

# THOMAS BERRY

## a Spirit in the Smokies Interview



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Thomas Berry, now in his 80's, is a Catholic monk and independent thinker who has gained the attention and respect of leaders in fields as diverse as education, economics, ecology, philosophy, politics, science, religion and history. He is considered a mentor to many influential thinkers and has written a number of books including ***The Religions of India*** (1972), ***The Dream of the Earth***, (1988) published by Sierra Club Books and one with physicist Brian Swimme entitled ***The Universe Story: From the Primordial Flaring Forth to the Ecozoic Era, A***

***Celebration of the Unfolding of the Cosmos*** (1992).

An interview in Newsweek (June 5, 1989) called Berry "The most provocative figure among this new breed of eco-theologians." Rather than a theologian, Berry considers himself a cosmologist and geologist (Earth scholar). According to Webster's Dictionary, theology is "the study of God and the relations between God and the Universe; the study of religious doctrine and matters of divinity." "Cosmology", on the other hand, is the "theory or philosophy of the nature and principles of the Universe."

What is so profound about Berry's work is his recognition that the only way to understand and therefore effectively function as individuals and as a species, is to understand the history and functioning of the universe itself. "I am trying to establish a functional cosmology not a theology." What he means by this "functional cosmology" is intriguing . . . as is what led him to his ideas.

Born in Greensboro, North Carolina in 1914, Berry was third of 13 children. Raised with "healthy neglect" (he says with a chuckle), Berry was able to spend a great deal of time exploring and thinking about his surroundings with a certain

measure of freedom. By age eight, he had concluded that the commercial values, which he saw our culture turning towards, were threatening life on the planet as he knew it.

At age 11 he had an epiphany experience in nature, which was to be his reference point for the rest of his life. "I walked down a ways from the new house we were moving into, across a creek and into a meadow I'd never seen before." Berry talked quietly about experiencing the powers of life "that inspire a person to a commitment to life itself...powers to heal and of imagination...an experience that provokes a deeper understanding of the full range of creation." Later he would rely on the "apprehension" of that setting to conclude that "a good economic system is one that would preserve that meadow and that a good religion is one that would reveal the deeper experience of that meadow...and how it came into being." Berry reflects, "It was a wonder world that I have carried in my unconscious and that has evolved all my thinking."

At age 20, Berry entered a monastery of the Passionist order. "I recognized I couldn't survive in the world the way it was becoming. I joined the monastery to escape from a world that was becoming crassly commercial world and to find meaning." The monastery tradition was aligned with the wider rhythms of nature--the daily rituals of prayer reflecting the diurnal cycle, the seasonal liturgy reflecting the seasonal cycles. Steeping himself in the scholarship of philosophies and cultures worldwide, Berry came to realize that to understand "meaning" requires an understanding of "context". Berry began examining the history of cultures with particular reference to the foundations of these cultures and their relations with the natural world. His study was extensive and took him to other parts of the world.

Achieving a doctoral degree in history from the Catholic University of America, he studied Chinese language and culture in China and learned Sanskrit for the study of India and its religious traditions. Later he assisted in an educational program for the T'boli tribal peoples of South Cotabataon, a Philippine island, and he taught the cultural history of India and China at universities in New Jersey and New York from 1956-1965. Later he was director of the graduate program in the History of Religions at Fordham University, from 1966 until 1979. In 1970 he founded the Riverdale Center of Religious Research in Riverdale, New York and was its director until 1995. Berry also studied the work of Teilhard de Chardin and was president of the American Teilhard Association from 1975 until 1987.

In Berry's search for meaning, he was attempting to answer three primary questions; "Where are we? How did we get here? and What to do about it?" With particular reference to survival of the natural world, he first looked to the context of long-lived cultures for perspectives that could be applied today. What he emphasizes is that the universe itself is the ultimate context within which to understand and orient the rest. "We are trying to

make the human self-referent and everything else human-referent. Yet, the cosmos itself is the only self-reference and must be at the heart of all our systems - the political, economic, educational and religious.

What Berry is saying is that we must understand the natural laws and systems of Earth/Life/Creation and reconfigure our human cultural systems accordingly. "To have any human economy, it must be based on the earth economy. To have a human economy that destroys the earth economy is stupid. Our human laws must be derived from the laws of the Earth, of life." Like economics, law, and other human institutions, medicine needs to be based on earth systems as well. Berry mentioned that a recent issue of the AMA Journal had an article on alternative medicine in which it was reported that you can't make people well on a sick planet, no matter what the technology. "The planet must be healthy in order for people to be healthy."

In the interview, Berry reviewed other institutions. "In the political realm, the constitution is a deadly document for the non-human world because it is based on inadequate jurisprudence. It needs to ensure the rights of the non-human world as well as the human." He laments that "corporations are controlling the political system with all its concerns being financial rather than preservation of life systems and within the education system, universities are narrowly focused on preparing people for corporate life. In the realm of religion, so much has been lost, there is no sense of the sacredness of the wider community, how to understand it or celebrate it."

So the question is, how do we begin to study the laws and systems of the universe? The answer to this is embedded in what Berry recommends for the education of our children. "There must be an awakening of the mind from childhood, as do indigenous peoples. They place themselves within the larger context." Referring to the book *Education of the Human Potential* written a number of years ago by the noted educator, Maria Montessori, Berry comments, "It's a beautiful book that talks about the child and the universe and how the universe has the answer to all questions. It's tragic to coop up a child to learn human language. Instead, they should learn the language of the universe around them...learn about the trees, the soil and butterflies... learn about the land and what water is."

Berry develops this further in the foreword he wrote to Dorothy Maclean's book, *To Honor the Earth* (1991). This book gives translations from her direct communication with Devas she worked cooperatively with to create a magical garden of Findhorn that astounded horticulture experts (see a full [interview with Maclean](#)). Berry wrote: "We lost the poetry of the Earth under the illusion that the sciences, in revealing to us the physical functioning of the natural world, were revealing to us the true reality of things. Poetry and music became not the quintessence of our earthly experience but something illusory, affected, unreal."

"Ultimately we lost the vast world of meaning without which humans become unbearable even to themselves. Even the natural world could not function in such conditions. A withering from within as well as extinction from without has been taking place throughout the entire natural world. For the deeds of humans have an impact not only on the physical forms but also on the inner life principles governing the natural world. This is the beginning of our new human intimacy with the larger earth community."

"Intimacy with its human component is a vital necessity for the integral functioning and survival of the planet we live on. Even while we foster our ecological and environmental movements...none of this will ultimately succeed unless it expresses a true intimacy with this larger Earth community. Such intimacy requires an awareness of the unique aspects of each region of the earth. A consciousness too of the many varied species and of the individuals within the species as they speak to us from the inner depths of their reality...From this comes the understanding of the vast web of interrelations that exist between all natural phenomena. We understand the flow of energy whereby each reality sustains and is sustained by all the other realities of the entire world."

In terms of "context" as to the scope of Earth history, Berry puts forth the perspective that "the Earth will never again function in the future as it functioned in the past. In the past, it functioned independent of human beings. Now, almost nothing will happen on Earth that humans will be not be involved in. We cannot make a blade of grass, but there is liable to not be a blade of grass if we do not accept it, protect it and foster it." In our interview, Berry shared, "The Great Work [title of his forthcoming book] is to shift to a mutually enhancing mode of presence. We humans are a power, like the sea or wind, not just a creature. We are setting the destiny of the land, ocean, birds. We are the greatest determining force of the planet by the planet and we are doing it with the great constraint of the human mind."

What's wonderful about Berry's work is that in his effort to look to the larger context to find meaning, his scholarly thinking integrates much of the innovations occurring on the planet today. For example, many people are feeling a need to grow and eat organic foods. Within the health field there are numerous efforts at "alternative" approaches, most of which honor and support the natural strengths and healing ability of the body rather than wage chemical war. In political/cultural arenas, there's a push toward "unity in diversity" just as there is a push for mediation and restorative justice in the legal system. All of these are consistent with taking a more organic, earth-friendly approach.

What's especially interesting is that the many creative and metaphysical endeavors such as music/dance/poetry/theatre, hands-on healing, meditation, interest in astronomy and astrology, communicating directly with nature, desire for expanded consciousness and direct manifestation can also be included. Whereas these endeavors have previously seemed extraneous, unimportant and

even feared and scorned, Berry's call to "apprehend" the world and greater universe call for exactly these kinds of activities.

In other words, Berry's scholarly perspective validates and helps us integrate into the larger context of meaning the profound importance of all of these endeavors as we reorient ourselves within the larger community of life. He speaks of the importance of the "shared dream experience". Within this larger context we see that the intuitive, creative and largely "right brain" endeavors are a vital aspect of the universe itself. "There may be some problems about how much sense the Universe makes, how rational it is, and how much we can understand it. One thing is certain, and this is that the Universe is fantastic! It is a high level of imaginative power...a fantastic effort of creativity."

"Imagination is primary in the life process. It is more primary than reflective thinking. Although it's not necessarily opposed to reflective thinking because we do have to be present to the imagination in order of the imagination to fulfill itself. I can say that I am constantly in an aware analytical frame of mind but also simultaneously, in a dream state of mind. We, of course, need both of these kinds of awareness, but the more we can function out of the immediacy of our arational responses, the better off we will be. However, in doing this we have to be very careful and not get too confident and uncritical on our activities and thought."

"So we need both the inspiration and critical faculty. And then we need what is called the Second Naivete. Paul Ricoeur states that there are two basic naivetes, the first is the 'primordial naivete' which is our initial yet immediate contact with the unconscious. For instance, a poet produces a poem. He writes it out spontaneously. After he is through 'transcribing from the unconscious, then he uses his critical faculties to go back over it. He may change it. Then if he meditates on it, he might come to see the deeper outlines of the original inspiration. This is the Second Naivete."

Whereas in the arts, a person may have the tendency to adhere to the primary naivete to the neglect of the latter two processes, scientists must keep hold of the primary naivete, not get lost in the mathematics of the analytical mind, and allow for the Second Naivete. "Somewhere should come this Secondary Naivete where all this rational study should come together and they don't think necessarily in terms of specific formulas and all that, but that they have a new sense of the gorgeous experience of the Universe; a new sense enriched by their intellectual activity and that is transcended by the Second Naivete."

Berry sings praises of Brian Swimme, a physicist who studies the Universe, as one scientist who is able to do this well. And he comments that Brian Swimme as being one person who truly understands the profound change in human consciousness currently required. Berry quotes him as saying, "The universe shudders with wonder." This "is a wonderfully comprehensive yet intimate way of

perceiving the workings of the whole of Reality! A wonderful description of the Universe acting, the Universe 'universing.'"

In our interview, Berry indicated that there are three principles of the universe that must be appreciated. The first is diversity. "Diversity is the magic. It is the first manifestation, the first beginning of the differentiation of a thing and of simple identity. The greater the diversity, the greater the perfection." The second is subjectivity of all aspects. "The universe is a community of subjects, not a collection of objects." The third principle of the universe is communion. "Diversity and subjectivity allow for communion."

In conclusion, Berry states; "In its every aspect, the human is a participatory reality. We are members of the great universe community. We participate in this life. We are nourished by this community, we are instructed by this community, we are healed by this community. In and through this community, we enter into communion with that numinous mystery whence all things depend for their existence and their activity."

Thomas Berry now resides once again in his native place, Greensboro, North Carolina. He continues to give lectures in this country and abroad. Currently he is completing his new book, entitled, *The Great Work*. Centers based on his work and which are continuing his legacy include: The Center for the Story of the Universe at the California Institute of Integral Studies in San Francisco, and Genesis Farm in New Jersey.

One meditative tool that is based on Thomas Berry's work is **The Cosmic Walk**, a spiral path in which one journeys to the center/origin of the universe and journeys back out to the present. Marnie Muller participated in the development of this Universe Story model and will be sharing it in a ceremonial-meditative way at our Winter Solstice Community Network Gathering. Thanks to Marnie Muller who collaborated on this article for Spirit in the Smokies. She has been a colleague and friend of Thomas Berry's since 1984. Thanks also to Thomas Rain Crowe who generously shared materials for this article.

### **It Takes a Universe**

by Thomas Berry

The child awakens to a universe.  
The mind of the child to a world of meaning.  
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.  
A universe to fulfill a child.

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