

THOMAS BERRY, 100-YEARS OF WISDOM AND A BIRTHDAY GIFT OF MY UNIVERSE STORY

By Shirley Pevarnik

Excerpt from one of Thomas Berry's Riverdale Papers: The Spirituality of the Earth

I am not speaking of a human spirituality with special reference to the planet Earth. I am speaking of a quality of the Earth itself. Earth is the maternal principle out of which we are born and whence we derive all that we are and all that we have. In our totality we come into being in and through Earth. We are earthlings. The Earth is our origin, our nourishment, our educator, our healer, our fulfillment.

If there is no spirituality in the earth, then there is no spirituality in ourselves.

Excerpts from The Great Work by Thomas Berry

The great work before us, the task of moving modern industrial civilization from its present devastating influence on Earth to a more benign mode of presence, is not a role that we have chosen. It is a role given to us, beyond any consultation with ourselves. We did not choose. We were chosen by some power beyond ourselves for this historic task.

Yet we must believe that those powers that assign our role must in that same act bestow upon us the ability to fulfill this role.

Thomas Berry 1914 – 2009 was born on November 9, 1914, 100 years ago. He was an eco-theologian, cultural historian, and self-proclaimed geologist – one who studies the spirit of Earth. He has been called the father of ecological spirituality and was described in 1989 by *Newsweek* as, “The most provocative figure among the new breed of eco-theologians.” He was the author of *Riverdale Papers, Volumes I-XI*, now housed at the Harvard library, and many books including *The Dream of the Earth* and *The Great Work*. Berry taught at Seaton Hall University, St. John's University, Fordham University, and founded the Riverdale Center for Religious Research along the Hudson River in Riverdale, New York.

Berry was one of the first religious leaders to suggest that Earth's ecological crisis was primarily a spiritual crisis. He believed that we humans have come to see ourselves as above the natural world; indeed, he believed we have become autistic to it. He would also say that if we are spiritual, it is only because everything in the universe is spiritual. Most indigenous peoples recognize these spiritual connections and honor the “more than human world.” Most modern humans, however, have a different story—one of separation that allows us to plunder the planet. Berry often said our real crisis was one of story. We need a new story, one that places us in a mutually enhancing relationship with Earth, our larger self.

Despite the seriousness of our environmental problems, Berry was hopeful and pointed out that a new story is beginning to be told all around the world by scientists who have studied the origin and evolutionary development of the universe. His book *The Universe Story*, co-authored with mathematical cosmologist Brian Swimme, celebrates this new story which describes the unfolding of the cosmos. This is the story he believed would bring the human/Earth relationship back to a communion relationship rather than a use relationship. When we understand that we humans fit into this unfolding story of the universe, that we are in relationship with everything, we begin to feel the sacredness of everything.

This year, 2014, communities around the world, in Australia, Great Britain, California, North Carolina, Connecticut and many other places are celebrating the centennial of the birth of Thomas Berry. Although Thomas passed five years ago, his groundbreaking work on human/Earth relationship has inspired thousands of academics, ecologists, religious leaders, and many people, like myself, who are simply trying to figure out why we are in the mess we are in on the planet.



I met Thomas in the summer of 1996, although I had fallen in love with him long before I met him. Friends had shared with me his books and tapes, and I felt like this great man had saved my life or at least my soul. I had been working in social services for many years, and after seeing the pain and poverty and the slow process of shift in our society's thinking, I had become frustrated and wondered about the very nature of human beings. Most of my peers had decided that humans were basically greedy and evil, but somehow that didn't feel right to me. So, when I finally heard Thomas

talk about the crisis of our time being one of story, well, that made sense to me. It gave me hope again and changed my life. I pretty much gave up social work and went off to learn as much as I could about this new story. I was lucky enough to meet Thomas Berry at the Holy Cross Centre for Ecology and Spirituality in Canada where I worked for four summers. We became friends, and I started making a pilgrimage to North Carolina every summer to visit Thomas. He was a shaman, really, one who acts as a medium between the human world and the spirituality of the natural world. I would be changed forever.

Here are a few stories about Thomas, I will share with you.

Thomas was having lunch with a group of people one afternoon and was in deep conversation talking about his Buddhist soul and his Christian soul when the woman across the table abruptly interrupted. "Just what do you believe in, Thomas?" she demanded. He thought for a moment and replied, "I believe in everything, Madame, just tell me something, and I'll believe it." He might have added that we humans are the self-reflective species, the believing species, the story species, and when we limit what we believe, we limit our possibilities and separate

ourselves from others with different beliefs. And, of course, he might have said, everyone naturally has a unique belief system.

* * *

When Thomas was a young man, 16 to 19, he became increasingly aware of the economically-driven, industrial destruction of the planet and the system that required everyone to participate. He said he had to think, think about this system and why it was the way it was. He said there were only two places one could really have the time and space to think: one was prison and the other a monastery. So he said he chose the latter.

* * *

Once when Thomas was visiting Canada and was being interviewed by their BBC, they asked him, "Thomas, you are getting old; where do you think you will go when you die?" (Thomas was a priest but never talked about heaven or hell.) He thought a moment and answered, "I will be where I have always been, in the universe."

* * *

Regarding the universe story, Thomas Berry often said, "To tell the story of anything you need to tell the story of everything."

There are millions of ways to tell any story; indeed this new creation story needs to be told a million times in a million ways.

Here's my birthday present to Thomas. My telling of the universe story:

Once upon the beginning of time and space, about 13 billion years ago (give or take a billion), there was a flaring forth. This is often referred to as the Big Bang, but that term is much too militaristic, too limited. The primordial fireball flared forth total energy, and in that energy was the potential of everything that would ever be. This pure energy was so thick and hot, no particles could emerge. But, after a while it cooled down enough for the first particles and then the first atoms of hydrogen. We might call these first material beings our first ancestors. Everything that would ever emerge in the universe would come from those first atoms of hydrogen!

Well, hydrogen was very happy just floating around the universe. (Remember this is a story). However, because the universe is a self-organizing system, it began to pull that hydrogen into bundles and bundles of bundles. These bundles became the first stars and the first grouping of stars or galaxies. Now a star, a first

generation star, is simply H (an atom with one electron) being pushed together so tightly fusion takes place. Two H atoms merge together to create an atom that has two electrons which is Helium. The energy that is given off in that process is a photon or light. When all the hydrogen in a star is used up, the star implodes with enough heat and energy to create the other atoms in our periodic table.

Around 5 billion years ago (give or take a billion), our grandmother star or stars went supernova, imploded, and all of the atoms we now know in our solar system were spewed into space.

Again, because we live in a self-organizing universe, atoms started to be pulled back into a second generation star – our SUN. (This has happened multiple times, billions of times around the universe; and this is how each solar system has been formed.) Other atoms that didn't make it back into the Sun self-organized and became the eight planets and the asteroid belt of our solar system. Our comfy home, the only living planet we know, our Earth was born. So we can say, with certainty, we are all stardust!

Shortly after this monumental event, life began on our planet around 4.5 billion years ago (give or take a million or so). The first cells probably ate the chemical soup that was being made as all of the atoms from the super nova were joining together to create molecules. The greatest one being H₂O – water. This made life possible. We should have a holiday celebrating water! Anyway, after a few million years (give or take a million), life on earth had its first big crisis. It began running out of food. Too many single-cell beings and not enough chemical soup. So evolution happened yet again. Cells began to eat photons from our Sun, and photosynthesis began. This was no small feat. Scientists today still can't create photosynthesis, and those single cells didn't even have brains or college educations.

This photosynthesis was just fine for a few million years or so, but it led to another major life crisis. One of the byproducts of photosynthesis is oxygen – another amazing molecule we should have a holiday for. Too much oxygen is dangerous, however, because

it is explosive, and so our ancestors, the first life on the planet, were literally burning up. Then another great evolutionary event occurred. One of the single-cell life forms evolved to deal with the oxygen, what we call today mitochondria. Other single cells learned how to take this cell into their own bodies, so they could deal with oxygen. Hence, every living cell in our bodies and all living bodies have a mitochondria cell inside of them with a different DNA. Deoxyribonucleic Acid – a better term might be “Divine Natural Abundance.

WOW, what creativity! Take in the cell that learned how to deal with your enemy, and you have the first eukaryotic cell that cannot only deal with oxygen, but is also the first cell that eats other cells--heterotrophy. Remember the first single cells on the planet digested the chemical soup of the planet, the next learned how to use photosynthesis for energy, and now the eukaryote cell learned to eat its neighbor. Life seems determined to evolve new ways to get the energy it needs. The eukaryote cells also learned to live in communities and created the first multicellular beings. (Yes, for the first three billion years of life on the planet there were only single cell beings.)

Okay, now those eukaryotes get really wild. They are the first life forms to create meiotic sex which is no small creation because now two genetically different beings can come together and create a radically different being. Unfortunately, with sex came death. You see the first life on the planet, those single cells that were on the planet for so long, didn't have a life span. In fact, it is possible that some are still alive today. They didn't die of old age. That only started happening after sex began. Bummer!

Well multicellular beings did very well. It seems working in community really helped life explode on the planet. Not only did we get an amazing variety of plants and animals, life began to get very big. At first, we had life in the sea—flat worms and jellyfish, but then life went on land, and we had our first amphibians, insects, and trees around 400 million years ago (give or take a few million). Life kept evolving as it faced all the challenges of a planet

that had extremely fluctuating temperatures, violent collisions with all the debris left over from the Super Nova, and the violent churning of our Earth's inner core. There were many extinctions, but always more and more adaptations and more variety.

Around 235 million years ago, life got really big and the first dinosaurs appeared, and along with them came the first flowers. Shortly after, came the first mammals who probably succeeded because of the nutritious flowers. Sixty-five million years ago, an asteroid hit Earth. This was also a time of great volcanic activity, and together these two things made Earth almost impossible to survive on. Some species did, and those little mammals were able to start on their evolutionary journey into primates. Earth entered into its current geological era, the Cenozoic era, the most fecund time in Earth's history. So much variety and so much beauty!

It was as though Earth needed a species to appreciate this amazing beauty, and so it took a chance in creating a species that had self-reflective consciousness, a species that knew that it knew. The first hominids emerged around three million years ago, and homo sapiens sapiens around two hundred thousand years ago. A species that, because of this self-reflection, was able to adapt through learning and then teach its offspring rather than waiting for the genetic coding to evolve new ways to deal with Earth's ever changing challenges. We did this through our stories; we have problem solving strategies in our stories rather than in our genes. This self-reflective consciousness allowed us to see the future, to plan, to celebrate, but also to fear our suffering and death. Most tribal humans found strength in their relationship with the natural world, a spiritual world, to help them deal with human suffering. We modern humans, however, have sought to remove the painful elements of life by exercising control over the natural world. This separation from the more than human world has led us to the end of the Cenozoic era. We have changed the chemistry and biology of the planet so much, we are entering a new geological era with an uncertain future.

If we were to take the Universe Story and condense it into 100 years, humans would only appear the last second or so before midnight of the 100th year. We are young, and it took 13.7 billion years to make us. We can be forgiving of our hubris because we are such a young species. Any species with these gifts and challenges might do the same. This gift of self-reflection, however, has also given us the desire to discover where we came from and where we are to go. It has given us this new story that shows us we are not separate but connected to the whole. At a time when our planet is in crisis, we are given this astounding insight that we are part of the larger story and what we do matters.

Thomas Berry saw this as a "moment of grace," when humans have a choice in the era they are entering. As the Cenozoic is ending, we can pursue the Technozoic, where humans try to control the Earth even more with greater technology, or we can enter a new era of deep relationship with Earth and begin what he termed the Ecozoic. Yes, we will need technology, but we need to understand our reciprocity with Earth even more.

The psychic energy needed for this shift into the Ecozoic is in our new story: the Universe Story. When we see our connection with the larger story of the universe, it compels us to become our greater self. Who is that self?

Thomas might pause a moment and then say: WE ARE THE UNIVERSE BECOMING AWARE OF ITSELF! (It's a pretty big shift in perception. Take a moment and think about it. Thomas did.)

HAPPY BIRTHDAY THOMAS!

Love,
Shirley