THRICE-BORN: ON THE TRANSFORMATION OF AN EXPERT DUFUS
By James Peacock

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Isabella, my granddaughter, explained on the way home from having pizzas, the “expert dufus.” Abuelo, there are many kinds of experts, which she named, and then she said there is the expert dufus: the person who is expert at being a dufus.

I was an expert dufus with respect to the environment.

Here was my stupidity and emerging learning and limitation. When I was four years old, my father was stationed at Fort Dix to train for D-day. We lived in a couple of rooms in a farmhouse in New Jersey. In wartime toys were cardboard, which we assembled. My father complimented me for fitting Tab A into Slot A, even though I had not yet learned to read. I did this, however, at the expense of learning about the environment that surrounded us on the farm, though I did learn a little, such as when I got to ride a mule. The Tab A/Slot A activity continued through erector sets, Lincoln Logs, and making things as well as drawing things, mainly individuals, and eventually photographing them, including my sister caught in unflattering poses. That led me eventually to read about psychology, which started when my sister and I read Parents Magazine, to which our mother subscribed. My father was an electrical engineer who became an electrical contractor and I, continuing the Tab A/Slot A activity, worked on his crews as a laborer from age thirteen to nineteen.

In college, focusing on the individual, I majored in psychology and minored in biology. Running a tachistoscope in a basement laboratory, I worked as a research assistant to Professor Charles Spielberger. When I was a senior, a friend named Chris Crocker invited me to accompany him and his teacher, Weston LaBarre, to a meeting of the American Anthropological Association in Washington, DC. That meeting was a revelation. I heard Alfred Kroeber, Margaret Mead, Alan Lomax, and others speak about cultures around the world. A gust of fresh air blew into my basement lab, and I immediately applied to graduate school in anthropology.

When I began graduate study, I encountered the ideas of culture and of society, at first through ethnography then, in the spring of my first year, through the theory of Talcott Parsons. That spring, I drove overnight with several fellow graduate students from Cambridge, MA, to Chicago to go to meetings of the Association for Asian Studies. As I drove through the night, stopping perhaps once, I harangued my colleagues with my thoughts on Parsons’ theory, which several
of them knew better than I. I was caught up in the realization that social and cultural systems were powerful and pervasive.

Soon afterwards I left for Indonesia to do fieldwork on the eve of the year of living dangerously which brought the killing of hundreds of thousands of alleged Communists. Later I returned to live and work with a Muslim movement, Muhammadiyah, whose membership now numbers thirty million. These experiences reinforced a sense of the huge power of the collective, culture and society.

Of course, the environment was important. Florence, my wife, and I lived in a slum in the midst of one of the most densely populated islands in the world. Volcanoes erupted, people starved, but I was blind to the power of the Earth and the threat to the Earth. Thomas Berry published *The Great Work* in 1999. Upon reading this, I finally began to see, but I did not know what to do. What not to do is obvious, not to violate the Paris Accord, not to dismember the EPA, etc. William James wrote about the twice born. The twice born are “born again.” They see the light, they are converted religiously. Goethe described Wilhelm Meister’s “Lehrjahre.” Wilhelm is a young man who experiences a Lehrjahre, a year of learning. His eyes are opened by a child of nature, Mignon, whose poignant song by Schubert is “Kenst du das land, wo die zitronen blühen?” Do you know the land where the lemon trees bloom? This is a song of nature that Wilhelm hears in his soul. Wilhelm’s transformation illustrated the concept of Bildung, life transformation, that is an emblem of maturation in German thought. My own account suggests a “thrice born” step, an evolution of awareness passing through a sense of the individual to a sense of society and culture and then to the wider and deeper reality of the environment. Thomas Berry takes us through this evolution and renders it as a spiritual journey; ecology is theology, the Earth is divine, humans have the great work of preserving and sustaining the Earth and all who live therein.

Romanticism and theology aside, the hard facts of science rebut decisively the expert dufus who refuses to get it or, getting it, acts with criminal intent to murder Earth and all who live therein.