

## Interview with Thomas Berry

Peter Reason

*Thomas Berry's book, The Dream of the Earth, has long been an inspiration to me. When I read his new book, The Great Work, which challenges us to search for a mutually enhancing relationship between humans and the planet, I knew I wanted to meet him. I visited him at his home in the Southern Appalachians, where he lives in three rooms above an old stable block surrounded by the memorabilia of a life's work and the papers and books of a working scholar. We talked for a long time about the place of the human in the universe and how we can respond to the ecological crisis of our times.*

Peter Reason: In *The Great Work* you emphasise that the human is integral with the planet and the universe. In *The Dream of the Earth* you write "In reality the human activates the most profound dimension of the universe itself, its capacity to reflect on and celebrate itself in conscious self-awareness." It does seem to me that we have lost that sense of belonging, and in our civilization the human being is seen as an addendum.

Thomas Berry: We've lost our deeper identity. Every being articulates in a unique way the universe in its comprehensive dimensions; nothing is itself without everything else. Consciousness is pervasive: every being has some mode of consciousness, you might say, but consciousness is species specific and limited. In other words tree consciousness is different from insect consciousness, and consciousness of insect can be no good for a tree. The human has its own special mode of consciousness which enables the universe to reflect on itself. Rather than saying 'humans know the universe' it would be better to say 'the universe knows itself in the human'.

PR: Does this imply that the universe is a living being?

TB: There is this sense of Gaia, the sense that the planet earth is a living being which has the capacity for self-regulation. But we must be a little bit careful about the use of the word 'living' because the earth has no DNA, the earth has no reproduction capacities. The earth is not a living being like a tree. The earth is the *mother* of life. As the mother of life and having these capacities for self-adjustment, it is in a sense a greater form of life than any particular form on the earth. But it's not a big animal or a big tree.

PR: A greater form of life—and the universe is yet greater?

TB: Yes, the universe is the great articulation of life that provides the earth with its fullness.

PR: So when you say the human activates this quality in the universe, we're bringing reflective knowing, while the trees and the ants are bringing other qualities?

TB: Yes. St Thomas Aquinas talked about why there are so many different things in the universe. Do we need all these things? His answer is that because the divine could not image itself forth in any one being, it created the great diversity of things so that what was lacking in one would be supplied by the others and the whole universe *together* would participate in and manifest the divine more than any single being. So we have to be very clear that the human is not *the* purpose of the earth or *the* purpose of the universe. The whole universe

together participates in the divine and manifests the divine. The universe is primary; the universe is the ultimate and noblest perfection in things.

PR: In *The Great Work* you write ‘the journey of the universe is the journey of each individual being in the universe... this... is an exciting story that gives us our macrophase identity with the larger dimensions of meaning that we need. To identify the microphase of our being with the macrophase of our being is the quintessence of human fulfilment.’ What do you mean by that?

TB: The primary meaning of the phrase *great work*, as I use it, is the great work of moving from a devastating presence on the planet to a benign presence. Because now we are acting on a macrophase scale, we are acting as no form of life ever acted before in our impact on the planet, except maybe microbes when they created the atmosphere. Brian Swimme says we have a microphase understanding of the universe trying to deal with the macrophase dimension of contemporary problems.

A child awakens to the universe: the mind of a child to a world of wonder, the imagination of a child to a world of beauty, the emotions of a child to a world of intimacy. It takes a *universe* to make a child, to educate a child; it takes a universe to *fulfil* a child. Sometimes you see children in an open field—they're cooped up so much they get a chance and they just run. Where to? They run to the horizon. You have to go chase after them to keep them from running into the river or somewhere. So the universe calls us forth into ourselves. That's the attraction. The universe is the greater self of every being in the universe. But it seems to be difficult for people in western civilisation to get the sense of being a component of this larger expression of being in the universe. We are educated to think of ourselves—even individually—as more important than the whole universe.

PR: But ‘component’ is really the wrong word isn't it? Elsewhere you write that we are part of a community of subjects, rather than a collection of objects.

TB: We are a component that brings a new dimension through conscious reflective awareness. A dimension is not only a part but a part that changes everything. And that's very important because that's the difficulty of the scientists. They get the physical dimension, but they can't get the psychic dimension. They talk about dualism, but it's not a dualism, it's a unity, it's two dimensions of one reality. There's not two realities of the soul and the body, there are two dimensions of a single reality. Neither has existence without the other.

PR: So your point is that the universe itself and every being in the universe has both phenomenal and noumenal, material and psychic/spiritual dimensions.

TB: That's right; psychic/spiritual and physical/material.

PR: And those co-exist together as a single reality?

TB: As a single reality. Where this shows up in a most basic way, is in regard to the idea of a vital principle. The scientists deny this—and it's not just they deny it, they have a certain almost pathological aversion for accepting a vital principle. And it's strange because biology itself is about life yet there's no life principle. It's only these components that act together to produce an oak tree. If you argue that DNA has a vast complexity of components which somehow act together in a synergistic way to produce the unity of an oak tree, well you don't

have an oak tree. All you have are these components. You have to have some unifying factor that enables this complexity to act in an organised structural form. St Thomas said the form of the thing is the divine element in things.

PR: In *The Great Work* you argue that because we are out of touch with this sense of participation and we're having this huge macrophase impact on the planet, we need to *reinvent the human*. You write that we need to reinvent the human in six ways: first, at a species level; second, with critical reflection; third, within the community of life systems; fourth, in a time developmental context; fifth, by means of stories; and sixth, by shared dream experience. Your first point is that we're not programmed by instincts, we are a self-creating cultural beings.

TB: The human creates itself more than any other being. The reason is that we are genetically coded toward a further transgenetic cultural coding, whereby we become human. Now, that cultural coding we invent and that's why we have a Hindu world, a Buddhist world, a Confucian world—all these different traditions. All the thousands of cultural traditions, all the tribal peoples of the world, each create their own language. A language is probably the finest of all human creations, for it brings together some understanding of the human and its relationship to the other components of the planet earth.

PR: Language brings forth a world.

TB: Yes. Language creates a world, creates a form of being together with the ethical codes and norms. We build a whole context in which a human being becomes human. Now the important thing is the connection between genetic coding and the cultural coding: we just can't create a cultural coding with no guidance. Our genetic coding gives us some very basic guidance that show up in all traditions through archetypal symbols, like the great mother, death and rebirth, the sacred centre.

The symbolism of the centre is where the natural world, the noumenal world, and the human world come together. It's our way of *situating* ourselves. It's why indigenous peoples like Native Americans are very conscious of the directions. I remember when Lame Deer got up to speak at a conference he identified himself with the universe through the sacred pipe and with the sacred directions—east, west, south, north. So he situated himself in the universe before he'd do anything, before he'd say anything.

PR: And you're also saying that not one of our human cultures is able to respond to the current threat, this is why you say we must reinvent ourselves at a species level? That's your second theme.

TB: The thing that none of our traditions have is a sense of an emerging universe, passing through irreversible transformational episodes, moving from lesser to greater complexity and from lesser to greater consciousness. They all have a sense of ever renewing seasonal cycles—what's born dies, what dies is born—but not of cosmogenesis.

PR: By cosmogenesis you mean the evolution of the universe itself, which includes these great, irreversible moments in the history of the universe. One of which we are slap bang in the middle of, that we are creating ourselves. Your point is that no human cultures has developed the capacity to see this, and that's the species level development that we need to make?

TB: Yes. The only person assimilated cosmogeneses in a significant way in a Christian context was Teilhard de Chardin. Teilhard was critiqued severely by the evolutionists who argue that the universe isn't creative but is formed by random processes. But the geneticist Dobzhansky maintained that the universe was neither random nor determined but *creative*. When someone is creating a work of art, they both know and they don't know. They know what they're after but they have to try out this and try out that and constantly reshape until they get a final form. But they recognise it once they have it. Musicians will know once they hear the melody, that's it, so they know and they don't know. They're finding their way. So you say there's a certain random aspect to it in the sense that it's not predecided. So I suggest that this is the best way of understanding Teilhard. He said the evolution process was not a fully determined but has a drift, a direction towards greater complexity, greater consciousness. Now how it's achieved is not preplanned, it's achieved by a certain amount of randomness, but it's not totally random because it does have a direction.

PR: So the universe is creative and in that creative process there are these irreversible moments, moments of grace, I think you call them later. So the next theme in the reinvention of the human is that it must involve critical reflection. You write that part of this shift to an ecozoic age—an age in which humans co-exist mutual benefit with the planet—needs to be an intentional process by human culture.

TB: It needs to be in a certain sense designed by humans. Because if we don't begin to understand our role we're going to just ruin the total life process. Like now, we are reducing the planet to total devastation in its life-giving processes. So to get out of this we need to think our way through.

PR: And in *The Dream of the Earth* you suggest how human technology can be congruent with the planet technologies.

TB: We need to see that our human technologies are coherent with earth technologies so that they protect and advance the earth's technologies in a positive way as regards the future of the planet, not simply as regards the future of one life system. We can plant a certain number of trees for ever or something like that but that wouldn't do it. We have to follow the patterns of the natural world and let them take the lead and in a certain sense respond to the way in which nature functions. We need an awareness of what we're doing in the light of what we know and of what can be expected, and the sensitivity to see when we are doing damage and withdraw from it. We have to do a lot of experimentation. For instance the development of food grains. Cross breeding of plants is within the processes of nature: we can improve the grains of wheat and so forth in that method. But to begin genetic engineering, getting into the DNA and selecting a DNA element from one species, inserting it into a completely different species, is working against natural patterns. Our cultures now have become pathological in so far as they are responding to industrial advance at the expense of the life systems of the planet.

PR: Can we put the notion of critical reflection together with our earlier discussion about culture. Presumably one of the things we need is many cultures to bring forth many worlds in order that there isn't just one form of critical awareness? It would seem that one of the things we're doing is destroying cultural diversity?

TB: That's right. That's an impoverishment of the total human process. There's a certain inevitability at the present time: if we aren't careful, globalisation will lead ultimately to only a very few languages being functionally effective. We have to realise the wonder of language and the wonder of cultures. When we first got in touch with the Australian Aboriginals we had great difficulty of accepting the fact that they were human. They were wandering with no clothes, no food, no things, living from day to day, only a couple of implements, almost no technologies and limited stable housing. We thought of them as not having any culture. But we find out that they have some amazing explanations of the universe, what they call the Dreamings—highly elaborated explanations of how the contours of the land take shape, the powers that are bringing forth all the natural phenomenon. So they have a rich mental life, a rich artistic life, and a viable material life and they have language that is integral with their life process.

PR: You write that we need to reinvent the human within the community of life systems. This community doesn't just involve other humans but other life forms. In *The Great Work* you suggest we need to see other living forms has having legal rights to flourishing.

TB: That's right. This is *the* most difficult thing for western people to accept that the reality is the community of the earth and that we must become a member. Now this is why I say that through science we know much more about the earth, much more about the universe, than anybody ever knew. But no people were ever so estranged from the earth or estranged from the universe as we are. We have no rapport. We have all the scientific formulas but no rapport, no sensitivity, no awareness of how life functions. That's why we just devastate everything for the improvement of the human—and that's pathological. We destroy the economy of the planet in expectation that we're improving the human economy. That's madness. We make the earth toxic and then try to establish health regimes. You cannot have well humans on a sick planet, it's obvious. You cannot have a viable human economy and a non-viable earth economy—it's stupid because the human economies are a sub-system of the earth economy. Human health is a sub-system of the earth's health. In every way the human is a sub-system of an earth system. It's a sub-community of the earth's community.

PR: It's very curious because you started by saying this is the most difficult thing for us to grasp and then you proceeded with a set of statements that really are so obvious but I can just hear politicians and journalists saying, 'Well, Thomas Berry is clearly a bit off his head if he says things like that'. It's very curious what is seems obvious to us sitting here is not obvious to our everyday world.

TB: Well I think it is obvious but that we just choose to ignore it because we are so hypnotised by our concern for the human that we just can't do anything else. That's why I said it's over with.

PR: It's over with?

TB: Yes. This type of a civilization is over. It's already self-destructed. There's no way to move. You can see it in civilizations of the past, at the height of their achievements they put themselves into an impasse and were destroyed. In the book I have tried to point out how vulnerable and fragile this so called successful time is. This civilization is over, it ain't going anywhere.

PR: Are there not some hopeful signs in the extent now to which solar energy is becoming available, the development of the ecological economics movement...?

TB: But you see my critique of the work on natural capitalism, ecological economics and so forth is that they still have not made the mental adjustment. They are still in the technological area. Their thinking is not being built on intimate rapport with natural systems.

PR: So you're saying 'natural capitalism' needs to develop this interior sense of belonging?

TB: Yes. It presents what sounds like a viable programme, but there's no talk about a community of mutuality where we learn to interact with the sun and with other living things as part of a community. If we don't have a sense of community we won't have the psychic energy to carry it through. These ideas of natural capitalism will make demands on us, and we will be able to accept the demands only if we have a psychic, a certain intimacy with the process that rewards us spiritually if we are deprived materially.

PR: So the next theme you explore in reinventing the human is this notion of story.

TB: Well, that is what Brian Swimme and I have introduced into the picture (in *The Universe Story*). We need the story of the past and the dream of the future. The story explains to us how we got to where we are in realistic terms and the dream is our way of thinking our way into the future. The dream drives the action and guides the action. A child dreams its future, I dreamed my future very early and it's my dream that has been my basic guide to the whole of my life. In Chicago a couple of years ago the American Association for Advancement of Science, which is the oldest and in some ways the most prestigious of the scientific associations, put on a conference on the epic of evolution which I think was very significant. They invited excellent scientists to talk about the various phases of evolution and the basic transition moments to life and the different forms of life. It was, to my mind, kind of a first time that scientists began really to think that they had discovered a new story...

PR: ...and part of this story is these irreversible moments in the evolution of the universe...

TB: Yes, that's the most important part of the story. But to accept this as *sacred* story, that is also important. We've all been initiated into the mechanics of the story at least, through the scientific discoveries. So the incorporation of the story or the understanding of the story as sacred story, giving us a deep insight into the mystery of the universe, is something that is urgent.

PR: Your final theme is that these stories form part of a shared dream experience.

TB: Yes, that's what a culture is, a culture is a shared dream experience.

PR: Of course that is one of the directions of the Medicine Wheel isn't it, The Dream We Live. And you're talking of an intentional and critical sense of dreaming here too.

TB: Yes. The dream identifies to some extent with the vision. The dream is the vision. I even take it back so far as the prologue of St John's Gospel where he says in the beginning was the logos. I say in the beginning was the dream and the dream was with God and the dream was God and through the dream were all things were made. This is in *The Dream of the Earth*. What I'm talking about there is not a human dream of the earth but the dream that

produced the earth. Whatever else you can say about the universe, it's a fantastic reality: all the plants, life systems and the stars and the mystery of the oceans and all that. So that once you look at the extravagance of the universe and see in particular the planet earth, it baffles intelligence but the imagination delights in it. It baffles intelligence but delights imagination—so that's the world of art.

PR: So we can't encompass our world just through understanding, without wonder and beauty.

TB: And the scientist, like E. O. Wilson, expects some day science will explain it on physical principles, expects the theory of everything. He'll talk about spirit, he'll talk about the poetry, he'll talk about the humanities, he'll talk about everything any of us will talk about. Only he will go back to the fact that physics will explain everything! Now he's right in one sense, that you won't understand it without the understanding of the physics of the process but he's totally wrong if he thinks understanding in the physical dimension is everything.

PR: But isn't the physics taking us back to wonder. Wasn't it Wheeler who talked about the strangest thing in a strange universe? Physics takes us back to wonder in a sense through things like the Hubble telescope.

TB: And the physics will accept the wonder, but they will resist the idea of a non material principle.

PR: But all their laws of science are non material principles?

TB: That's right. You're right. All their laws of science are transmaterial. So it's transmaterial aspect that is causing the difficulty simply because people figure out certain things with physical laws, they think they've understood it, and they've only stated the dilemma of the thing.

PR: There seems to me to be a link between this notion of a shared dream experience and the symbols that you talked about earlier. You write about ceremony and expressing the symbols through ceremonial actions?

TB: Well the way we insert ourselves into the universe is through ceremonies. The book *Black Elk Speaks* is enormously important. I go back to it frequently and particularly that second chapter which describes the vision he had when he was 9 or 10 years old, that is a fantastic achievement. I think that's the greatest vision of modern times and the most authentic.

He had the vision when he was quite young, but it was almost 6-8 years before he even talked about it to anybody. Then a medicine man explained it to him, and it was transformed into a ceremony that was carried out by the whole village. In the culminating part of the vision he sees the whole universe dancing, the trees and the flowers, everything dancing in a single coherent dance. The final epilogue of the book describes him as an old man, going back to the mountain that appeared in the vision. That's when he felt sadness and the pathos of the predictions, the hopes expressed in the vision had not been fulfilled, things had got worse and worse for the indigenous people. The tree had not flowered. So, I think it's one of the most

important books in trying to understand what I am saying, because my own thinking has correspondences with his vision.

We come into being at the most advanced stage of the Cenozoic Era because we couldn't exist in a less beautiful world. To bear the burden of intelligence and responsibility that we have, we need the solace of the natural world. Why are we so delighted with the dawn, the sunset, the song of the bird or the beauty of the flower? Every being is nourished both physically and psychically by other beings, nothing nourishes itself.

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