

An Eulogy for Thomas Berry: Cosmology and a Unifying Philosophical Context for Transition into the Ecozoic Era

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Malcolm Kenton is a writer and activist in his mid-twenties. Born in New York City but raised in Greensboro, NC, he has been a student of Thomas Berry ever since the two met in the late 1990s. Having been interested in animals and the natural world since childhood, since high school he has sought opportunities to take political and social action in pursuit of a more humane, sustainable society living within the bounds of the Earth community. A 2008 graduate of Guilford College in Greensboro with a BA in Political Science and Environmental Studies, he currently resides in Washington, DC, where he works for the National Association of Railroad Passengers in pursuit of a greener transportation system for the 21st century.



First, let me say that I am profoundly grateful for the opportunity to have considered Thomas a mentor and a friend. I believe the best way to eulogize Thomas is to do what he and I always did during our many visits and meals together: discuss big ideas.

I met him so early that I was too young to know what an important figure he was, but from the beginning of our relationship, he saw a lot in me. Before I could articulate my thoughts on such matters as the human-Earth relationship, he had picked me to be an integral actor in the profound transformation he knew humanity must undergo in order to restore our planet to health and reestablish our proper place in the universe. He tried to guide me in a certain direction by recommending books to read and planting suggestions in my consciousness, but he knew in the end that I had to forge my own path. He saw my role, first and foremost, as being a writer. The last time I spoke to him, the week before last, despite his diminished mental capacity, he expressed a desire for me to someday write at least one book. That day seems pretty far off, but I have a feeling it may come. The way that I will most assuredly continue to honor Thomas's memory is by leading a mindful life, both in the sense of a life of the mind, and in the sense of one that is mindful of the context and impacts of my actions.

When I think about Thomas, I remember one key word that was central to his thinking: "Cosmology." It's a word you don't hear much in contemporary academics or literature, much less everyday conversation. It literally means, "The study or knowledge of the universe, or cosmos." Like much of Thomas's thought, the word is overarching and evokes the big picture. The fact that contemporary culture lacks a cosmology, or a way of relating to the universe and considering humans' place in it, is disconcerting, and is one of the fundamental challenges Thomas grappled with as he envisioned the road ahead of us. He did so in a way that was challenging and critical, yet elegant and enlightening. His writing, often verging on the poetic, is enough to invoke a desire to recapture what has been lost in the process by which the inborn cosmology that evolved in the human species has been weathered away by belief systems that have the human project at the center point of reference and acknowledge its impact on the rest of the Earth as secondary.

Perhaps the idea of cosmology is most usefully applied to our society through the idea of context. Having a working relationship with the natural world involves putting the institutions and belief systems that guide our endeavors into a broader context. Thomas taught me that a proper cosmology obviates the age-old struggle between science and religion by giving context to both, allowing us to see the role each one plays in deepening our understanding of the world around us, which hopefully leads to a stronger desire to live in greater harmony with it. He also taught me that a

cosmology can serve as a guide to the four core institutions in our society—organized religion, the business sector, the government, and the education system. As Thomas memorably observed, “The churches are too pious. The corporations are too greedy. The government is too subservient to the corporations. And the universities should know better.” Instead, guided by a firmer sense of context, the faith that guides religious institutions and the knowledge that guides academia can perhaps work together to restore corporations and government to their proper roles in fulfilling society’s material needs while curbing its excesses.

Reclaiming such a unifying philosophical context to guide human endeavors will be our core task as we transition into the Ecozoic Era. In this next stage in world history, about whose eventual coming Thomas remained convinced, we will reestablish the universe as our primary frame of reference. Given that the universe is too big for most of us to comprehend in a way that is relevant to our daily lives, the best we can do is to place our activities in the context of the natural systems in our own small corner of the cosmos.

Thomas placed a lot of faith in my generation as the one that must, and will, lead the world into the Ecozoic Era by working within the aforementioned four core institutions to reframe their missions and purposes in light of a broader understanding of the human relationship with the universe. It’s a tall order, to be sure, and it will require a lot of teamwork, each of us contributing in our own small way, maximizing the use of our talents and the engagement of our interests. While I could not always follow Thomas as he charted a wide-ranging mental path, I could generally see the direction in which his compass was pointing. Now, my peers and I are left to continue to blaze the trail he began and, using his lifetime of scholarship as a map and foundation, write the next chapter in the Universe Story.