

Session V: End of an Era  
Excerpts from Chapters 11, 12 & 13  
*Of The Great Work* by Thomas Berry

## Chapter 11: The Corporation Story

[117] Among the more significant concerns of this transition period into the twenty-first century must be the modern industrial, commercial, and financial corporations. We need to understand the larger significance of these corporations in American society, in the human community, and in the functioning of the planet Earth.

The corporations, in their ambivalent commitment to financial profit while making progress in human affairs and providing comfort and security for people, are among the principal instruments for devastating the planet. There are other historical and cultural causes found deep in the course of Western civilization, yet these other causes have found their most effective expression in the structure and functioning of the modern corporation.

[119] There are several basic critiques to be made of the corporations as they exist in the United States. They have obtained the natural rights of individual citizens without assuming responsibility in proportion to their influence on public concerns. They have devastated the natural endowment of the North American continent. They have corrupted the government. They have relentlessly harassed the public through newspapers, mail, and magazines, through signs and billboards on the highways, through telephone and television, through sponsorship of sports and cultural events, through exploitation of the wonder of children, of the female form, of the sacred seasons of the year. They have even used the sky as a billboard for advertising. In the social order they have not given the working people their share of the profits earned through the effort of these same people.

Through all these impositions the corporations have taken possession of human consciousness in order to evoke the deepest of psychic compulsions toward limitless consumption. This invasion of human consciousness has brought about deleterious effects throughout the moral and cultural life of the society as well as the impoverishment of the Earth. Yet the corporations are so basic to contemporary life that a central purpose of contemporary education from high school through college, and even through professional training, is to prepare younger persons for jobs within the corporation context.

[121] This region was settled by groups that were chartered by the king of England in the manner of corporations to occupy and develop a vaguely defined area for the primary benefit of England but also for whatever benefit colonists sought in their own ambitions. To understand the sequence of events leading from this early period to the present we will take a brief look at the history of the corporation in what became the United States.

[122] The settlers found difficulty in relating to this continent in any creative manner. Some ancient fear of the wilderness in Western civilization led either to a direct assault on the various life-forms of the continent or to subjugation for some utilitarian purpose. Land was for settlement and possession. Soil was for cultivation. Forests were for timber. Rivers were for travel, for irrigation of the fields, and for power. Animals such as the wolf, the bear, and the snake were for killing. Animals such as the beaver, the deer, the rabbit, and the passenger pigeon were for the fur or the food

they could provide. Fish, so abundant throughout the streams and rivers and along the shores, were for catching. North America was indeed a luxuriant continent awaiting human exploitation under the title of “progress” or “development.”

There was a latent appreciation of the continent for its wonder and inspiration that would later appear in the naturalist writers, the scholars, the artists, the poets, and a few religious persons who could understand the need that humans had for the natural world to activate the inner life of imagination, emotion, and understanding and to convey a sense of the sacred. For the most part, however, the settlers brought their Bibles with them. That was all they needed for spiritual inspiration. They were hesitant to experience the deep spiritual communication provided by this continent. It might bring them to judgment for heresy.

[127] That the corporation could be so severe with its working people and so devastating to the natural world was not simply because of personal drive for power and possession but also because of a mythic sense that the industrial process under corporation control, driven by the doctrine of the survival of the fittest, was the predestined means for fulfillment of the historical destiny of humans. This destiny was the attainment of a kind of industrial-technological wonderworld, a state of profound human fulfillment, a vision of the future that appeared ever closer with the achievements of the new age of plastics, electronics, and computers that came after World War II. Such an achievement was considered ample justification for all the oppression to be imposed and all the devastation to be wrought on the way. The sense of progress as “control over nature” attained by human talents was manifested in economic competition in a realm of free enterprise. These two attitudes, derived from Darwinism, can be considered as the background of the industrial and corporate control of America. In their larger

consequences these attitudes have led to the exploitation of the continent, and of the planet itself.

The entire American society was caught up in the transformation taking place. From its beginning until the present, the corporation has proclaimed that the public well-being could only be attained through a prosperous industrial, commercial, and financial establishment whose benefits were freely appropriated by the managerial and ownership class, with minimal payment to those who provided the labor and the skills needed for the process. ...

[132] In most discussion of the corporate world and its consequences, the main concern has been on social issues. Until recently, little consideration was given to the disastrous effects that the advancing industrial, commercial, and financial establishments were having on the life-systems of the planet.

This situation leads us to our present situation, ... This phase can be identified as the period of transition from a devastating phase of corporation economics to the period when the corporations recognize that a human economy can only exist as a subsystem of the Earth economy. While any comprehensive change just now would be beyond expectations, the existing corporations are finally beginning to recognize that they can only survive within the limited resources of the natural world.

The first occasion when some public recognition was given of the coming impasse between human demands and Earth resources occurred at the Stockholm Conference of the United Nations in 1972. ...

[134] ... Since 1972 the issue has been progressively on the mind of the most significant public and private persons throughout the human community as the stark reality that must be dealt with in this coming century. Just how it evolves will determine

the larger destinies of the human community as we venture into the twenty-first century.

When we hear corporations speak of “feeding the world” as a global enterprise, we can only reflect that feeding themselves belongs to each local community. It belongs to any people to be intimately related to the region of their dwelling. This includes a mutual nourishment. The land and all its living components nourish each other under the all-sustaining guidance of natural forces that bring us together ...

As we reflect on this imposition of immense global corporations trying to take over responsibility for “feeding the world,” we can only wonder at the reduction of the peoples of Earth to a condition of being nurse-maided by some few corporation enterprises. We might conclude that Mother Monsanto with her sterile seeds wishes to take over the role of Mother Nature herself. The people of the world need the assistance of each other, but only such assistance that enables them to fulfill their own responsibility for doing the essential things themselves. Village peoples everywhere, indeed all of us, need assistance within the pattern of our own inventive genius, not being reduced to a franchise of some distant corporation.

## Chapter 12: The Extractive Economy

[136] When we consider where we are in the course of our historical destiny we might observe three events that could be considered as defining moments leading to our situation at the end of the twentieth century.

The first of these events occurred when the biblical-Christian emphasis on the spirituality of the human joined with the traditions of Greek humanism to create an anthropocentric view of the universe. At this time a certain discontinuity became possible between the human and the nonhuman components of the planet Earth. ...

[137] A second historical moment occurred when this spiritual and humanist alienation was deepened into a feeling that the natural world was an actual threat to both the physical and spiritual well-being of the human. This feeling arose when the Black Death occurred in Europe from 1347-1349, a period when at least a third of the human population of Europe died. ...

A third historical moment occurred in the last two decades of the nineteenth century when an even more severe situation arose. These were the critical years. In some sense the modern destiny of America, of the human community, and the planet Earth was determined at this time. These were the years of transition from an organic economy to an extractive economy. Modern technologies and the industrial establishment under the control of the modern corporation seemed to have effected an unqualified human conquest of the forces of nature. Indeed, they had achieved a control over nature never known previously in human history. The integral functioning of the geobiological systems of Earth that had governed the functioning of the planet for some 4.6 billion years came under the assault of humans determined to use the resources of Earth and the infinitely subtle functioning of nature in a manner immediately beneficial for humans, without regard for the consequences for the natural systems of the planet.

[138] Little attention has been given to the consequences of basing the entire functioning of the human community on an extractive economy. An organic economy is by its very nature an ever-renewing economy. An extractive economy is by its nature a terminal economy. It is also a biologically disruptive economy. As long as we lived within the bounty of the seasonally renewing productions of the biosystems of the planet we could, apparently, continue into the indefinite future. But as soon as we established a way of life dependent on

extracting nonrenewing substances from Earth, then we could survive only so long as these endured; or so long as the organic functioning of the planet was not overwhelmed by the violent intrusion involved in extracting and transforming these substances. ...

[140] A psychic compulsion developed, even perhaps a kind of mysticism of progress, that drove the commercial and industrial entrepreneurs as well as the scientists and engineers in their work. Some scientists indeed were attracted by the quest for knowledge. An immense number, however, were driven by a quest for control over the awesome powers in the world about them. Suddenly commercial entrepreneurs became aware of the possibility of financial profits to be made by using these powers to release the human community from age-old afflictions; this awareness combined with the attractions of a life filled with an abundance of Earth's delights. These were attractions not to be refused.

[149] Even as regards this planet we need to esteem this planet and its functioning in the depths of their mystery. The greatest of human discoveries in the future will be the discovery of human intimacy with all those other modes of being that live with us on this planet, inspire our art and literature, reveal that numinous world whence all things come into being, and with which we exchange the very substance of life.

## Chapter 13: The Petroleum Interval

[150] The story of the late nineteenth and the entire twentieth century has been largely the story of petroleum, its discovery and use by humans, and the social and cultural consequences in human society. The story of the twenty-first century will be the story of the terminal phase of petroleum and

the invention of new patterns of human living in relation to Earth's resources in the post-petroleum period. ... These years, the glory years of the industrial period and the devastating years of the Earth, might be designated as the Petroleum Interval.

[157] Here is where the modern industrial world reveals itself as failing in its larger purposes even while it seems to accomplish so much. It has failed to align its own functioning with the functioning of the planetary forces on which it depends. The intrusion of the chemical profession into the physics of the universe has enabled this profession to enter so profoundly into the hidden forces of the biological and physical world that it can turn the most benign substances into the most deadly forms.

Fundamental to this attitude is the feeling that humans have the right and even the obligation to intrude upon the natural world as extensively as they are able. A person can only marvel that scientists generally seem never to have reflected on or explained to the community why the petroleum is buried in the Earth in the first place. Even the slightest reflection would reveal that nature has taken great care to bury the vast amounts of carbon in the coal and petroleum in the depths of the Earth and in the forests so that the chemistry of the atmosphere, the water, and the soil could be worked out with the proper precision. This needs to be thoroughly understood and respected lest anyone intrude into this delicate balance by extracting and using the petroleum or the coal or by cutting down and using the great forests of the planet without consideration of what will happen when these forces will no longer be able to fulfill their role in the integral functioning of the planet.