

# Leaders' Guide

A 6-Session Group Study  
of

***The Great Work***  
– *Our Way into the Future*  
By Thomas Berry



Prepared by F. Nelson Stover

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Updated: March 7, 2010

This study guide and related handout material was originally prepared on behalf of Environmental Stewardship Greensboro for use in conjunction with its county-wide study program. The process of excerpting the readings from *The Great Work* has been conducted in consultation with the author, Thomas Berry, and copyright permission has been obtained from the publisher, Random House. Further revisions of the particular sessions have been completed by F. Nelson Stover, Director of Educational Programs, greenschemes, Inc.

The study sessions draw heavily on the Technologies of Participation<sup>®</sup> developed by the Institute of Cultural Affairs. Additional information about these methods and in-depth training is available from greenschemes and on line at [www.ica-usa.org](http://www.ica-usa.org).

A limited number of Leader's Guides have been prepared. The owner of each of the numbered Leader's Guides is authorized to make and distribute up to 25 copies of the session study materials. This limit has been agreed upon by the publisher and the team preparing for this study.

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Leaders' Guide # \_\_\_\_\_

For: \_\_\_\_\_

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# A Greeting From Thomas

## A Note for Nelson Stover's Study Guide Based on *The Great Work*

After a century of relentless exploitation of Earth's natural resources for human benefit, we realize that we have exceeded what the planet can endure. How to respond to this situation is the challenge before us.

Much needs to be done immediately. Thus the importance of this program of Nelson Stover. He sees the depths of the problem and the way to a solution. His insights need communication throughout the human community. By far the most effective program yet devised to direct us at this critical moment, Nelson's work is a clear guide to the shaping of a sustainable future, not only for the human community, but, as well, for the comprehensive Earth community.

*Thomas Berry*  
*September 2007*

This Study Guide was originally prepared under the auspices of the Environmental Stewardship Greensboro as a part of a county-wide celebration to commemorate the 93<sup>rd</sup> birthday of Thomas Berry, a native of Greensboro, North Carolina. The team had the distinct privilege of meeting personally with Thomas and his sister, Margaret, on several occasions during the process of producing the Study Guide. Their support and encouragement provided a continual source of inspiration for the project.

The work of selecting the excerpted readings was undertaken by F. Nelson Stover. Thomas often referred to this study guide as "Nelson's work"; in fact, many hands were involved in the overall success of the project.

## Typographical Conventions

In order to refer to the various parts of the study guide and the original work of Thomas Berry, several specific numbering and typographical conventions have been used in this guide.

References to particular pages in the original publications of *The Great Work* by Thomas Berry are indicated in [ ]. Thus [6] refers to text from page 6 of Thomas' book.

This study guide is arranged for six study sessions based on six major sections of *The Great Work*. These six sessions are numbered with Roman numerals. Session I, II etc.

Within each of the sessions several themes are highlighted for study by the group. These are lettered with Capital Letters – A, B, C ....

Several questions have been suggested for each of the themes. These questions are numbered sequentially: 1, 2, 3 ....

Within the procedural guide to the study leader, some process notes have been included. These are enclosed in { }.

## Table of Contents

Copyright Information	2
A Greeting from Thomas	3
Typographical Conventions	4
Table of Contents	5
Editors' Comments	6
Study Overview Chart	7
“A Voice of the Age: Greensboro’s Thomas Berry	8
Recommendations for Enhancing Participation	10
Session I: Leader’s Guide	12
Readings for Session I: Our Contemporary Task	14
Session II: Leader’s Guide	18
Readings for Session II: The Historical Background	20
Session III: Leader’s Guide	24
Readings for Session III: A New Way of Knowing	26
Session IV: Leader’s Guide	30
Readings for Session IV: How To Decide	32
Session V: Leader’s Guide	36
Readings for Session V: The End of An Era	38
Session VI: Leader’s Guide	42
Readings for Session VI: The Species Level Change	44
Additional Opportunities	48
The Study Guide Preparation Team	49
“I Do Declare”	50

## Editors' Comments

The team preparing this Study Guide has worked to provide materials for groups of people interested in applying the writings of Thomas Berry to their everyday lives. In doing so, six excerpts have been culled from *The Great Work*. Any attempt to shorten or reduce Thomas' book definitely detracts from its power and comprehensive perspective; yet the editors believe that in doing so they have made his insights more available to larger numbers of readers.

Some passages of *The Great Work* contain profound philosophical insights, others flow more like a lyric poem, still others provide detailed historical background and some motivate a person to action. In excerpting these six passages for study, the editors have attempted to include some of each of these four elements. Anyone participating in this study is definitely encouraged to read the entire book to more fully grasp the breadth of Thomas' thinking.

The chart on the following page provides an overview of the six sessions in this study. The first two sessions cover the first five chapters of *The Great Work* in which Thomas lays out the Planetary Context in which the current Great Work arises. The **first session** lays out the general concept of a Great Work and Thomas' personal journey to understanding the current situation. The **second session** reviews the history of Planet Earth and in particular the Piedmont region of North Carolina in order for the student to understand how we got to the present time. The next three sessions focus on the magnitude the Sociological Transformation that is required in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century; this material is covered in the sixth through thirteenth chapters of the book. The **third session** focuses on the changes necessary in the way we know and learn about life and the world we live in – our Educational Institutions. The **fourth session** deals with how we make decisions both at the personal and societal level – our Political Institutions. The **fifth session** highlights the implications of living at the end of the petroleum era and its impact on our Economic Institutions. The **sixth session** focuses on the Species-Level Change that Thomas calls for in the last four chapters of his book. This process of reinventing the human at the species level involves a change of consciousness and a revitalization of our Religious Institutions.

In each of the sessions, a series of questions have been provided that guide the group through becoming familiar with the content of the section, sharing their opinions of the material being discussed, coming to terms with the implications of the author's observations and making decisions about practical changes they can make in their own daily living. In so doing, it is anticipated that each participant will find ways to appreciate and appropriate the insights of Thomas Berry as conveyed in *The Great Work*.

# The Great Work – Our Way into the Future Study Guide Overview

Prepared by: F. Nelson Stover

Revised: October 16, 2007

Themes	The Sociological Transformation				The Species-Level Change
	The Planetary Context	A New Way of Knowing	How to Decide	End of an Era	
<p><b>Our Contemporary Task</b></p> <p>1. Introduction The Great Work</p> <p>2. The Meadow Across the Creek</p>	<p>3. The Earth Story</p> <p>4. The North American Continent</p> <p>5. The Wild and The Sacred</p>	<p>6. The Viable Human</p> <p>7. The University</p> <p>8. Ecological Geography</p>	<p>9. Ethics and Ecology</p> <p>10. The New Political Alignment</p>	<p>11. The Corporation Story</p> <p>12. The Extractive Economy</p> <p>13. The Petroleum Interval</p>	<p>14. Reinventing the Human</p> <p>15. The Dynamics of the Future</p> <p>16. The Fourfold Wisdom</p> <p>17. Moments of Grace</p>
<p>The book is about: the human presence on planet Earth in the opening years of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.</p> <p>The Great Work now is to carry out the transition from a period of devastation of the Earth to a period when humans are present to the planet in a mutually beneficial manner.</p> <p>The Great Work of a people is the work of all the people.</p> <p>Whatever preserves and enhances this meadow in the natural cycles is good; whatever opposes it is not good.</p>	<p>Our great work has to do with a new understanding of planet Earth.</p> <p>Three commitments are basic: to observational science, to a developmental universe, to an inner self-organizing capacity.</p> <p>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.</p> <p>To understand the human role in the functioning of the Earth we need to appreciate spontaneities that we associate with the wild.</p>	<p>We need to move from our human-centered to an earth-centered notion of reality and value.</p> <p>This comprehensive context of our thinking is important in any consideration of human affairs.</p> <p>The universe would become the primary university.</p> <p>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.</p>	<p>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.</p> <p>So influential is the commercial-industrial order that our dominant professions and institutions are functioning in this context.</p> <p>The more ultimate question has to do with the soul of the future. ... The next generations need an inspiring vision of wonder.</p>	<p>The corporations have taken possession of human consciousness in order to evoke the deepest of psychic compulsions toward limitless consumption.</p> <p>An organic economy is an ever-renewing economy. An extractive economy is a terminal economy.</p> <p>The greatest of human discoveries in the future will be the discovery of human intimacy with all other modes of being on the planet.</p> <p>The story of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century will be the story of the terminal phase of petroleum.</p>	<p>The historical mission of our times is to reinvent the human – at the species level, with critical reflection, within the community of life-systems, in a time-developmental context, by means of story and shared dream experience.</p> <p>The evolutionary vision provides the most profound mystique of the universe.</p> <p>Guidance can come from: indigenous people, women, the classical traditions and science.</p> <p>The present is a historical and religious moment of grace.</p>
<p><b>Major Points</b></p>					
<p><b>Excerpts On Pages</b></p>	<p>ix, x, xi, 1, 3, 4, 7, 10, 12, 15, 16, 20</p>	<p>56, 58, 70, 72, 77, 80, 82, 85, 86, 99</p>	<p>100, 104, 105, 106, 107, 109, 110, 113, 114, 116</p>	<p>117, 119, 121, 122, 127, 132, 134, 136, 138, 140, 149, 150, 157</p>	<p>159 - 162, 164 - 166, 168, 169, 174, 175, 176, 193, 195, 196, 201</p>

## A Voice of the Age: Greensboro's Thomas Berry

By Maureen Parker

Human presence on planet Earth in the opening years of the twenty-first century is the subject of Thomas Berry's 1999 *The Great Work: Our Way Into the Future*. We need to understand where we are, Berry urges, and how we got here. That understood, we can move forward to create "a mutually enhancing mode of human dwelling on planet Earth." So begins the author's meditation on the survival of the Earth, the human species, and all the companion species sharing our space.

Rarely does a person come along so forward-thinking that he seems the voice of the age. Such a man lives among us in Greensboro today. Renowned cosmologist, ecologist, anthropologist, cultural historian, scholar, teacher, and priest, Thomas was born and raised in Greensboro and has a large extended family in this area. Yet the saying that a prophet is often not recognized in his own country is true of Berry who is better known nationally and internationally than locally.

Thomas, as he likes to be called, has studied and taught throughout the world. As founder and for twenty-five years director of the Riverdale Center for Religious Research, Riverdale, New York, he spoke at the Millennium World Peace Summit of Religious and Spiritual Leaders in August 2000. His seminal work *Every Being Has Rights* was first heard as an E.F. Schumacher Lecture in October 2003. Of his many books those most closely related to environmental concerns are *The Dream of the Earth*, *The Universe Story* (with Brian Swimme), *The Great Work*, and the 2006 *Evening Thoughts: Reflecting on Earth as Sacred Community*.

Thomas speaks to those who love the sea, the mountains, the Earth and the stars; to those who feel kinship with deer, fish, raccoons, bullfrogs, ladybugs and spiders; to those awed by clouds, trees, rivers, and rocks; to those who delight in wildness; to those who find in all these phenomena a reflection of the divine. He speaks also to those who have lost their Earth connection in hopes that they will regain it.

In *The Great Work* Berry addresses the range of environmental and spiritual problems facing the world today. Each historical era, he notes, has participated in a great work for organizing society in its own time. In these opening years of the twenty-first century, observes Berry, we must re-assess our relations with nature in all its manifestations, acknowledge our present destructive attitudes and determine measures to restore the health of this once-only magnificent event, this Earth, of which humans are the consciousness.



Humanity's task in our time, the author continues, is to advance from a period of human devastation of Earth to one in which humans live harmoniously with the planet and all its components. The twenty-first century he regards as a bridge from the Cenozoic to the Ecozoic (House of Life) Age. Disagreements between developers and ecologists, he predicts, will replace those between social conservatives and social liberals. Besides concern for the physical-material survival of the planet and its species, Berry worries about the *soul* of the future. In the current tendency to disconnect ourselves from mystery, awe, and wonder, he sees spiritual loss and denial of the fullness of our humanity.

To correct misconceptions and move meaningfully toward a future of human intimacy with all other modes of being on the planet, Berry calls for four changes of consciousness: First, recognition that the planet is and ought to be “a communion of (valued) subjects,” not a “collection of objects” to be used, abused, discarded, or disregarded. Each manifestation of the natural world, he insists, has a communicable psychic or spiritual dimension insofar as it has form. Second, acknowledgment that we live in a time-developmental context. What we do or don't do affects the future. We can't go back and do it over. Third, realization that we are part of, not separate from, the natural world. Fourth, acceptance of individual responsibility, according to one's gifts, in shaping the future.

These four changes in human understanding, Berry believes, can gradually transform basic societal institutions: education, religion, politics, and economics. When educational and religious organizations celebrate the glory of the universe that is there before us, and when society comprehends the universe as ever-emergent divinity, and acts accordingly, then humans will be able to live harmoniously with the Earth. Such wisdom, such cosmology, Berry suggests, is strengthened by contact with the cultures of indigenous peoples, women, classical and ancient civilizations, and science.

Prepared for the Greensboro News & Record  
September, 2007.  
*Included here with the author's permission.*

## Recommendations for Enhancing Participation

This study is meant to be a *trialogue*: a conversation between the **author** – what he says, **you** – what you understand him to say – and **other people** in the group – what they understand him to say.

### To ensure full participation:

- Ask open-ended questions, ones that cannot be answered with “yes” or “no” responses.
- The questions in the guide are sequenced. Ask them in the order in which they are written.
- Ask for specific examples and illustrations to “ground” their answers, to connect them to their daily lives.
- Elicit responses rather than present information.
- Honor everyone’s responses.
- Maintain a non-judgmental stance.
- Avoid “Why” questions – only use these as a follow-up to other questions.
- Allow several people to answer the question at hand. After one person answers, say, “some one else”. If there is silence, you may need to repeat (or rephrase) the question and then allow time for responses.
- Don’t be afraid of silence. People need “soak” time. If you think the silence is because people are unclear about the question, repeat it – but in a little bit different way.
- Try to cover all the material in the allotted time.

Practical suggestions for studying *The Great Work*:

1. The curriculum is designed to work best with groups ranging in size from 8 to 20 people.
2. An 11 x 17 page has been excerpted for each of the six sessions. The Study Leader should make copies of these for the participants and pass them out the week prior to each study. This will allow each person to read the section in advance of the study
3. A one-page chart of the entire book has been prepared along with this Study Guide. These should be distributed to each participant at the first session so that they can see the overall context of each individual session.
4. A single-page worksheet has also been prepared for each session to allow note-taking and to give a general outline of the particular section. These can be distributed to each participant either with the readings or on the day of the session
5. At the end of the sessions, please report the number of participants back to F. Nelson Stover, Director of Education, greenschemes, Inc. ([StoverN@BellSouth.net](mailto:StoverN@BellSouth.net)). Please include any comments about the study.
6. This Study Guide is an emerging reality. Suggestions and changes are appreciated and will be communicate back to those interested and incorporated in further editions of this study guide.

The methods used in this study guide are based on processes developed by the Institute of Cultural Affairs. Additional training in this method of guided discussion is available. Visit the ICA's website at [www.ica-usa.org](http://www.ica-usa.org). Click on the Technology of Participation - ToP<sup>®</sup> Training Courses for a description of the training, dates and locations.

## Session I: Our Contemporary Task

10 min.	<p><b>Introductory Comments:</b> In this section Thomas Berry lays out the basic themes that he will discuss in the rest of the book. By looking quickly at the topics here we will all get a good idea of what is to come. We do not have to solve everything in this session since we will have time to go into more depth in each arena later on.</p>
10 min.	<p>A. The Scope of the Problem [ix &amp; x]</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What words and phrases caught your attention in the <i>Introduction</i>? {Round-robin – go around the table and get a response from everyone.}</li> <li>2. Ask someone to read the 1<sup>st</sup> paragraph out loud.</li> <li>3. {Give each person a few minutes to look at the rest of the <i>Introduction</i>.}</li> <li>4. What does the author say are some of the themes (threads) of this book?</li> <li>5. Which ones of these themes most interest you? Why?</li> <li>6. What are some of the other themes (or points) he mentions or points he makes?</li> <li>7. Based on his introduction, what would you say this book is about? {Get several answers.}</li> </ol>
10 min.	<p>B. The Concept of a Great Work [1]</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Thomas states that there have been great works in the past – so, as you think back, what are some of these “great works”? {Get several out}.</li> <li>2. What are some others that you think of?</li> <li>3. What are some characteristics of these Great Works? {Get additional details on a few.}</li> <li>4. What would it have been like to have lived in one of these times? {Choose one.} Positively? Negatively?</li> <li>5. What’s the residue of these Great Works? How have we benefited from them?</li> </ol>

10 min.	<p>C. The Current Great Work [3-10]</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Read the first paragraph of [3].</li> <li>2. Let's talk briefly about this transition; we will come back to this theme in later discussions.</li> <li>3. In the immediate past, how does Thomas say humans have behaved?</li> <li>4. What is the change he is calling for?</li> <li>5. What does he say is the cause of this problem? [4]</li> <li>6. How would you state this problem? {Get several responses.}</li> <li>7. In [10] Thomas says everyone participates in the Great Work of their age. What are some practical things you have done in this arena?</li> </ol>
15 min.	<p>D. Becoming Aware [12 &amp; 15]</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Take a minute to read or reread [Section 12].</li> <li>2. Someone tell Thomas' story in their own words. What do you think he experienced?</li> <li>3. {Pair off with the person sitting next to you.} Each person share a similar personal story. What did you experience?</li> <li>4. {Reconvene.} How has the experience you shared had a long-lasting impression on you?</li> <li>5. What do you call this kind of experience? What does Thomas call it?</li> <li>6. What are some examples of times when you've made decisions based on that experience? Thomas calls this the "key ethical indicator" – the measure for all else.</li> </ol>
10 min.	<p>E. Pointer to Action – Recovering an Integral Relation [16 &amp; 20]</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. In [16] what does Thomas say we have to do?</li> <li>2. What new alignment is he calling for?</li> <li>3. What would be some examples? Some examples on this continent?</li> <li>4. What would be done differently in the early grades of school?</li> <li>5. Someone read [20].</li> <li>6. How would you say this in other words?</li> <li>7. If you were going to advocate for a viable future, how would you do it? What would you do?</li> <li>8. How does your personal story inspire your advocacy?</li> </ol>
	<p><b>Closing:</b> These subjects will come up again and again as we discuss the rest of the sections in the book. Please read Section II for next week.</p>

## 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

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## Session II: The Historical Background

**Introductory Comments:** In this section Thomas Berry helps us understand the long-term history of Planet Earth and the continent on which we live. In his analysis he points out the major commitments required of us if we are to begin to envision a viable future. His perspective on wildness challenges many common understandings and provides an invitation to participate in the creativity of an emerging universe.

15  
min.

- A. Need for a New Story [21, 24 & 26]
1. Have someone read the first sentence of [21].
  2. Where are some memorable places that you have been? What did they look like? How did they create an overwhelming impression?
  3. [24] How does Thomas state that we have experienced the Planet in the recent past? What does it mean to treat everything as a collection of objects?
  4. What are some questions that he asks?
  5. What clues does he give to answering these questions?
  6. What are the traditions that he says will help us?
  7. What do you think he means by “transformed in the context of an emergent universe”?

[27] Read as an interlude.

10  
min.

- B. History of the Universe [27, 28 & 30]
1. Let’s turn our attention to what Thomas means by an “emergent universe”.
  2. What are some of the events that Thomas mentions from the history of the universe?
  3. What was the sequence that he says they happened in?
  4. How long of a time frame does he allow for all this?
  5. What other parts of the story would you add? Where are those parts in the sequence?

10 min.	<p>C. Creativity [31]</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Have someone read sentences 1 &amp; 2.</li> <li>2. How does he go on to say that this is our “sacred story”?</li> <li>3. What is another way of saying “sacred story”?</li> <li>4. How does he describe the human role in the universe?</li> <li>5. What would you add or question?</li> <li>6. Why is this concept of an “emergent universe” <u>crucial</u> to our new understanding of reality and our place as humans?</li> <li>7. What difference does it make?</li> <li>8. WOW!! – Take a stretch break, everybody stand up, wave your hands, stretch or make a noise like a bird.</li> </ol>
15 min.	<p>D. North American and European History [33 - 40]</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Let’s tell the story of the continent we live on. What were some of the events in the continent’s history that brought us here?</li> <li>2. What sequence did these happen in?</li> <li>3. What did the indigenous people know about living on this continent?</li> <li>4. When the Europeans came, how did everything change?</li> <li>5. Think back to the indigenous people, what inspiration might we draw from them about <u>reshaping</u> our attitudes about an integral community and <u>guiding</u> our behaviors?</li> </ol>
10 min.	<p>E. The Wild and the Sacred [48 &amp; 54]</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Read the first two sentences of [48].</li> <li>2. What are the choices that Thomas gives us?</li> <li>3. Where have you participated in the wildness of life ?</li> <li>4. How is what Thomas says about wildness different from our common understanding of it?</li> <li>5. What’s the relationship of the inner life and the outer world?</li> <li>6. What does Thomas say about this? How do you experience this interrelation?</li> </ol>
	<p><b>Closing:</b> Go back to [47]. Have someone read the paragraph.</p> <p>If you began to dream again, what might be some of the parts of your dream? Where would you be? What would you be doing?</p> <p>This week, pay attention to your daydreaming.</p> <p>Please read Section III for next week.</p>

## 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 & 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.

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## Session III: A New Way of Knowing

**Introductory Comments:** In this section Thomas Berry leads us on a journey into a new context for our thinking and acting – an Earth centered “norm of reality”.

10  
min.

A. An Earth-centered Norm [56 & 58]

1. Have someone read the first two sentences of [56]. This is what we will be exploring in this session.
2. How does Thomas talk about this earth-centered reality?
3. How does this provide a “satisfying referent”?
4. What does the author see as the human role on Planet Earth?
5. What do you do to act this out?
6. What else could you do?

10  
min.

B. A New Story [70]

1. What are the institutions which are responsible for passing on the norms to the next generation?
2. How are these organizations being deficient today?
3. What does Thomas say they should be doing?
4. What would you say they could be doing to be more effective?
5. Give some practical examples.

10  
min.

C. The University [72 & 77]

1. What does Thomas say about the role of the university?
2. Why is it deficient?
3. How has this deficit been passed on to you? Where did you learn this?
4. Historically, when did that come about and how?
5. What effect has this had on all of us?
6. What’s the alternative to this?



10 min.	<p>D. The Primary University [80 &amp; 82]</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. How does Thomas talk about the universe as the primary university?</li> <li>2. What are some examples? {The leaders will need to have at least one example themselves.}</li> <li>3. How does this affect the way we learn and teach?</li> <li>4. Specifically, one of the things he says we need to teach is “that the universe is composed of subjects to be communed with, not primarily of objects to be exploited.”</li> <li>5. If we embodied this, how would it change our behavior?</li> </ol>
10 min.	<p>E. Our Sacred Story [82 &amp; 85]</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What are some of the elements of the new story of the universe that Thomas is describing? Think back to what he has already mentioned.</li> <li>2. How is the new story different from previous stories?</li> <li>3. On a daily basis, what difference does it make which story of the universe we live out of?</li> <li>4. [85] “The universities must decide...” How do the universities need to rethink themselves in order to educate students for the future?</li> </ol>
10 min.	<p>F. Intimacy with the Local – Your Ecological Address [86 – 99]</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What are some of the topics that Thomas says geography covers?</li> <li>2. What would be some specific examples of these for you?</li> <li>3. Which places are your favorite places in our city, region?</li> <li>4. When Thomas says “To experience wonder and enter into <u>intimate relations</u> with the life communities”.</li> <li>5. Where, in your community or this bioregion, do you feel most intimate with your surroundings? (Share specific places.)</li> <li>6. How is that intimacy revealed for you? (Share a few.)</li> </ol>
	<p><b>Closing:</b> Have someone read the last sentence of the excerpt for this week.</p> <p>What are you going to do DIFFERENTLY this week?</p> <p>Please read Section IV for next week.</p>

## 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.

...

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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## Session IV: How to Decide

5 min.	<p><b>Introductory Report:</b> What are some things you did this past week to discover intimacy with your surroundings?</p>
15 min.	<p>A. Macrophase Ethics [100 - 106]</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Read the first 4 sentences out loud.</li> <li>2. What other words or phrases does Thomas use to further describe this new situation?</li> <li>3. What are some current examples of this phenomenon?</li> <li>4. What are some of the characteristics of the new ethic that he mentions?</li> <li>5. [106] Where, in the past year, have you seen or experienced a “new revelatory experience” taking place? (e.g. polar bear on the ice block)</li> </ol>
10 min.	<p>B. New Alignment [107 &amp; 109]</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What is the shift in alignment that Thomas describes?</li> <li>2. How does he say that our dominant professions and institutions are functioning?</li> <li>3. What are some examples where you have seen this?</li> <li>4. How have you chosen to become a part of this new alignment?</li> </ol>
10 min.	<p>C. Lifestyle Change [110 &amp; 113]</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Have someone read the first two sentences out loud.</li> <li>2. What are some problems that the current lifestyle is causing?</li> <li>3. What are some local examples? Some personal examples of how you find yourself participating in the old mode?</li> <li>4. What are the problems beyond the physical realm?</li> <li>5. Give some examples of these.</li> <li>6. What is Thomas calling for in this section?</li> <li>7. What is the new awareness that is emerging?</li> </ol>

15 min.	<p>D. A Sustainable Mode [114 &amp; 116]</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What does Thomas say is CENTRAL to a sustainable mode?</li> <li>2. What are some ways that we can tie together (reunite) the inner spirit and outer form?</li> <li>3. What are some of the elements of your inner vision? {Give time for several people to answer.}</li> <li>4. How are you enhancing your intimacy with the other components of the planet?</li> <li>5. How does this bring fulfillment to you as well as the other elements?</li> <li>6. Thomas uses the phrase “this is a commitment”. What does this mean for you? For the groups that you are a part of?</li> </ol>
5 min.	<p><b>Closing:</b> Have someone read the last three sentences.</p> <p>Think about these during the week – how might your profession or workplace be “reinvented”?</p> <p>Please read Section V for next week.</p>

## 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

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## Session V: The End of an Era

**Introductory Comments:** In this section Thomas Berry focuses on the role that corporations play in shaping our consciousness and our lives.

10  
min.

- A. The Role of the Corporation [117 & 119]
1. Look over sections [117] and [119]. Here Thomas gives his critique of corporations in the US.
  2. What are some of his criticisms? Give examples of these.
  3. Why are these kinds of actions a problem for the Planet?
  4. How have corporations invaded human consciousness?
  5. Why is this a problem for individuals?

10  
min.

- B. The History of Corporate America [121- 127]
1. In order to understand how we got into the current situation, Thomas always takes us on an historical journey.
  2. What was the early settlers' relationship to North America?
  3. How did the corporations deal with the natural world? Give examples.
  4. Who had the latent appreciation of the continent for its wonder and inspiration?
  5. 5. Who are some writers, poets, artists who have influenced you?

10  
min.

- C. The Emerging Understanding [132 - 134]
1. What are some corporations finally beginning to realize?
  2. Where have you seen examples of this?
  3. What are some essential things that you do locally that don't require buy-in to a distant corporation?
  4. Read aloud the last two sentences in [134].

10 min.	<p>D. The Extractive Economy [136 - 140]</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. So ...what are the 3 defining moments that led us to our global situation at the end of the Twentieth Century?</li> <li>2. With each of these events – <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i) What really happened?</li> <li>ii) What were the people dealing with at the time?</li> <li>iii) How did it contribute to our present situation?</li> </ol> </li> <li>3. What is the real problem with the extractive economy?</li> <li>4. A psychic compulsion developed. [140] How does Thomas describe it?</li> <li>5. How would you describe what happened?</li> </ol>
10 min.	<p>E. The Petroleum Interval [150 - 157]</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What does Thomas mean when he says “The Petroleum Interval”?</li> <li>2. What are some things that happened in the Petroleum Interval that could not have happened before?</li> <li>3. What were some of the assumptions of the Petroleum Interval?</li> <li>4. How did it fail in its purpose?</li> <li>5. What does Thomas suggest is the alternative to the Petroleum Interval? Describe this alternative in your own words.</li> </ol>
10 min.	<p><b>Closing:</b> Look back at [149]</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What does Thomas envision as the great discoveries of the future? How might these manifest themselves?</li> <li>2. What inklings do you have about these discoveries?</li> <li>3. How might you help the next generation move in this direction?</li> </ol> <p>Homework: Try to figure out what Thomas means with the word “Numinous”. Why would he want to use this word instead of other words he might have used? We’ll discuss this next week.</p> <p>Please read Section VI for next week.</p>

## 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-aided 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.

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## Session VI: The Species-Level Change

**Introductory Comments:** After our five previous sessions with Thomas, he pulls everything together in this final section. For a change, this time, we'll start in the middle and come back to the beginning of this section.

15  
min.

- A. Participate in Creativity [166 - 175]
1. Read the first sentence of this section.
  2. What would be some examples of this?
  3. What's the shortcoming of machine-made products?
  4. What's the shortcoming of the myth of evolution according to Thomas?
  5. How does he say we need to understand the process of evolutionary change?
  6. What are the three "governing principles" that guide this?
  7. Where have you seen these manifested in your day-to-day activities?
  8. How does this spiritual renewal become an invigorating perspective?
  9. What is emerging? How is this hope-filled?

10  
min.

- B. Draw on Four Wisdom Traditions [176 - 195]
1. What does Thomas say are the four wisdom traditions that are available to us to guide us into the future?
  2. For each of these traditions – what can we learn from them that will guide us into our desired future?

5  
min.

- C. A Moment of Significance [196 - 201]
1. In this section, how does Thomas talk about the significance of our time?
  2. Why does he say that this is such a momentous time?
  3. Now – let's go back to Chapter 14 and see what Thomas outlines for us to do in this transitory moment.

30 min.	<p>D. Re-invent the Human [159 - 165]</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Have someone read the first paragraph of [159].</li> <li>2. Give everyone a few minutes to write down on their worksheet their own words to describe each of the phrases in Thomas' sentence as well as practical ways these might be embodied.</li> <li>3. Have everybody share some of their phrases.</li> <li>4. Have everybody share some of their actions. {Write these on flipcharts if possible.}</li> <li>5. In your own words – what is the Great Work of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century?</li> </ol>
	<p><b>Closing:</b> Thinking back over this 6-week session --</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. People know you've been reading this book. What would you tell them it is about?</li> <li>2. If you were going to make an advertising slogan for this, something that would motivate people to get involved – what would it be?</li> </ol> <p>Have someone read aloud the last paragraph of [165].</p> <p>Conclude with the comment that: “Indeed, herein lies our hope for the future for ourselves and for the entire Earth community.”</p>

## Session VI: The Species-Level Change

Excerpts from Chapters 14, 15, 16 & 17

Of *The Great Work* by Thomas Berry

### Chapter 14: Reinventing the Human

[159] We might describe the challenge before us by the following sentence. The historical mission of our times is to reinvent the human – at the species level, with critical reflection, within the community of life-systems, in a time-developmental context, by means of story and shared dream experience.

I say *reinvent the human* because humans, more than any other living form, invent themselves. Other species receive their basic life instructions at the time of their birth. With this endowment they know how to obtain their food, how to defend themselves, how to obtain shelter, how to carry on their mating rituals, how to care for their young. ... Many animal species need to be taught how to hunt. Yet this is minimal if compared to the extent of teaching and acculturation that humans need to arrive at maturity. That acculturation process is the purpose of the long childhood distinctive of humans.

[160] We need to reinvent the human *at the species level* because the issues we are concerned with seem to be beyond the competence of our present cultural traditions, either individually or collectively. What is needed is something beyond existing traditions to bring us back to the most fundamental aspect of the human: giving shape to ourselves. The human is at a cultural impasse. In our efforts to reduce the other-than-human components of the planet to subservience to our Western cultural expression, we have brought the entire set of life-systems of the planet, including the human, to an extremely dangerous situation. Radical new cultural forms are needed. These new cultural forms would place the human

within the dynamics of the planet rather than place the planet within the dynamics of the human.

[161] Thirdly, I say *with critical reflection* because this reinventing of the human needs to be done with critical competence. Originally there was a certain instinctive, spontaneous process whereby the early cultural formations were established. Now we need all our scientific insight and technological skills. We must, however, see that our sciences and technologies are coherent with the technologies of the natural world. Our knowledge needs to be in harmony with the natural world rather than a domination of the natural world. ...

Fourth, we need to reinvent the human *within the community of life systems*. This is the central phrase, the primary condition for reinventing the human. Because the Earth is not adequately understood either by our spiritual or by our scientific traditions, the human has become an addendum or an intrusion. We have found this situation to our liking since it enables us to avoid the problem of integral presence to the Earth. This attitude prevents us from considering the Earth as a single community with ethical relations determined primarily by the well-being of the total Earth community.

[162] Fifth, reinventing the human must take place *in a time-developmental context*. This constitutes what might be called the cosmological-historical dimension of the program I am outlining here. Our sense of who we are and what our role is must begin where the universe begins. Not only does our physical shaping and spiritual perception begin with the origin of the universe, so too does the formation of every being in the universe. This human formation is governed

by three basic principles: differentiation, subjectivity, and communion.

[164] The final aspect of our statement concerning the ethical imperative of our times is *by means of the shared dream experience*. The creative process, whether in the human or the cosmological order, is too mysterious for easy explanation. Yet we all have experience of creative activity. Since human processes involve much trial and error with only occasional success at any high level of distinction, we may well believe that the cosmological process has also passed through a vast period of experimentation in order to achieve the ordered processes of our present universe. In both instances something is perceived in a dim and uncertain manner, something radiant with meaning that draws us on to a further clarification of our understanding and our activity. This process can be described in many ways, as a groping or as a feeling or imaginative process. The most appropriate way of describing this process seems to be that of dream realization. The universe seems to be the fulfillment of something so highly imaginative and so overwhelming that it must have been dreamed into existence.

[165] Such is our present situation. We are involved not simply with an ethical issue but with a disturbance sanctioned by the very structures of the culture itself in its present phase. The governing dream of the twentieth century appears as a kind of ultimate manifestation of that deep inner rage of Western society against its earthly condition as a vital member of the life community. As with the goose that laid the golden egg, so the Earth is assaulted in a vain effort to possess not simply the magnificent fruits of the Earth but the power itself whereby these splendors have emerged.

At such a moment a new revelatory experience is needed, an experience wherein human consciousness awakens to the grandeur and sacred quality of the Earth process. This awakening is our human participation in the dream of the Earth, the dream that is carried in its integrity not in any of the Earth's

cultural expressions but in the depths of our genetic coding. Therein the Earth functions at a depth beyond our capacity for active thought. We can only be sensitized to what is being revealed to us. We probably have not had such participation in the dream of the Earth since earlier shamanic times, but therein lies our hope for the future for ourselves and for the entire Earth community.

## Chapter 15: The Dynamics of the Future

[166] As we enter the twenty-first century we observe a widespread awakening to the wonder of the earth. . . .

The human venture depends absolutely on this quality of awe and reverence and joy in the Earth and all that lives and grows upon the Earth. As soon as we isolate ourselves from these currents of life and from the profound mood that these engender within us, then our basic life-satisfactions are diminished. None of our machine-made products, none of our computer-based achievements can evoke that total commitment to life from the subconscious regions of our being that is needed to sustain the Earth and carry both ourselves and the integral Earth community into the hazardous future.

[168] In more recent times we have replaced these earlier mythic structures first with the myth of continuing and inevitable progress, then with the myth of evolution.

[169] This myth of progress supplanted the earlier myths of personal presences manifested throughout the natural world. At this same time we lost the world of meaning in an evolutionary world governed by chance without direction or higher significance, a world of emergent process that would eventually come to be spoken of as the work of a "blind watchmaker," as in Richard Dawkins's book *The Blind Watchmaker*. Yet a different interpretation of the data of evolution is available. We need merely

understand that the evolutionary process is neither random nor determined but creative. It follows the general pattern of all creativity. While there is no way of fully understanding the origin moment of the universe we can appreciate the direction of evolution in its larger arc of development as moving from lesser to great complexity in structure and from lesser to greater modes of consciousness. We can also understand the governing principles of evolution in terms of its three movements toward differentiation, inner spontaneity, and comprehensive bonding.

With this understanding it would be difficult to overemphasize the magnificence of this evolutionary doctrine. It provides a grandeur in our view of the universe and our human role in it that is overwhelming. Indeed, in its human expression the universe is able to reflect on itself and enjoy its grandeur in a special mode of conscious self-awareness. The evolutionary vision provides the most profound mystique of the universe.

[174] ...While our sense of the sacred can never be recovered precisely as it existed in former centuries, it can be recovered in the mystique of the Earth, in the epic of evolution. Spiritual disciplines are once again being renewed throughout the world. For some the ultimate mystery of things is experienced in the depth of the inner self, for others in the human community, for still others in the Earth process itself. Yet in each instance the full sense of communion seems to be present. A way is opening for each person to receive the total spiritual heritage of the human community as well as the total spiritual heritage of the universe. Within this context the religious antagonisms of the past can be overcome, the particular traditions can be vitalized, and the feeling of presence to a sacred universe can appear once more to dynamize and sustain human affairs.

[175] We are not lacking in the dynamic forces needed to create the future. We live immersed in a sea of energy beyond all comprehension. But this energy, in an ultimate sense, is ours not by domination but by invocation.

## Chapter 16: The Fourfold Wisdom

[176] In these opening years of the twenty-first century, as the human community experiences a rather difficult situation in its relation with the natural world, we might reflect that a fourfold wisdom is available to guide us into the future: the wisdom of indigenous peoples, the wisdom of women, the wisdom of the classical traditions, and the wisdom of science. We need to consider these wisdom traditions in terms of their distinctive functioning, in the historical periods of their florescence, and in their common support for the emerging age when humans will be a mutually enhancing presence on the Earth.

Indigenous wisdom, which extends far back into the Paleolithic Period, survives even into the present among the 200 million indigenous peoples. The wisdom of women, which flourished throughout the Neolithic Period, is now experiencing a reassertion of itself in a new form. The wisdom of the urban classical literate traditions had its beginning some five thousand years ago and was the most powerful force in human cultural formation until it was challenged by the scientific tradition of more recent times. Science as a wisdom tradition is only in its beginning phase, even though scientific knowledge has advanced with amazing success ever since the sixteenth century.

[193] After considering the wisdom of indigenous peoples, the wisdom of women, the wisdom of the traditions, and the wisdom of science, it seems quite clear that these all agree in the intimacy of humans with the natural world in a single community of existence. The human emerges from the larger universe and discovers itself in this universe. This we find expressed throughout the life and thought and ritual of indigenous peoples. In the wisdom of women it is found in the description of the universe as a mutually nourishing presence of all things with each other. Such is the view of the

universe presented in the Goddess figure and other symbolisms. After being excluded from so much of the human world over the centuries, women are revealing the disaster of androcentrism to our society for the first time in Western history.

[195] ... This was a movement out of a patriarchal society into a truly integral human order. So too the traditional Western civilization must withdraw from its efforts at dominion over the Earth. This will be one of the most severe disciplines in the future, for the Western addiction to economic dominance is even more powerful than the drive toward political dominance.

Then, finally, there is the epic of evolution, the contribution of science toward the future. The universe story is our story, individually and as the human community. In this context we can feel secure in our efforts to fulfill the Great Work before us. The guidance, the inspiration and the energy we need is available. The accomplishment of the Great Work is the task not simply of the human community but of the entire planet Earth. Even beyond Earth, it is the Great Work of the universe itself.

## Chapter 17: Moments of Grace

[196] As we enter the twenty-first century, we are experiencing a moment of grace. Such moments are privileged moments. The great transformations of the universe occur at such times. The future is defined in some enduring pattern of its functioning.

There are cosmological and historical moments of grace as well as religious moments of grace. The present is one of those moments of transformation that can be

considered as a cosmological, as well as a historical and a religious moment of grace.

[201] We are now experiencing a moment of significance far beyond what any of us can imagine. What can be said is that the foundations of a new historical period, the Ecozoic Era, have been established in every realm of human affairs. The mythic vision has been set into place. The distorted dream of an industrial technological paradise is being replaced by the more viable dream of a mutually enhancing human presence within an ever-renewing organic-based Earth community. The dream drives the action. In the larger cultural context the dream becomes the myth that both guides and drives the action.

But even as we make our transition into this new century we must note that moments of grace are transient moments. The transformation must take place within a brief period. Otherwise it is gone forever. In the immense story of the universe, that so many of these dangerous moments have been navigated successfully is some indication that the universe is for us rather than against us. We need only summon these forces to our support in order to succeed. It is difficult to believe that the purposes of the universe or of the planet Earth will ultimately be thwarted, although the human challenge to these purposes must never be underestimated.

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## Additional Opportunities

**Read** other books by Thomas Berry:

*Dream of the Earth*, Sierra Club Books, 1988: In listening to the dream of the Earth, the reader begins to share with the Earth a new vision for the unfolding tomorrow.

With Brian Swimme; *Universe Story – A Celebration of the Unfolding of the Cosmos*; Harper San Francisco, 1994. From the Primal Flaring Forth, across 15 billion years of time to the emergence Eozoic Era, *The Universe Story* narrates the unfolding transitions of the universe as we know it today. By combining the best of modern science with the depth wisdom of contemporary society, the authors weave an inspiring narrative of the creative process that permeates all aspects of the natural and human worlds.

*Evening Thoughts*, Sierra Club Books, 2006: A collection of essays celebrating the human presence within the community of life systems.

**Take** the Universe Story Walk: this ½-mile pathway through upland woods near the Piedmont Triad Airport tells the 14-billion year history of the Universe in a series of brief readings – one for every billion years. Phone (336) 605-0143 to make an appointment for individuals or groups. Email [StoverN@Bellsouth.Net](mailto:StoverN@Bellsouth.Net) to arrange a time to take the Universe Story Walk.

**Study** additional papers by F. Nelson Stover on the themes introduced in *The Great Work* are available from [www.greenschemesnc.com/culture](http://www.greenschemesnc.com/culture). Mr. Stover is available for presentations to groups and can provide training in leading seminars on these topics.



## The Study Guide Preparation Team

**F. Nelson Stover** – cultural engineer. Nelson received his Bachelor of Science degree from Purdue University and completed his graduate work at Chicago Theological Seminary. Currently he works as a senior application specialist for a North Carolina based company providing computer software to professional associations. He serves as President of the Institute of Cultural Affairs International Board of Directors. A collection of 60 of his poems entitled *The Rocks Sang Om* was illustrated and published in Nepal and sold internationally with the proceeds being used for women's literacy training in the Himalayan foothills. He also designs and leads courses dealing with contemporary social issues and the individual journey to profound consciousness. Mr. Stover has lectured in Australia, Bangladesh, Belgium, Canada, India, Nepal, the Netherlands, Sweden and across the US. Now residing in Greensboro, NC, Nelson can be reached at [StoverN@BellSouth.Net](mailto:StoverN@BellSouth.Net).

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## I Do Declare

Refrain:

I do declare. I do declare:

I see Beauty,  
Awe and Wonder  
Everywhere.

I do declare. I do declare:

Ours is an *emerging* reality –  
Newness comes from nothingness,  
Now transforms into then,  
This and that become it.  
Creativity is everywhere.

Refrain

We live amidst a *communion* of subjects –  
Each has the right to life,  
All have a gift to give,  
Each one relates to all.  
Selfhood pervades the Universe.

Refrain

Each can experience the *oneness* of it all.  
Sometimes in the stillness,  
Or in the blazing light,  
Or in a dark despair,  
The walls of separation dissolve.

Refrain

Each one *participates* in shaping tomorrow  
Decisions forge the new,  
Actions shape history,  
Ideas manifest.  
Together we build community.

Refrain



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