

Session IV: How To Decide

Excerpts from Chapters 9 & 10
Of *The Great Work* by Thomas Berry

Chapter 9: Ethics and Ecology

[100] Now our concerns for the human community can only be fulfilled by a concern for the integrity of the natural world. The planet cannot support its human presence unless there is a reciprocal human support for the life systems of the planet. This more comprehensive perspective we might identify as macrophase ethics. This is something far beyond our ordinary ethical judgments involving individual actions, the actions of communities, or even of nations. We are presently concerned with ethical judgments on an entirely different order of magnitude. Indeed, the human community has never previously been forced to ethical judgments on this scale because we never before had the capacity for deleterious action with such consequences.

As indicated by Brian Swimme in *The Hidden Heart of the Cosmos*, humans, through our scientific insight and our technological skills, have become a macrophase power, something on the level of the glaciations or the forces that caused the great extinctions of the past. Yet we have only a microphase sense of responsibility or ethical judgment. We need to develop a completely different range of responsibility.

[104] We find ourselves ethically destitute just when, for the first time, we are faced with ultimacy, the irreversible closing down of the Earth's functioning in its major life systems. Our ethical traditions know how to deal with suicide, homicide, and even genocide; but these traditions collapse entirely when confronted with biocide, the extinction of the vulnerable life systems of the Earth, and geocide, the devastation of the Earth itself.

We have a radically new *problematique*. To appreciate this fully we must understand that the misuse of our scientific-technological powers has not itself come ultimately from the scientific tradition, although this is the general accusation made against the empirical inquiry into the functioning of the natural world. The danger and the misuse have come ultimately from the deficiencies of the spiritual and humanist traditions of Western cultural development. These traditions themselves have alienating emphases. Both our religious and our humanist traditions are primarily committed to an anthropocentric exaltation of the human.

[105] The present urgency is to begin thinking within the context of the whole planet, the integral Earth community with all its human and other-than-human components. When we discuss ethics we must understand it to mean the principles and values that govern that comprehensive community. Human ethics concerns the manner whereby we give expression at the rational level to the ordering principles of that larger community.

The ecological community is not subordinate to the human community. Nor is the ecological imperative derivative from human ethics. The basic ethical norm is the well-being of the comprehensive community and the attainment of human well-being within that community.

[106] Perhaps a new revelatory experience is taking place, an experience wherein human consciousness awakens to the grandeur and sacred quality of the Earth process. Humanity has seldom participated in such a vision since shamanic times, but in such a renewal lies our hope for the future for

ourselves and for the entire planet on which we live.

Chapter 10: The New Political Alignment

[107] The older tension in human affairs between conservative and liberal based on social orientation is being replaced with the tension between developers and ecologists based on orientation toward the natural world. This new tension is becoming the primary tension in human affairs.

So too the political tension between the empires and the colonies is being replaced by an economic tension between village peoples of the world with their organic modes of agriculture and the transnational corporations with their industrial agriculture.

This new alignment should not be taken as if the ecology movement were a New Left movement or a new liberalism. For the ecology movement has moved the entire basis of the division into a new context. It is no longer a division based on political party or social class or ethnic group. It is a division based on the human as one of the components within the larger community of the planet Earth.

In this new alignment those committed to industrial-commercial development of natural areas see this development as inherently progressive. Those committed to the integrity of the natural world and their indigenous peoples see this development as degradation, since the intrusion of the human into the life systems of the planet has already gone beyond any acceptable limits.

[109] So influential is the present commercial-industrial order that our dominant professions and institutions are functioning in this context; not merely our economic system, but government, jurisprudence, the medical profession, religion, and education. Every aspect of life has been absorbed into the

commercial-industrial context. We seem not to know how to live in any other way. In the industrialized nations the automobile, the highways, parking lots, shopping malls, all seem to be necessary for survival at any acceptable level of human well-being.

[110] Never before has the human community been confronted with a situation that required such sudden and radical change in lifestyle under the threat of a comprehensive degradation of the planet and its major life systems. The difficulty can only increase. Tensions between capitalism and socialism, between liberalism and conservatism, are disputes over minor differences in comparison with the issues now before us. Both capitalist and socialist regimes are committed to ever-increasing commercial-industrial exploitation of the resources of the planet. Neither is acceptable to the ecologist.

Fixation on the primacy of industry in the well-being of the human is producing a recession of the basic resources of Earth which is now a permanent condition. This recession is not a temporary economic recession of any one nation, nor the recession of some financial or commercial arrangement, it is an irreversible recession of the planet itself in many of the most basic aspects of its functioning. The Earth simply cannot sustain the burden imposed upon it. The air in many places has become polluted. The water of the planet is toxic for an indefinite period of time. The soils of the Earth are saturated with chemicals. We have only the slightest idea of the consequences for the physical and psychic life of the human community, especially for the children who have lived in this chemically saturated environment since the day of their conception.

Physical degradation of the natural world is also the degradation of the interior world of the human. To cut the old-growth forests is not simply to destroy the last 5 percent of the primordial forests left in this country. It is to lose the wonder and majesty,

the poetry, music, and spiritual exaltation evoked by such awesome experience of the deep mysteries of existence. It is a loss of soul even more than a loss of lumber or a loss of money. Loss of spiritual, imaginative, intellectual, or aesthetic experience is considered irrelevant by the developers as soon as a territory is identified as a place where money is to be made. In North America, even after taking 95 percent of these forests, developers insist on the right to cut the few timberlands that survive, while speaking of the extreme demands of the ecologists.

The severity of the tension between the developers and the ecologists can only be fully realized if, in addition to what has already been indicated, we understand that the exploiters have been in control of the North American continent since the beginning of its settlement by Europeans in the seventeenth century. Americans have never known any other way of life. The original settlers came here for religious freedoms but also for a “better” life than was available in the European world. The spaciousness of the continent, the luxuriance of its coastlands, its woodlands, its fertile soils, the beaver and deer and buffalo – all these seemed, in their abundance, to be beyond the capacity of any human force to diminish in any significant manner. The attrition of most life forms has been severe in these past few centuries.

[113] Yet there is still a tendency to think of ecologists as radical, romantic, or trivial New Age types. If by clear-cutting the last 5 percent of the surviving old-growth forests we provide jobs for the present, then clear-cutting is justified. This is the realist position. Forests are seen as so many board feet of lumber whose primary value is to be cut down for human use. The sense of meaning, of entry into the mysteries of existence, the grandeur experienced in their presence, all these are marginal to the essential thing of life, which is to exploit the

forests for their passing human use and their monetary value.

Such issues require a reorientation of all the professions, especially the legal profession, which is still preoccupied with individual “human” rights, especially with the limitless freedom to acquire property and exploit the land. The number of lawyers hired by single corporations to defend themselves against any limitation of their perceived rights to exploit the natural world is evidence of the strange principles of jurisprudence that allow the devastation of the planet to proceed. Universities are still preparing students for professional careers in the industrial-commercial world even as this world continues its planetary destruction. The medical profession is only beginning to recognize that no amount of medical technology will enable us to have healthy humans on a sick planet.

A new awareness is emerging, however, throughout every realm of human activity. The term *sustainable development* is now the single most significant phrase in any discussion of these issues.

[114] David Korten makes proposals for the sequence of intermediate steps needed if we are to move into a sustainable mode of human presence on the planet in a later book, *The Post-Corporate World: Life After Capitalism*. A further observation might be made that a *sustainable* mode of survival at our present level of economic well-being in the industrialized countries is hardly possible as a universal attainment. It is estimated that to support our present Earth population at the level enjoyed in North America would require two or three planets.

The more ultimate question has to do with the “soul” of the future as this finds expression in the single life principle of planet Earth. There is much consideration of the physical and biological modes of survival with relatively little comment on the soul of the future. Here we are mainly concerned with the “soul” as the shaping spirit within

any vital process. These, the inner spirit and the outer form, are two distinctive aspects of a single mode of being. In considering the soul of the future, I am concerned with the inner vision that we need if we are to make the intellectual, social, economic, and religious adjustments required for a viable future.

That the human and other components of Earth form a single community of life, is the central issue of the Great Work. We can hardly repeat too often that every mode of being has inherent rights to their place in this community, rights that come by existence itself. The intimacy of humans with the other components of the planet is the fulfillment of each in the other and all within the single Earth community. It is a spiritual fulfillment as well as a mutual support. It is a commitment, not simply a way of survival. Anything less, to my mind, will not work. The difficulty we confront is too great. The future is too foreboding. We need to think of twice the present human population facing the future with half the resources. The next generations need a truly inspiring vision of the wonder and grandeur of life, along with the beginnings of the new technologies they will need.

[116] What we propose here is not a solution of the issue but a clarification of the fact that the real issue before us is no longer finding expression in terms of liberal and conservative but rather in terms of the ecologist or environmentalist on the one hand and the commercial-industrial establishment on the other. A new alignment of forces is taking place throughout every institution and every profession in our society.

It is important to understand this new situation, the inherent difficulties of reconciliation, and the new language that has come into being. Only in this manner can we appreciate the true nature of the issues under discussion and the magnitude of change required in shaping a viable mode of human presence on the planet Earth for the future. All our professions and institutions need to be

reinvented in this new context. We must in a manner reinvent the human itself as a mode of being. Eventually this implies rethinking the planet and our role within the planetary process.

Reader's Notes for Further Discussion