

Developing Thomas Berry's Functional Cosmology in the Trenches by Means of Story and Shared Dream Experience

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We are gathered at a colloquium, which is by definition, a meeting of academics or experts. Since I am neither, as I find myself somewhat intimidated. I'm counting on what Thomas wrote in the introduction to Anne Marie Dalton's wonderful book on *A Theology for the Earth*: "My intent is simply to present and to have the reader respond out of whatever background the reader might have."¹

My background is that of a practitioner—working as a community organizer in American inner cities and Canadian communities, as a Student Chaplain in Paris, and in my 27 years in the Canadian Arctic walking between indigenous Inuit and Dene cultures on the one hand and Euro-Canadian government cultures on the other hand.

In 2006 my wife and I moved from Yellowknife in the Northwest Territories to the Comox Valley on Vancouver Island in British Columbia—one of the most beautiful places to live in Canada. Since then I've been organizing against fossil fuel projects in our valley.

My subject is "Developing Thomas Berry's Functional Cosmology in the Trenches by Means of Story and Shared Dream Experience." This is a bit of a mouthful, so I thought I'd start with some explanations. Then I'll tell you where I'm going and where I'm hoping to take you.

1. Anne Marie Dalton, *A Theology for the Earth: The Contributions of Thomas Berry and Bernard Lonergan* (Ottawa, Ontario: University of Ottawa Press, 1999).

Some Clarifications

First, the meaning of a “functional cosmology.” As you are aware, cosmology is the study of how the universe and Earth were created and how they developed, along with the study of how other species and our human species developed. A functional cosmology is, in essence, a determination of meaning. It is how we translate this awareness of the universe and Earth into actions that guide our lives. And, since Earth and we ourselves are continuing to grow, develop, and change—what Thomas referred to as part of a cosmogenesis—we find ourselves in a sort of hermeneutical circle, only this time the “text” is the universe and Earth. This is what Thomas called “The only text without a context.” So we are influenced by changes in Earth and Earth is influenced by changes in us—big time—which shall become abundantly clear in a few minutes.

Now we come to Thomas’s statement about our mission.

The Historical Mission of our time is:

- *To reinvent the human*
- *At the species level*
- *With critical reflection*
- *Within the community of life systems—*
- *In a time-developmental context—*
- *By means of story and shared dream experience² —Whoa!*
Where did those two come from?

It strikes me that the first five—reinventing the human, species level, critical reflection, community of life systems, time developmental (historical) context are simple to understand but not easy to accomplish. They are all a more in-depth explanation about the *what* of reinventing the human.

But the last two—by means of story and shared dream experience—are about the *how*. And these are the two I’d like to talk to you about today.

2. Thomas Berry, *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future* (New York: Bell Tower, 1999), 159 (italics and capitalization added).

So how do we translate Thomas's message to a broader audience: in the streets, in diverse cultures, and in the trenches? I use the word "trenches" deliberately for what was once a challenge has indeed become a battleground.

Two final introductory, but essential, comments before leaving Thomas's famous statement.

Thomas begins with the word "mission." He was telling us that we are not engaged in an intellectual exercise, not even one involving philosophy or theology. This is about our role in The Great Work. He is telling us that we have an obligation to go forth and, if you will, preach the gospel of a mutually enhancing relationship between the human species and Earth—the emerging Ecozoic era.

The last word in the text is "experience"—and it is important. We are going forth not only with a story of a shared dream, but we are going forth with *our own experience of telling the story and sharing the dream.*

Experience is critical. Erich Fromm once noted: "People never think their way into new ways of acting. They act their way into new ways of thinking." And Lao Tzu put it even more succinctly: "If you know, but do not do, you do not know."

And that brings me to a picture of the way forward.

Tell the Story

Often after Thomas gave a talk, people would ask him what they should do and he'd say, "Tell them the story." He was referring to the cosmological story. So, in this talk, I'm going to follow Thomas's lead and tell you my functional cosmology story. Actually I'll tell you four stories that I will weave together into one big story.

The first story is about my experiences in Paris and the Arctic. Out of these experiences emerged an understanding of Thomas's functional cosmology.

The second story is about framing and reframing. If we are to carry out our mission we must understand where people are coming. We must step outside our frames, understand their frames, and determine how we can help them reframe.

The third story is about my understanding of the two key ele-

ments, story and shared dream experience, and how they fit together.

The fourth story is about the new story and shared dream experience in the trenches. In this part I will describe how we are trying to tell the story and share the dream while wrestling with coal mines and pipelines in our valley and in the waters around Vancouver Island.

The common thread in these stories is how my version of a functional cosmology has emerged and is still emerging out of my experiences.

Paris and the Arctic

I was born and raised in Toronto and, in my early teens, I went to a prep school run by the Passionist Order. Eventually I entered a novitiate in this order and spent the next eight years living as a monk. This is when I first met Thomas Berry, who was also a Passionist, when we lived in the same monastery in New York. I was eventually ordained and worked for a number of years in the institutional priesthood. I'm deeply indebted to the Passionists. They cared for me, parented me, educated me, and fostered my spiritual development.

Several years after my ordination, I went on for further theological studies, first in Ottawa and then in Paris where I worked part-time as a student chaplain at the Cité Universitaire. The Cité is a unique student campus on the edge of Paris. Bringing together students from around the world, it houses 6,000 students in forty national houses. Paris and the Cité were interesting but even more interesting was what happened when I was there.

In May 1968 student riots broke out. In addition to attending countless student meetings and watching the student and French police battling it out on the barricades on the Left Bank, I was trying to work on a degree in the theology of preaching and was interested in all aspects of communications. The university and libraries were closed, but I did have most of the books of the Canadian communications guru Marshall McLuhan. I remember one of his statements in particular. He said, "I don't know who it was that first discovered water, but I'm sure it wasn't a fish." I saw this played out one day at

the huge student cafeteria on campus.

The student riots were in full swing and I went across the campus to get lunch. It was an amazing sight. Students were eating lunch in their cultural groups, some of them dressed in traditional dress and speaking in their own languages. They had to yell at one another to be heard over the din of the tin plates and other languages. It was like the ground floor of the Tower of Babel.

I was standing in a serving line next to two American students. They were looking at this amazing sight like I was and one of them said to the other, “Gee, I wish we had a culture, don’t you?” This was my first real introduction to the often invisible, but very real existence, of frames.

In the following years I left the Passionists and the institutional priesthood, married, got a degree in communications from the University of Wisconsin and worked as a community organizer in communities in the United States and Canada.

In 1980, our family moved to Baffin Island, an Inuit homeland, where I took up a job as Superintendent of Social Services. The Baffin is the fifth largest Island in the world. It is in the high Arctic north of Quebec and to the west of Greenland. This was almost 20 years before the creation of Nunavut³. I asked my boss in Yellowknife, in the Western Arctic, what my job was. He told me it was to help people develop. It took some months before the irony of that statement struck me. The Inuit had lived on the land and survived for thousands of years in perhaps the most severe climate on earth—and I was there to teach them how to develop. But I was up to the challenge.

When I first got to the Baffin, I was quite confident in my abilities. I was well-educated, had a lot of relevant street work experience, and had even worked for five years as an administrator of a health care facility in northern British Columbia. At times, in my arrogance, I figured I was just the person for whom the Inuit were waiting.

3. Nunavut is the newest, largest, northernmost, and least populous territory of Canada. It was separated officially from the Northwest Territories on April 1, 1999. Wikipedia contributors, “Nunavut,” *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, accessed July 3, 2016, <https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Nunavut&oldid=728058618>.

I was sure that having a workable management context was essential. I was most anxious to try out my management theories: performance measurement, management by objectives, zero-based budgeting, etc. etc. But I bombed. I quickly discovered that these contexts weren't working in the cross-cultural environment in which I found myself.

Another thing: I ran into some competition trying to help folks in the communities "develop." I'd be way up at the top of Baffin Island in community meetings. It would be in the dead of winter, 40o F below without the wind-chill with twenty-four hours of darkness, and I'd be holding forth in community meetings on child welfare services or correctional services or mental health services—very serious stuff. But I'd find myself competing with elders. As I listened to their speeches through an Inuktitut translator, they would be saying over and over different versions of the same mantra: "Learn from the land. Learn from the land." I thought their words were interesting from a cultural point of view, even quaint, but not relevant. So with my organizational contexts falling apart, and the elders, in my opinion, not addressing the real issues, I was going through a vocational crisis. Was I really cut out for this type of work?

Then one day, in the search for a new organizational context that would work in this environment, I picked up one of Thomas's books and read these words: "The universe is the only text without a context." The words began to sink in. Could this be the context I had been looking for? Could it be that all human endeavours should be organized the way Earth and life organizes itself? And a short time later I read the clincher: "We are not a collection of objects. We are a communion of subjects." As I read these words the teaching of the Elders flashed into my mind: "We have come from the land, we will return to the land. Learn from the land."

From my experience in Paris and the Arctic I came to realize that my role in the Great Work was essentially about communication. And to communicate effectively, I had to step outside my own frame and comfort zone and explore and discover the other person's frame—his or her beliefs, values, and concerns, the way he or she sees the world and gives it meaning. Only then could I carry out my mission.

About Frames and Reframing

Most of you, I'm sure, are quite aware of frames and reframing. This is Marshall McLuhan and his "the medium is the message," Thomas Kuhn's paradigm shifts, Howard Gardner's frames of mind, Paulo Freire's praxis, George Lakoff's framing, and particularly the Indigenous frame of elders about learning from the land. In the theological context, we might turn to concepts of *kenosis* and *metanoia*.

My definition of a frame is "*the living context within which we send, receive and interpret messages, establish relationships, see the world and give it meaning.*"

Our frames are not visible to the eye, but they are real. They are the compilation of our family history, our work experiences, our values, our successes, our failures our education, and so forth. They have emerged out of our experiences. Because frames are so much a part of our personalities and way of life, we have a vested interest in preserving them.

Our frames are deep within us and defend us from unwanted intrusions. They filter out information with which we do not agree, and they let in things that support our values and viewpoints. Because of our frames, Anais Nin has noted, "*We do not see the world the way it is. We see the world the way we are.*" That is why it is so difficult to help people to reframe—even the good guys.

Over the last ten years of Thomas's life, I went down from the Arctic once or twice a year to visit him in North Carolina. He would always ask me about my work. And the discussions helped me to understand more and more about reframing.

I remember a reframing experience I had during one early visit to Thomas. I said to him, "Tom in the Arctic there are many people interested in an Earth-based spirituality. Have you ever written anything on an Earth-based spirituality?" He paused for a moment and said, "No I haven't. But I have written something on the spirituality of Earth that you might find interesting."

About Story and Shared Dream Experience

We tend to think of story and shared dream experience as two

different things. I think they are two distinct elements of the same dynamic. One day, in the midst of a discussion, Thomas said "Context is everything." He saw story as providing the context in which life could function in a meaningful manner. He was talking about the essential role of story as the creator of context. For me, shared dream experience is the inner spirit that enables us to manifest and activate the story by sharing it with others in some kind of community setting.

So a few words about story and then shared dream experience.

The Power of Story

Some years ago a First Nation band (you would likely call it a tribe) in northern British Columbia wanted to negotiate their land claim. The federal government officials arrived from Ottawa and held a meeting with the band council and some of the elders. During the course of the meeting one of the civil servants said, "I hope you realize that this land we are talking about belongs to the federal government in Ottawa." The elders were shocked. One of them stood up, looked across the table at the civil servant who made this statement, and said, "If this is your land, where are your stories?"

The stories we tell confer identity. They validate our persona and power.

For Carl Jung, stories were not just something people told. They were part of a person. He noted that everyone has a story and when psychological problems occur it is because our personal story has been denied or rejected. Healing comes when we discover or re-discover our personal stories. So, in a very real sense, we are our stories.

Stories have power. It is through the telling of stories that we often become aware of the presence of Spirit. Most of the great leaders have used story to motivate people.

St. Matthew's Gospel tells us "Jesus spoke to the crowds in parables; indeed he would never speak to them except in parables." (Matthew 13:34)

Mahatma Gandhi was a story teller. He entitled his autobiography, "The Story of My Experiments with Truth." Martin Luther King was a great story-teller as we see in his "I have a Dream" speech.

For many years Thomas told the story about the degradation of Earth. Today we have something that he didn't have—a name for that degradation: *The Anthropocene epoch*. It emerges from science. Its primary manifestation is global warming. It is having universal impacts and is affecting all aspects of life as we know it: all environments, cultures, populations, economies, lands, oceans.

Unlike previous epochs—like the Holocene which began 11,700 years ago with the retreat of the ice shields—the Anthropocene is relatively recent. It began at the beginning of the industrial revolution in the early 1800s and unlike all previous natural epochs, it is man-made—thus the name “Anthro” for “human” and “cene” for new.

The predictions are dire. Denis Meadows, one of the authors of the 1972 M.I.T. study *Limits to Growth*⁴ has stated that we have overshot the so-called “limits” described in the study. Our only option now is to try and build resilience into the declining systems. I think of us as triage workers on declining systems. Other scientists state that we are on our way to the sixth mass extinction of the species. *Sic transit Gloria mundi*.⁵

The anthropocene is the dominant story in our lifetime but it is not the emerging story that Thomas called for. So we are faced with a puzzle. As we all know, Thomas said “We are in between stories now.... The old story is no longer effective...yet we have not learned the new story.” How can we tell the story if we do not have a new story to tell? Who will create it?

I think if Thomas were here today he would say to us, “You must create it. You must not only tell the traditional cosmological story, you must create and tell the new cosmological story. This is what a functional cosmology is all about. This is The Great Work. This is your mission.”

The Power of Shared Dream Experience

What Thomas meant by “dream” is a bit uncertain. It probably

4. Donella H. Meadows, et al, *The Limits to Growth: A Report for the club of Rome's Project on the Predicament of Mankind* (New York: Signet, 1972).

5. Thus passes the glory of the world.

goes back to *The Dream of the Earth*⁶—some dynamic, conscious, powerful force that created the universe, our Earth and its species, and our human species. But if “dream” is a bit uncertain, the concept of a “shared dream” is not. Whatever the dream is, it must be a shared dream. It brings together humans with Earth and its species. There is a communion of subjects who work together to help carry out the mission of the great work. So the shared dream is a community enterprise.

Indigenous people in the Arctic understand this. They have lived a nomadic existence. So their concept of a community have not been defined by geographical boundaries, nor limited to relationships with humans. Here is one Dene definition of community. A *community is an intimate relationship with all living things, both animate and inanimate*. I think this was written for the white guys who will quickly point out that something can't be both living and inanimate at the same time. You've got an oxymoron —unless of course you believe that Earth—all of it—is indeed living. (A bit of reframing there).

As Dom Hélder Câmara noted: “*When we dream alone, it is only a dream. When we are dreaming with others, it is the beginning of reality.*”

The Challenge in the Trenches

As I indicated earlier, I spent a lot of my early life in the United States and I've always enjoyed the American perspective of Canadians. We are seen as people with funny accents who are polite, genteel, deferential, and not at all pushy.

American question: “How do you get 100 Canadians out of a swimming pool? Answer: You say to them, “Please get out of the swimming pool.”

I'm here to tell you that if you still have this impression of Canadians, you have to do some serious reframing. The federal government under Stephen Harper and the provincial government in British Columbia under Christy Clark are trying to turn our coun-

6. Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1988).

try into a super energy state by digging up tar sands, gas and coal and transporting them by pipelines and huge tanker ships for sale abroad.

They are doing away with environmental laws, lying to the public, silencing scientists, attacking environmental groups, disregarding their responsibilities to aboriginal peoples' traditional lands and their self-government and forbidding ordinary citizens to participate in environmental project reviews unless they can demonstrate that they are directly affected by impacts. (Try and prove that you are personally affected by climate change.) They are signing international agreements which give foreign companies access to our resources. The Chinese, Japanese and Koreans have more say over the future of our Comox Valley than we do. We Canadians now live in very different times. This is life in the trenches.

Thomas tells us in *The Great Work* that we each have to figure out how to carry out our role. I have no intention of suggesting to you how you should carry out your role in your own discipline or your own community. I can only tell you what we are trying to do in our community. And, once again, much of it is about reframing.

When I was new to the valley and first got involved in a project, people told me I should talk to Ruth Masters. Ruth, now in her mid-90s, has been involved in every environmental project in the valley for the past fifty years. She shows up at demonstrations wearing a sign that says, "*Senior Citizen Shit Disturber.*" So I phoned Ruth, explained what the project was about, and asked her to join us. She asked me one question. "Are you in it for the long haul?" I said I was and she joined us.

Ruth's question was insightful. She knows that many people get involved because they think we can win. But we lose more battles than we win and many people drop out. Sometimes they flare out. We have to reframe.

Our work is not about winning—though it is nice when we do. It is about some spiritual power that rises up within you and makes you do things *because it is the right thing to do*. You don't get this from the project. It is something you bring to the project or develop when you get involved.

To survive in this work you have to be spiritually grounded. For

some it is a daily practice of meditation or contemplation, for others it is a walk in the woods and communing with nature, for some it is prayer—listening to creation for guidance, but it is always some kind of spiritual practice that grounds us and enables us to continue for what Ruth calls the “long haul.”

Just as we need to ground ourselves in some kind of spiritual practice, so we need to do something similar on a community level. We have numerous groups in our valley, most of them dedicated volunteer groups providing a range of community services: environmental groups, labour unions, farm groups, food security groups, health care groups, etc. They are all doing their own thing, but they have difficulty finding a common ground that provides a solid basis for working together to deal with resource development in the valley. Is there a common ground?

I think there is. Years ago I remember a conversation with my friend Tom Keevey. We were discussing the ecumenical movement and the problem the churches were having finding a common ground. Tom said, “*The first things the churches seeking a common ground have to realize is that they are standing on it.*” I think the same principle applies to our groups in the Comox Valley.

We try to build coalitions around our love of this valley. This is our common ground.

We don't just complain about things. We stress the need for positive alternatives—clean energy and green jobs, better public transportation, limits to carbon, better housing, support for small businesses, longer-term jobs, and so forth,

We try to reach out beyond the “usual suspects.” We try to and build upon issues that affect people directly and about which they have an emotional investment. We've been supporting our First Nations and their efforts to stand up for their traditional rights. Recently some of the churches have come on board by opposing coal projects. And we develop things like letters of agreement and social contracts that provide a way of linking groups together.

And the key to success? In all the successful groups there is a spark: two or three committed people who do the heavy lifting on a day-to-day basis.

So we create and tell the new story and share a dream, reflect on

our experiences, and take care of ourselves and one another.

A Few Words about the Way Forward

There is no doubt that the Anthropocene and climate change is becoming the dominant story of our times and will remain so for some generations to come. Nor do I doubt that what Thomas described as a cultural autism—living in a denial bubble—will continue for some time to come.

The anthropocene is the classic bad news story and people don't like bad news. It is a complex story with no easy solutions. It requires us to change and change is difficult for all of us. Many people will claim that the climate change is something "out there" that we really can't do anything about so it is best not to worry about it.

So they fail to see that the coal mines, pipelines, and fracking wells are the symptoms of a greater problem. The causes are governments and their partnerships with multinational corporations. They seem to have one policy first articulated by Deep Throat to Robert Redford in that dark parking garage in the movie *All the Presidents Men*: "Follow the Money." But, for a variety of reasons, many organizations will refuse to "Get Political."

But as bleak as things look, I think there are signs of real hope. I'm a news junkie and every morning I read a number of papers on-line. There are constant references to droughts, hurricanes and tornadoes, disappearing ice shields and shrinking glaciers, disastrous floods and landslides dead zones in the oceans, poisoning of local waters, holes in the ozone, dense air pollution, etc. These are beginning to create awareness of a clear and present danger that is finally getting many peoples' attention, worries them and makes them seek solutions.

Then, of course, there are the folks in communities all over the world who are fighting back, creating the new story, and sharing the dream.

Bringing these thoughts close to home...the task of carrying out the Great Work in this rapidly changing world has special significance for academics. You are the experts on the thinking of Thomas Berry and you understand systems. AS R.D. Laing once said, "Until

you can *see through* the rules you will only see through the rules." You have the skills and intellectual capacity to see through the rules, but you have a real challenge.

In *The Great Work*, Chapter 14 deals with "Reinventing the Human." But the four preceding chapters tell the story of "The New Political Alignment," "The Corporation Story," "The Extractive Economy," and "The Petroleum Interval." The members of these groups are the ones we must influence—but none of them are at this Colloquium.

I intend no criticism when I say that members of the academic community are often locked within the boundaries of their own disciplines. So are community organizers like me and we are often seen as the "radical enemy." But we all have to regularly "wander off the ranch" and become, like Thomas, geologists.

And as geologists, working to usher in the new Ecozoic world, we must continually recognize the importance of telling the story. As the poet Muriel Rukeyser put it some years ago: "The world is not made up of atoms. It is made up of stories."

Closing Thoughts

Thomas Berry has changed my life and given it meaning and I'm sure he has done the same for you. I think of my visits and conversation with him as very special times—what he called "moments of grace" in times of transition.

In terms of our mission, I liken the difficult situation we are all going through as our chrysalis experience. When the caterpillar's body breaks down into a mass of protoplasm, a few cells—very different cells—begin to emerge. They are called *imaginal cells*. They carry within them the image of the butterfly that is waiting to be born. At first they are attacked by the cells trying to protect the caterpillar's immune system. Some of the imaginal cells are destroyed. But eventually the imaginal cells become more numerous and succeed in the transformation.

Somehow Thomas has placed the image of the Ecozoic era within us. We are going through a painful transition—but new life will emerge. This is what we hang onto. It is our hope. And, as Teilhard said, "The future belongs to those who can give a reason for hope."