



Thomas Berry On Our Broken Connection To The Natural World

an interview by DERRICK JENSEN

Thomas Berry does not fit the image of a typical environmentalist. A Catholic monk in his late eighties, he is a philosophical forebear to younger generations of activists. His main focus is not the immediate battles being fought, but the roots of the problem, which he traces back to the very beginnings of Western civilization.

*Berry wrote his book *The Dream of the Earth* (Sierra Club Books) beneath an ancient oak in New York City, on a slope overlooking the Hudson River. That tree, to which he dedicated his book, lived through many changes, beginning with the arrival of the Europeans and the end of traditional Native American*

ways. It lived through the disappearance of the wood bison, the passenger pigeon, the great American chestnuts, the wolverines who prowled the shores of the Hudson, the Atlantic salmon that were once so numerous they threatened to carry away fishermen's nets. It stood there as men cut down the neighboring trees, demolishing the forest where its life began. It lived through the pouring of billions of tons of concrete, the erection of brick buildings and rigid structures of steel.

Born in 1914, when there were fewer than 2 billion people in the world, Berry, too, has lived through many changes. He grew up in an undeveloped area of the South. "I saw the beginnings



Photo: Barbara Kline

of the automobile age,” he says, “and, to some extent, the age of industrialization. I remember the discovery of the Arabian oil fields in the 1920s, and the development of the petrochemical age after the Second World War. By the time I was eight years old, I already saw something happening that I didn’t like.”

Berry has spent much of his life trying to understand why our culture is bent on destroying the natural world. When he was twenty, he entered a Passionist monastery, and for ten years, he got up at two every morning for liturgy. Then, from 3 A.M. on, he studied the foundations of Western thought. He discovered that environmental degradation is not a recent development: by the time Plato wrote his Republic, the Greeks had already cut down the forests of their homeland. At thirty, Berry went to the Catholic University of America, where he earned a doctoral degree in history. He also learned Chinese and Sanskrit, he says, “so I could find out how other cultures and religions dealt with the problems of human existence.” Berry traveled to China to teach and later became director of the graduate program in the history of religions at Fordham University. In 1970, he founded the Riverdale Center of Religions Research in Riverdale, New York, and remained its director until 1995.

The fate of the next generation, which will live to see a world of 8 to 10 billion people, is often on Berry’s mind. “They are going to be in a tragic situation,” he says, “particularly in regard to petroleum. Our food depends on petroleum, and in a sense is transformed petroleum, just like our energy, transportation, clothing, utensils, and plastics. What are people going to do when the petroleum is gone?”

Berry’s latest book is *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future* (Crown Publishing). The “great work” facing humanity, he says, is to move from mindlessly extracting and consuming

the earth’s resources to establishing a mutually beneficial relationship with nature. His other books include two academic works on religion, *Buddhism and Religions of India* (both Columbia University Press), and *The Universe Story* (Harper San Francisco), coauthored with cosmologist Brian Swimme.

The old oak tree under which Berry wrote is no more: cut down by a homeowner worried that its branches would fall on his roof. And Berry no longer lives in New York. He has returned to his place of birth in North Carolina, where he lives on a



THOMAS BERRY

are still trying to figure out how nature *works* in order to control it.

I’ve been thinking a lot lately about genetic engineering. People have been talking positively about “designer babies.” We don’t just want to know whether the child is going to be a boy or a girl — which is bad enough. We want the child to look the way we want it to, think the way we want it to. That’s just one example of the insane degree to which we wish to control nature.

We need to regain our sense of the natural world as sacred. All that is left to us these days is the possibility of going to the seashore, or the mountains, or another wilderness area. But even this experience has become progressively less meaningful and more separate from our day-to-day existence. In our workaday world, we are no longer present to the natural world in any manner. We no longer see trees as other beings to commune with. We are not taught to make that connection, not encouraged to speak of trees this way. That’s why we live in a world of concrete and steel, of wires and wheels and mechanisms. This is the tragedy of our civilization: our children don’t see the stars because of light pollution; they play on grass poisoned with pesticides; they experience a world circumscribed by so much human-made material they are deprived of any normal relationship with the earth.

As adults, we maintain that disconnection. At one time, we depended directly on the earth for the necessities of life. We recognized this dependency and gave thanks and praise for it, as indigenous and agricultural peoples still do. But now most of us have no idea where our food comes from.

Jensen: And we work a lot harder to get it than hunter-gatherers did.

Berry: The way humans lived before civilization was a lot less work, because we ate what the planet naturally produced, so our food sources renewed themselves. And the planet offered us not only food, but also its wonders, its presence. There was none of this separation of the sacred and the

former farm that is now part of the city of Greensboro. I stayed there on a cool November night, talking with him until the small hours and starting up again the following frosty morning.

Jensen: My friend Jeannette Armstrong, an Okanagan Indian, says she’s got nothing against Jesus, except that he never said anything about our relationship with the land.

Berry: Much of the Bible is concerned with how humans should relate to God, and to one another. What’s gotten lost is our intimate relationship with the natural world. Our theology is highly developed, and our anthropology — our study of each other — is highly developed, but our so-called life sciences



secular: both spiritual and physical well-being were granted at the same time, because — and this is most important — the physical and the spiritual are two dimensions of the same thing.

Each thing is so present to everything else in the universe that nothing is separate. If people would only pay proper attention, they would find verification of this, even within the scientific worldview. For instance, the science of quantum physics tells us that every atom influences every other atom without a known signal passing through the intervening space. But most scientists do not take the next step of understanding.

Steven Weinberg, in *The First Three Minutes*, a brilliant scientific study of the first three minutes of the universe, says, “The more you know about the universe, the less point it seems to have.” My response to that is “Well, Steven, if there’s no point to it, then why do you study it so much?”

The answer is very simple. The “point” of the universe is the attraction between the Great Self and the small self. Every being has two dimensions: its individual dimension and its universal dimension. The universe is the Great Self. That’s why we are so inspired by being among trees, hearing bird songs, seeing the colors of flowers, and watching the flow of rivers. The source of our inspiration is an encounter with the Great Self, the dimension where we experience fulfillment. We are not ourselves without it. Taking a drink of water when you are thirsty is as spiritual an experience as it is a physical one. You see a river. You drink from it. The river takes care of you both spiritually and physically.

Jensen: I’ve always thought that traditional indigenous peoples live in equilibrium with their surroundings, but you suggest something else: “creative *disequilibrium*.”

Berry: Imagine that there are two basic forces in the universe: differentiation and bonding. One force pushes things apart, making them different, and the other brings things together, making them present to each other. If the differentiation overcame the bonding, then the universe would disperse. If the bonding overcame the differentiation, then everything would collapse. If the bonding and the differentiation entered into equilibrium, then everything would become fixated, static. The only viable option is for the universe to be in a state of creative disequilibrium, holding together enough not to fly apart, but remaining open enough to expand.

Jensen: How does this manifest itself in human relations?

Berry: Creativity. Play. There is a difference between a philosopher and a poet. Philosophers look for equilibrium. Poets delight in a teasing disequilibrium, in the interplay of tension among all beings.

This is also the difference between Chinese and Japanese art: Chinese art, although it has dynamics and interplay, looks for balance. Japanese art, on the other hand, is more free form and always insists on a certain disequilibrium.

Jensen: Do you think we’re now in a state of destructive disequilibrium?

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Berry: I’d be more inclined to say we’re collapsing from excessive equilibrium.

Jensen: I don’t understand. What part of our world is in equilibrium?

Berry: Look at concrete and asphalt. They’re flat. They’re under control. That’s a form of equilibrium, probably the ultimate form: stasis — which is surely what Western civilization aims for. We can’t stand the wild. We can’t stand the creative disequilibrium.

What I’m really concerned with is the question of how we experience the universe. I propose that there is a cosmological order that might be called the “great liturgy,” and that the human project is validated by ritual participation in this natural order. Our job, as humans, is to be a part of the great hymn of praise that is existence.

We have lost touch with the cosmological order. The precise hour of the day is more important to us than the diurnal cycles. We’re so busy worrying — Will I get to work on time? Will I avoid rush-hour traffic? Will I get to watch my favorite television program? — that we have forgotten the spiritual import of the daily moments of transition. The dawn is mystical, a moment to experience the wonder and depth of fulfillment found in the sacred. The same is true of nightfall, and of bedtime, when we pass from consciousness to sleep and our subconscious comes forward. Children, in particular, know that bedtime is magical. Their parents talk to them in a different way at this time: tender, sensitive, quiet.

There are magical moments in the yearly cycle, too. One is the winter solstice, the turning point between a declining and an ascending sun. It’s a moment of death in nature, and a moment when everything is reborn. We have lost touch with this once intimate experience.

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