

## 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.