

## THOMAS BERRY'S "COMMUNION OF SUBJECTS": AWAKENING THE "HEART OF THE UNIVERSE"

By Peggy Whalen-Levitt

### Communion at the Heart of Reality

In *The Dream of the Earth*, Thomas Berry writes:

At present...we are in that phase of transition that must be described as the groping phase. *We are like a musician who faintly hears a melody deep within the mind*, but not clearly enough to play it through. This is the inner agony we experience, especially when we consider that the music we are creating is the very reality of the universe.

It would be easier for us if we would remember that the earth itself, as the primary energy, is finding its way both to interior conscious expression in the human and to outer fulfillment in the universe.<sup>1</sup>

Thomas often uses symphonic metaphors to bring us to awareness of the transition that is occurring in the present moment. He helps us cultivate new ears to hear the melody making itself known.

We faintly hear a melody deep within the mind:

A melody of a universe unfolding in time

A melody of a numinous mystery that resonates throughout the entire universe

A melody of an unbroken bond of relatedness throughout the whole universe that is both spatial and temporal

A melody of a bond of intimacy that holds all together in communion

A melody of ourselves as that communion becoming conscious of itself<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1988), 47 (italics added).

<sup>2</sup> See *ibid.*, 91.

“This sense of communion at the heart of reality,” Thomas tells us, “is the central force bringing the ecological age into existence.”<sup>3</sup>

Just as we begin to hear with new ears what is coming toward us from the future, we also see a troubling paradox that Thomas observes. The human capacity to penetrate deeply into the physical structure of reality has, at the same time, distanced us from an intimacy with the universe. And this distancing has had devastating consequences for Earth, our home. This is “the inner agony we experience” as we grasp more deeply the co-creative role the human plays. Those who hear the melody ache with sorrow, while others seem deaf to the sounds.

Thomas speaks a warning, a wakeup call, which is a mantra for our time:

*The universe is composed of subjects to be communed with,  
Not [a collection] of objects to be used.*<sup>4</sup>

Threaded throughout his writings, Thomas considers the patterns of cultural coding that have brought us to this place of dissonance. He applauds efforts being made toward cultural reform and he outlines his own pathways forward. *Always*, he call us back to the deeper realm of consciousness itself.

### **Reorientation of Mind and Inner Attitude**

In *The Sacred Universe*,<sup>5</sup> he writes:

Pragmatic efforts at establishing a viable way into the future are urgently needed and invaluable. They are indispensable in any effort to deal with that future. Even with the change in attitude that I am proposing, the details of implementation will be an essential aspect of any future program. I do not wish to diminish what is being done. I wish only to indicate that the basic difficulty lies deeper in the human mind and emotions than is generally recognized. If the reorientation of mind is not effected, then whatever remedy is proposed will not succeed in the purposes it intends.

So far, we have not been able to effect a major change in inner attitude.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Berry, *Evening Thoughts: Reflecting on Earth as Sacred Community* (San Francisco: Sierra Club, 2006), 149 (italics added).

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Berry, *The Sacred Universe: Earth, Spirituality, and Religion in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 169.

In so saying, Thomas recognizes that as long as we continue to perceive the world through the same lens that has brought us to this place, our well-intentioned efforts will have no lasting effect.

He speaks often of the psychic energy needed for transformation in our time and wonders where such energy will come from that is equal to the magnitude of the task before us. He focuses on the new sacred story as the source of this energy, but he also recognizes we have so far failed to imbue the story with its sacred dimension. Thomas emphasizes we must enlarge our consciousness to tell the story, hear the story, and live the story in its full sacred dimension.

Others have heard the call for “the reorientation of mind” of which Thomas speaks. Ecologist John Milton, speaking of well-intentioned efforts to reform institutions, writes,

By themselves [these efforts] won’t bring about the penetrating changes in human culture that we need for people to live in true harmony and balance with one another and the earth. The next great opening of an ecological worldview will have to be an internal one.<sup>7</sup>

In *Spiritual Ecology, The Cry of the Earth*,<sup>8</sup> Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee recognizes the deep divide between spirit and matter that is at the heart of the ecological crisis:

Our present ecological crisis...is calling to us and it is for each of us to respond. This crisis is not a problem to be solved, because the world is not a problem but a living being in a state of dangerous imbalance and deep distress.... There is action to be taken in the outer world, but it must be action that comes from a reconnection with the sacred—otherwise we will just be reconstellating the patterns that have created this imbalance.<sup>9</sup>

In *Spiritual Ecology: A Quiet Revolution*, Anthropologist Leslie E. Sponsel offers a history of those engaged with an inner “rethinking, refeeling, and revisioning of the place of humans in nature.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Arthur Zajonc, *Meditation as Contemplative Inquiry* (Great Barrington, MA: Lindisfarne Books, 2009), 15.

<sup>8</sup> Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee, ed., *Spiritual Ecology: The Cry of the Earth* (Point Reyes, CA: The Golden Sufi Center, 2013).

<sup>9</sup> Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee, “The Call of the Earth,” in *ibid.*, 255-256.

<sup>10</sup> Leslie E. Sponsel, “Prologue,” in *Spiritual Ecology: A Quiet Revolution*, ed. Leslie E. Sponsel (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2012), xiv.

Let us look closely, then, at what Thomas has to say about the deep psychic shift that must take place in order for us to move from a view of the universe as a collection of objects to a relationship with the universe as a communion of subjects—a shift from “view” to “relationship,” from a spectator to communion.

Thomas takes us back to Descartes’ writing as the decisive moment when humans as thinking subjects were split off from everything else as objects. In *Evening Thoughts*, Thomas writes:

The universe is a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects. The devastation of the planet can be seen as a direct consequence of the loss of this capacity for human presence to and reciprocity with the nonhuman world. This reached its most decisive moment in the seventeenth-century proposal of René Descartes that the universe is composed simply of “mind and mechanism.” In this single stroke, he devitalized the planet and all its living creatures, with the exception of the human.

The thousandfold voices of the natural world [thus] became inaudible to many humans.”<sup>11</sup>

“Descartes,” Thomas says, “desouled the Earth, with his division of reality between mind and extension.”<sup>12</sup>

Thomas describes this rational mode of consciousness in the language of confinement. He uses words like *autistic, mute, deadening, paralysis, suffocation, mechanistic fixation, atrophy, pathology, alienation, dissatisfied* and *starved* to describe the human mind cut off from the deeper realms of reference and meaning. In *The Great Work* he writes:

We have, in the accepted universe of these times, little capacity for participating in the mysteries that were celebrated in the earlier literary and artistic and religious modes of expression. For we cannot live in the universe in which these celebrations took place. We can only look on, as it were, as at something unreal.<sup>13</sup>

Still, Thomas recognizes that the scientific period had a particular role to play in the evolution of consciousness that culminated in the story of a time-developmental universe, in a transition from cosmos to cosmogenesis, and in a revelation of the role of the human as that being in whom the universe reflects upon itself in a special mode of conscious self-awareness.<sup>14</sup> Thomas

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<sup>11</sup> Berry, *Evening Thoughts*, 17-18.

<sup>12</sup> Thomas Berry, *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future* (New York: Bell Tower, 1999), 78.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

holds the tension between these two polarities of rational consciousness—one devitalizing and the other full of awe and wonder—through which a third force emerges.

### **Unitive Consciousness**

This third force is a new, unitive consciousness of the human being. In *The Great Work* he writes:

We are a pervasive presence. By definition we are that reality in whom the entire Earth comes to a special mode of reflexive consciousness. We are ourselves a mystical quality of the Earth, a unifying principle, an integration of the various polarities of the material and the spiritual, the physical and the psychic, the natural and the artistic, the intuitive and the scientific. We are the unity in which all these inhere and achieve a special mode of functioning. In this way the human acts as a pervading logos.<sup>15</sup>

He clearly recognizes, however, these human capacities have been marginalized throughout the modern period of scientific/rational/Cartesian consciousness. In *Evening Thoughts* he writes:

Narration of this sequence has required the immense effort of scientific investigation of these past few centuries. It has necessitated the setting aside, for a while, of the spiritual, the visionary, intuitive, imaginative world in order to probe as deeply as possible into the visible, material, quantitative world, the measurable world, the world that could be expressed in the language of calculus, the great instrument of the scientific endeavor.<sup>16</sup>

### **Cultivation of Capacities**

To midwife a new unitive consciousness, the spiritual, visionary, intuitive, and imaginative worlds need to be invited back in. Thomas gives us a feeling for the human capacities that must now be cultivated to release us from our confinement and allow us to enter more fully into communion with Earth. Here, Thomas quotes William Blake, who asked: “What do you see when you look out over the landscape? Do you simply see the sun rising or do you see the flaming forth of the deep mystery of the universe?”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry, *The Universe Story: From the Primordial Flaring Forth to the Beginning of the Ecozoic Era—A Celebration of the Unfolding Cosmos* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994), 1.

<sup>15</sup> Berry, *Great Work*, 174-175.

<sup>16</sup> Berry, *Evening Thoughts*, 56.

<sup>17</sup> Berry, *Sacred Universe*, 149.

A close reading of Thomas's writings reveals these capacities that must now be cultivated:

- A capacity for humility
- A capacity for surrender
- A capacity for courtesy
- A capacity for gratitude
- A capacity for reverence
- A capacity for compassion
- A capacity for veneration
- A sense of the sacred, a sense of the numinous
- A sense of mystery
- A capacity for wisdom
- A capacity for awe
- A capacity for wonder
- A capacity for revelatory experience
- A capacity for presence
- A capacity for listening
- A capacity for intimate rapport
- A capacity for mutual presence
- A capacity for communion
- A capacity for reciprocity
- A capacity for conscious reflection
- A capacity for nurturing
- A capacity for celebration
- A capacity for spontaneity
- A capacity for creativity
- A capacity for ecstasy
- A capacity for praise
- A capacity for joy
- A capacity for fulfillment

In his book, *Living Presence*, Kabir Helminski reminds us of the full potential of the human who has embraced such capacities:

We have subtle subconscious faculties we are not using. In addition to the limited analytic intellect is a vast realm of mind that includes psychic and extrasensory abilities; intuition; wisdom; a sense of unity; aesthetic, qualitative, and creative capacities; and image-forming and symbolic capacities. Though these faculties are many, we give them a single name with some justification because they are operating best when they are in

concert. They comprise a mind, moreover, in spontaneous connection to the cosmic mind. This total mind we call "heart."<sup>18</sup>

Thomas extends this understanding of the "total mind" from the human heart to the "heart of the universe," understood through the Chinese word *hsin*. Thomas writes:

*Hsin* is written as a pictograph of the human heart. It should be translated by a single word or a phrase with both a feeling and an understanding aspect. It could thus be translated by saying that humans are the "understanding heart of heaven and Earth." Even more briefly the phrase has been translated by Julia Ch'ing in the statement that humans are the "heart of the universe." It could, finally, be translated by saying that humans are "the consciousness of the world," or that humans are "the psyche of the universe." Here we have a remarkable feeling for the absolute dimensions of the human, the total integration of reality in humans, the total integration of humans in reality.<sup>19</sup>

In his essay "The Meadow across the Creek,"<sup>20</sup> Thomas tells a story and gives an image of how, when he was eleven years old, a "heart of the universe" experience brought awareness of the universe as a communion of subjects, and became a touchstone for his future thinking and actions. At the end of the essay he writes:

We might think of a viable future for the planet less as the result of some scientific insight or as dependent on some socioeconomic arrangement, than as participation in a symphony or as renewed presence to some numinous presence manifested in the wonderworld about us. This was perhaps something I vaguely experienced in that first view of the lilies blooming in the meadow across the creek.<sup>21</sup>

The "heart of the universe" participates in the symphony of the universe in both its spatial and temporal dimensions. The "heart of the universe" hears the melody of a bond of intimacy that holds all together in communion. The "heart of the universe" hears the melody of the human being as that communion becoming conscious of itself.

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<sup>18</sup> Kabir Edmund Helminski, *Living Presence* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, 1992), 157.

<sup>19</sup> Thomas Berry, "The Spirituality of Earth," *The Ecozoic: Reflections on Life in an Ecological Age 1* (2008): 4.

<sup>20</sup> Berry, *Great Work*, 12-20.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

## Where These Capacities Are Being Cultivated

Where in our culture are these capacities for the “heart of the universe” being cultivated? New terms are arising, such as *heart-mind*, *heartfelt thinking*, *heart-mind entrainment*, *nondual thinking*, *putting the mind in the heart*. There is a rise of communion consciousness, particularly in the realm of contemplative ways of knowing.

Here are some examples:

First, I call attention to the work of Douglas Christie, Professor of Theological Studies at Loyola Marymount University in California and author of *The Blue Sapphire of the Mind: Notes for a Contemplative Ecology* (2013).<sup>22</sup> Christie writes on the essential importance of *contemplative ecology*:

Our ecological commitments, if they are to reach mature and sustainable expression, need to be grounded in a sense of deep reciprocity with the living world. And...this sense of reciprocity must be cultivated over time, in a process of deepening awareness and growing ethical maturity rooted in practices akin to those long cherished in the great spiritual traditions of the world—*contemplative* practices, oriented toward helping us see and inhabit and tend to the world fully and deeply.<sup>23</sup>

Christie recognizes the practice of seeing deeply into the living world as a moral and spiritual activity that dissolves dualistic thinking and restores a sacred sense of the whole. “The question,” Christie says, “of what it is to become aware of oneself as alive in the living world and how to cultivate this awareness for the sake of that world remains one of the most pressing spiritual concerns of our time.”<sup>24</sup>

Second, I note the work of Arthur Zajonc, Professor of Physics Emeritus at Amherst College, former Director of the Academic Program of the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society, former President of the Mind and Life Institute, and author of several books, including *Meditation as Contemplative Inquiry: When Knowing Becomes Love* (2008)<sup>25</sup> and, with Parker Palmer, *The Heart of Higher Education: A Call to Renewal* (2010).<sup>26</sup> Working closely with the

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<sup>22</sup> Douglas E. Christie, *The Blue Sapphire of the Mind: Notes for a Contemplative Ecology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>25</sup> Arthur Zajonc, *Meditation as Contemplative Inquiry: When Knowing Becomes Love* (Great Barrington, MA: Lindisfarne Books, 2008).



contemplative traditions of Rudolf Steiner and Buddhism, Zajonc has worked tirelessly to legitimate a shift from “knowledge as power” to “knowledge as love” in the academic world. These words, written by Zajonc, could easily have been written by Thomas:

The native peoples of all continents live within a tradition that fosters an awareness of the sacred being of nature and therefore a reverence for her. Our environmental groups largely lack the consciousness of the Earth as Mother; we have much to learn from our indigenous brothers and sisters in this regard. In deepening our relationship to nature by moving from wonder and awe to reverence, we meet nature not as a physical mechanism but as a moral and spiritual agent. While science will protest that we are merely projecting our moral inclinations onto nature, we can inwardly sense the emptiness of that assertion. Every civilization except ours has understood that we are not the only moral agents in the universe. Our survival depends on setting aside such self-centeredness and acknowledging the agential or “being” character of the world around us. It is then possible to feel true reverence toward nature, our fellow human beings, and towards those beings or Being who have always been active within her.<sup>27</sup>

Through a meditative practice based on humility and reverence, Zajonc opens the possibility of listening to Earth for guidance, one of the primary principles of Thomas’s work.

Third, of signal importance is the work of Robert Sardello, founder of the School of Spiritual Psychology, Co-Founder and Fellow of the Dallas Institute of Humanities and Culture and former Head of the Psychology Department at the University of Dallas. With the publication of *Facing the World with Soul: The Reimagination of Modern Life* (1992),<sup>28</sup> Sardello jostles our habitual ways of thinking about caring for the world:

I am suggesting that political, social, ecological, and technological programs (and all other imaginable kinds of programs) will not alter the condition of the world one wit; they only rearrange what is already given into new patterns into which we are inserted as onlookers, strangers.<sup>29</sup>

Drawing upon the archetypal psychology of James Hillman and others, Sardello works with silence, concentration, meditation, image-making, and contemplation to develop the interior

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<sup>26</sup> Parker J. Palmer et al, *The Heart of Higher Education: A Call to Renewal* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2010).

<sup>27</sup> Arthur Zajonc, *Meditation as Contemplative Inquiry*, 56-57.

<sup>28</sup> Robert Sardello, *Facing the World with Soul: The Reimagination of Modern Life* (Great Barrington, MA: Lindisfarne Press, 1992).

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., 9.

presence of heart with Earth. Over the course of more than twenty years, these practices have culminated in a four-part course of study, “Contemplative Living with Earth”<sup>30</sup> and the publication of *Heartfulness* (2015).<sup>31</sup>

Fourth, of profound significance is the work of Cynthia Bourgeault, PhD in Medieval Studies, author, Episcopal priest, hermit, a founding Director of both The Contemplative Society and The Aspen Wisdom School, and current faculty member of the Living School with Richard Rohr, James Finley, and others at the Center for Action and Contemplation in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Through her wisdom writings and contemplative practices, Bourgeault fosters a new level of evolutionary consciousness based on a shift from the dividing, separating mind to a consciousness that experiences the universe as “an emergent symphony of wholeness—a delicious inter-abiding where every part is precious and particular but only makes sense when it takes its place within the whole.”<sup>32</sup> This new consciousness is based on a heart-mind entrainment that perceives through coherence and connection, and can be cultivated and stabilized through the contemplative practices of kenosis (holding openness), abundance (sensing fullness), and singleness (perceiving from wholeness).

Douglas Christie, Arthur Zajonc, Robert Sardello, and Cynthia Bourgeault collectively create a considerable field of psychic energy today for actualizing the universe as a communion of subjects. Through contemplative practices, they provide pathways for the deep psychic shift that Thomas calls for within the human soul. These are everyday practices that move us from the dividing, separating mind to an awakening of “the heart of the universe.”

Thomas recognized the deep promise of contemplative ways of knowing. In *The Sacred Universe*, he speaks of a creative newness arising from contemplative traditions:

As we seek to escape from the wasteland about us, we witness these ancient springs once again flowing with cool water capable of sustaining us on the next phase of our journey. Contemplative traditions are renewed, prayer is again a source of wisdom, and the healing power of silence is rediscovered. As the need for a more mystical relationship with the Earth becomes more widespread, education could become an initiation into a wisdom tradition rather than simply an acquisition of factual data.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> The four parts are “Dying Awake, Coming Alive: A Contemplative Spiritual Quickening of the Soul,” “Heart Initiation: Developing Incarnational Contemplative Presence,” “Contemplative Listening: Bodily Presence with Soul,” and “Contemplative Action: A Handbook of Non-Doing Doing.” See “Contemplative Living with Earth,” accessed August 27, 2016, [http://reneecoleman.net/?page\\_id=1159](http://reneecoleman.net/?page_id=1159).

<sup>31</sup> Robert Sardello, *Heartfulness*. (Gainesville, TX: Goldenstone Press, 2015).

<sup>32</sup> Cynthia Bourgeault, (lecture, Co-Creation Conference Greensboro, NC, May 2, 2014).

<sup>33</sup> Berry, *Sacred Universe*, 64.

And Thomas also acknowledges that a “sense of the sacred requires recovery of ourselves, a return to the depths of our own being. We must in some manner,” he says, “manage the whole existence in terms of the authenticity of our own deeper self.”<sup>34</sup>

### **The Work of the Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World**

On October 12, 2000, a new non-profit organization, which was to become the Center for Education Imagination and the Natural World, initiated a program at Timberlake Earth Sanctuary in the foothills of North Carolina with a program featuring Thomas Berry and Richard Lewis, Founder of the Touchstone Center for Children in New York City. Called “The Biological Imperative: Nature, Education and Imagination,” this was the beginning of a work for educators and children situated in the authenticity of the deeper self rather than in factuality about the natural world.

Berry’s opening remarks that day were illuminating and gave those of us involved with the new center a way forward:

*The capacity of presence is so important. When I was eleven, we moved from one side of town to the borders of the other side of the town when Greensboro was 18,000 people. The destiny of the children and planet is going to depend on us to respond to their deeper mode of being. In 1926, just a few years before the Depression, we were building the new house and I went there and there was an incline down to the creek. I was a wanderer and a brooder. I was a solitary in a sense. I knew I couldn’t make it in a commercial world and survive. It was too unacceptable. I would have died in some sense.... A meadow was there. The grass was growing and the crickets were chirping...an extraordinary view of a meadow and the white lilies. It remained in my mind and it developed into a referent, like this place [(gesturing at Timberlake Earth Sanctuary)] could be to children. It became normative. Whether the woodland, the meadow, the creek, it was something very sublime. I think when a child sees a butterfly, there’s some kind of ecstasy. The natural world is there to present the numinous aspect of existence.*

Once I was in the Cathedral of St. John the Divine where there was a meeting of people: Lame Deer, a Sioux Indian was there; Zen master Roshi, Edgar Mitchell, and me. We had a meeting on technology. The Zen master and Edgar Mitchell argued that technology is indifferent, it is just how we use it. Lame Deer and I argued no. Lame Deer mentioned the Cathedral. As beautiful as all of this was, the Sioux needed the sky above to draw in everything from the four directions, above and below. *You establish yourself with the universe before you do anything.*

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 55.

Black Elk is a patron saint of mine. His vision was profound. He was ill as a child in a coma and a vision occurred. He came out of the coma and it was six years before he would speak to the medicine man of his vision. The culmination of the vision can be read to establish a community of what we are all about. Loren Eiseley is my next patron saint....

*My childhood dream is what has guided my life...of what it should be...what I should strive for...what I should do. Particularly in relation to children. That's why I've been dedicated to children. Imagination has to be activated by the natural world. I would push things back from the biological imperative to the primordial imperative; to the universe itself and within the universe, the human participation at the deepest level of the universe is our gift of imagination, but our imagination has to be activated by the natural world. So this goes with the fact that it's one thing, a self-activating process. The universe gives us the imagination and it imprints the imagination.<sup>35</sup>*

So began our work for educators and children at the Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World, work guided particularly by these words he spoke that day:

*The capacity of presence is so important.*

*The destiny of the children and planet is going to depend on us to respond to their deeper mode of being*

*You establish yourself with the universe before you do anything.*

*My childhood dream is what has guided my life...of what it should be...what I should strive for...what I should do. Particularly in relation to children. That's why I've been dedicated to children.*

*The human participation at the deepest level of the universe is our gift of imagination, but our imagination has to be activated by the natural world.*

Being and becoming, cosmos and cosmogenesis, meet in Thomas's fuller account of "The Meadow across the Creek" in his book *The Great Work*.<sup>36</sup> A moment of cosmic consciousness became the reverberating touchstone for the new cultural coding that Thomas was to bring to expression in his life and work. The "communion of subjects" was born there—the place of reciprocity, mutual presence and intimate rapport between the imagination of the universe and the imagination of a child.

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<sup>35</sup> Thomas Berry, (in conversation during program on "The Biological Imperative: Nature, Education and Imagination," Timberlake Earth Sanctuary, Whitsett, NC, October 12, 2000) (italics added).

<sup>36</sup> Cited above in footnote 20.

All the work of the Center is formed in the image of a communion of subjects, from governance, to staff development, to the formation of programs for educators and children; and all the work of the Center begins with *presence*, establishing ourselves in the natural world as primary.

In our programs for adults at the Center, we are preparing for a deep change of heart, a deep psychic shift in the culture at large...one educator at a time. We believe the change that is needed in our time cannot be achieved through sweeping movements, curriculum change, or further exchange of information. Thus in our two-year program for educators called the “Inner Life of the Child in Nature,” we focus in the first year on the development of the capacity for inner presence to the natural world , and in the second year on the creation of individual practices that are diverse and generative like the universe itself.

This is a new social form for working with educators based on the assumption that a shift in consciousness within the educational realm will come only through an inner transformation of the educator, through an honoring of the soul/spirit of the educator as a core value, and through the creation of a community of educators who support and inspire one another on the threshold of a new consciousness for our time—a consciousness that moves us beyond a view of the natural world as a collection of objects into an experience of the natural world as a communion of subjects.

In our programs for children, we also focus on eco-contemplative practices that bring children into a deep inner relationship with the natural world. Over the past sixteen years, we have cultivated ways of working that:

Foster a deep awareness of the sacred presence within each reality of the universe.

Nurture an attitude of awe, wonder and reverence.

Nurture a capacity for inner presence to other modes of being.

Cultivate a soul-attitude of loving attention.

Develop the imaginal capacity to feel a bond of intimacy with the world.

Our work also requires inner development on the part of our staff, all of whom have graduated from the Center’s Inner Life of the Child in Nature Program.

### **Listening to the Voices of Children**

It seems fitting to end this presentation on Thomas Berry with the voices of children.

One day in early December, a fifth-grade child came into communion with a raptor in flight through our beholding practice. These are the words she wrote at day's end:

*Peace Eagle*

By Ruby

Soaring past the trees  
Halting at its beautiful home  
I hope you are protected, and if shot  
there are fees. You did not make  
much noise, but still amazed all  
the girls and boys. I wanted to fly  
up there with you but instead I stood  
by and observed with my eye. But  
afterward I hopped up on a rock and made  
sounds just like the birds. Later on  
complete silence crept on in and I  
heard you remote and thin.  
You are a beauty.  
You are a Peace Eagle.

During one of our Poetry of Nature programs, an eighth grader wrote the following poem as he sat in his solo sit-spot on an Earth sanctuary trail:

*Bridge*

By Sebastian

so soft  
the spirit trickles down  
filling me  
quenching my thirst  
the spirit flows from the tops of trees  
it scrapes across rocks  
below the water of the creek

it soothes  
filling everything with its sound  
so perfectly imperfect  
so quietly brilliant

i want to leap  
leap  
into its arms

i leap

it catches me  
holds me

i fall  
deeper and deeper  
until we are one

the tree's spirit is my spirit  
the bird's song my own

and i stay perfectly silent  
under the stars  
and the light of the sun

Thomas Berry would have recognized such moments of communion as moments of fulfillment, but also as moments where the universe awakens to itself through the child as "heart of the universe." "This," he says, "is the beginning of poetry and music and literature. It is the beginning of cosmology, of philosophical reflection, of moral perception, of theological insight. It is the beginning of the Epic of Evolution."<sup>25</sup>

Finally, I'd like to invite you to enter inwardly into the following account of an earth walk with a Title I public school fifth grade class, written by Marnie Weigel, one of the Center's Earth Guides:

This was my third group, and the spring season. Everything was in bloom and budding. The earth sanctuary was alive with sounds of bird songs, crickets, and frogs. Tadpoles were hatching in the pond, and there were babies being born all over the Earth sanctuary. My group walked along the Timberlake Trail. I decided to guide them on a solo walk on a moss-covered part of the trail. I invited the children to take their shoes off and carry them as they slowly walked on the soft moss. Most of the children took their shoes off with delight. I said, "Notice the sounds beneath your feet and all around you as you walk. Can you walk on the path in silence even beneath your feet? Notice the air on your arms and your face as you walk." I started down the trail first. Noticing, silence, and walking barefoot will slow you to walk at nature's pace. I noticed the coolness of the moss under my feet. Some parts of the trails were dry and some were really wet. I noticed the softness of the earth. There was a comforting, calm, and balancing feeling I noticed as I walked along. I noticed the Bluet wildflowers growing out of the moss, delicately dancing along the path and defining it for me. When I reached the end of the moss on the path, I stopped and sat on the ground and waited to watch the children as they slowly made their way down the path. I love to see the expressions on their faces as they get closer to the end of the solo walk. There is a peaceful

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<sup>25</sup> Berry, *Evening Thoughts*, 118.

happiness in their expressions. Linda sent each child one at a time down the trail to me. When they each arrived they sat on the ground with me to put their shoes back on. I was making a sun mandala with pebbles on the moss to mark the end of solo walk for the day. The children were drawn in by the mandala and watched the mandala come to life. I invited them to add to the mandala. I remember looking up each time a child would approach and smiled to invite them to join us sitting along the path. I noticed Savon walking down the path with an interesting expression on his face as he approached the group. When he sat down, he had a look about him that was as if he was trying to put into words his experience on his solo walk. He shared, "I had a strange feeling come up from the Earth through my feet. It was an energetic feeling." He later described this to the Earth Walk group when I opened the moment for sharing and reflecting. He looked up to the sky and said, 'It was like the spirit of the Earth moving up through my feet into my body. It was like a dream.'<sup>37</sup>

These communion experiences return children to the origin and authenticity of their being and give deep hope for the future. They return us, ultimately, as Thomas Berry writes, to

"The dream of the earth. Where else can we go for the guidance needed for the task that is before us?"<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> After each of the Center's programs for children, our staff meets to reflect on the day and write field notes on the children's experiences. This description was written by Marnie Weigel after an "Awakening to Nature" program at Timberlake Earth Sanctuary on April 22, 2014.

<sup>38</sup> Berry, *Dream of the Earth*, 223.