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Ecozoic Era



Thomas Berry's awareness of the magnitude of the planetary change we have effected with our industrial revolution was one of his great insights. Indeed, he saw that the Cenozoic period, the last sixty-five million years of the incredible florescence of life on Earth, is coming to an end. This is due to the extinction spasm that humans have induced. Such a realization provoked Berry to call for a transformation into a new period of flourishing for the Earth community, which he termed the Ecozoic era.

The Cenozoic period provided the biological context for self-reflexive consciousness to emerge. The richness of life evident in this period has given rise to the human capacity for wonder, beauty, and intimacy. In presenting the term "Ecozoic," Berry calls for a new awareness and reciprocity on the part of humans so they can be "present to the planet in a mutually enhancing manner."

This shift to the Ecozoic occurs just as contemporary geologists are identifying our current age as the "Anthropocene," namely, the period in which human-induced change is the defining characteristic. Berry understands that the transformation needed now is a turn from an anthropocentric perspective to biocentric and ecocentric concerns. The full resilience of Earth's ecosystems is beyond our knowledge. Nonetheless, life as we know it is being severely curtailed by human industrial

obsessions that distract us from realizing the consequences of what we are doing.

Even religions themselves are threatened as we diminish our sense of experiencing the divine in nature. However, the religions show little sign of appreciating how such a sense of the divine arises within the landscape of Earth. We are being confronted by the critical, moral dilemmas presented by suicide, homicide, and even genocide. But, as Berry observes, we have yet to hear the world religions speak about the impinging challenges of biocide and geocide. These present powerful moral concerns regarding the diminishment of life throughout the planet, as well as the imperilment of the ecosphere itself.

Berry meditates on the spiritual realization of this reality in his reflection on the human story as integral with the universe from the beginning. The dynamic presence of the universe to itself is reflected in human consciousness—in the galactic story and the Earth story that infuses every dimension of our universe, interrelating it to everything else. Perfection is simultaneously in the whole and that whole is expressed in each particular being and event of the universe. Languages may vary in their efforts to articulate reality as event, being, or relationship, but many languages articulate the profound kinship of emergence that now comes to us as life.

One articulation that has arisen out of the Western world is the term, “wild,” which Berry described as the spontaneities of life. Rather than simply idiosyncratic or individuated, socially constructed or biologically determined, he understands these spontaneities as profound expressions of the universe within each particular being. Wild, for Berry, is not something subject to uncontrollable emotions or driven by unconscious desires, but rather is a subjectivity that is aware of its vibrant place in ecosystems and human communities. It is from this perspective that Berry articulates the determining features of the Ecozoic era as a meditation on that spiritual journey of recovering the wild.

THE EARTH COMMUNITY

The magnitude of the ecological crisis of our times is such that we are presently terminating the Cenozoic era of Earth's development and entering into the Ecozoic era of the Earth process. The Cenozoic has been the period of the expansion of life in the full brilliance of its expression, but this expansion of the life systems of Earth is being terminated. This will affect all our human institutions and professions that were appropriate to the Cenozoic era. They must now undergo a transformation if they are to be integral with the new period in the historical evolution of the planet. The transformation required is a transformation from an anthropocentric norm of reality and value to a biocentric or geocentric norm. This will affect every aspect of our human thought and action. It will affect language, religion, morality, economics, education, science, technology, and medicine.

In our discussion of sacred community, we need to understand that in all our activities Earth is primary, the human is derivative. The Earth is our primary community. Indeed, all particular modes of earthly being exist by virtue of their role within this community.

—"Earth as Sacred Community," in *Evening Thoughts*, 43

THE DAWN OF THE ECOZOIC ERA

Humans as a planetary presence are currently terminating the Cenozoic era of Earth history and entering the Ecozoic era. This geological shift is marked by the fact that the sixth extinction spasm is occurring, and it is of our own making. . . . The survival of other species and the vitality of human affairs will depend on our capacity to adapt to this transition. Above all, this entry into the Ecozoic era is the entry into the period of the Earth community with a new sense of its sacred dimension. . . .

Presently, those of us who are heirs to the biblical tradition are trying to be religious in accordance with written scriptures and covenant relations with the divine based on a juridic model. This can be effective only as long as it functions within the

awesome awakening to the divine evoked by our experience of the natural world. We become religious by fulfilling our role within the larger community of the universe itself. The natural world is both the primary source of religious understanding and the primary religious community. In the natural world, we discover the mysterious power whence all things come into being. In humans this religious community reflects on and celebrates itself and its numinous origins in a special mode of conscious self-awareness.

Rather than accord with these vast cosmic forces in the natural rhythms of their expression, especially in the biosystems of the planet, we have, in recent centuries, been subverting these forces. We have long been imposing our mechanistic patterns on these biosystems, forcing the natural rhythms of Earth to accord with our accelerated demands. When organic processes are too slow or too limited in bringing forth their produce, we force the growth through chemical processes that increase the volume of production, even though the nourishing quality of the product is inferior and the fertility of the land diminished. In a multitude of different ways, we seek to subdue Earth to our own ephemeral purposes, considering this the proper human relationship to the natural world.

Because of this distortion in our thinking, we are carrying out what may be one of the most devastating assaults ever on Earth in more than four billion years of life on this planet. . . .

Not simply the human future is involved. The future of every living being on the planet is at issue. The fate of the planet itself in its most profound physical and psychic structure is being determined. We are witnessing nothing less than the dissolution of the planet Earth and all its living systems in consequence of this strange distortion of our human role in the Earth process that has emerged from within our modern Western world, which was itself born out of a biblical-classical matrix.

—“Earth as Sacred Community,” in
Evening Thoughts, 45–47

IF WE LIVED ON THE MOON

Here we might observe that our Western religious institutions are strangely indifferent to what is happening. This indifference arises, apparently, as a result of excessive concern for redemptive processes out of this world—which is considered to be seductive—rather than integration within this world considered to be sacred. There seems to be little realization that the disintegration of the natural world is the destruction of the primordial self-manifestation of the divine. The very existence of religion is threatened in proportion as the splendor of the natural world is diminished. We have a magnificent sense of the divine because we live in such a resplendent world. If we lived on the moon, our sense of the divine would be as dull as the lunar landscape.

Even when we try to bring religious influence to bear on these issues, we find that our religious traditions have little relevance to what is happening. Our Western religions exist in a different world, a world of covenant relations with the divine, a world little concerned with the natural environment or with the Earth community. Our sacred community is seen primarily as one concerned with human-divine relations, with little attraction toward a shared community existence within the larger world of the living. Our iconoclasm is such that we can hardly think of ourselves within a multispecies community or consider that this community of the natural world is the primary locus for the meeting of the divine and the human.

—“Earth as Sacred Community,” in
Evening Thoughts, 47–48

NO MORAL TEACHINGS FOR BIOCIDES OR GEOCIDES

From these observations we can say that establishing a mutually enhancing human presence upon Earth has been a difficulty from the late Paleolithic era until the present. Also, we can say that the biblical-Christian-classical tradition has intensified this

alienation from the natural world and has set up conditions that have permitted extensive plundering of Earth for human use. As regards our own specifically Western responsibilities, we must note that, although we have developed a moral teaching concerned with suicide, homicide, and genocide, we have developed no effective teachings concerned with biocide, the killing of the life systems of Earth, or geocide, the killing of Earth itself.

—“Earth as Sacred Community,” in
Evening Thoughts, 52

UNIVERSE AS PRIMARY SACRED COMMUNITY

My proposal is that we cannot fully remedy this situation except by a realization that the universe from the beginning has been a psychic-spiritual, as well as physical-material, reality. Within this context, the human activates one of the deepest dimensions of the universe and is, thus, integral with the universe from its beginning. The universe story needs to be accepted simultaneously as the human story and the story of every being in the universe.

There is a need for the religious traditions, on their part, to appreciate that the primary sacred community is the universe itself, and that every other community becomes sacred by participation in this primary community. The story of the universe is the new sacred story. The Genesis story, however valid in its basic teaching, is no longer adequate for our spiritual needs. We cannot renew the world through the Genesis story; at the same time, we cannot renew the world without including the Genesis story and all those creation stories that have nourished the various segments of the human community through the centuries. These belong to the great story, the sacred story, as we presently know this sacred community.

The new story of the universe is a biospiritual story as well as a galactic story and an Earth story. Above all, the universe as we now know it is integral with itself throughout its vast extent

in space and throughout the long series of its transformations in time. Everywhere, at all times, and in each of its particular manifestations, the universe is present to itself. Each atomic element is immediately influencing and being influenced by every other atom of the universe. Nothing can ever be separated from anything else. The Earth is a single if highly differentiated community. This is the quintessential way of understanding the universe.

So, too, every part of the universe activates a particular dimension or aspect of the universe in a unique and unrepeatable manner. Thus everything is needed. Without the perfection of each part, something is lacking from the whole. Each particular being in the universe is needed by the entire universe. With this understanding of our profound kinship with all life, we can establish the basis for a flourishing Earth community.

—“Earth as Sacred Community,” in
Evening Thoughts, 57–58

THE WILD AND THE SACRED

To understand the human role in the functioning of Earth, we need to appreciate the spontaneities found in every form of existence in the natural world, spontaneities that we associate with the wild—that which is uncontrolled by human dominance. We misconceive our role if we consider that our historical mission is to “civilize” or to “domesticate” the planet, as though wildness is something destructive rather than the ultimate creative modality of any form of earthly being. We are not here to control. We are here to become integral with the larger Earth community. The community itself and each of its members has ultimately a wild component, a creative spontaneity that is its deepest reality, its most profound mystery.

We might reflect on this sense of the wild and the civilized when the dawn appears through the morning mist. At such times a stillness pervades the world—a brooding sense, a quiet transition from night into day. This experience is deepened when evening responds to morning, as day fades away, and night comes

in the depth of its mystery. We are most aware at such moments of transition that the world around us is beyond human control. So too are the transition phases of human life; at birth, maturity, and death we brood over our presence in a world of mystery far greater than ourselves.

I bring all this to mind because we are discovering our human role in a different order of magnitude. We are experiencing a disintegration of the life systems of the planet just when Earth in the diversity and resplendence of its self-expression had attained a unique grandeur. This moment deserves special attention on the part of humans who are themselves bringing about this disintegration in a manner that has never happened previously in the entire 4.6 billion years of Earth history.

We never thought of ourselves as capable of doing harm to the very structure of the planet Earth or of extinguishing the living forms that give to the planet its unique grandeur. In our efforts to reduce the planet to human control, we are, in reality, terminating the Cenozoic era, the lyric period of life development on Earth.

If such moments as dawn and dusk, birth and death, and the seasons of the year are such significant moments, how awesome, then, must be the present moment when we witness the dying of the Earth in its Cenozoic expression and the life renewal of Earth in an emerging Ecozoic era. Such reflection has a special urgency if we are ever to renew our sense of the sacred in any sphere of human activity. For we will recover our sense of wonder and our sense of the sacred only if we appreciate the universe beyond ourselves as a revelatory experience of that numinous presence whence all things come into being. Indeed, the universe is the primary sacred reality. We become sacred by our participation in this more sublime dimension of the world about us.

—“The Wild and the Sacred,” in
The Great Work, 48–49

THE DETERMINING FEATURES OF THE ECOZOIC ERA

1. Earth is a communion of subjects; it is not a collection of objects.
2. Earth exists and can survive only in its integral functioning. It cannot survive in fragments any more than any organism can survive in fragments. Yet Earth is not a global sameness. It is a differentiated unity and must be sustained in the integrity and interrelations of its many bioregional modes of expression.
3. Earth is a one-time endowment. It is subject to irreversible damage in the major patterns of its functioning.
4. The human is derivative, Earth is primary. Earth must be the primary concern of every human institution, profession, program, and activity. In economics, for instance, the first law of economics must be the preservation of the Earth economy. A rising Gross National Product with a declining Gross Earth Product reveals the absurdity of our present economy. It should be clear, such as in the medical profession, that we cannot have well people on a sick planet.
5. The entire pattern of functioning of the planet Earth is altered in the transition from the Cenozoic to the Ecozoic era. The major developments of the Cenozoic era took place entirely apart from any human intervention. In the Ecozoic era, the human will have a comprehensive influence on almost everything that happens. While the human cannot make a blade of grass, there is liable not to be a blade of grass unless it is accepted, protected, and fostered by the human. Our positive power of creativity in the natural life systems is minimal, while our power of negating is immense.

6. "Progress," to be valid, must include the entire Earth in all its component aspects. To designate human plundering of the planet as "progress" is an unbearable distortion.
7. A new role exists for both science and technology in the Ecozoic era. Science must provide a more integral understanding of the functioning of Earth and how human activity and Earth activity can be mutually enhancing. Our biological sciences especially need to develop a "feel for the organism," a greater sense of the ultimate subjectivities present in the various living beings of Earth. Our human technology must become more coherent with the technologies of the natural world.
8. New ethical principles must emerge that recognize the absolute evils of biocide and geocide, as well as the other evils concerned more directly with the human.
9. New religious sensitivities are needed, sensitivities that will recognize the sacred dimension of Earth and that will accept the natural world as the primary manifestation of the divine.
10. A new language, an Ecozoic language is needed. Our Cenozoic language is radically inadequate. A new dictionary should be compiled with new definitions of existing words and introduction of new words for the new modes of being and of functioning that are emerging.
11. Psychologically, all the archetypes of the collective unconscious attain a new validity, also new patterns of functioning; especially in our understanding of the symbols of the heroic journey, the death-rebirth symbol, the Great Mother, the tree of life.
12. New developments can be expected in ritual, in all the arts, and in literature. In drama, especially, extraordinary opportunity exists in the monumental issues that are being worked out in these times. The conflicts that

until now have been situated simply within the human are now magnified considerably through the larger contours of conflict as these emerge in this stupendous transition from the terminal Cenozoic to the emerging Ecozoic era. What we are dealing with is in epic dimensions beyond anything thus far expressed under this term.

13. Mitigation of the present ruinous situation, the recycling of materials, the diminishment of consumption, the healing of damaged ecosystems; all this will be in vain if we do these things to make the present industrial systems acceptable. They must be done, but in order to build a new order of things.

—Used by Thomas Berry for
“Remarks at the Center for Reflection
on the Second Law,” Raleigh, NC