

## Section on Thomas Berry

### From Robert Macfarlane's *Is the River Alive?* (pages 152-53)

'Do you know Thomas Berry's work, Rob?' Yuvan asks.

I do. Berry was an American ecologist, historian, scholar of religion and one of the philosophical fathers of the modern Rights of Nature movement. He did not like being referred to as a 'theologian'; his deep-time perspective meant that he preferred to think of himself as a 'geologist', a distinction I like. His world view was both urgent and optimistic: he believed that humanity, after centuries spent despoiling the planet, was close to recognizing its new, true role as part of a far larger, interdependent Earth community of beings.

For Berry, we stand at a crossroads. If humans can reimagine themselves along these lines, we will enter what he called the Ecozoic Era, in which we re-comprehend and re-organize ourselves as part of a web of entangled life. If we fail to do so, we will intensify what he called the Technozoic Era, in which we continue to degrade both justice and life on Earth, leaving a deep-time future signature of destruction and extinction.

Berry wasn't naive about the difficulty of reaching the Ecozoic. 'The Great Work' was what he called the gigantic effort required to reimagine everything from subject-object relations through human governance systems to the role of capital; an echo of Le Guin's 'great reach outward of the mind and imagination'. 'We are talking only to ourselves,' Berry wrote, we, are not talking to the rivers, we are not listening to the wind and stars. We. Have broken the great, conversation.'

Crucial to Berry's 'Great Work' was the recognition of Earth as home to what he called 'a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects'. He is credited with coining the phrase 'Earth Jurisprudence' to refer to a philosophy of law and governance which was founded upon recognizing and upholding that communion. At the heart of his Earth Jurisprudence is the recognition that fundamental 'Earth rights' have always obtained to the planet's many subjects. 'Trees have tree rights,' wrote Berry, 'insects have insect rights, rivers have river rights, and mountains have mountain rights.'

'Rivers have river rights, so insects have insect rights,' I say to Yuvan, who nods and smiles in recognition. 'And — wasps have wasp rights, right?!'

Yuvan laughs. 'Yes! And Berry coined the word "inscendence", as you are surely aware, meaning "to enter deep within",' he says. 'Where "transcendence" is the impulse to rise above the world and its cares — the weight of the body, say, or the burden of mortality — "inscendence" is the impulse to climb *into* it, to fathom its depths and delve towards its core.'

We consider the wasp as it completes its ablutions, lifts off with a sound like rustled paper — and then makes for the balcony and the open air beyond, thorax hanging low.

For me,' says Yuvan, 'Berry's verb "inscend" lives close to the word "insect". Insects *call me in*. Indeed, they are almost always boring or tunnelling or entering something or somewhere — and in turn, I find, they invite the same movement if you watch them very carefully.'