

Transformation, The Universe Story, and Love: What Works?

BY ALICE LOYD

The question on my mind when I found *Dream of the Earth* on a book giveaway table in 1997 was “How can people and our society recover the humanness that is our birth potential?” Thomas Berry’s writing applied that inquiry to its larger context more masterfully than I could have imagined doing. I underlined almost every word. At that time I was new to North Carolina, I’d never heard of the North Carolina Berrys or their noted philosopher-ecologist Thomas, and I was working alone on this issue and on the larger concern of ecological destruction.

At present, as Director of North Carolina Interfaith Power & Light, a program of the North Carolina Council of Churches, I work alongside hundreds of people engaged in these efforts across the state and have expressed my appreciation to Thomas in person. In my job I am confronted daily with the same question I dealt with then, however, a question that, judging by all reports, our movement has not answered, “How are humans to recover what Thomas refers to as our genetic coding in order to live peaceably within Earth’s society?” As I talk with Berry readers, I get the impression that what people need is to learn *The Universe Story*, the scientific narrative recounted in the book Thomas co-authored with Brian Swimme by that name. It’s an amazing story, and since I don’t recall not knowing it, I can’t say for certain that it would not have been transformative. I might have been turned from Earth-indifferent to Earth-connected by hearing *The Universe Story*, but I doubt it.

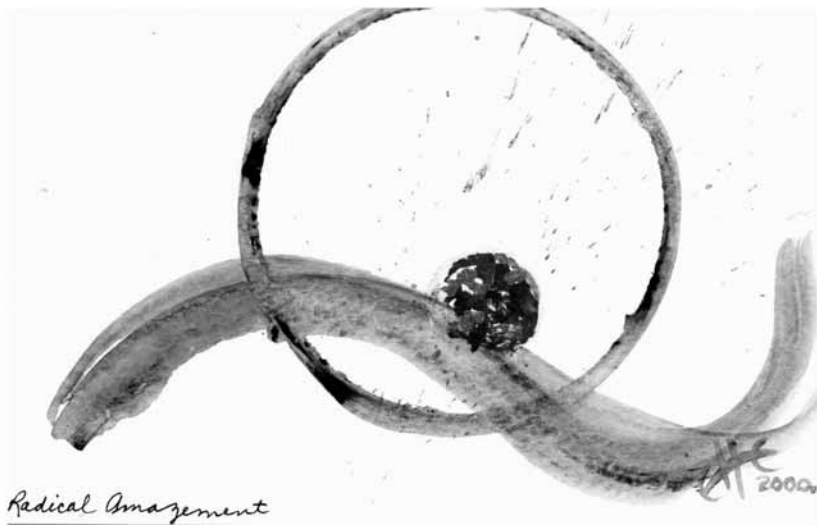
I’m not convinced that change comes through new information. As an educator willing to use any instrument that would help

avert the worst outcomes of human-caused climate change, I have not found a sure conversion technique. I share with most of the people who write for *The Ecozoic* the sense that the problem humanity must resolve lies underneath the problems we customarily address. I know, for example, that climate change is not the problem, but rather its symptom. And the immediate cause of the symptom—the industrial economy—is not the ultimate problem either, because even this economy could reduce its use of fossil fuels dramatically within a few years. Should it succeed in stabilizing the climate, though, it would create an equally large disaster within a short time, for the underlying cause would still be in play. Until we address the cause effectively, I think we can expect to create unjust economic systems with colossal environmental and social consequences.

I doubt that learning *The Universe Story* will correct the root cause of injustice because I don’t think the intellect is the vehicle that changes a worldview. I think a person’s view of origins reflects a person’s view of relationships, and that beliefs about relationship arise from relationship experiences rather than from statements about what relationships are or should be. In other words, I’m coming to view the role of the educator as that of convener rather than communicator. I’m coming to view the root cause of environmental destruction as a failure of relationship, or as every major religious prophet of the historical period has expressed it, as a lack of love.

The question all social justice activists are dealing with is, “How do we come to love Earth, ourselves and each other?” Here I’m expressing doubt that a story will effect that

transformation. More precisely, I'm questioning whether The Universe Story will speak tenderly enough to the hurt child inside the civilized adult human to heal its heart. For a wound of the heart is what I see as the root cause of the irrational, even suicidal choices now being made by humans in every nation on Earth. It's very hard to persuade people who are losing their love of life to step off their paths to preserve life for themselves or others. Our five-thousand-year history of hierarchic, life-hostile social structures has come



near destroying the zest for life that characterizes all wild things and would re-invigorate humanity now if it could be recovered.

Exploitative economic systems with their inordinate consumption patterns fill people with anxiety and grief wherever they are in the socio-economic hierarchy. Blighted, unwholesome relationships are the cause of climate change. I propose that the educational approach must be through the heart and not the intellect because I think that to revive this culture's liveliness and capacity for relationship, both human-to-human and human-to-non-human, requires more than information.

The Hebrew prophets saw love as foundational, and the fact that we call their teachings on love "commandments" shows how little we know of love, for love cannot be commanded. The prophets were calling attention

to love as the healer; they were giving counsel rather than commands. Because love is the magic that connects us with each other and with all things in a wholesome, voluntarily-encountered spell, they recommended that we exchange our isolation for belonging. The Universe Story tells us we belong here—I acknowledge that this is its meaning. But does it facilitate the removal of our defensiveness? I don't think it does.

I suspect that broken relationships must be mended body to body, and that only wild nature can alleviate the fears of the civilized adult. I think that if fifty adults were told the Berry-Swimme Universe Story and fifty others were guided into a non-exploitative experience with a free wild being in a safe setting, the latter group, having experienced a face-to-face relationship, would be more moved toward loving than the ones hearing the story. Nature's approach is utterly non-hostile to life, even allowing for the killing and devouring seen in the food chain and the destruction that comes with weather or seismic events. To experience nature's equanimity and egalitarian generosity is the essential balm, and I'm coming to believe that this experiencing must be first-hand and concrete.

I realize that contact with nature occurs each day in every life in some way without the healing effect, but I think this is because humans are not in a listening mode. The contact won't become a healing until it becomes a dialogue. As Thomas says in *The Great Work*, nature must be met on nature's terms. If industrialized humans are to enter into this world view, we need signals that bypass the culture-shaped intellect.

It may be true, in fact, that all humans require such a vehicle of re-entry into wildness and that the puberty-related initiation rites of Earth-based cultures assist the achievement. One educator who may have found suitable words and procedures for our current situation is Michael J. Cohen, who in *Reconnecting with Nature*¹ offers exercises in the stylized language he has developed to name what hinders and what helps to re-seat

¹ Michael J. Cohen, *Reconnecting with Nature*, 2d ed. (Lakeville, MN: Ecopress, 1997).

humans in nature's pattern. But he warns, "Remember, nature's intelligence has no stories. It is illiterate. It thinks by trusting and combining the innate intelligences. . . ."²

It makes sense to me that de-humanized, de-wilded Cenozoic humans require ritual in order to enter into that trustful relationship. African teacher Sobonfu Somé writes, "The ritual requires us to speak through our heart; the logic of the mind is an obstacle to its success."³ Ritualized encounters in which a human experiences the sentience of another species engage faculties more primitive and less socially adapted than the mind. Smell, touch, hearing and vision are more ancient and more adapted to this learning. They are more directly linked to the heart.

Without ritual to establish non-exploitative relating, in fact, it is hard for people today to relate well to each other, and the relationship with the whole of nature is even more demanding. I do think, however, that story is closely related to ritual, and I am therefore tentative in questioning the use of The Universe Story as the instrument of change. Perhaps what we need is ritual that reveals our story of origins.

I can state confidently that in my educational efforts, the people who respond most helpfully to information about climate change

are the ones who have a relationship with nature, usually formed in childhood. With people who hear the same facts but don't move into helpful action, I think I observe a detachment from nature, expressed usually by their mention of what matters more to them—family, career, income, or a social justice project more habitually engrossing. These people would be moved by the cries of a bluebird caught in a fence, though, because through that bird, nature would acquire a voice. I'm looking for a way to bring into their reality what I know as real because it became real for me a long time ago. I see a bird caught in every fence, just as a mother in the grocery store, missing her child, hears it crying down every aisle.

We will have to stop climate change by working with people as they now exist, and as they will exist during the coming days of calamity. But if we get past this crisis, we will need a more compassionate human through whom to build a more secure and fair society. More than we need to know our evolutionary past, I think we need to experience nature's daily guidance. I think our task at this moment consists of two simultaneous efforts: achieve the necessary carbon emissions reductions, and persuade others and ourselves to let nature open our hearts

² Ibid., 30.

³ Danielle and Olivier Föllmi, eds., *Origins: African Wisdom for Every Day* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, 2005), reading for February 11.