

Continuing the Great Work: A Tribute to Thomas Berry

Patrick Tolan

History is governed by those overarching movements that give shape and meaning to life by relating the human venture to the larger destinies of the universe. Creating such a movement might be called the Great Work of a people.

-Father Thomas Berry, *The Great Work*¹



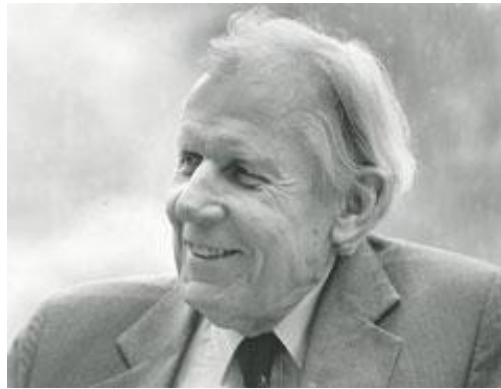
This inaugural edition of the Earth Jurisprudence and Environmental Justice Journal looks for ways to continue Thomas Berry's Great Work.² It is fitting not only to reflect upon and pay tribute to his profound contributions, but also to consider pathways forward. The best way to honor Thomas Berry's teaching is to continue in his work.

¹ THOMAS BERRY, *THE GREAT WORK: OUR WAY INTO THE FUTURE 1* (1999). Photograph by Marty Ostrow, Internment Service for Thomas Berry, Green Mountain Monastery, Greensboro, Vermont (June 8, 2009), available at http://www.thomasberry.org/tributes_and_photos/photos.html (last visited June 11, 2011).

² This journal is solely in electronic format as a means of reducing its environmental footprint; this electronic format also has many benefits in that it promotes communications to these other excellent internet resources. Hyperlinks are retained in footnotes to foster immediate connections for the reader.

While this humble tribute can't approach the eloquence of Thomas Berry, whose prose was "more akin to that of poetry, art, myth, or storytelling,"³ it can help to introduce those who don't know Thomas Berry to his life and work, and can serve to remind those who knew him of what made him so special.

"Beloved friend and companion," "priest, prophet and seer," "renowned scholar," "thinker," "Brother"; "[h]e was the truest man I ever knew."⁴ These testimonies at Thomas's funeral in Greensboro, Vermont, tell volumes about a man who epitomized truth and love.⁵



I first became aware of the teachings of Thomas Berry through Herman Greene⁶ and Sister Patricia Siemen as they met with the dean of our law school to establish a Center for Earth Jurisprudence based upon the philosophy of Thomas Berry. As I began my studies of Thomas Berry, I was reminded of the teachings of Thoreau, Leopold and others who have shared a profound respect for and a deeper understanding of the need to treat the Earth and her bountiful resources prudently and ethically.⁷ To this core truth,

³ Heather Eaton, Introduction to the Special Edition on Thomas Berry's *The Great Work*, available at <http://www.thomasberry.org/Essays/IntroductionToTheSpecialEdition.html> (last visited June 1, 2011).

⁴ Patrick O'Neill, *Fr. Thomas Berry's Funeral Service in Greensboro, N.C.*, NAT'L CATH. REP. (June 11, 2009) (remarks attributed to Passionist Priest, Fr. Terence Kristofak, C.P. and Berry family members), available at <http://ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/fr-thomas-berrys-funeral-service-greensboro-nc> (last visited June 1, 2011).

⁵ Angela Manno, *Fr. Thomas Berry's burial service at Green Mountain Monastery in Vermont*, THE NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER (June 11, 2009), available at <http://ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/fr-thomas-berrys-burial-service-green-mountain-monastery-vermont-0> (last visited June 11, 2011). Thomas was well respected internationally and thousands attended additional funeral and memorial services in North Carolina, New York, Australia and the United Kingdom.

⁶ Herman F. Greene leads the Center for Ecozoic Studies (CES) an organization that promotes "more just and cooperative relationships among humans, as well as transformed relationships of humans with the larger community of life." See http://www.ecozoicstudies.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=18&Itemid=25 (last visited June 1, 2011).

⁷ Thomas Berry attributes early recognition of the need for a more viable ethic to Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, Aldo Leopold, Rachel Carson, David Brower, Wallace Stegner and a multitude of others in the 20th century and notes that their work has been extended to more modern times by "Wes Jackson, Fred Kirschenmann, Miriam Therese MacGillis, John Seed, Wendell Berry, and a long list of others with an ethics of reverence dedicated to preservation of the land." Thomas Berry, Response to the Essays [concerning *The Great Work*], *Worldviews: Environment, Culture, Religion*, Vol. 5, No.11/111

Berry added additional wisdom, insight, and perception. Through the lens of decades of religious studies of the East and the West, Native and indigenous traditions and established religions,⁸ Berry saw the tapestry of theological truth in creation and extended this understanding to the necessary interplay of humans as but one constituent element which ought to function in harmony with all of the universe—“The Universe Story.”⁹



Heart and Soul Nebulae¹⁰

The beauty of Berry’s work is that it rings of intrinsic and universal truth. Recognizing the laws of nature trump the laws of man is critical to reorienting behavior to what is ultimately sustainable and eternal. Thomas Berry’s vision is a broad umbrella that captures the messages of earlier authors, but adds the dimension of spirituality. While earlier writers acknowledge a need for a healing approach and a need for laws that both heal and restore balance, Berry understood that these needs are intrinsic as well as communal;¹¹ that each individual conscious self was part of a greater universal self.¹²

(2001), available at <http://www.thomasberry.org/Essays/ResponseToTheEssays.html> (last visited June 1, 2011) [hereinafter Thomas Berry Responds].

⁸ For a detailed account of Berry’s religious studies and teachings, see THOMAS BERRY, EVENING THOUGHTS, 151-62, App. 3, *Editor’s Afterword: An Intellectual Biography of Thomas Berry* (Mary Evelyn Tucker ed., 2006). See also Eaton, *supra* note 3, and John Grim, *Time, History, Historians in Thomas Berry’s Vision*, available at <http://www.thomasberry.org/Biography/grim-bio.html> (last visited June 1, 2011).

⁹ See BRIAN SWIMME & THOMAS BERRY, THE UNIVERSE STORY (1992).

¹⁰ Infrared Photo courtesy of NASA/JPL-Caltech/WISE Team, Photo of May 24, 2010. WISE is a wide-angle, infrared satellite exploring the galaxy for the beginnings of the universe, http://wise.ssl.berkeley.edu/gallery_Heart_Soul.html (last visited June 1, 2011).

¹¹ See Diarmuid O’Murchu MSC, A Tribute to Thomas Berry (1914-2009), Memorial Service, Greenspirit London (Sept. 20, 2009), available at http://www.thomasberry.org/tributes_and_photos/Tribute_by_Diarmuid_O'Murchu.html (last visited June 1, 2011) (describing integrated features of Berry’s work as Differentiation—everything’s distinctive

Thomas Berry engages us at the confluence of the spiritual and the tangible—¹³ calling us to see the goodness in the trees and the birds, life-giving water and air, and in each other. His life and his lessons are stories of love and truth, but also an awakening and a calling for transition to a world with reverence for the wonders of the universe and compassion for all species; a respect for nature and a responsibility for humankind to restore an eternal balance. Thomas challenges us "to reinvent the human at the species level, reflectively, within the community of life systems, in a time-developmental context, by means of story and shared dream experience."¹⁴

Yale University Professor John Grim explains the importance of Berry's shift toward a broader reflection:

To undertake this reinvention *reflectively* refers to the responsible, critical capacity whereby humans realize that the remaking of the human demands recognition of our existence as species. We share traits that organize us, that allow us to see ourselves as different and unique from other life forms. Now we must extend our reflective powers beyond ourselves to the *community of life systems* in order to adequately understand the integral connection we have to this larger community.¹⁵

Thomas understood the sacred nature of the universe was deeper than a reality that science alone could explain or understand,¹⁶ "that reasoning alone does not reveal all that is real."¹⁷ "[R]ecovering our awareness of the universe as a communion of subjects—not a collection of objects—is available to each one of us as our eyes awaken to a world of wonder, our imaginations to a world of beauty, and our emotions to a world of intimacy."¹⁸ Such an understanding is a starting point to appreciating that the environment is not something appropriate to manipulation and exploitation through the agencies of humans, but that ecology embraces the human as but one integral component of an inextricably intertwined reality.¹⁹ Right relations may be better understood as expressed in the never-ending Celtic knot so profoundly woven as to maintain and foster the integrated relations of species in Mary Coelho's artwork, *The Faces of Gaia*, inspired by the Universe Story.

uniqueness; Interiority—the basis of meaning comes from within; and Communion—everything in creation is interrelated).

¹² Ann Berry Somers (Thomas Berry's Niece), Address at Thomas Berry's Vermont Funeral (June 8, 2009), available at http://www.thomasberry.org/tributes_and_photos/Ann_Berry_Somers_Address.html (last visited June 1, 2011). "We all have the capacity for acknowledging and working toward the larger fulfillment of the community which is the Great Self and fostering the relationship between the Great Self to the small self, for within this awakening is a new spirituality . . ." *Id.*

¹³ Eaton, *supra* note 3 ("Berry connected the primal awakening to an awesome universe permeated with numinous energy to the primordial experience of human consciousness . . . It is this recovery or reintegration of the primal numinous experiences of the universe, genetically encoded within the human psyche, which needs to be retrieved into consciousness.").

¹⁴ Grim, *supra* note 8 (emphasis in original).

¹⁵ *Id.*

¹⁶ THOMAS BERRY, EVENING THOUGHTS 45 (Mary Evelyn Tucker ed., 2006).

¹⁷ Ann Berry Somers, *supra* note 12.

¹⁸ *Id.*

¹⁹ BERRY, THE GREAT WORK, *supra* note 1, at x-xi.



The Faces of Gaia²⁰

In *The Great Work*, Berry expounds upon these concepts noting, “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.”²¹ Berry then calls for a new envisioning of human-earth relations as we enter an Ecozoic Era where humans may not simply rely on the regenerative powers of the Earth herself, but also must engage in a cultural paradigm shift “toward a viable human situation on a viable planet.”²² The more viable human depends on a reawakening of the wild and sacred in nature, “a conversion experience deep in the psychic structure of the human.”²³

Continuing the Great Work requires exploring and developing these opportunities for conversion. More specifically, in the field of law and jurisprudence, Berry calls for a paradigm where inherent rights exist not just for people, but “the inherent rights of the natural world are recognized as having legal status.”²⁴ The challenge then, for an Earth Jurisprudence is identifying a legal framework conducive to a mutually enhancing Earth-human relationship.²⁵

The Center for Earth Jurisprudence (CEJ) seeks to develop a philosophy and practice of law that respect the rights of the natural world and recognize humans as an

²⁰ Mary C. Coelho, *New Universe Story Watercolors* (artwork reprinted with permission of the artist), available for purchase at <http://newuniversestory.com/newstory/thefacesofgaia.html> (last visited June 11, 2011).

²¹ BERRY, *THE GREAT WORK*, *supra* note 1, at 48 (The Wild and the Sacred).

²² *See id.* at 3, 55, 58-59. Thomas Berry, *The Ecozoic Era*, <http://www.earth-community.org/images/The%20Ecozoic%20Era.pdf>.

²³ BERRY, *THE GREAT WORK*, *supra* note 1, at 60.

²⁴ *Id.* at 61.

²⁵ *Id.*

integral member of the Earth community.²⁶ Sister Patricia Siemen (Sister Pat) led the Center from its inception through its formative years and in the process was able to meet Thomas and further explore his work. CEJ was established in Academic Year 2006-2007 and the first law school class in Earth Jurisprudence was taught by Sister Pat and a host of guest lecturers in the Spring of 2007 at Barry Law School. Sister Pat Siemen recalls:

It was Thomas Berry who awakened my intellect and imagination to the need for humans to create mutually enhancing relationships with members of the Earth community.²⁷ Upon my first reading of *The Dream of the Earth*²⁸ in 1988 I knew something was shifting within me. Over the next ten years Miriam MacGillis, among others, helped me to grasp the implications of Thomas' work and to discern my own part of the great work to be done.²⁹ Thomas became a mentor and personal friend as the Center for Earth Jurisprudence began its work in the fall of 2006. I am so pleased that the very first volume of the Barry University School of Law's Earth Jurisprudence and Environmental Justice Journal is dedicated to Thomas Berry in recognition of his lasting contributions and inspiration to an "overarching movement"³⁰ whose time has come.

It is Thomas' clarion call *for us to remember the story of who we are as a human species*³¹ that is foundational to the inspiration and work of the Center for Earth Jurisprudence (CEJ). Thomas' critical insight that we as a human species need a new story,³² one that inspires us to "reinvent" ourselves in ways that protect the community of life systems, permeates the work of CEJ. Reinventing the law and governance systems so that all beings could be legally protected as subjects and not objects was at the core of his thinking.³³ This new jurisprudence would foster laws that legally protect nature's inherent right to exist and so that nature can fulfill its purpose in the ever-renewing processes of the Earth community.³⁴

²⁶ See CEJ, <http://www.earthjuris.org/> (last visited June 1, 2011).

²⁷ "Earth community" includes all components of the interdependent community that constitutes Earth's processes. See THOMAS BERRY, *THE DREAM OF THE EARTH* 66 (1988).

²⁸ *Id.*

²⁹ Miriam MacGillis is a Dominican Sister and founder of Genesis Farm, Blairstown, N.J. See <http://www.genesisfarm.org/index.taf> (last visited June 1, 2011).

³⁰ BERRY, *THE DREAM OF THE EARTH*, *supra* note 27.

³¹ *Id.* at 124.

³² *Id.* at xi.

³³ BERRY, *EVENING THOUGHTS*, *supra* note 16, at 107-12.

³⁴ *Id.* at 110.



Thomas Berry believed that our education systems must be revamped to cultivate an ecocentric versus anthropocentric worldview and CEJ's teaching directly addresses what Thomas collectively referenced as "the university."³⁵ In February of 2008, CEJ took its educational role to the international level when it hosted an international Earth Jurisprudence Symposium. The Symposium was memorialized in a special symposium edition of the *Barry Law Review*.³⁷ Since that time, Sister Pat's work and the work of CEJ have continued Berry's search for the truth particularly in re-envisioning law and governance in ways that support and protect the health and well being of the Earth community as a whole.

Thomas Berry took the first major step toward Earth literacy by giving the world a framework for such understanding—the Universe Story. To heal the Earth one must appreciate the intimacy and interdependence of life forms and life sustaining forces. The next steps require reflection and refinement of the relationships among and between beings and life forces and establishing a comprehensive system of protections—legal, communal, moral, societal, ethical, scientific, cosmic and spiritual. "Above all, then, the New Story provides context and perspective for implementing the kinds of social, political and economic changes that will be needed to sustain and foster life on the planet The assumption is that, when one's worldview shifts to comprehend the interrelatedness of all life, one's ethics likewise will be affected to encourage human justice and environmental sustainability."³⁸

The following slideshow, created by Caroline Webb, captures many of Berry's main themes in a beautiful panorama of Earth, nature, and life.³⁹ After viewing the slideshow, one can't help but feel part of the community that Berry finds so important.

³⁵ See BERRY, *THE GREAT WORK*, *supra* note 1, at 77; see also *EVENING THOUGHTS*, *supra* note 16, at 102-103 (educational values subverted by "plunder-consumption" economy).

³⁷ See 11 *BARRY L. REV.* (Fall 2009).

³⁸ BERRY, *EVENING THOUGHTS*, *supra* note 16, at 155.

³⁹ Caroline Webb, Slideshow Tribute to Thomas Berry, http://www.earth-community.org/slideshow_1.htm (last visited June 11, 2011).



Click Here: http://www.earth-community.org/slideshow_1.htm

Though the task is daunting,⁴⁰ the articles in this inaugural edition are designed to continue the Great Work within the Universal framework Berry established.⁴¹ The possibilities for pathways forward are as infinite as the capacity for imagination. This flexibility radically compounds the magnitude of identifying the most appropriate means to restore the Earth-human balance. The path is steep and the journey forward may be difficult, but the destiny of the Earth depends upon our success.

All creatures of Earth are looking to us for their destiny. Among these are our children and grandchildren, who depend on our decisions for the sustenance and flourishing of the life systems of the planet. This remains one of our primary challenges in the twenty-first century.

-Father Thomas Berry, *Evening Thoughts*⁴²

The first article, by attorney Dan Leftwich, continues the examination of how to harmonize human-Earth relations. *Evolving from Dominion to Communion: How Legal Rights for Nature Can Exist in Balance with Individual Property Rights in a Global Commons*, explores evolving memes to transition from an anthropocentric to an Earth-centered construct. Thomas Berry recognized the extreme tension created in a world with a purely human-centered system of values; even the term “environment” “distorted the discussion by establishing the human as the absolute value to be preserved at whatever cost to the other components of the Earth.”⁴³ Berry preferred the term “ecological” in that “the central concern is the full community of life systems.”⁴⁴ Leftwich recognizes that the success of the Ecozoic Era depends in large measure on this shift from dominion to communion. He builds on Berry’s notion “that from here on nothing effective can be

⁴⁰ Rosemary Radford Ruether contends that “No generation has ever faced a greater challenge.” Rosemary Radford Ruether, Response to Thomas Berry’s *The Great Work*, available at <http://www.thomasberry.org/Essays/ResponseToThomasBerrysTheGreatWork-Ruether.html> (last visited June 1, 2011).

⁴¹ Essential transformative work such as Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*, The World Charter for Nature in 1982, The Rio Conference in 1992, and the Charter for Earth in 2002 have occurred over the past fifty years, to “give promise of a new generation with new energies ready to carry the transformation of human-Earth relations into their new more integral phase.” Thomas Berry Responds, *supra* note 7.

⁴² BERRY, EVENING THOUGHTS, *supra* note 16, at 106.

⁴³ Thomas Berry Responds, *supra* note 7.

⁴⁴ *Id.*

done in the human order in isolation from this larger Earth Community.”⁴⁵ Leftwich also offers hope that the paradigm not only can be shifted, but is already shifting “from dominion to communion.”

Attorney Mark Hopson shows how Westernized notions of conservation have sought to preserve “wilderness” by setting aside flora and fauna in an environment relatively free of human pressures, but that these practices simultaneously have driven a wedge between indigenous peoples and their Earth-friendly ways of life. In his article, *The Wilderness Myth*, Hopson details how American efforts to preserve wildlife areas did so to the ultimate exclusion of native peoples that had lived harmoniously with nature from time immemorial. Hopson traces the exportation of American policies overseas, focusing on the African Congo where governments, nongovernmental organizations and international agencies mimicking American practices threaten to destroy a symbiotic bond between the Iyaelima people and the African bonobo, man’s closest natural relative. Hopson’s interviews with Dr. Jo Thompson, the leading international authority on the bonobo, show how both the Iyaelima and the bonobo risk losing their heritage, their culture, and their way of life. The insight Hopson shares helps showcase how fragile and vulnerable the natural relations between species can be and how important it is to preserve for posterity ecological integrity where indigenous humans are already living in balance with nature.

While Hopson’s article showcases the communal relationship between closely related species, law student Traci Timmons explores the broader connections between plants, insects, and the life-sustaining forces of the planet. Her article, *Earth Jurisprudence and Lockean Theory: Rethinking the American Perception of Private Property*, also takes a deep historical look at the evolution of Western property norms, especially how some of the earliest concepts of John Locke have been overlooked in their modern application. Both Timmons and Thomas Berry recognized how Locke greatly influenced the framers of the U.S. Constitution and noted how this influence led to rights for humans but no parallel rights for nature.⁴⁶ Timmons then links Locke’s provisos against spoilage and waste to the need for an Earth-jurisprudential construct that protects future generations from the overconsumption of existing humans. In its simplest form, it amounts to a normative shift to include safeguarding a truly sustainable Earth as an obligation. If societies today do not make this normative shift, we fail to heed Berry’s call to a new Ecozoic age.

“As a storyteller Thomas Berry [guided] his readers through a powerful and gripping plot which can be narrated innumerable ways.”⁴⁷ Australian scholar Samuel Alexander’s article, *The Path to Entropia*, takes a hundred year leap forward into a hypothetical future world—perhaps one possible next chapter in the Universe Story. While Alexander’s article is obviously speculative and contemplative in nature, it postulates one possible pathway forward for humankind and its evolving relationship

⁴⁵ *Id.*

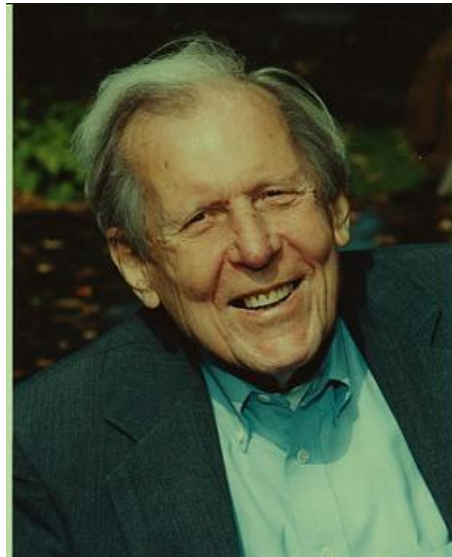
⁴⁶ Thomas Berry, *Foreword to CORMAC CULLINAN, WILD LAW* 13 (2003).

⁴⁷ Grim, *supra* note 8; Eaton, *supra* note 3 (“In general it is the mythic aspects of cultural narratives which concern Berry, with a further interest in those stories which carry a cosmology; a story of the universe and the human place within the scheme of things.”).

with nature. The story builds upon foundational notions established by Thomas Berry, that the present human-Earth relationship is pathologically flawed.⁴⁸

While none of these future developments may ever take place, the simple telling of the story forms a foundation for continued academic discussion about how costs for exploiting nature can be shifted so that people appreciate the need for reduced consumerism and more balance. Like Berry's stories harmonizing creation and the scientific story of origins, Alexander's "presumptions [may] subtly direct the search for knowledge and its assumptions guide the understanding of what is observed."⁴⁹

As the story builds, "our present . . . orients us to our future."⁵⁰ One can only hope that from his place in the eternal universe, Thomas Berry is smiling at those searching for ways to continue his Great Work.



*God give new life
To this planet
To the Earth Community
To all children of the future
Send your spirit
In its fullness
That we may awaken
As one planetary body⁵¹*

⁴⁸ BERRY, EVENING THOUGHTS, *supra* note 16, at 155; *see also* BERRY, DREAM OF THE EARTH, *supra* note 27, at 208 ("this pathology is manifest in the arrogance with which we reject our role as an integral member of the earth community in favor of a radical anthropocentric life attitude.")

⁴⁹ Grim, *supra* note 8.

⁵⁰ *Id.*

⁵¹ Photo from http://www.thomasberry.org/tributes_and_photos/index.html (last visited June 11, 2011); Prayer from Thomas Berry's burial service in at Green Mountain Monastery in Vermont (June 8, 2009), Manno, *supra* note 5.