

A Confession

Mary Reynolds Thompson

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I knelt in the small, dark confessional box and peered at the shadowy figure of a priest whose outline I could barely determine through the grate that divided us. It was 1966, and the church was the Lady of Mount Carmel on Kensington Church Street in London. “Bless me father for I have sinned, it has been two weeks since my last confession.” I searched my ten-year-old conscience for some suitably interesting wrong-doings: “I lied; I ate too much chocolate cake; I was angry at my friend for reading my comics instead of playing with me.”

The priest cleared his throat and delivered my penance: three St. Joseph prayers. “You know the St Joseph prayer, don’t you?” he asked.

“Of course, Father,” I said, aware that I would have to confess to this lie, too, in the weeks to come.

As I grew older and came to live in the United States, I professed to know something about the environment as well. I learned to recycle, shop less, buy organic. It felt a little like penance at times, I confess. I didn’t always enjoy it, and often didn’t fully understand the reasons behind what I was doing. I had a horrible feeling that like the elusive St. Joseph prayer, it wasn’t having much of an effect on me—or the planet.

When I first came across the work of Thomas Berry, that feeling changed. I felt liberated and exhilarated. Cut free from the prescriptive “dos” and “don’ts” of what it is to be green, and invited into a spiritual experience of what it means to be fully human. It was as if I had been released from the confessional box and welcomed into a church flooded with choral music. It wasn’t guilt that Berry was inspiring in me: it was hope, possibility—a desire to evolve.

Berry wrote in *The Dream of the Earth*, “Beyond our genetic coding, we need to go to the Earth, as the source whence we came, and ask for its guidance, for the Earth carries the psychic structure as well as the physical form of every living being upon the planet.”

In my years of recovering from alcoholism, it was the beauty of nature that healed me as much as any therapist or 12-step meeting. I hadn’t really understood why, except to say that I felt better out of doors, by the ocean, or walking among the giant redwood trees of Muir Woods close by my home in Marin County, California. Berry showed me that nature was my guide, that it held wisdom and wonder, and that my own psyche and soul were mirrored there, in the living, breathing world. I had a sense of coming home.

Later, reading *The Universe Story*, Berry’s work with cosmologist Brian Swimme, I learned how all of life had emerged from a single point 13.7 billion years ago, and that I was made of the same stuff as river, raven, rock; I learned that this planet, this miraculous blue orb in its ocean of darkness,

was not only infinitely precious, but almost certainly unique. “No other such planet exists in the solar system,” wrote Berry and Swimme, “perhaps in the universe.” I began to absorb the real horror of our plundering, polluting, decimating ways.

Confronting the full extent of our planetary emergency can feel overwhelming. But Thomas Berry reminds us that we are not in this alone. We are supported by billions of years of cosmological history and the symphony of life it has produced: vast prairies and giant sequoias, lightning storms and braided streams, winter flocks and breaching whales. We are cheered on by star-lilies and the dazzling spread of stars in the night. And beneath our feet, the warm Earth holds us up and makes us strong.

As we move from the Cenozoic into the Ecozoic Age (as Berry describes the period where humans will live on the Earth in a manner that enhances all of life) we need never feel alone again. We are one voice in a universal choir, working to become the kind of humans who can avoid destroying our planet; it will not be an act of penance. Recycling, re-imagining, re-creating our way of living will not be a chore. What Thomas Berry teaches is that it will be an act of love, aligned with the higher purposes of the planet.

I imagine myself ten years old again, and Thomas Berry on the other side of that iron grate. I imagine him lifting the grate and then inviting me to walk with him out of the church down the winding high street, and left into Kensington Gardens. There, beside chestnut trees moist with sap and shrill with sparrow song, before roses every shade of pink to peach, we stand together in silent reverie. I feel the beauty of the world enter me, and all my sins absolved.