

## Imagining Berry

Elizabeth McAnally and Sam Mickey

Thomas Berry has expressed many profound teachings throughout his writings, speeches, and conversations with students and companions. One teaching that continues to enhance the vitality of our engagements with the world can be summarized as a simple imperative: Dream of the Earth. Participation in such dreaming can provide the human species with a way into an ecologically vibrant future. Transforming the relations of human beings to themselves, to the planet, to the elements, and to the cosmos as a whole, dreaming of the Earth transforms the very identity of the human. It facilitates a reinvention of human nature.

To dream of the Earth is “to reinvent the human—at the species level.” This reinvention implies the creation of new ways of being in the world, which would re-place the human so as to place human nature back into nature, back into the Earth Community, back into the evolving cosmos. Berry teaches us that the task of reinventing the human is neither a mere cognitive endeavor, nor a mere personal mission. It is far greater. It is “the historical mission of our times,” a mission that calls for the emergence of a human species that can activate socially and ecologically sustainable ways of inhabiting the planet.

Dreaming makes possible a reinvention that would reorient the human to its place within the living systems and evolutionary processes of the natural world. Not simply a human faculty, dreaming can reorient the human to the natural world because dreaming is part of the same elemental creativity manifest throughout the unfolding cosmos. Berry observes that, in human and cosmic manifestations of this creativity, something is given “in a dim and uncertain manner, something radiant with meaning that draws us on to a further clarification of our understanding and our activity.” Such creativity “can be described in many ways, as a groping or as a feeling or imaginative process.” The imaginative process enacted when a human dreams of the sacred marriage of Earth and Sky is the same creativity enacted in the process with which the mass of the sun turns itself into light, in the groping whereby a predator seeks and finds its prey, and in the intimate feeling that allows an atom to bond with another atom.

Imagine. Dream of the Earth. To follow this imperative and participate in the imaginative process pervading the universe, one can attend to the playful ambiguity that marks the grammar of this phrase. Not only is it an imperative, it is also a noun phrase. Furthermore, the genitive (“of”) in the phrase “dream *of* the Earth” can be heard in two ways, both in the sense of dreaming *about* the Earth and in the sense of dreaming that comes *from* the Earth. Dreaming about the Earth is a way of drawing together images that reveal the Earth. Dreaming is from the Earth insofar as it is an elemental force that emerges from the Earth and its life systems. The

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imaginative process of dreaming is thus active not only in human beings, but also in the elemental forces of nature, which are “forces of primitive imagination.” With great clarity and beauty, Berry shows us that forces of dreaming and imagining are not only faculties that belong to the human but that, more fundamentally, the human belongs to the elemental forces of dreaming and imagining inherent in the planet and the cosmos.

Imagine. There are so many ways that Berry experiences his place amidst the cosmic force of imagination. Perhaps his family name evokes dreams and reveries that show how the human family belongs to the Earth Community and to the unfolding universe. After all, “Berry” is not simply a name that belongs to Thomas and his family. “Berry” is a name for a greater family to which Thomas and his family belong, a family that in common usage includes strawberry, raspberry, blueberry, blackberry, and boysenberry, and in the strict botanical sense includes tomato, grape, persimmon, and gooseberry. Along with many other berries, Thomas participates in the cosmic forces of dream and imagination, such that every “berry” is an imagining berry. Along with many other berries, Thomas is a sweet and nourishing being brought forth from the expansive creativity of the Earth Community.

With imagination bursting forth from the elements of the cosmos and from every berry and every fruit of the Earth, our work is simple, yet profoundly complex and infinitely varied: to participate in the dream of the Earth. Imagine.