

Reinventing the Human

By Thomas Berry

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The task of our time might be expressed as a single sentence with seven phrases:

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 experience.

I say “reinvent the human” because the issues we are concerned with seem to be beyond the competence of our present cultural traditions. As humans, more than any other mode of being we give shape and form to ourselves in our cultural configurations. We are genetically coded toward a further transgenetic cultural coding whereby we articulate the human mode of our being. We are genetically coded to think. We do not have a choice to think or not to think. We do have a choice of what we think and how we shape our patterns of living, our moral codes, our social institutions, and our artistic and literary traditions. What is needed is something beyond our existing traditions to bring us back to the most fundamental aspect of the human. The issue has never been as critical as it is now. The human is at an impasse. We have been using our freedom of determination to set ourselves at odds with the entire non-human community of earthly existence. We need to give a cultural form to ourselves that is coherent with the larger community of life.

Second, we must work “at the species level” because our problems are beyond any existing cultural solution. We must return to our genetic coding. Our problems are at the species and inter-species level. This is clear in every aspect of the human. As regards economics, we need not simply a national or a global economy, but a species and inter-species economy. Presently our schools of business teach the skills whereby the greatest possible amount of natural resources is

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processed as quickly as possible, put through the consumer economy, and then passed on to the junk heap where it is useless at best, and at worst toxic to every living being. There is need for the human species to develop reciprocal economic relationships with other life forms providing a sustaining pattern of mutual support, as is the case with other life systems.

As regards law, we need a species legal tradition that would provide for the legal rights of geological and biological as well as human components of the Earth community. A legal system exclusively for humans is not realistic. Habitat for example, must be given legal status as sacred and inviolable for every mode of being.

Third, I say “with critical reflection” because this reinventing of the human needs to be done with critical competence. We need all our scientific knowledge. We cannot abandon our technologies. We must, however, see that our technologies are coherent with the technologies of the natural world. Our knowledge needs to be a creative response to the natural world, rather than a domination of the natural world.

Fourth, we need to reinvent the human “within the community of life systems.” Because the Earth, at present, is not adequately understood either by our spiritual or by our scientific traditions, the human has become an addendum or an intrusion. We have found this situation to our liking since it enables us to avoid the problem of integral presence to the Earth. This attitude prevents us from considering the Earth as a single society with ethical relations determined primarily by the well-being of the total Earth community.

But while Earth is a single integral community, it is not a global sameness. It is highly differentiated in bioregional communities—in Arctic as well as tropical regions, in mountains, valleys, plains, and coastal regions. These bioregions can be described as identifiable geographical areas of interacting life systems that are relatively self-sustaining in the ever-renewing processes of nature. As the functional units of the planet, these bioregions can be described as self-propagating, self-nourishing, self educating, self-governing, self-healing and self-fulfilling communities.

Fifth, reinventing the human must take place in a “time developmental context.” We now understand the universe and the planet Earth, not simply

as an ever-renewing sequence of seasonal transformations, but as an emergent process going through an irreversible sequence of transformation episodes, moving in general from lesser to greater complexity in structure, from lesser to greater modes of consciousness, and from lesser to greater freedoms. This movement constitutes what might be called the cosmological dimensions of the program we are outlining here. Our sense of who we are and what our role is begins where the universe begins. Not only our physical shaping, but also our spiritual and cultural shaping begin with the formation of the universe.

Sixth, from this we can appreciate the directing and energizing role played by “the story of the universe.” This story that we know through empirical observation is our most valuable resource in establishing a viable mode of being for the human species as well as for all those stupendous life systems whereby Earth achieves its grandeur, its fertility and its capacity for continuing self-renewal. This story as told in its galactic expansion, its Earth formation, its life emergence, and its consciousness manifestation in the human fulfills in our times the role of the mythic accounts of the universe that existed in earlier times when human awareness was dominated by a spatial mode of consciousness. We have moved from cosmos to cosmogenesis, from the mandala journey, from the center of an abiding world to the great irreversible journey of the universe itself as the primary sacred journey. This journey of the universe is the journey of each individual being in the universe. So this story of the great journey is an exciting revelatory story that gives us our macrophase identity—the larger dimensions of meaning that we need. To be able to identify the microphase of our human being with the macrophase mode of our universe being is the quintessence of what needs to be achieved.

The present imperative of the human is that this journey continue on into the future in the integrity of the unfolding life systems of Earth, systems that presently are threatened in their survival. Our great failure is the termination of the journey for so many of the most brilliant species of the life community. The horrendous fact is we are, as Norman Myers has indicated, in an extinction spasm that is likely to produce “the greatest single setback in life’s abundance and diversity since the first flickerings of life almost four billion years ago.” The labor and care expended over some billions of years and untold billions of experiments to bring forth such a gorgeous Earth, all

this is being negated within little more than a century with what we mistakenly consider progress toward a better life in a better world.

Seventh, the final aspect of our statement concerning the ethical importance of our times is the shared dream experience. The creative process, whether in the human or the cosmological order, is too mysterious for easy explanation. Yet, we all have experience of creative activity. Since human processes involve much trial and error with only occasional success at any high level of distinction, we may well believe that the cosmological process has also passed through a vast period of experimentation in order to achieve the ordered processes of our present universe.

In both instances something is perceived in a dim and uncertain manner, something radiant with meaning that draws us on to further clarification of our understanding and our activity. Suddenly out of the formless condition, a formed reality appears. This process can be described in many ways, as a groping or as a feeling or imaginative process. The most appropriate way of describing this process seems to be that of dream realization. The universe seems to be the fulfillment of something so highly imaginative and so overwhelming that it must have been dreamed into existence.

But if the dream is creative, we must also recognize that few things are so destructive as a dream or entrancement that has lost the integrity of its meaning and entered into exaggerated and destructive manifestation. This has happened often enough with political ideologies and religious visions, but there is no dream or entrancement in the history of the Earth that has wrought the destruction that is taking place in the entrancement with industrial civilization. Such entrancement must be considered as a profound cultural pathology. It can be dealt with only by a creative vision capable of giving birth to a new more integral expression of the entire planetary process.

Such is our present situation. We are involved not simply with an ethical issue, but with a disturbance sanctioned by the very structures of the culture itself in its present phase. The present destructive dream that came to fullness in the twentieth century appears and continues now as a kind of ultimate manifestation of that deep inner rage of Western society against its earthly condition as a vital member of the life community. As with the goose that laid the golden egg, so the Earth is assaulted in a vain effort to possess not

simply the magnificent fruits of Earth but the power itself whereby these splendors have emerged

At such a moment a new revelatory experience is needed, an experience wherein human consciousness awakens to the grandeur and sacred quality of the Earth process. This awakening is our human participation in the dream of the Earth, the dream that is carried in its integrity, not in any one of Earth's cultural expressions, but in the depths of our genetic coding. Therein Earth functions at a depth beyond our capacity for conscious awareness. We can only be sensitized to what is being revealed to us. Such participation in the dream of the Earth we probably have not had since our earlier shamanic times, but therein lies our hope for the future, for ourselves, and for the entire Earth community.

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