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## **THE MYSTIQUE OF THE EARTH** **The Vision of Thomas Berry for an Earth Democracy**

**Thomas Berry is interviewed by Caroline Webb**

' I have been having coffee with *Confucius*, for heaven's sake. This person is as giant a thinker as Confucius – and I've been having coffee with him!' Speaking at a conference in Berkeley California in November 2002, cosmologist Brian Swimme recalls his astonishment after his first meeting in 1982 with the person who has emerged as one of the leading thinkers of the world, and who became his primary mentor and co-worker: Thomas Berry. The description seems apt. As the seminal influence of this American monk, philosopher, cultural historian, poet and teacher continues to expand into all fields of society, it would seem that Berry's contribution is most especially that of a visionary. Visionaries and prophets are known for their interference with complacent social beliefs and Thomas is no exception. His call to us – whatever the field we work in – is to come off the pedestal of human superiority over nature and expand our horizons far beyond our anthropocentrism, all the way out to the stars. Emphasizing time and again that the real context for all human affairs is the universe which gave birth to us, Berry's life work has been to call humanity into a new partnership with the Earth, imbued with reverence and wonder, which he describes as 'a mutually enhancing relationship and presence'. In that altered relationship and presence lies the key to a true sustainability for all life, far into the future.

Now 87, with three books to his name that address fundamental issues of our relationship with the cosmos and with Earth, Berry's creativity is undiminished. Preferring the title of 'geologist' to that of 'theologian', and having been heard many times to call for the Bible to be placed on a shelf for twenty years while attention is paid to the 'primary sacrament', namely the Universe itself, Thomas is now busy with generating ideas and principles by which our legal structures and thinking may be altered. Jurisprudence – the philosophy of law and the assumptions couched in all national constitutions, written or unwritten – has become his primary focus for tackling the deep-rooted causes of human destruction of nature.

Caroline Webb met Thomas Berry and discussed his work on creating an ‘Earth jurisprudence’ at a conference held in honour of his work in Berkeley, California called *The Cosmological Imagination: Transforming World Views for the Planetary Era*.

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***Caroline Webb: As Caduceus is a magazine concerned with healing, transformation and wholeness, I'd like to start with asking how you approach the question of healing – whether for an individual, a community or the planet. What do you see as its essence?***

Thomas Berry: Healing presupposes the integral unity of things. What is the context of healing? Human health is a subsystem of the Earth's health. You cannot have well humans on a sick planet. And that is what we are trying to do, with all our technologies: we are trying to have well humans on a sick planet. The same principle applies for economics: you cannot have a viable human economy by destroying the Earth's economy. So a person could apply this in different ways. Everything we have is derivative from the larger community out of which we come and to which or in which we are fulfilled.

***We have a sense of spirituality that is still very anthropocentric, and your interest in an Earth jurisprudence gives me a different sense about what it means to be spiritual***

We talk about spirituality but first of all humans are not spirits. That's why I don't use the word 'spirit' or 'spirituality' much. 'Spirit' has no inner reference to body, or to matter. We are ensouled beings. The soul is that vital principle in a living organic body, and all living beings are ensouled beings. Humans have an intelligent soul, a soul that is capable of reflecting on itself and on the deeper aspects of the universe. In the human it's not so much that we know the universe, but the universe knows itself *in* us. And in a certain sense we could apply this to every aspect of things – like 'governance'. The human has been trying to establish a human governance out of its own needs, or its own functioning, but in reality human governance is a function of the universe, particularly of planet Earth, so planet Earth is the unit of governance. The ecology issue emerges

out of the fact that humans have been constructing a government for humans, by humans and with its destiny in developing the human – but that won't work because if the human is looking for its own benefit rather than the benefit of the larger community, if we become predators on the natural community, then we lose in every way.

The American constitution is a disaster for everything that is not human. It may be wonderful for humans to have all these rights, including rights of property without restriction on the part of government as to what they own or what they do with it, but if there are no rights and no protections for anything that is not human, then we establish a predator relationship. And so humans in this country are just devouring *everything* – because that's what this constitution stands for – for humans to devour, to manipulate, to *use*. So the whole idea of humans being *human* is gone. We've been caught up in a mechanistic world, because what we make, *makes us*. We make the automobile, the automobile *makes us*. We make an industrial economy, the industrial economy *makes us*. We are now in a weird dream world of industrial technological imagination. Who would be so destructive to the very basis out of which we exist, that we spoil our water and our air? For what? To invent an industrial economy. We are so brilliant scientifically and so absurd in any other way. We are into a deep cultural pathology – in ordinary language, we are crazy. To think that we can have a viable human economy by destroying the Earth economy is absurd.

***I see what you mean, but the whole world is currently committed to the idea that not only is an industrial economy inevitable but it is a positive benefit. It seems to be the only way we can think of 'progress'.***

We have all grown up with the indoctrination of industrial processes and we don't know anything else; we are captured by this pathology. We present our whole industrial process as *benign*, as a benefit, as the only way to go, when it is obviously so inhuman. It distorts education, political life, economics and all aspects of the community's existence.

What I am proposing is the development of an integral human order *within* the order of the planet Earth: that we begin to think of an integral relationship of every aspect of existence with all other aspects, because in the design of Nature things are inherently supportive of other things.

It's a question of developing a qualitative relationship instead of a quantitative one. We are so quantitatively oriented that we see the planet Earth as a natural resource to be used. That's the basic distortion of modern times that comes from Descartes who said there is only 'mind' and 'matter' – with humans being the only ones with 'mind'. So the idea arose that there is no living principle in living organisms: it's just a mechanistic process that biologists would say is an 'emergent property' of matter. And if there is nothing 'there' then obviously it is something to be used. But as soon as the person begins to think of living beings as 'ensouled' beings and thinks of the planet as a qualitative presence, *to be communed with* primarily, not simply as a natural resource to be used, then we can restore the key element in human-earth relationships that has been distorted in the West ever since the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries.

***How does one make a living, how does one survive without in some way using what's around us? Are you saying we shouldn't be using nature?***

We can't survive without using what's around us but we have to do it in such a way that we recognize this mystique of the community of the Earth. It is time to step back and find the human place in the natural world and not think that we can make the human world primary and the natural world secondary. We have got to say to ourselves, 'Let's begin to try to understand the natural world and find a way of prospering the natural world *first*.' Then find our survival within that context. Because if we think we can put ourselves first and then fit the natural world into our programme, it's not going to work. We have got to fit the human project into the Earth project. That is what I am suggesting with Law. You have got to fit human law into the structure and functioning of planet Earth.

***So being aware of that mystique would make all the difference?***

All the difference in the world. In other words it's the mystique of the mountains and the birds, the sea – it's what makes us sing. It's what makes our literature. Even though we have worked out a mechanics that is fairly helpful, it doesn't give us an interior world. The natural world gives us an interior world. It gives us a healing presence, a fulfilling presence. By the term 'presence' I mean that indwelling quality that manifests itself throughout the natural world. We find this awesome presence in the sun and moon and stars in the heavens, in the mountains and seas of Earth, in the dawn and sunset, in the forests and meadows and wildlife. We are immersed in an ever-renewing wonder-world that evokes our music and dance, our poetry and literature as well as our philosophical reflection and our scientific inquiry. None of our industrial productions brings such inspiration as we obtain from these sources.

So, even if we use solar energy, without some mystique of the Sun and the Earth, it won't work. We should do away with the light pollution in cities so that children and all of us can see the stars. Our children don't have the experience of seeing the stars, and they are crippled, emotionally and in other ways. And that's the danger of putting children into this context of computers and machines, because what we make, makes us. Children don't have contact with anything natural, they don't wander through the meadows and see butterflies, fireflies, lizards and frogs and so they do not have contact with reality – they are living in an artificial world. The greater difficulty is not the physical damage to our lungs from industrial pollution; it is what is happening to our souls, our minds and our emotions.

***You are developing a response to these problems with your work on creating a jurisprudence for the Earth. Can you tell me what this is about?***

It comes from the realization that we cannot carry out an environmental programme within the present legal structures of our society. We are actually re-thinking law within the context of Earth as a whole, so that we are into a world democracy, or what Vandana Shiva calls 'Earth democracy', which means that every component of the community of Earth needs to have its say, and to find its place and needs a spokesperson. There is no such thing as a human community

separate from the Earth community, and to legislate simply in relation to humans, in an isolated context, giving all rights to humans, is unrealistic. The planet Earth functions as an integral community and no part of that community can be guided in its activities except with reference to the total community. Just like a body cannot function in some parts without integration with all the other parts. That's why in economics, human economy is an extension of Earth economy. So with political affairs, human legislation must insert itself into the structural functioning of the planet Earth. If we have a Bill of Rights for humans, we should have a Bill of Rights for the natural world because otherwise it's a distortion.

***So the principles you have written would become a foundation for constitutions and actual laws?***

Yes. The basic idea of what I have written should be in the prologue of every constitution. Instead of 'We, the people of this country ordain this and that...', it would be a question of: 'We the people, recognizing ourselves as a member of this great Earth Community, hereby do this and that, with responsibility not only to ourselves but to the integral community of the planet Earth'. This would be the prologue, the basis of everything that follows.

Practically speaking, the principles of Earth jurisprudence cover the four basic establishments that rule our lives: the government-legal, the economic, the educational and the religious. Each of these functions in this larger context. Religion is founded on this deep meaning that is conveyed by the mysterious functioning of the universe that surrounds us, by the stars in the heavens and by all the wonders of Earth. So in economics, human economy functions in integral relationship with the Earth economy. And the same with government: Government must function in relationship with the governing principles that are observed throughout the planet. And then education must be primarily an awakening in the human mind to the teachings of the universe.

***Some critics of ecological philosophy say that we are advocating that we go back to a pre-industrial stage. Are you saying it is not a technological future?***

No, it *is* a technological future – but with a difference from how we are doing things today. We can never go back to being pre-industrial. But we can think of being *post*-industrial. The way to look at it is to have human technologies that are *coherent* with Earth technologies. It's the coherence – that is, the proper interplay and their mutual interaction – that fosters *both* the natural systems and the human systems. We need to work out patterns of interaction where the human and the natural world interact creatively. We need a mutually beneficial mode of human presence on the planet Earth. For instance, we should *improve* the fertility of the land rather than dis-improve it by exploiting it. That's the criminal aspect of our whole chemical cultivation of the soil.

***Are there initiatives taking place that reflect the ideas you are speaking of here?***

Yes, many. To mention a few that I know: Richard Register, an architect in California doing new designs for cities; John and Nancy Todd in Burlington, Vermont who have worked out ways for dealing with human waste through artificially constructed wetlands; Wes Jackson in Kansas who is restoring the native prairie grasses that has potential for helping with our food problem. Then religiously there is Miriam Therese McGillis and her Eco-Literacy farm, Genesis Farm in New Jersey. And there is Liz Hosken of the Gaia Foundation in London who organized a meeting in April 2001 based originally on my principles for a new jurisprudence at the Airlie Conference Center outside Washington. A group of people involved in the law and with indigenous peoples came together from South Africa, Britain, Colombia, Canada and the United States. The outcome of that meeting is *Wild Law*, an excellent book on Earth jurisprudence written by environmental lawyer, Cormac Cullinan, which was launched at the World Summit for Sustainable Development in Capetown 2002.

***You frequently place your ideas in the context of 'cosmology', but many people I meet do not understand this word. What, in our contemporary situation, does it mean?***

Well, a better word is 'comprehensive community'. The universe is a community of subjects, not a collection of objects. It is intimate. Every aspect is intimately present to all other aspects. With varying styles, various techniques, humans have always understood this. Seeing the universe as a

great cosmic liturgy, they always validated the human by a ritual insertion of the human into the universe, into the cosmological order. This is done at transforming moments, and humans have always had springtime rituals, summer harvest rituals and the winter solstice at the moment of decline. This is the order of the universe and ritual is the way in which humans establish their basic rapport with the natural world in visible form.

Transformation moments are sacred moments. It's like the day-night ritual. As the night draws on, the body quiets down and the mind and the emotions become very sensitive and aware of the more spiritual moments or the more meaningful qualitative moments in inter-human relations and in human-Earth relations and in human-Cosmos relations. We become aware of the vastness of the universe and of our relationship with it. At transformation moments the small self meets the great Self. Everything in the universe is necessary for each part of the universe. So everything in the universe has two modes: its particular mode and its universal mode, because we are present to the whole universe, as the physicist says, 'without passing through the intervening space'. That's one of the most remarkable discoveries of physics, and it's one of the least understood, how things are present to – and influencing each other – without passing through the intervening space. So I would say, the appreciation of that makes the difference between someone who is humanly more fulfilled and more true and more developed, and those who are in some manner unfulfilled, because they cannot be fulfilled within 'mechanism'. It is that subjective presence of things to each other.

Indigenous people still live in a universe, but we don't; we live in an economic system. We've got all kinds of scientists but we don't have a universe. There is an Earth out there, but for us it's just a collection of resources to be exploited. It's got no dignity. But really it is a communication of wonder.

Let me recite a poem I wrote about children. It expresses what I mean about 'cosmology':

The child awakens to the universe  
 The mind of the child to a world of wonder  
 Imagination to a world of beauty  
 Emotions to a world of intimacy

It takes a universe to make a child  
 Both in outer form and inner spirit  
 It takes a universe to educate a child  
 It takes a universe to fulfill a child

And the first obligation of any generation to its children  
 Is to bring these two together  
 So that the child is fulfilled in the universe  
 And the universe is fulfilled in the child

While the stars ring out in the Heavens

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### References

1. Berry, Thomas, *The Dream of the Earth*, Sierra Club Books, San Francisco, 1988  
 Berry, Thomas and Swimme, Brian, *The Universe Story: From the Primordial Flaring Forth to the Ecozoic Era*, Harper Collins, San Francisco, 1992  
 Berry, Thomas, *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future*, Bell Tower, New York, 1999
2. The conference was organized by the Philosophy, Cosmology and Consciousness faculty of the California Institute of Integral Studies in November 2002. See [www.ciis.edu/pcc/](http://www.ciis.edu/pcc/)
3. Thomas Berry has formulated these principles in *The Origin, Differentiation and Role of Rights*, which is available on the website version of this article.

4. Cullinan, Cormac, *Wild Law* , SiberInk, South Africa, 2002 . This book may be obtained through [www.earthjurisprudence.net](http://www.earthjurisprudence.net)

#### CALLOUTS

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