

THOMAS BERRY AND THE SELF-ORGANIZING UNIVERSE

By Mary Coelho

In the mid-1980s a friend invited me to go to a lecture on a Saturday afternoon at a place called the Riverdale Center for Religious Research, which had been founded by Thomas Berry. I had not heard of it. We found our way north of Manhattan up to the Center high up on a bank of the Hudson River. We went several times to the monthly Saturday afternoon events that were held there. I only superficially understood what Thomas Berry was saying in those lectures, but I learned the name Brian Swimme, so I went to see his video series “Canticle to the Cosmos” when it was being shown at a church on Central Park West in New York City in the early 1990s. The decision to go to that video series must have meant that at some level Thomas’s talks had struck a chord. And I had learned that Brian Swimme, a physicist, had studied with Thomas Berry.

I was excited and profoundly moved by several remarkable discoveries and insights I learned about during those evenings at the video series as they gave me a glimpse of a worldview fundamentally different from what I had been taught as a student of biology and evolution in college. Can we actually trace a 13.8-billion-year history of the universe? Where have I been, I wondered, as I had no idea of that discovery. He said the atom is 99.99% empty, a mysterious realm of pure generativity. What is that about? As someone in our new story group said recently, we are no longer in Kansas. It was during those evenings watching the video series that I began to leave many of my objectified assumptions about “Kansas.”

As I was beginning to embrace a transformed understanding of our world, there were questions that I stumbled over. One was that I could not imagine how our complex bodies and those of all the other living beings of Earth could actually have arisen out of the elements created in stars before Earth was even formed. When I studied evolution, our studies of human origins were limited to the changes in living beings on the surface of the Earth from whom a line of descent could be traced. I learned, for example, to trace the origin of the human backbone to very early chordates, fishlike water organisms. This familiar focus of the study of evolution which assumes the presence of simpler creatures while

fascinating did not address the question of how the complex forms of the early beings of the Earth arose. Did the elements forming the bodies of the early creatures come together as they randomly bumped into each other? Did complex molecules and conglomerates of them arise simply from the attraction of charged molecules? Did an external creative force assemble the elements over the millennia? I turned to Thomas Berry with my questions. Discerning among these and other possibilities are important as the answer determines the nature of human belonging within the evolutionary story.

I asked Thomas Berry how on Earth could the elements made in stars possibly find their way to become part of my body and countless other beings? Can we actually trace our origins to a continuous, unbroken succession of events going back to the formation of atoms in the stars and some elements formed even earlier? Thomas understood my question clearly and recommended that I read Erich Jantsch's *Self-Organizing Universe*.

By reading that book with great care and arguing with the librarian about keeping it too long, I began to grasp ideas about the origin of complexity by means of the active, creative ordering powers intrinsic to the cosmos and Earth. Everything is a form, including atoms and cells and human beings. So is a star and the flame of a candle. Self-organizing involves an ordering from within, an inner ordering and creative patterning such that the universe continually seeks new forms, new domains of emergence. New forms of being are carried forward and are sometimes nested in more complex forms in which self-organizing continues. Parts organize themselves into new patterns that could not be predicted from the parts alone. Arthur Peacocke proposed that chaotic processes and self-organizing, acting together, may produce new patterns and forms. The emergence of complexity through self-organizing enables us to understand how the world of daily life can be both old and also new.

Thomas Berry and Brian Swimme write that intelligent ordering permeates each being at all levels of complexity. In this understanding nothing exists outside unseen shaping activity. F. David Peat, physicist and speculative thinker, suggested the name "objective intelligence" or "creative ordering" for the generative power that brings about the dynamic ordering of matter and mind. He proposed that this generative, ordering power in the universe cannot lie within the mental and material worlds alone. The base of the universe seethes with creativity. As I learned about

the inner ordering process that brought the elements made in stars into today's world, Thomas Berry's work became more important.

It was a further understanding that made self-organizing even more personal and most important regarding human participation in this process. The Jungian analyst Michael Comforti has proposed that Jung's archetypes are the psychological parallel to the scientific theory of self-organizing dynamics in nature. So the archetype of the Self, the soul-like inner ordering of the person, is one form of the inner creative ordering process of the Earth and cosmos. Through understanding the nature of self-organizing we can see how archetypal patterns enable a person's participation in the unfolding story in the depth of consciousness. It was most hopeful and encouraging to me to learn that self-organizing, expressed in consciousness as the Self (or soul), is a given potential by virtue of being human. It is important that these patterns were understood by C. G. Jung to be psychoid, which means they order the whole spectrum of our being from the psychological to the material, physical world, helping to integrate his thought with the understanding of self-organizing as a holistic process. It is heartening and life-giving to learn that everyone, wounded or whole, has an intrinsic belonging grounded in this inner creative patterning within us. With this understanding, I could begin to leave the claim of the objectified, impersonal evolutionary story I had learned in college. I was no longer in Kansas.

Self-Organizing and Subjectivity

Self-organizing is at the heart of Thomas Berry's understanding of subjectivity. Subjectivity is one of his three governing tendencies of evolution, the other two being differentiation and communion. The subject, the person and other beings, is a self-manifesting, dynamic center of experience. Swimme and Berry write in *The Universe Story* that the universe pushes us toward greater variety and intensity in its psychic modes of expression! We are ordered by the self-organizing dynamics intrinsic to our being, not solely by ego efforts alone or by our defenses against early wounding and cultural violence of so many kinds. We must consciously cooperate with the expression of self-organizing as a subject.

New ordering appears especially in times of chaos, both personal and collective. In these times of ecological crisis, confidence in the possibility of new order is a source of hope. New order can arise in unexpected places as each region of the universe is permeated with self-organizing dy-

namics in latent form. We are invited to be alert to the emergence of new order in our individual lives and in our communities. We have reason to hope that the new story with its promise of change will encourage people to be alert to new patterns emerging in these chaotic times. Thomas reminds us that only a coordinated sequence of transitions makes possible the emergence of entirely new realities.

If Thomas Berry had not recommended Erich Jantsch's book to me, I wonder how I might ever have come to understand the central role of self-organizing in the person, in cultures, and in the evolutionary story. Actually, it is a bit frightening to think of the great personal loss I would have suffered had this critical understanding not been offered to me. I am deeply indebted to Thomas's wisdom.