

## Session I: Our Contemporary Task

Excerpts from the Introduction and Chapters 1 & 2  
Of *The Great Work* by Thomas Berry

### Introduction

[ix] Human presence on the planet Earth in the opening years of the twenty-first century is the subject of this book. We need to understand where we are and how we got here. Once we are clear on these issues we can move forward with our historical destiny, to create a mutually enhancing mode of human dwelling on the planet Earth.

Just now we seem to be expecting some wonderworld to be attained through an ever-greater dedication to our sciences, technologies and commercial projects. In the process, however, we are causing immense ruin in the world around us.

We might begin to think about our present life-situation by reflecting for a moment on the wonder of Earth, how it came to be the garden planet of the universe and what might be our human role in this context. To appreciate our immediate situation we might also develop a new intimacy with the North American Continent. For we need the guidance and support of this continent as we find our way into the future.

The most basic and most disturbing commitment of the original European settlers was to conquer this continent and reduce it to human use. Because the exaltation of the human and the subjugation of the natural have been so excessive, we need to understand how the human community and the living forms of Earth might now become a life-giving presence to each other.

[x] The future can exist only when we understand the universe as composed of subjects to be communed with, not as objects to be exploited. "Use" as our primary relationship with the planet must be abandoned. While there are critical issues in

providing food, shelter, and livelihood to vast numbers of peoples, these issues themselves ultimately depend on our capacity to sustain the natural world so that the natural world can sustain us. All our sciences and technologies and all our social institutions become dysfunctional if the natural life systems cease to function.

Intimacy with the planet in its wonder and beauty and the full depth of its meaning is what enables an integral human relationship with the planet to function. It is the only possibility for humans to attain their true flourishing while honoring the other modes of earthly being. The fulfillment of the Earth community is to be caught up in the grandeur of existence itself and in admiration of those mysterious powers whence all this has emerged.

Nourishment of both the outer body and the inner spirit will be achieved in intimate association with each other or not at all. That we can now understand and work toward this fulfillment is the challenging future that opens up before us in these early years of the twenty-first century.

### Chapter 1: The Great Work

[1] History is governed by those overarching movements that give shape and meaning to life by relating the human venture to the larger destinies of the universe. Creating such a movement might be called the Great Work of a people. There have been Great Works in the past: the Great Work of the classical Greek world with its understanding of the human mind and creation of the Western humanist tradition; the Great Work of Israel in articulating a new experience of the divine in human affairs; the

Great Work of Rome in gathering the peoples of the Mediterranean world and of Western Europe into an ordered relation to one another. So too in the medieval period there was the task of giving a first shape to the Western world in its Christian form. The symbols of this Great Work were the medieval cathedrals rising so graciously into the heavens from the region of the old Frankish empire. There the divine and the human could be present to each other in some grand manner.

In India the Great Work was to lead human thought into spiritual experiences of time and eternity and their mutual presence to each other with a unique subtlety of expression. China created one of the most elegant and most human civilizations we have ever known as its Great Work. In America the Great Work of the First Peoples was to occupy this continent and establish an intimate rapport with the powers that brought this continent into existence in all its magnificence. ... Through these and a multitude of other aspects of the indigenous cultures of this continent, certain models were established of how humans become integral with the larger context of our existence here on the planet Earth.

[3] The Great Work now, as we move into a new millennium, is to carry out the transition from a period of human devastation of the Earth to a period when humans would be present to the planet in a mutually beneficial manner. This historical change is something more than the transition from the classical Roman period to the medieval period, or from the medieval period to modern times. Such a transition has no historical parallel since the geobiological transition that took place 67 million years ago when the period of the dinosaurs was terminated and a new biological age begun. So now we awaken to a period of extensive disarray in the biological structure and functioning of the planet.

Since we began to live in settled villages with agriculture and domestication of animals some ten thousand years ago, humans have put increased burdens upon the biosystems of the planet. These burdens were to some extent manageable because of the prodigality of nature, the limited number of humans, and their limited ability to disrupt the natural systems. In recent centuries, under the leadership of the Western world, largely with the resources, psychic energy, and inventiveness of the North American peoples, an industrial civilization has come into being with the power to plunder Earth in its deepest foundations, with awesome impact on its geological structure, its chemical constitution, and its living forms throughout the wide expanses of the land and the far reaches of the sea.

[4] ... Natural selection can no longer function as it has functioned in the past. Cultural selection is now a decisive force in determining the future of the biosystems of the Earth.

The deepest cause of the present devastation is found in a mode of consciousness that has established a radical discontinuity between the human and other modes of being and the bestowal of all rights on the humans. The other-than-human modes of being are seen as having no rights. They have reality and value only through their use by the human. In this context the other than human becomes totally vulnerable to exploitation by the human, an attitude that is shared by all four of the fundamental establishments that control the human realm: governments, corporations, universities and religions – the political, economic, intellectual and religious establishments. All four are committed consciously or unconsciously to a radical discontinuity between the human and the nonhuman.

In reality there is a single integral community of the Earth that includes all its component members whether human or other than human. In this community every being

has its own role to fulfill, its own dignity, its inner spontaneity.

[7] Perhaps the most valuable heritage we can provide for future generations is some sense of the Great Work that is before them of moving the human project from its devastating exploitation to a benign presence. We need to give them some indication of how the next generation can fulfill this work in an effective manner. For the success or failure of any historical age is the extent to which those living at that time have fulfilled the special role that history has imposed upon them. No age lives completely unto itself. Each age has only what it receives from the prior generation. Just now we have abundant evidence that the various species of life, the mountains and rivers, and even the vast ocean itself, which once we thought beyond serious impact from humans, will survive only in their damaged integrity.

[10] We might observe here that the Great Work of a people is the work of all the people. No one is exempt. Each of us has our individual life pattern and responsibilities. Yet beyond these concerns each person in and through their personal work assists in the Great Work. Personal work needs to be aligned with the Great Work. This can be seen in the medieval period as the basic patterns of personal life and craft skills were aligned within the larger work of the civilizational effort. While this alignment is more difficult in these times it must remain an ideal to be sought.

We cannot doubt that we too have been given the intellectual vision, the spiritual insight, and even the physical resources we need for carrying out the transition that is demanded of these times, transition from the period when humans were a disruptive force on the planet Earth to the period when humans become present to the planet in a manner that is mutually enhancing.

## Chapter 2: The Meadow Across The Creek

[12] My own understanding of the Great Work began when I was quite young. At the time I was some eleven years old. My family was moving from a more settled part of a small southern town (Greensboro, North Carolina) out to the edge of town where the new house was being built. The house, not yet finished, was situated on a slight incline. Down below was a small creek and there across the creek was a meadow. It was an early afternoon in late May when I first wandered down the incline, crossed the creek, and looked out over the scene.

The field was covered with white lilies rising above the thick grass. A magic moment, this experience gave to my life something that seems to explain my thinking at a more profound level than almost any other experience I can remember. It was not only the lilies. It was the singing of the crickets and the woodlands in the distance and the clouds in a clear sky. It was not something conscious that happened just then. I went on about my life as any young person might do.

Perhaps it was not simply this moment that made such a deep impression upon me. Perhaps it was a sensitivity that was developed throughout my childhood. Yet as the years pass this moment returns to me, and whenever I think about my basic life attitude and the whole trend of my mind and the causes to which I have given my efforts, I seem to come back to this moment and the impact it has had on my feeling for what is real and worthwhile in life.

This early experience, it seems, has become normative for me throughout the entire range of my thinking. Whatever preserves and enhances this meadow in the natural cycles of its transformation is good; whatever opposes this meadow or negates it is not good. My life orientation is that simple. It is also that pervasive. It applies in

economics and political orientation as well as in education and religion.

[15] While we have more scientific knowledge of the universe than any people ever had, it is not the type of knowledge that leads to an intimate presence within a meaningful universe. The various phenomena of nature are not spirit presences. We no longer read the book of the universe. We have extensive contact with the natural world through photographs and television presentations. But as Saint Augustine remarked long ago, a picture of food does not nourish us. Our world of human meaning is no longer coordinated with the meaning of our surroundings. We have disengaged from that profound interaction with our environment that is inherent in our nature. Our children no longer learn how to read the great Book of Nature from their own direct experience or how to interact creatively with the seasonal transformations of the planet. They seldom learn where their water comes from or where it goes. We no longer coordinate our human celebrations with the great liturgy of the heavens.

So completely are we at odds with the planet that brought us into being that we have become strange beings indeed. We dedicate enormous talent and knowledge and research in developing a human order disengaged from and even predatory on the very sources from whence we came and upon which we depend every moment of our existence. We initiate our children into an economic order based on exploitation of the natural life systems of the planet. ...

[16] A primary concern for the peoples of this continent must be to recover an integral relation with the universe, the planet Earth, and the North American continent. While a new alignment of our government, our institutions, and our professions with the continent in its deep structure and functioning cannot be achieved immediately, a beginning can be made

through our educational programs. Especially in the early grades of elementary school, new developments are possible. ...

[20] As Earth is, in a sense, a magic planet in the exquisite presence of its diverse members to one another, so this movement into the future must in some manner be brought about in ways that are ineffable to the human mind. 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.

## Readers' Notes for Further Discussion