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AWAKENING TO OUR ROLE IN *THE GREAT WORK*

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Abstract
Thomas Berry breaks new ground in *The Great Work*, with a reassessment of "wild" as it applies to both humans and nature. He challenges traditional western dualisms, showing how creative or chaotic energy is in continuous relationship with the stabilizing force of discipline or form. In his view of modern globalization, all conflicts reduce to the central tension between environmentalist and developer, a clash of worldviews and resource uses. Berry urges a serious rethinking of what it means to be human in order to break the deep entrancement with industrial civilization.

Keywords: Thomas Berry, *The Great Work*, wildness, dualisms

Pioneering ecotheologian, Catholic priest, and cultural historian Thomas Berry put forth one of the earliest visions of spiritual ecology in *The Dream of the Earth* (1988). With his latest book, *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future*, Berry extends his invitation for us to imagine and participate in the realizing of this dream. The title *The Great Work* derives from Berry's long-range perspective on cultural history. He sees history as "governed by those overarching movements that give shape and meaning to life by relating the human venture to the larger destinies of the universe." (p. 1). The Great Work of a people or era is the creating of such an overarching movement. This generation's Great Work, he argues, is the transformative effort to change human-Earth relations from disruptive and destructive to mutually enhancing and beneficial.

As environmental crises multiply around the globe, Berry offers the alternative of deeply affirming the sacred quality of the Earth. For him this is not merely an idealized goal, but a necessity, if the present Cenozoic era is not to be a terminal phase. This coming century's Great Work is equivalent, he says, to earlier large-scale socially transformative efforts of the Greeks, medieval Christianity, the First Peoples of North America. Berry is candid in expressing his sense of foreboding in assessing the "extensive disarray in the biological structure and functioning of the planet." (p. 3). Not only does this threaten the stability of life on the planet, but it signals a painful loss of human intimacy with the natural word, overridden

by the primacy of the economic order. Associated with this loss is the deterioration of a sense of mystery and capacity for celebrating the vast wonders of the universe.

Berry declares the need for healing, not only for humans, but for *all* beings on Earth whose lives are threatened or wounded from human activity. Despite his high regard for scientific discovery, he challenges the dominant mechanistic worldview of the universe as an accretion of random events devoid of meaning. This, he says, reflects only one interpretation of the facts, evoking resistance from those who worldviews are based in awe, admiration, even fear about the scale of forces at work on life.

The genius of *The Great Work* is its historical perspective, and in this, Berry is in his element. He tells the full story of the North American continent, from plate tectonics to glaciers, from the rise of botanical communities to the arrival of first peoples and then European settlers. He documents the tremendous cultural-psychic impact of the Black Plague in engendering a long-term sense of betrayal by nature. He compares the threatening situation of this current millennium with the Middle Ages, hoping for a parallel flowering of creativity such as arose in response to that earlier dark time. The book also reviews phases of corporate expansion—from early land companies to the canal and railroad builders, from the industrial petrochemical phase to the current world domination by transnational corporations. All of this serves to provide a big picture of the forces at play in this challenging transition to the Ecozoic era.

Here I would like to highlight two contributions of the book that are particularly provocative. The first is on the subject of "wildness" and "the wild". Numerous volumes of environmental history and philosophy have been dedicated to exploring human relations with wildness (and the related concept of wilderness)—for example *The Practice of the Wild* by Gary Snyder and *Wilderness and the American Mind* by Roderick Nash. Most often the wild state of nature is portrayed as opposing that which is cultivated, tame, or human-influenced, i.e. seen as outside or "other" to the civilizing force of human activity. Berry, in contrast, defines "wild" as "the most profound mystery" (p. 48), "the root of the authentic spontaneities of any being" (p. 51). He contends that humans have misconceived their historical missions as one of domesticating or controlling nature, based on a narrow view of wildness as something destructive rather than creative. He acknowledges both the formidable, fearsome aspects

of the wild as well as the nourishing pastoral elements. But he argues that these are manifest in both *humans* and *other-than-humans* as the very source of life in the struggle for existence.

It is that wellspring of creativity from whence come the instinctive activities that enable all living beings to obtain their food, to find shelter, to bring forth their young; to sing and dance and fly through the air and swim through the depths of the sea. This is the same inner tendency that evokes the insight of the poet, the skills of the artists, and the power of the shaman." (p. 51).

Rather than equating "wild" only with "chaos", he suggests it is one of two constituent forces in the intelligible order of the universe, the other being discipline or form. The wild is the expansive force, the disciplined is the containing force, "bound into a single universe and expressed in every being in the universe." (p. 52). Disequilibrium at play with equilibrium, originating energy at play with limiting form—Berry shows how these are manifest in the works of poets and artists as well as the Earth's natural processes. He suggests it is a common fault of human perception to miss the creative patterns in the universe, responding only to the apparent chaos of life-threatening energies. Western culture has traditionally regarded limitation as a "demonic obstacle to be eliminated rather than as a strengthening discipline." (p. 67). Thus religious traditions have a role to play in the transition to the Ecozoic by offering time-tested methods of discipline to generate spiritual development and preserve human creativity, so deeply under siege in today's industrial world.

Berry's fresh interpretation of wild and wildness as "norm of authenticity" (p. 49) breaks new intellectual ground, replacing the outmoded, oppressive, and oppositional dualisms of human/nature, reason/emotion, self/other, and spirit/body with dualisms which are interpenetrating and complementary: wild/disciplined, expansive/containing, energy/form. Ecofeminist philosophers Val Plumwood and Karen Warren have analyzed in some depth the extensive impact of oppositional dualisms, where each half is exclusive of the other. When one half of the pair is assigned moral superiority by the dominant group, behaviors of domination are legitimized and encoded in social constructions. These long-standing Western dualisms have been perpetuated and reinforced by science, religion, and national states over the past millennium to the point of almost complete acceptance for all political and economic ventures. This has led

increasingly to a worldview that commodifies all aspects of the Earth for human ends. Berry's shift to dualisms in which each half informs and shapes the other offers a more complex alternative with more possibility for enhancing and affirming life.

> Acceptance of the challenging aspect of the natural world is a primary condition for creative intimacy with the natural world. Without this opaque or even threatening aspect of the universe we would lose our greatest source of creative energy. This opposing element is as necessary for us as is the weight of the atmosphere that surrounds us. This containing element, even the gravitation that binds us to the Earth, should be experienced as liberating and energizing, rather than confining. (p. 67).

The second contribution I would highlight here is Berry's reassessment of the traditional dualisms of political alignment. Twentieth century economics and politics have revolved around oppositional definitions for conservative/liberal, First World/Third World, developed and developing nations. Berry argues that these alignments are rapidly being subsumed by new tensions over how humans are to relate to the Earth. He credits the ecology movement with articulating the new divide as no longer based on political party, social class, or ethnic group but rather on irreconcilable differences between environmental worldviews. Thus the primary political divisions in today's world are between those with an ecological or environmental worldview and those with a human-centred, developmental worldview. Developers see human needs and desires as primary; environmentalists see the Earth community as primary. Developers expect nature to adapt to human activity; environmentalists ask humans to adapt to nature. Developers, in general, exhibit a low sensitivity to the concerns of the Earth community; environmentalists are driven by a painfully high sensitivity to other beings. Reconciliation between these tensions is not new but is escalating in difficulty as every aspect of life becomes absorbed into the commercial context and natural systems are strained to breaking point. Industrial developer values now permeate the entire globe through the aggressive economic initiatives of the transnational corporations. "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."

(p. 110). Berry reiterates the oft-repeated litanies of devastation to the Earth, claiming we are now experiencing an irreversible recession of the planet itself.

Hand in hand with the physical loss is the degradation of the interior world of the human. To lose "the wonder and majesty, the poetry, music, and spiritual exaltation of the deep mysteries of existence" (p. 111) is, in Berry's mind, a loss of soul and an impoverishment of the human imagination. Such continued loss can only fuel both the desperate pleas of the environmentalists and the rapacious demands of the developers. Berry concludes that the seriously degraded condition of the Earth reflects "a deadening or paralysis of some parts of human intelligence and also a suppression of human sensitivities." (p. 115). By articulating the scale and dimensions of this new political tension, Berry lays out the parameters and mandate for *The Great Work.*

A new vision of human-Earth relations requires humans to begin thinking in the context of the whole planet. The basic ethical guideline would be "the well-being of the comprehensive community and the attainment of human well-being within that community." (p. 105). This, Berry says, will require a *reinventing* of the human with critical reflection, rethinking, readapting, and reevaluating our role in the universe. The challenge is enormous, impossible in its scale. Berry urges us to confront the "profound cultural disorientation" of the deep entrancement with industrial civilization. Rethinking ethics is a place to begin, but ultimately a deep cultural therapy is required, one which will overthrow the governing dream of the twentieth century. For Berry, the most powerful recipe for liberation is awakening 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 Earth's cultural expressions but in the depths of our genetic coding." (p. 165).

Our generation, like others before, has the opportunity to take up the challenge of awakening from the paralysis. From Berry's view, the nobility of our lives depends on how well we manage this arduous transition from the Cenozoic to the new dream of the Earth. Based on his own revelatory experience and deep love for the Earth, Berry sounds the call to awaken to our human role as creative, authentic beings in the pattern that contains and connects. His call is an offering, an invitation, a generous gift of inspiration. Who could

not be moved by these words to take up their piece of *The Great Work* of healing human-Earth relations?

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