

Session III: A New Way of Knowing

Excerpts from Chapters 6, 7 & 8
Of *The Great Work* by Thomas Berry

Chapter 6: The Viable Human

[56] We need to move from our human-centered to an earth-centered norm of reality and value. Only in this way can we fulfill our human role within the functioning of the planet we live on. Earth, within the solar system, is the immediate context of our existence. Beyond the sun is our own galaxy and beyond that the universe of galactic systems that emerged into being some fifteen billion years ago through some originating source beyond human comprehension.

Establishing this comprehensive context of our thinking is important in any consideration of human affairs, for only in this way can we identify any satisfying referent in our quest for a viable presence of the human within the larger dynamics of the universe. The universe itself is *the* enduring reality and *the* enduring value even while it finds expression in a continuing sequence of transformations.

By bringing forth the planet Earth, its living forms, and its human intelligence, the universe has found, so far as we know, its most elaborate expression and manifestation of its deepest mystery. Here, in its human mode, the universe reflects on and celebrates itself in a unique mode of conscious self-awareness. Our earliest documents reveal a special sensitivity in human intellectual, emotional, and aesthetic responses to this larger context of survival. The Universe, the Earth, the Human are centered in one another. The later realms of being are dependent on the earlier for survival while the earlier realms are dependent on the later for their more elaborate manifestation. The more complex are dependent on the more simple; the more simple are revealed in the more elaborate.

[58] Once we recognize that a change from a human-centered to an Earth-centered norm of reality and value is needed, we might ask how this is to be achieved and how it would function. We might begin by recognizing that the life community, the community of all living species, including the human, is the greater reality and the greater value. The primary concern of the human community must be the preservation and enhancement of this comprehensive community, even for the sake of its own survival.

[70] Among the controlling professions in America, the educational and religious professions should be especially sensitive in discerning what is happening to the planet and the value of these symbols in restoring a certain integrity to the human process. These professions present themselves as guiding our sense of reality and value at its ultimate level of significance. They provide our life interpretation. Education and religion, especially, should awaken in the young an awareness of the world in which they live, how it functions, how the human fits into the larger community of life, the role that the human fulfills in the great story of the universe, and the historical sequence of developments that have shaped our physical and cultural landscape. Along with this awareness of the past and present, education and religion should communicate some guidance concerning the future.

The pathos of these times, however, is precisely the impasse that we witness in our educational and religious programs. Both are living in a past fundamentalist tradition or venturing into New Age programs that are often trivial in their consequences, unable to support or to guide the transformation that is

needed in its proper order of magnitude. We must recognize that the only effective program available as our primary guide toward a viable human mode of being is the program offered by the Earth itself.

Both education and religion need to ground themselves within the story of the universe as we now know it through our empirical ways of knowing. Within this functional cosmology we can overcome our alienation and begin the renewal of life on a sustainable basis. This story is a numinous revelatory story that could evoke not only the vision but also the energies needed for bringing ourselves and the entire planet into a new order of survival.

Chapter 7: The University

[72] The university has a central role in the direction and fulfillment of the Great Work. It seems appropriate, then, that we give some thought to the difficulties the university has experienced in recent times and the directions it might take in fulfilling its role in the twenty-first century.

The university can be considered as one of the four basic establishments that determine human life in its more significant functioning: the government, the religious traditions, the university, and the commercial-industrial corporations.

All four – the political, religious, intellectual, and economic establishments – are failing in their basic purposes for the same reason. They all presume a radical discontinuity between the nonhuman and the human modes of being, with all the rights and all inherent values given to the human. The other-than-human world is not recognized as having any inherent rights or values. All basic realities and values are identified with human values. The other-than-human modes of being attain their reality and value only through their use by the human. This attitude has brought about a

devastating assault on the nonhuman world by the human.

[77] Historically the break with this tradition took place at the time of the Great Plague that struck Europe in 1347 – 1349. This was a traumatic moment for the Western world. The deep aversion to the natural world that resulted has profoundly conditioned the Western cultural tradition ever since.

A definitive stage in this aversion came with Rene Descartes in the early seventeenth century. In a very real sense he *desouled* the Earth with his division of reality between mind and extension. In this perspective the nonhuman world was seen simply as mechanism. It was, however, a mechanism that could be, and even must be, exploited for human benefit.

For six centuries from the Great Plague and for more than three centuries from the time of Descartes, the aversion of the human from any intimacy with the natural world has increased in Western society, with the exception of the period of Romanticism from the late eighteenth century through the early nineteenth century. Scientists have insisted with ever-greater vehemence until recently that the universe can only be understood as the random action of minute particles with neither direction nor meaning. That we should have resisted such an interpretation given by scientists to their own discoveries is quite proper. That we should have permitted scientists to evoke in us a deep suspicion of the natural world is a matter of extreme regret.

We should have been able to provide our own interpretation of the scientific discoveries. It should have been obvious that our empirical inquiry into the structure and functioning of the universe was revealing a magnificent world beyond anything that we could have thought or dreamed. Any reasonable response is admiration, awe, and even a certain foreboding at the deeper mysteries presented in such an overwhelming reality. We might even consider the emergent

universe, in the sequence of its unfolding, is providing us with a new revelatory experience of whatever is the origin from which it emerges.

[80] Even beyond the Earth, the sense of community would extend throughout the entire universe seen as a single coherent community that has emerged into being with a total dependence of each component on all the others. Indeed, we need to think of the universe as the supreme norm of reality and value, with all component members of the universe participating in this context, each in accord with its own proper role.

In this setting the universe would become the primary university, just as the universe is the primary lawgiver, the primary economic corporation, the primary scientist, the primary technologist, the primary healer, the primary revelation of the divine, the primary artist, the primary teacher, and indeed the primary source, model, and ultimate destiny in all earthly affairs. Throughout our human intellectual development we are totally dependent on what the universe communicates to us in an earlier stage through immediate observation and in this later stage through all those instruments of observation that we have devised. Through these instruments of observation we enter profoundly into the most hidden realms of phenomenal existence itself while at the same time these hidden realms enter into our own minds. It is a reciprocal relationship. We are touched by what we touch. We are shaped by what we shape. We are enhanced by what we enhance.

The human university would be the context in which the universe reflects on itself in human intelligence and communicates itself to the human community. The university would have the universe as its originating, validating, and unifying referent. Since the universe is an emergent reality the universe would be understood primarily through its story. Education at all levels would be understood as knowing the universe

story and the human role in the story. The basic course in any college or university would be the story of the universe.

This story can fulfill its role only if the universe is understood as having a psychic-spiritual as well as a physical-material aspect from the beginning. ...

[82] Precisely in this intimate relationship with the entire universe we overcome the mental fixation of our times expressed in the radical division we make between the human and the other-than-human. This fixation that I have described as an unfeeling relation of the human to the natural world is healed in its deepest roots as soon as we perceive that the entire universe is composed of subjects to be communed with, not primarily of objects to be exploited. This communion experience is, I believe, universal. It can be observed in the immediate reaction of almost anyone who simply looks at the ocean at dawn or sunset or at the heavens at night with all the stars ablaze, or who enters a wilderness area with its foreboding as well as its entrancing aspects.

In every phase of our imaginative, aesthetic, and emotional lives we are profoundly dependent on this larger context of the surrounding world. There is no inner life without outer experience. The tragedy in the elimination of the primordial forests is not the economic but the soul-loss that is involved. For we are depriving our imagination, our emotions, and even our intellect of that overwhelming experience communicated by the wilderness. For children to live only in contact with concrete and steel and wires and wheels and machines and computers and plastics, to seldom experience any primordial reality or even to see the stars at night, is a soul deprivation that diminishes the deepest of their human experiences.

Here I propose that the universities need to teach the story of the universe as this is now available to us. For the universe story

is our own story. We cannot know ourselves in any adequate manner except through an account of the transformations of the universe and of the planet Earth through which we came into being. This new story of the universe is our personal story as well as our community story.

We have moved from a sense of time in which the universe revolves simply in ever-renewing seasonal cycles into a universe that has emerged into being through a sequence of irreversible transformations, even while it is also revolving in an ever-renewing sequence of seasonal changes. Our greatest single need is to accept this story of the universe as we now know this as our sacred story. It could be considered as the most magnificent of all creation stories. This story does not diminish, it rather enhances the earlier story that we have through the Book of Genesis. That story was related to the ancient Mesopotamian stories of the universe. Our new story is attained in a more empirical manner and with new instruments of observation.

[85] The universities must decide whether they will continue training persons for temporary survival in the declining Cenozoic Era or whether they will begin educating students for the emerging Ecozoic. Already the planet is so damaged and the future so challenged by its rising human population that the terms of survival will be severe beyond anything we have known in the past. We have not thought clearly or behaved properly in the twentieth century. We are now caught in a mind-tormenting ambivalence. We have such vast understanding of the universe and how it functions, and yet we manifest such inability to use this knowledge beneficially either for ourselves or for any other mode of earthly being. While this is not the time for continued denial by the universities or for attributing blame to the universities, it is the time for universities to rethink themselves and what they are doing.

Chapter 8: Ecological Geography

[86] Geography is an integrating study of the earth in its comprehensive extent as well as in its various regional integrations.

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While geography provides a comprehensive context for understanding the functioning of the Earth in its larger structure, it is even more useful in appreciating the integral functioning of the various regions into which the planet is divided. In this manner it provides the context for ecological understanding.

Earth, we might say, is a single reality composed of a diversity beyond all understanding or description. This diversity in its arctic and tropical regions, its oceans and its continents, in its mountains and valleys, its forests and deserts, its rivers and their floodplains, all give to Earth both its endless wonder and its functional integrity. These landscape features and these living forms have come into being as some self-woven tapestry or some self-composed symphony or some self-designed painting. To experience this wonder and to enter into intimate relations with the various life communities of these regions seems to be the high purpose of human presence on Earth.

[99] Indigenous peoples know their region. They must know where the food is, where water is available, where firewood is found, where the medicinal plants are, where the trees grow that furnish the poles for their tents or the wood for their fires. Our studies in what we call ecology must lead to such intimacy with our natural surroundings. Only intimacy can save us from our present commitment to a plundering industrial economy.

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