Our Way Into the Future* (New York: Bell Tower, 1999), 81.

² Bayo Akomolafe, *These Wilds Beyond Our Fences: Letters to My Daughter on Humanity’s Search for Home* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2017), 281.



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empty shell, revealing a pearly orange sherbet color, Imer gasped. He was visibly affected by the sight. I invited each child to smell the open shell. It smelled of water and sweetness and life. One little girl from Haiti told her teacher that her mother used to cook them in her homeland. Imer held on to the shell all day. Before lunch he adorned it with a few small flowers that poked through a small broken hole in the shell. After lunch he invited me to touch the soft white enamel between the dark outside of the mollusk and the peach colored inside. I closed my eyes and felt the smooth pearly shell. I hadn't realized how soft that part of the shell was, until Imer shared it with me. I wish that I spoke his language so that I could tell him the story of the freshwater mussel, a story that I tell the English-speaking children. It is a story about how the mussel paints the rainbow inside his shell every day and how the mussel carries the Water Dream. But I think he already knew that."

This moment of co-becoming between Imer and this flower-adorned mollusk is a moment of communion, a moment of deep participation in the Water Dream and the dream of the Earth.

Thomas Berry has said that “the Earth functions at a depth beyond our rational capacity for active thought. We can only be sensitized to what is being revealed to us. We probably have not had such participation in the dream of the Earth since earlier shamanic times, but therein lies our hope for the future for ourselves and for the entire Earth community.”³

How different this is from thinking of Earth as a problem to be solved. This call to communion, this call to co-becoming, sounds strange to our anthropocentric ears. But this is what turning our attention looks like. We shift from a place of human agency and control, from a place of “sustainability” and human progress, from a place of

³ Thomas Berry, *The Great Work*, 165.

“saving the earth,” to a place of intimacy and co-becoming, to a place of solidarity with suffering and beauty, to a place of possibility beyond current concepts of cause and effect.

A new voice for this turning is the voice of Bayo Akomolafe, Chief Curator and Executive Director of The Emergence Network, who hopes to inspire an “ethos of new responsibility.” We are deeply honored to be hosting a talk by Bayo on March 18, 2018 entitled, *The Gift of Fading Away*, based on his new book, *These Wilds Beyond Our Fences: Letters to My Daughter on Humanity’s Search for Home* (see page 23 for a full description of his talk).

In this issue of *Chrysalis* we also explore Thomas Berry’s profound understanding of a “communion of subjects” through a paper I delivered at the Thomas Berry Colloquium on May 27, 2014 at the University of North Carolina.

In her reflection on our work with The Doris Henderson Newcomers School this year, Sandy wrote:

“During these times of unprecedented forced migration of people from their homelands all over the earth, we are faced with the staggering images of suffering of large populations of immigrants and refugees from all walks of life and of all ages. Many people have made their way to America under great duress. Some of them have come to Greensboro, North Carolina, where their children can attend the Doris Henderson Newcomers School, a school that helps prepare the children for their new home. Our staff will never know the hardships and horrors that many of these children have endured, and yet we have some inkling when we hear the names of countries that the children have come from: Congo, Miramar, Nigeria, Guatemala and El Salvador. Knowing what we do know, we feel overwhelmingly grateful to welcome these children to our program, to the earth sanctuary in the foothills of North Carolina. Our staff eagerly waits for the Newcomers’ bus to pull up in front of the Treehouse, and for the children of all sizes, shapes and colors to step off the bus, look around, and smile back at us. As we gather in a circle outdoors we sing a hearty welcoming song that one of the children taught us. “Good Morning, Good Morning, It’s very good to meet you, My heart is very happy, uh huh, uh huh, uh huh!” We are each humbled to have an opportunity to share our love, wonder, laughter and genuine interest in each child’s presence. For one glorious day, we are able to participate in the healing of hearts as we come together as one united family of the Earth.”

Blessed is the space between us.

In Co-becoming,



Peggy Whalen-Levitt, Director



Thomas Berry's "Communion of Subjects": Awakening the "Heart of the Universe"

by

Peggy Whalen-Levitt

(A Talk given at The Thomas Berry Colloquium,
UNC-Chapel Hill, May 27, 2014)

In *The Dream of the Earth*, Thomas Berry writes:

"At present...we are in that phase of transition that must be described as the groping phase. We are like a musician who faintly hears a melody deep within the mind, but not clearly enough to play it through. This is the inner agony we experience, especially when we consider that the music we are creating is the very reality of the universe."

It would be easier for us if we would remember that the earth itself, as the primary energy, is finding its way both to interior conscious expression in the human and to outer fulfillment in the universe."¹

Thomas often uses a symphonic metaphor to hold a mirror up to the transition of the present moment. Throughout all of his books, he helps us cultivate new ears to hear the melody making itself known.

We faintly hear a melody deep within the mind:

A melody of a universe unfolding in time.

A melody of a numinous mystery that resonates throughout the entire universe.

A melody of an unbroken bond of relatedness throughout the whole universe that is both spatial and temporal.

A melody of a bond of intimacy that holds all together in communion.

A melody of ourselves as that communion becoming conscious of itself.²

"This sense of communion at the heart of reality," Thomas tells us, "is the central force bringing the ecological age into existence."³

¹ Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1988), 47.

² Berry, *Dream*, 91.

³ Berry, *Dream*, 121.

Just as we begin to hear with new ears what is coming toward us from the future, we see also a troubling paradox that Thomas Berry outlines with deep insight. The human capacity to penetrate deeply into the physical structure of reality has, at the same time, distanced us from an intimacy with the universe. And this distancing has had devastating consequences for Earth, our home. This is “the inner agony we experience” as we grasp more deeply the co-creative role the human plays.

Those who hear the melody ache with sorrow, while others seem deaf to the sounds. Thomas speaks a warning, a wake up call, that has become a mantra for our time:

The universe is a communion of subjects to be communed with, not a collection of objects to be used.

Threaded throughout all his writing, Thomas considers the patterns of cultural coding that have brought us to this place of dissonance. He applauds efforts being made and he outlines pathways for cultural reform. But *always*, he calls us back to the deeper realm of consciousness itself:

In *The Sacred Universe*, he writes:

“Pragmatic efforts at establishing a viable way into the future are urgently needed and invaluable. They are indispensable in any effort to deal with that future. Even with the change in attitude that I am proposing, the details of implementation will be an essential aspect of any future program. I do not wish to diminish what is being done. I wish only to indicate that the basic difficulty lies deeper in the human mind and emotions than is generally recognized. If the reorientation of mind is not effected, then whatever remedy is proposed will not succeed in the purposes it intends.

So far, we have not been able to effect a major change in inner attitude...”⁴

In so saying, Thomas recognizes that as long as we continue to perceive the world through the same lens that has brought us to the place where the life-force itself is threatened with extinction, our well-intentioned efforts will have no lasting effect.

He speaks often of the psychic energy needed for transformation in our time and wonders where the psychic energy will come from that is equal to the magnitude of the task before us. He focuses on the new sacred story as the source of this energy, but he also recognizes that we have so far failed to imbue the story with its sacred dimension. Throughout all his written work is the recognition that we must enlarge the consciousness that tells the story, hears the story, and lives the story in its full sacred dimension.

Others have begun to hear the call for “the reorientation of mind” of which Thomas speaks.

Ecologist John Milton, speaking of well-intentioned efforts to reform institutions, says:

“By themselves they won’t bring about the penetrating changes in human culture that we need for people to live in true harmony and balance with one another and the earth. The next great opening of an ecological worldview will have to be an internal one.”⁵

⁴ Thomas Berry, *The Sacred Universe* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 169.

In *Spiritual Ecology, The Cry of the Earth*, Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee recognizes the deep divide between spirit and matter that is at the heart of the ecological crisis:

“Our present ecological crisis is calling to us and it is for each of us to respond. This crisis is not a problem to be solved, because the world is not a problem but a living being in a state of dangerous imbalance and deep distress...There is action to be taken in the outer world, but it must be action that comes from a reconnection with the sacred – otherwise we will just be reconstellating the patterns that have created this imbalance.”⁶

In *Spiritual Ecology: A Quiet Revolution*, Anthropologist Leslie E. Sponsel offers a history of those engaged with an inner “rethinking, refeeling, and revisioning of the place of humans in nature.”⁷

Let us look closely, then, at what Thomas has to say about the deep psychic shift that must take place in order for us to move from a view of the universe as a collection of objects to a relationship with the universe as a communion of subjects. A shift from “view” to “relationship”, from a spectator role to communion.

Thomas takes us back to Descartes as the most decisive moment in the split of human consciousness between subject and object, mind and matter. In *Evening Thoughts* he writes:

“...the universe is a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects. The devastation of the planet can be seen as a direct consequence of the loss of this capacity for human presence to and reciprocity with the nonhuman world. This reached its most decisive moment in the seventeenth-century proposal of René Descartes that the universe is composed simply of ‘mind and mechanism.’ In this single stroke, he devitalized the planet and all its living creatures, with the exception of the human.

The thousandfold voices of the natural world became inaudible to many humans...”⁸

“Descartes,” Thomas says, *desouled* the Earth, with his division of reality between mind and extension.”⁹

Throughout his writings, Thomas describes this rational mode of consciousness in the language of confinement. Words like *autism*, *mute*, *deadening*, *paralysis*, *suffocation*, *mechanistic fixation*, *atrophy*, *pathology*, *alienation*, *dissatisfied* and *starved* are used to describe the human mind cut off from its deeper realms of reference and meaning. In *The Great Work* he writes:

⁵ Quoted in Arthur Zajonc, *Meditation as Contemplative Inquiry* (Great Barrington, MA: Lindisfarne Books, 2009), 15.

⁶ Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee, “The Call of the Earth,” in *Spiritual Ecology: The Cry of the Earth*, ed. Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee (Point Reyes, CA: The Golden Sufi Center, 2013), 255-256.

⁷ Leslie E. Sponsel, “Prologue,” in *Spiritual Ecology: A Quiet Revolution*, ed. Leslie E. Sponsel (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2012), xiv.

⁸ Thomas Berry, *Evening Thoughts: Reflecting on Earth as Sacred Community* (San Francisco: Sierra Club, 2006), 17-18.

⁹ Thomas Berry, *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future* (New York: Bell Tower, 1999), 78.

“We have, in the accepted universe of these times, little capacity for participating in the mysteries that were celebrated in the earlier literary and artistic and religious modes of expression. For we cannot live in the universe in which these celebrations took place. We can only look on, as it were, as at something unreal.”¹⁰

Still, Thomas recognizes that the scientific period had a particular role to play in the evolution of consciousness that culminated in the story of a time-developmental universe, in a transition from cosmos to cosmogenesis, and in a revelation of the role of the human as that being in whom the universe reflects upon itself. Thomas holds the tension between these two polarities of rational consciousness, one devitalizing the other full of awe and wonder, through which a third force emerges.

This third force is a new, unitive consciousness of the human being. In *The Great Work* he writes:

“We are a pervasive presence. By definition we are that reality in whom the entire Earth comes to a special mode of reflexive consciousness. We are ourselves a mystical quality of the Earth, a unifying principle, an integration of the various polarities of the material and the spiritual, the physical and the psychic, the natural and the artistic, the intuitive and the scientific. We are the unity in which all these inhere and achieve a special mode of functioning. In this way the human acts as a pervading logos.”¹¹

He clearly recognizes, however, the human capacities that have been marginalized throughout this period of scientific/rational consciousness. In *Evening Thoughts* he writes:

“Narration of this sequence has required the immense effort of scientific investigation of these past few centuries. It has necessitated the setting aside, for a while, of the spiritual, the visionary, intuitive, imaginative world in order to probe as deeply as possible into the visible, material, quantitative world, the measurable world, the world that could be expressed in the language of calculus, the great instrument of the scientific endeavor.”¹²

To midwife a new unitive consciousness, the spiritual, visionary, intuitive and imaginative worlds need to be invited back in. Everywhere in his writings, Thomas gives us a feeling for the human capacities that must now be cultivated to release us from our confinement and allow us to enter more fully into communion. Here, Thomas quotes William Blake, who asked: “What do you see when you look out over the landscape? Do you simply see the sun rising or do you see the flaming forth of the deep mystery of the universe?”¹³

A close reading of Thomas’ writings reveals the capacities that must now be cultivated:

- A capacity for humility
- A capacity for surrender
- A capacity for courtesy
- A capacity for gratitude
- A capacity for reverence

¹⁰ Berry, *Great Work*, 17.

¹¹ Berry, *Great Work*, 174-175.

¹² Berry, *Evening Thoughts*, 56.

¹³ Berry, *Sacred Universe*, 149.

A capacity for compassion
A capacity for veneration
A sense of the sacred, a sense of the numinous
A sense of mystery
A capacity for wisdom
A capacity for awe
A capacity for wonder
A capacity for revelatory experience
A capacity for presence
A capacity for listening
A capacity for intimate rapport
A capacity for mutual presence
A capacity for communion
A capacity for reciprocity
A capacity for conscious reflection
A capacity for nurturing
A capacity for celebration
A capacity for spontaneity
A capacity for creativity
A capacity for ecstasy
A capacity for praise
A capacity for joy
A capacity for fulfillment

In his book, *Living Presence*, Kabir Helminski reminds us of the full potential of the human that includes the capacities that Thomas is calling for:

“We have subtle subconscious faculties we are not using. In addition to the limited analytic intellect is a vast realm of mind that includes psychic and extrasensory abilities; intuition; wisdom; a sense of unity; aesthetic, qualitative, and creative capacities; and image-forming and symbolic capacities. Though these faculties are many, we give them a single name with some justification because they are operating best when they are in concert. They comprise a mind, moreover, in spontaneous connection to the cosmic mind. This total mind we call ‘heart.’”¹⁴

Thomas refers to this “total mind” of the human as the “heart of the universe” from the Chinese word *hsin*, which “conveys both feeling and understanding.” In a translation of *hsin*, Thomas writes:

“*hsin* is written as a pictograph of the human heart. It should be translated by a single word or a phrase with both a feeling and an understanding aspect. It could thus be translated by saying that humans are the “understanding heart of heaven and Earth.” Even more briefly the phrase has been translated by Julia Ch’ing in the statement that humans are the “heart of the universe.” It could, finally, be translated by saying that humans are “the consciousness of the world,” or that humans are “the psyche of the universe.” Here we have a remarkable feeling for the absolute dimensions of the human, the total integration of reality in humans, the total integration of humans in reality.”¹⁵

¹⁴ Kabir Edmund Helminski, *Living Presence* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, 1992), 157.

¹⁵ Thomas Berry, “The Spirituality of Earth,” *The Ecological: Reflections on Life in an Ecological Age*, 1 (2008), 4.

In his essay “The Meadow Across the Creek”, Thomas tells a story and gives an image of the “heart of the universe” that restored him to the universe as a communion of subjects when he was eleven years old and became a touchstone for his future thinking and actions. At the end of the essay he writes:

“We might think of a viable future for the planet less as the result of some scientific insight or as dependent on some socioeconomic arrangement than as participation in a symphony or as renewed presence to some numinous presence manifested in the wonderworld about us. This was perhaps something I vaguely experienced in that first view of the lilies blooming in the meadow across the creek.”¹⁶

The “heart of the universe” participates in the symphony of the universe in both its spatial and temporal dimensions. The “heart of the universe” hears the melody of a bond of intimacy that holds all together in communion. The “heart of the universe” hears the melody of the human being as that communion becoming conscious of itself.

Where in the culture are these capacities for the “heart of the universe” being cultivated? We now see new terms arising: *heart-mind*, *heartfelt thinking*, *heart-mind entrainment*, *nondual thinking*, *putting the mind in the heart*. There is now considerable psychic energy emerging to move beyond the subject/object duality we inherited from Descartes into the communion consciousness that Thomas Berry calls us to, particularly in the realm of contemplative ways of knowing.

First, there is the work of Douglas Christie, Professor of Theological Studies at Loyola Marymount University in California and author of *The Blue Sapphire of the Mind: Notes for a Contemplative Ecology* published by Oxford University Press in 2013. Christie’s *contemplative ecology* rests on the following understanding:

“...our ecological commitments, if they are to reach mature and sustainable expression, need to be grounded in a sense of deep reciprocity with the living world. And...this sense of reciprocity must be cultivated over time, in a process of deepening awareness and growing ethical maturity rooted in practices akin to those long cherished in the great spiritual traditions of the world – *contemplative* practices, oriented toward helping us see and inhabit and tend to the world fully and deeply.”¹⁷

Christie recognizes the practice of seeing deeply into the living world as a moral and spiritual activity that dissolves dualistic thinking and restores a sacred sense of the whole. “The question,” Christie says, “of what it is to become aware of oneself as alive in the living world and how to cultivate this awareness for the sake of that world remains one of the most pressing spiritual concerns of our time.”¹⁸

Next, there is the work of Arthur Zajonc, Professor of Physics Emeritus at Amherst College, former Director of the Academic Program of the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society, Director of the Mind and Life Institute and author of several books, including *Meditation as Contemplative Inquiry: When Knowing Becomes Love* (2008) and, with Parker Palmer, *The Heart of Higher Education: A Call to Renewal* (2010). Working closely with the contemplative traditions of Rudolf Steiner and Buddhism, Zajonc has worked tirelessly to

¹⁶ Berry, *Great Work*, 20.

¹⁷ Douglas E. Christie, *The Blue Sapphire of the Mind: Notes for a Contemplative Ecology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 21.

¹⁸ Christie, *Blue Sapphire*, 6.

legitimate a shift from “knowledge as power” to “knowledge as love” in the academic world. These words, written by Arthur, could easily have been written by Thomas Berry himself:

“The native peoples of all continents live within a tradition that fosters an awareness of the sacred being of nature and therefore a reverence for her. Our environmental groups largely lack the consciousness of the Earth as Mother; we have much to learn from our indigenous brothers and sisters in this regard. In deepening our relationship to nature by moving from wonder and awe to reverence, we meet nature not as a physical mechanism but as a moral and spiritual agent. While science will protest that we are merely projecting our moral inclinations onto nature, we can inwardly sense the emptiness of that assertion. Every civilization except ours has understood that we are not the only moral agents in the universe. Our survival depends on setting aside such self-centeredness and acknowledging the agential or “being” character of the world around us. It is then possible to feel true reverence toward nature, our fellow human beings, and towards those beings or Being who have always been active within her.”¹⁹

Through a meditative practice based on humility and reverence, Arthur Zajonc opens the possibility of listening to Earth for guidance, one of the primary principles of Thomas Berry’s work.

This brings us to the work of Robert Sardello, Founder of the School of Spiritual Psychology, Co-Founder and Fellow of the Dallas Institute of Humanities and Culture and former Head of the Psychology Department at the University of Dallas. With the publication of *Facing the World with Soul: The Reimagination of Modern Life* in 1992, Sardello jostled our habitual ways of thinking about caring for the world, as he wrote:

“I am suggesting that political, social, ecological, and technological programs (and all other imaginable kinds of programs) will not alter the condition of the world one wit; they only rearrange what is already given into new patterns into which we are inserted as onlookers, strangers.”²⁰

Drawing upon the archetypal psychology of James Hillman and others, Sardello works with silence, concentration, meditation, image-making and contemplation to develop the interior presence of heart with Earth. Over the course of more than twenty years, these practices reach a new maturity in a fourfold course of study, Contemplative Living with Earth.

There is also the work of Cynthia Bourgeault, PhD in Medieval Studies, author, Episcopal priest, hermit, Founder of The Contemplative Society, The Aspen Wisdom School and current faculty member of the Living School with Richard Rohr, James Finley and others at the Center for Action and Contemplation in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Through her wisdom writings and contemplative practices, Cynthia fosters a new level of evolutionary consciousness based on a shift from the dividing, separating mind to a consciousness that experiences the universe as “an emergent symphony of wholeness – a delicious inter-abiding where every part is precious and particular but only makes sense when it takes its place within the whole.”²¹ This new consciousness is based on a heart-mind entrainment that perceives through coherence and connection and can be cultivated and stabilized through the contemplative practices of kenosis (holding openness), abundance (sensing fullness) and singleness (perceiving from wholeness).

¹⁹ Zajonc, *Meditation as Contemplative Inquiry*, 56-57.

²⁰ Robert Sardello, *Facing the World with Soul: The Reimagination of Modern Life* (Hudson, NY: Lindisfarne Press, 1992), 9.

²¹ Cynthia Bourgeault, talk given at Co-Creation Conference, May 2, 2014, Greensboro, NC.

Douglas Christie, Arthur Zajonc, Robert Sardello and Cynthia Bourgeault collectively create a considerable field of psychic energy today for actualizing the universe as a communion of subjects. Through contemplative practice, they provide a tangible pathway for the deep psychic shift that Thomas Berry called for deep within the human soul, an everyday pathway that moves us from the dividing, separating mind to an awakening of “the heart of the universe.”

There is some indication that Thomas would have applauded these efforts. In *The Sacred Universe*, he speaks of a creative newness arising from contemplative traditions:

“As we seek to escape from the wasteland about us, we witness these ancient springs once again flowing with cool water capable of sustaining us on the next phase of our journey. Contemplative traditions are renewed, prayer is again a source of wisdom, and the healing power of silence is rediscovered. As the need for a more mystical relationship with the Earth becomes more widespread, education could become an initiation into a wisdom tradition rather than simply an acquisition of factual data.”²²

And Thomas also acknowledges that a “sense of the sacred requires recovery of ourselves, a return to the depths of our own being. We must in some manner,” he says, “manage the whole existence in terms of the authenticity of our own deeper self.”²³

On October 12, 2000, a new non-profit that was to become the Center for Education Imagination and the Natural World initiated a program at Timberlake Earth Sanctuary in the foothills of North Carolina with Thomas Berry and Richard Lewis, Founder of the Touchstone Center for Children in New York City. Called “The Biological Imperative: Nature, Education and Imagination,” this was the beginning of a work for educators and children situated in the authenticity of the deeper self rather than in factuality about the natural world.

Thomas’ opening remarks were illuminating that day and gave us a way forward:

“*The capacity of presence is so important.* When I was eleven, we moved from one side of town to the borders of the other side of the town when Greensboro was 18,000 people. *The destiny of the children and planet is going to depend on us to respond to their deeper mode of being.* In 1926, just a few years before the Depression, we were building the new house and I went there and there was an incline down to the creek. I was a wanderer and a brooder. I was a solitary in a sense. I knew I couldn’t make it in a commercial world and survive. It was too unacceptable. I would have died in some sense...A meadow was there. The grass was growing and the crickets were chirping...an extraordinary view of a meadow and the white lilies. It remained in my mind and it developed into a referent, like this place (gesturing at Timberlake Earth Sanctuary) could be to children. It became normative. Whether the woodland, the meadow, the creek, it was something very sublime. I think when a child sees a butterfly, there’s some kind of ecstasy. The natural world is there to present the numinous aspect of existence.

²² Berry, *Sacred Universe*, 64.

²³ Berry, *Sacred Universe*, 55.

Once I was in the Cathedral of St. John the Divine where there was a meeting of people: Lame Deer, a Sioux Indian was there; Zen master Roshi, Edgar Mitchell and myself. We had a meeting on technology. The zen master and Edgar Mitchell argued that technology is indifferent, it is just how we use it. Lame Deer and I argued no. Lame Deer mentioned the Cathedral. As beautiful as all of this was, the Sioux needed the sky above to draw in everything from the four directions, above and below. *You establish yourself with the universe before you do anything.* Black Elk is a patron saint of mine. His vision was profound. He was ill as a child in a coma and a vision occurred. He came out of the coma and it was six years before he would speak to the medicine man of his vision. The culmination of the vision can be read to establish a community of what we are all about. Loren Eiseley is my next patron saint...

*My childhood dream is what has guided my life...of what it should be...what I should strive for...what I should do. Particularly in relation to children. That's why I've been dedicated to children. Imagination has to be activated by the natural world. I would push things back from the biological imperative to the primordial imperative; to the universe itself and within the universe, *the human participation at the deepest level of the universe is our gift of imagination, but our imagination has to be activated by the natural world.* So this goes with the fact that it's one thing - a self-activating process. The universe gives us the imagination and it imprints the imagination.”²⁴*

So began our work for educators and children at the Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World, guided particularly by these words he spoke that day:

The capacity of presence is so important.

The destiny of the children and planet is going to depend on us to respond to their deeper mode of being

You establish yourself with the universe before you do anything.

My childhood dream is what has guided my life...of what it should be...what I should strive for...what I should do. Particularly in relation to children. That's why I've been dedicated to children.

...the human participation at the deepest level of the universe is our gift of imagination, but our imagination has to be activated by the natural world.

Being and becoming, cosmos and cosmogenesis, meet in Thomas' account of "The Meadow Across the Creek". A moment of cosmic consciousness becomes the reverberating touchstone for the new cultural coding that Thomas was to bring to expression in his life and work. The image of a "communion of subjects" was born there; that place of reciprocity, mutual presence and intimate rapport between the imagination of the universe and the imagination of a child.

All the work of the Center is formed in the image of a communion of subjects, from governance to staff development to the formation of programs for educators and children, and all begins with *presence*, establishing ourselves in the natural world as primary.

²⁴ Thomas Berry, in transcript of "The Biological Imperative: Nature, Education and Imagination," a program sponsored by the Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World at Timberlake Earth Sanctuary, October 12, 2000.

In our programs for adults at the Center, we are preparing for a deep change of heart, a deep psychic shift in the culture at large – one educator at a time. We believe that the change that is needed in our time cannot be achieved through sweeping movements, curriculum change, or further exchange of information. Rather, we focus our adult programs on the development of the capacity for inner presence to the natural world during the first year, and the creation of individual practices the second year that are as diverse and generative as the universe itself.

This is a new social form for working with educators based on the assumption that a shift in consciousness within the educational realm will come only through an inner transformation of the educator, through an honoring of the soul/spirit of the educator as a core value, and through the creation of a community of educators who support and inspire one another on the threshold of a new consciousness for our time – a consciousness that moves us beyond a view of the natural world as a collection of objects into an experience of the natural world as a communion of subjects.

In our programs for children, we offer eco-contemplative practices that bring children into a deep inner relationship with the natural world. Over the past fourteen years, we have cultivated ways of working that:

- ~ Foster a deep awareness of the sacred presence within each reality of the universe.
- ~ Nurture an attitude of awe, wonder and reverence.
- ~ Nurture a capacity for inner presence to other modes of being.
- ~ Cultivate a soul-attitude of loving attention.
- ~ Develop the imaginal capacity to feel a bond of intimacy with the world.

This way of working calls for inner development on the part of our staff, all of whom have graduated from the Center's Inner Life of the Child in Nature Program.

It seems fitting to end a presentation on Thomas Berry with the voices of the children.

One day in early December a fifth grade child named Ruby was brought into communion with a raptor in flight through our beholding practice and these are the words she wrote at day's end:

Peace Eagle

Soaring past the trees
Halting at its beautiful home
I hope you are protected, and if shot
there are fees. You did not make
much noise, but still amazed all
the girls and boys. I wanted to fly
up there with you but instead I stood
by and observed with my eye. But
afterward I hopped up on a rock and made
sounds just like the birds. Later on
complete silence crept on in and I
heard you remote and thin.
You are a beauty.
You are a Peace Eagle.

During one of our Poetry of Nature programs, an eighth grader, Sebastian Lucek, wrote the following poem as he sat in his solo sit spot on an earth sanctuary trail:

Bridge

so soft
the spirit trickles down
filling me
quenching my thirst
the spirit flows from the tops of trees
it scrapes across rocks
below the water of the creek

it soothes
filling everything with its sound
so perfectly imperfect
so quietly brilliant

i want to leap
leap
into its arms

i leap
it catches me
holds me

I fall
deeper and deeper
until we are one

the tree's spirit is my spirit
the bird's song my own

and I stay perfectly silent
under the stars
and the light of the sun

Thomas Berry would have recognized such moments of communion as moments of fulfillment, but also as moments where the universe awakens to itself through the child as “heart of the universe”. This, he says, “is the beginning of poetry and music and literature. It is the beginning of cosmology, of philosophical reflection, of moral perception, of theological insight. It is the beginning of the Epic of Evolution.”²⁵

In closing, I’d like to invite you to enter inwardly into the following account of an earth walk with a Title I public school fifth grade class, written by one of the Center’s earth guides:

²⁵ Berry, *Evening Thoughts*, 118.

“This was my third group, and the spring season. Everything was in bloom and budding. The earth sanctuary was alive with sounds of bird songs, crickets, and frogs. Tadpoles were hatching in the pond, and there were babies being born all over the earth sanctuary. My group walked along the Timberlake Trail. I decided to guide them on a solo walk on a moss-covered part of the trail. I invited the children to take their shoes off and carry them as they slowly walked on the soft moss. Most of the children took their shoes off with delight. I said, “Notice the sounds beneath your feet and all around you as you walk. Can you walk on the path in silence even beneath your feet? Notice the air on your arms and your face as you walk.” I started down the trail first. Noticing, silence, and walking barefoot will slow you to walk at nature’s pace. I noticed the coolness of the moss under my feet. Some parts of the trails were dry and some were really wet. I noticed the softness of the Earth. There was a comforting, calm, and balancing feeling I noticed as I walked along. I noticed the Bluet wildflowers growing out of the moss, delicately dancing along the path and defining it for me. When I reached the end of the moss on the path, I stopped and sat on the ground and waited to watch the children as they slowly made their way down the path. I love to see the expressions on their faces as they get closer to the end of the solo walk. There is a peaceful happiness in their expressions. Linda sent each child one at a time down the trail to me. When they each arrived they sat on the ground with me to put their shoes back on. I was making a sun mandala with pebbles on the moss to mark the end of solo walk for the day. The children were drawn in by the mandala and watched the mandala come to life. I invited them to add to the mandala. I remember looking up each time a child would approach and smiled to invite them to join us sitting along the path. I noticed Savon walking down the path with an interesting expression on his face as he approached the group. When he sat down, he had a look about him that was as if he was trying to put into words his experience on his solo walk. He shared, “I had a strange feeling come up from the Earth through my feet. It was an energetic feeling.” He later described this to the Earth Walk group when I opened the moment for sharing and reflecting. He looked up to the sky and said, ‘It was like the spirit of the Earth moving up through my feet into my body. It was like a dream.’”²⁶

These communion experiences return children to the origin and authenticity of their being and give deep hope for the future. Ultimately, they return us to Thomas Berry when he wrote: “The dream of the earth. Where else can we go for the guidance needed for the task that is before us.”²⁷

²⁶ After each of the Center’s programs for children, our staff meets to reflect on the day and write field notes on the children’s experiences. This description was written by Marnie Weigel after an “Awakening to Nature” program on April 22, 2014.

²⁷ Berry, *Dream*, 223.

Friends of the Center

We wish to express a heartfelt thank you to the following individuals and foundations for their generous support of our work from January 5, 2017 – January 26, 2018

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Margery Knott & Marnie Weigel

Guest Hosting:

Jim North

Programs for Children

To register or reserve dates for our children's programs go to
<http://www.beholdnature.org/programsforchildren.php>



Awakening to Nature

9:30 am – 1:30 pm

Place: Timberlake Earth Sanctuary
1501 Rock Creek Dairy Road, Whitsett, NC
Grades K-5, maximum 24 children
Cost: \$250 per class (bring a bag lunch)

The Center's "Awakening to Nature" programs are intended to foster reverence for the natural world, develop the inner capacity to attend to the world around you, and create a deep, personal connection with nature. The programs bring the inner lives of children into a new relationship with the beauty, wonder and intimacy of the natural world.

"Awakening to Nature" programs begin in a circle where children are invited to slow down and make themselves at home in nature. Guided earth walks follow, led by experienced Earth Guides, with groups of 8 children. The small size of the group and the "beholding" practices of the Center enable the children to enter into a living and loving relationship with the natural world. Throughout the changing seasons, children are invited to enter into silence and experience the fullness of each moment – to take in the sounds, the smells, the feel of the air, the colors and movements of the world around them.

Children then return to the circle where they enjoy a bag lunch together. The day ends with a heartwarming circle of reflection. The rhythm of the day enables the children to assimilate their experiences and to enter into community together as they share what touched them about the day.

We are happy to adapt this program to the differing developmental needs of children in grades Kindergarten-5.

We especially like to work with schools year after year so that the children can have sustained and meaningful connections with the natural world over time. From the returning children who have experienced our program over the course of several years, we have learned how one day spent in our program has lived in their memories and in their hearts for a whole year in between visits. They remember the peaceful sounds of the Native American Flute, the relationships with various creatures that they have encountered, the beauty of nature, and our practices, especially our Behold practice. We have also learned how much the children appreciate being in an atmosphere of peace and quiet.

Empathetic Listening

9:30 am – 1:30 pm

Place: Timberlake Earth Sanctuary

1501 Rock Creek Dairy Road, Whitsett, NC

Grades 4-8 (maximum 24 children)

Cost: \$250 per class (bring a bag lunch)

Our children live in a fast-paced, competitive and high-tech world, in a culture where continuous partial attention and multi-tasking are becoming the norm. Are we losing our ability to truly listen to each other? Do we carry an attitude of respect that allows us to listen to the meaning and feeling that come through another's words?

The “Empathetic Listening” program engages children in a practice of deep listening to each other and to the natural world. The program begins with an introduction to empathetic listening, a way of listening that creates mutual understanding, trust and respect. Can we learn to listen without judgement? Can we listen without interrupting? Can we reflect back what we think we have heard? Can we sense the feelings behind the words? These are some of the practices that children have an opportunity to explore together in pre-selected pairs.

During the second half of the program, the children are invited to listen deeply to the natural world during a solo writing time in their own special sit spot within a beautiful earth sanctuary. They are invited to become still, to deeply notice the place where they are sitting. What makes this particular landscape special and unique? What are you hearing in your special place? What might nature reveal to you? In the rare experience of silence, a voice begins to emerge, their own, inspired by the wonders of nature. Our highly experienced staff members carry an attitude of deep respect for all life. We seek always to embody new ways of listening to nature and to each other, ways that are respectful, reverential and relational.

The Poetry of Nature

9:30 am – 1:30 pm

Place: Timberlake Earth Sanctuary

1501 Rock Creek Dairy Road, Whitsett, NC

Grades 6 – 12 (maximum 24 children)

Cost: \$250 per class (bring a bag lunch)

“Whoever you are, no matter how lonely, the world offers itself to your imagination, calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting – over and over announcing your place in the family of things.”

~ Mary Oliver

Poetry is a language of deep seeing that reveals dimensions of the world inaccessible to discursive thought, and so it is to poetry that we turn for our programs for middle school and high school students. Our Poetry of Nature program is a passage through three landscapes in the natural world where students listen to a poem, are asked to be fully present to the place, the moment and the feelings and images that arise within them. At each site, students are invited to find a solo spot, enter into a practice of presence, and record their inner experiences through guided writing practices. The poems and landscapes are carefully chosen to resonate with one another. The day culminates in a poetry reading after lunch where each contribution is deeply connected to the student's experience in nature and to his/her inner life. The students read poems, ask questions, and share reflections on the day and on their sense of belonging to the natural world. This program taps a deep wellspring within young adults that rarely is accessed at school.

Thomas Berry Summer Programs for Children



A 4-day Program

9:30 am - 3:00 pm

June 11-14, 2018: Ages 8-10

June 18-21, 2018: Ages 11-14

Place: The Treehouse at Timberlake Earth Sanctuary

1501 Rock Creek Dairy Road, Whitsett, NC 27377

Group size: 12 children

(please bring a healthy lunch in reusable containers)

Cost: \$250 per child

Register online at <http://www.beholdnature.org/thomasberrysummerprogram.php>

Inspired by the vision of Thomas Berry, our summer programs for children provide a unique opportunity for a small group of 12 children to make a deep personal connection to the natural world within the meadows, creeks, gardens and forests of a 165-acre earth sanctuary. Earth walks and creek walking are daily sources of joy and inspiration. Within the peace and beauty of Timberlake Earth Sanctuary, new eyes and ears awaken as the children create expressions out of their experiences with the earth. Clay, papermaking, nature journaling and Native American flute are some of the eco-contemplative arts that enliven the rhythm of our days.

Led by Sandy Bisdee and Marnie Weigel

Director of Children's Programs, **Sandy Bisdee**, completed her Association Montessori International (AMI) Teaching Certificate in 1979. A born naturalist and Native American flute player, Sandy has developed the Center's eco-contemplative practices for children since 2005. She completed her certification in the NC Environmental Education Certification Program in 2009. Sandy brings to her work a lifetime of loving children and of loving the earth and of finding ways to bring the two together!

Marnie Weigel is an eco-contemplative artist who enjoys knitting, making pottery, journals, and jewelry. Her creations are inspired by her reflections in silence and beholding in the natural world. She received a BA in Environmental Studies from Warren Wilson College in the beautiful Swannanoa Valley in Western, NC in 1995 and an AAS in Professional Crafts: Clay from Haywood Community College in 2000.

Presence to Living Earth

“We still have little understanding of the spiritual dimension within the natural world, or how our individual soul relates to the larger dimension of the world soul (what the ancients called the *anima mundi*)... Instead we are caught within a contemporary consciousness that focuses on the individual self, no longer even aware of our deep bond to the sacred within creation.”

~ Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee, *Spiritual Ecology: The Cry of the Earth*

We invite you to join us for a contemplative experience of the cycle of the year through a series of seasonal retreats that offer an opportunity to step beyond the confinement of the contemporary individual self into an awareness of our deep bond to the sacred within creation.

Each of our retreats creates an opening to the inner quality of what we see and hear in the temporal rhythms of the year. Through contemplative participation in the yearly cycle, an awareness of the inner reality of the seasons arises within us and can be brought to expression.

Presence to Living Earth in Winter

Sunday, January 28, 2018

2:00 pm – 5:00 pm

Place: The Treehouse, Timberlake Earth Sanctuary
1501 Rock Creek Dairy Rd.

Whitsett, NC 27377

Cost: \$50 (register online at <http://www.beholdnature.org/livingearth.php>)

Presence to Living Earth in Spring

Sunday, April 15, 2018

2:00 pm – 5:00 pm

Place: The Treehouse, Timberlake Earth Sanctuary
1501 Rock Creek Dairy Rd.
Whitsett, NC 27377

Cost: \$50 (register online at <http://www.beholdnature.org/livingearth.php>)

Led by Margery Knott and Marnie Weigel

Margery Knott is a weaver and teacher of all ages from kindergarten to college, who recently moved to Greensboro after raising llamas in the woods of Nelson County, VA. Margery has led workshops in ecotheology and fiber arts, including weaving in several public schools through the Artisans Center of Virginia. In 2003, delicious serendipity led her to several amazing years of study with Matthew Fox’s University of Creation Spirituality.

Marnie Weigel is an eco-contemplative artist who enjoys knitting, making pottery, journals, and jewelry. Her creations are inspired by her reflections in silence and beholding in the natural world. Marnie received a BA in Environmental Studies from Warren Wilson College in the beautiful Swannanoa Valley in Western, NC in 1995 and an AAS in Professional Crafts: Clay from Haywood Community College in 2000.

Bayo Akomolafe: The Spaces Between

Led by Morgan Josey Glover

Sunday, February 18, 2018

2:00 pm – 5:00 pm

Place: The Treehouse, Timberlake Earth Sanctuary
1501 Rock Creek Dairy Rd.
Whitsett, NC 27377

Cost: \$50 (register online at <http://www.beholdnature.org/thespacesbetween.php>)

We invite you to attend a small group conversation inspired by the work of Bayo Akomolafe, author of *These Wilds Beyond our Fences: Letters to My Daughter on Humanity's Search for Home*.

The invitation that Bayo Akomolafe extends to us through his writing and teaching is that of intimacy with darkness, the "spaces between," and that which haunts us - a thread that is woven throughout his work of seeing grief, bewilderment, and darkness as resources rather than solely obstacles or means to an end. As Bayo often says, "We are coming down to earth. We will not arrive intact."

Bayo Akomolafe is a new voice guiding us into these dark, pregnant realms. He discourages us from relying on certain idealistic conceptions of nature (in his words, "nature with a halo"), which can blind us to opportunities for engagement. He writes, "Perhaps what we are warned against is the tendency to fixate on a particular notion of nature. While we need stabilities to survive, to make sense of things, nature cannot be still. It moves. It disturbs itself. Ancient alchemists adopted the symbol of the Ouroboros or the snake devouring its own tail to show how creation arises out of destruction and vice versa. How life itself is errancy."

He also invites us to comprehend intelligence and creativity as not originating with the human, but with the world as a whole. He invites us to understand that it's not only humans who are intuiting, imagining or contemplating. It is the world intuiting, contemplating and imagining through various forms, including trees, clouds, stones, bacteria, seagulls and humans. Thus, gratitude stems from a deep recognition that it's not primarily up to humans to solve our ecological crises (as Thomas Berry wrote, we need an earth solution to an earth problem). The world is still pondering, experimenting, shifting, questing. And we are privileged to be part of that grand, messy adventure.

Being present to the natural world means not only being present to its beauty, creativity and wholeness, but also to its incoherence, indifference, violence, awkwardness and preposterousness.

Morgan Josey Glover was introduced to Bayo Akomolafe's work through his course, "We Will Dance with Mountains," and maintains dialogue with him through personal correspondence. Morgan lives in Greensboro, North Carolina. She has been on a path of discovering her place in the earth community since encountering the work of Thomas Berry and other cultural visionaries a decade ago. She previously wrote about green living and sustainability at the News & Record and has facilitated related discussion groups at Presbyterian Church of the Covenant. She now considers herself an apprentice to the plant world and her bioregion. A former journalist, Morgan works as a communications specialist at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

The Gift of Fading Away

A talk by Bayo Akomolafe



Sunday, March 18, 2018

7:00 pm – 9:00 pm
Church of the Covenant
501 S. Mendenhall St.
Greensboro, NC 27403

Cost: \$25 (advance registrations required at <http://www.beholdnature.org/thegiftoffadingaway.php>)

Our modern lives are built on the foundation of a truism: that we are the center of the world, and that nature around us is a mere backdrop for human activity. In recent imagination, nature has mounted an irresistible insurgency, shocking us by spilling through, by disturbing our calculations, by infiltrating our purity, and closing the presumed distance between us. In this talk about culture, losing faith, meeting loss, seeking home, and dealing with toxic futures, Bayo Akomolafe speaks about the cracks, openings and undoing of our former stories of certainty, and why we can make do with "dwelling in the meantime." The call to honor our entanglement with place and planet invites a strange but familiar vocation of recognizing we are fading away, and that this is ironically our deepest source of hope for justice.

Bayo Akomolafe (Ph.D.) is Chief Curator and Executive Director of The Emergence Network. He is author of *These Wilds Beyond our Fences: Letters to my Daughter on Humanity's Search for Home* (North Atlantic Books, 2017) and *We will tell our own Story* (Universal Write Publications LLC, 2016). Lecturer, speaker, father, and "rogue planet saved by the gravitational pull" of his wife Ijeoma Clement Akomolafe (Director, Broken Compass), Bayo hopes to inspire a diffractive network of sharing within an ethos of new responsiveness – a slowing down, an ethics of entanglement, an activism of inquiry, a 'politics of surprise'. Born into a Yoruba family, Bayo graduated summa cum laude in psychology in 2006 at Covenant University (Nigeria), and then was invited to take up a lecturing position. Largely nurtured and trained in a world that increasingly fell short of his deepest desires for justice, Bayo conducted doctoral research into Yoruba indigenous healing systems as part of his inner struggle to regain a sense of rootedness to his community. He has been speaking about his experiences around the world since those moments back in 2011. Bayo understands he is on a shared decolonial journey with his family to live a small, intense life. He is an ecstatic (and often exhausted, but grateful) father to Alethea Aanya and Kyah Jayden.



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