

Session II: The Historical Background

Excerpts from Chapters 3, 4 & 5
Of The Great Work by Thomas Berry

Chapter 3: The Earth Story

[21] Our great work, our historical role in its deeper significance, has to do with a new understanding of the planet Earth: this radiant blue-white planet hanging in the sky, twirling upon its axis in the light of the sun each day, swinging in its solar orbit each year. Seven continents rise out of the great world ocean. The polar regions appear as vast stretches of snow. The Sierra Nevada along the western edge of the Americas, the Alps in Europe, the Himalayas in Nepal, the T'ien Shan in China, Kilimanjaro in Africa – these give to the continents a foreboding majesty. The rivers flow down from the mountains across the continents into the sea. Rain forests girdle the planet in its equatorial regions. Such vistas create an overwhelming impression whether we look down from the heavens or across the landscape and up at the sky with its sun and clouds in the day and its moon and stars in the night.

[24] Now, after these centuries of experiencing the planet as being a collection of objects for scientific analysis and commercial use, we must ask: where can we find the resources for a reevaluation of our activities? How can we obtain the psychic energies needed to disengage from our plundering industrial economy? We might begin with our basic sense of reality as this exists at present. Our sense of reality cannot be simply the mythic worlds of the past, nor can it be limited to the traditions that exist in a spatial mode of consciousness. Whatever be the case with other societies and other times we function through our observational sciences, in the context of a developmental universe that has, within the phenomenal world, its own self-organizing powers.

For our sense of reality three commitments are basic: to observational science, to a developmental universe, to an inner self-organizing capacity. We cannot do without our earlier experiences of the numinous presence manifested in the great Cosmic Liturgy. We cannot do without our humanistic traditions, our art and poetry and literature. But these traditions cannot themselves, simply with their own powers, do what needs to be done. These earlier experiences and accomplishments were dealing with other issues, providing guidance for different worlds than the world of the early twentieth-first century. To meet the current environmental challenge they too need to be transformed within the context of an emergent universe.

[26] The astronaut Edgar Mitchell tells us that he had an amazing experience when he looked out at Earth from outer space and saw “this blue-and-white planet floating there,” then saw the sun set “in the background of the very deep black and velvety cosmos.” He was overcome with immersion in an awareness that there was “a purposefulness of flow, of energy, of time, of space in the cosmos” beyond any previous experience that he ever had.

[27] This sensitive experience of the universe and of the Earth leads us further back to appreciation of the ten billion years required for the universe to bring the Earth into existence and another 4.6 billion years for the Earth to shape itself in such splendor. For our present Earth is not the Earth as it always was and always will be. It is the Earth at a highly developed phase in its continuing emergence. ...

After the origin moment a sequence of other transformation moments took place, the shaping of the first generations of stars within their various galaxies, then the collapse of one of these stars into a vast dispersion of fragments throughout the realms of space. The energy of this supernova moment brought into being the entire array of elements. These elements in turn made possible the future developments on the planet Earth, for indeed the appearance of life needed the broad spectrum of elements for its full expression.

[28] The radioactive elements within Earth provided the heat for the volcanic explosions leading to the atmosphere and the seas and raising the continents above the waters. Profound mysteries were taking place all this while, but nothing so mysterious as setting into place the conditions required for the emergence of life and the human form of consciousness. The 3.4 billion-year story of life is so integral with the story of Earth in its basic structure that we cannot properly think of the Earth as first taking shape in its full physical form and then life emerging somehow within this context.

Earth as we know it came into being through its four great components: land, water, air, and life, all interacting in the light and energy of the sun. Although there was a sequence in the formation of the land sphere, the atmosphere, the water sphere, and the life sphere, these have so interacted with one another in the shaping of the Earth that we must somehow think of these as all present to one another and interacting from the beginning.

[30] The late Cenozoic (Era) was a wildly creative period of inspired fantasy and extravagant play. It was a supremely lyrical moment when humans emerged on the scene, quietly, somewhere on the edge of the savanna in northeast Africa. From here they later spread throughout Asia and Europe. From early transitional types come our own more recent ancestors, some sixty thousand

years ago, with developed speech, symbolic language, skills in tool-making, extended family communities along with the capacity for song and dance, and for elaborate rituals along with visual arts of amazing grandeur. All of these are expressions of the late Paleolithic Period.

Then some ten thousand years ago, the human community emerged into the Neolithic Period with its new social structures, weaving and pottery, domestication of wheat and rice, also of sheep, pigs, cattle, horses, chickens, and reindeer. Above all, this was the period of village beginnings. Out of this village context came the early cities of the world along the Tigris-Euphrates, the Nile, the Indus, the Yellow River, the Mekong. Later came the Maya on the Yucatan peninsula, the Toltec in Mesoamerica, and the Inca on the high plateaus of Peru. From its beginnings in Sumer, some five thousand years ago, the Western civilization story unfolds over the centuries, a story that leads eventually to European civilization.

[31] With all the inadequacies of any narrative, the epic of evolution does present the story of the universe as this story is now available to us out of our present experience. This is our sacred story. It is our way of dealing with the ultimate mystery whence all things come into being. It is much more than an account of matter and its random emergence into the visible world about us. For the emergent process, as noted by the geneticist Theodore Dobzhansky, is neither random nor determined but creative. Just as in the human order, creativity is neither a rational deductive process nor the irrational wandering of the undisciplined mind but the emergence of beauty as mysterious as the blossoming of a field of daisies out of the dark Earth.

To appreciate the numinous aspect of the universe as this is communicated in this story we need to understand that we ourselves activate one of the deepest dimensions of the universe. ... The human is neither an

addendum nor an intrusion into the universe. We are quintessentially integral with the universe.

In ourselves the universe is revealed to itself as we are revealed in the universe. Such a statement could be made about any aspect of the universe because every being in the universe articulates some special quality of the universe in its entirety. Indeed nothing in the universe could be itself apart from every other being in the universe, nor could any moment of the universe story exist apart from all the other moments in the story. Yet it is within our own being that we have our own unique experience of the universe and of the Earth in its full reality.

Chapter 4: The North American Continent

[33] In these opening years of the twenty-first century we find ourselves here on this continent, known earlier as Turtle Island, now known as North America. To live here in any acceptable manner, we should know something about this continent and its distinctive features, for only in this manner can we know where we are or understand our authentic role in this context. ...

[35] To tell this story with any richness of detail we might begin with the time when this continent in its early form, some 250 million years ago, came together with the other land masses of the planet as a single world island, Pangaea, in the midst of the world ocean. At the meeting of the continents the Appalachian Mountains experienced their final uplift. Then some 200 million years ago the various continents rifted apart.

The North American continent swung away from the other continents toward the northwest. While separating out from the bulge of what became North Africa, this continent kept its close relationship with the

Eurasian continent to the east. Indeed, Greenland geologically is part of the North American continent. Since South America later drifted off from the African continent to the southwest there has been no land contact between North America and South America until recently. North America kept its contacts with the Eurasian continent until its more complete separation some 100 million years ago. That we share the pines, the oaks, the beeches, the elms, and other tree species so extensively with the European world is due to the continued close association with that continent. ...

[36] The historical and cultural accomplishments of the indigenous peoples of this continent are only now beginning to be appreciated and accepted into a general narrative of the human venture. The peoples who lived here first, with their unique experience of this continent, have much to teach us concerning intimate presence to this continent, how we should dwell here in some mutually enhancing relation with the land. If the original peoples living in North and South America have not previously entered our general account of the human venture, they are now recognized as having influenced the larger course of history economically and politically as well as intellectually and spiritually.

It was the gold and silver of Central and South America that lifted the economic life of Europe to a new level of activity. The vegetables of these continents – the potatoes, corn, beans, squash, tomatoes – altered the diet of the world. ...

[40] The moment when the Europeans arrived on the North American continent could be considered as one of the more fateful moments in history, not only of this continent but of the entire planet. As we look back on this occasion it becomes increasingly clear that it was a moment of awesome significance, not only for the indigenous peoples, but for all the various

plants and animals of this continent. Every living being on this continent might have shuddered with foreboding when that first tiny sail appeared over the Atlantic horizon.

The threatening attitude shown by the incoming settlers toward this continent as a region to be exploited in both its lands and its peoples is especially clear in the early Spanish expeditions in the southern regions of North America and in South America. In these regions conquistadors such as De Soto in the southeast, Coronado in the south central regions of North America, Cortez in Mexico, and Pizarro in Peru were all on a relentless quest for gold. Efforts were made to enslave the Indians in their gold and silver mines and in their plantation economies. This project did not succeed because the Indians could not survive in captivity.

[47] We might well brood over these scenes until we come to some depth awareness of what has happened and begin to dream again, this time a more coherent dream of an integral community of the human and all those other-than-human component members of the North American continent.

Chapter 5: The Wild and the Sacred

[48] To understand the human role in the functioning of the Earth we need to appreciate the spontaneities found in every form of existence in the natural world, spontaneities that we associate with the wild – that which is uncontrolled by human dominance. We misconceive our role if we consider that our historical mission is to “civilize” or to “domesticate” the planet, as though wildness is something destructive rather than the ultimate creative modality of any form of earthly being. We are not here to control. We are here to become integral with the larger Earth community. The community itself and each of its members has ultimately a

wild component, a creative spontaneity that is its deepest reality, its most profound mystery.

[54] The landscape that encloses the Appalachian region, the rivers that flow down from the mountains to the sea, the trees that blossom in these surroundings, the birds that sing throughout this valley, all these were brought into being during this past 65 million years. If this has been a period of wildness beyond compare, it has also been the lyric period in the story of Earth. The human, perhaps, could only have appeared in such a period of grandeur; for the inner life of the human depends immediately on the outer world of nature. Only if the human imagination is activated by the flight of the great soaring birds in the heavens, by the blossoming flowers of Earth, by the sight of the sea, by the lightning and thunder of the great storms that break through the heat of summer, only then will the deep inner experiences be evoked within the human soul.

All these phenomena of the natural world fling forth to the human a challenge to be responded to in literature, in architecture, ritual, and art, in music and dance and poetry. The natural world demands a response beyond that of rational calculation, beyond philosophical reasoning, beyond scientific insight. The natural world demands a response that rises from the wild unconscious depths of the human soul. A response that artists seek to provide in color and music and movement.

The response that we give must have a supreme creative power, for the Cenozoic Era in the story of Earth is fading as the sun sets in the western sky. Our hope for the future is for a new dawn, an Ecozoic Era, when humans will be present to the Earth in a mutually enhancing manner.