

INSCENDENCE AND RE-AWAKENING TO THE ECOLOGICAL SELF WITH THOMAS BERRY

By Kaytlyn Creutzberg

How difficult it was to bring myself to task and write just a glimpse of my connection to the work of Thomas Berry! It kept expanding and expanding! This “bit of verse” he wrote says it best for me.

An Appalachian Wedding

Look up at the sky –

The heavens so blue, the sun so radiant,

The clouds so playful, the soaring raptors,

The meadows in bloom, the woodland creatures,

The rivers singing their way to the sea,

Wolf song on the land, whale song in the sea,

Celebration everywhere, wild, riotous,

Immense as a monsoon lifting an ocean of joy

And spilling it down over the Appalachian Landscape,

Drenching us all with a deluge of delight

As we open our arms and rush toward each other,

You and I and all of us,

Moved by that vast compassionate Presence

That brings all things together in intimate Celebration,

Celebration that is the universe itself.

When was the last time most of us saw, heard, smelled, felt sensations on our skin, imagined, were in awe of beauty, or could sense the power of nature? In his “Bill of Rights for the Planet Earth,” Thomas states: “The universe is a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects.” From the greatest expanse to the most minute, all are capable of having rights. This is the *New Story* that tells how humanity is part of nature based on what science has unveiled. This, the new cosmological story, is especially important because there are many who are no longer rooted in a religion. What Thomas Berry offers is solace. His message can be heard by all, including those who do not heed Christian texts, and personally I have found great comfort in his words.

Thomas Berry gave me a huge gift—validation of my inner journey—and the word “inscendence.” I had such a problem with the word transcendence for so many years. And when I encountered inscendence, I grabbed hold of it and have never let go! As creatures of this Earth, we cannot transcend life and the day-to-day. “The Earth is our origin, our nourishment, our educator, our healer, our fulfillment. At its core, even our spirituality is Earth derived.” In a live presentation in Guelph, Ontario, in 2016, Joanna Macy spoke to what I call the posturing of transcendence. “We see our world in either of four ways,” she explained:

1. As a battlefield, where we need to face the enemy, be fearless. It is a worldview that is polarizing, self-righteousness, and othering; the privileged vs. the oppressed.
2. As a trap we want to escape from (from the suffering and brokenness). We transcend the brokenness, “but it feels shitty up there when everyone else is still down there,” Macy exclaims! The escapism is isolating and premature equanimity.
3. As a lover. This worldview is tempting, with the world as partner. In mirroring others, we are engaged together.
4. As our larger self. This is the perspective of deep ecology and interconnectedness, where we can keep expanding our sense of self outwards, like ever widening circles rippling outward to the entire universe.

In the words of Thomas Berry, “We are quintessentially integral with the universe. In ourselves the universe is revealed to itself as we are revealed in the universe.” And when we learn to inscend, we can have a felt experience of “our small part in the larger cosmic orchestra,” and do what we were meant to do.

In seeking to find what the web was saying about inscendence, I found only a few writings, mostly by Bill Plotkin. Then on June 1, 2017, author Robert Macfarlane posted on Twitter:

Word of the day: “inscendence” – the impulse not to rise above the world (transcendence) but to climb into it, seek its core. (Thomas Berry)

Drew Dellinger responded the next day (@drewdellinger):

Replying to @RobGMacfarlane: I remember hearing Berry use this word in '92. Asked about Platonic forms (archetypes) he said, they're not transcendent, but inscendent.

As I put the finishing touches on this essay, I received an email regarding a webinar about the urgency of the work of social transformation. The webinar delved into an invitation for “an evolutionary leap in our very ways of being human and relating” to create the conditions for system-wide change. I thought how this was not unlike how Thomas Berry wrote about realigning culture with nature by relearning to embrace the dream of Earth.

A couple of days later, another invitation, this time announcing a collaboration between Sounds True, LinkedIn, Wisdom 2.0, and Mindful NYU for the launch of the InnerMBA. The program’s aim is to train a new generation of leaders who inspire others to action—doing business in such a way that it is a “complement with the inner world” and “operationalizes compassion.”

You can’t say things have not begun to shift! *The Dream of the Earth* (the title of one of Thomas Berry’s books) and a healthier “cultural coding” are emerging. Joanna Macy, who is still active in her 90s teaching about the Great Turning and her “Work that Reconnects,” says that change cannot take root and be sustained without a profound shift in the way we see our world, cognitively, spiritually, and in relationship. “When we awaken to the grandeur of who we are, we experience a shift of consciousness and recognize that our planet is an intelligent living system, and we belong to it, like the cells of a living body.”

On the Farm

Thomas Berry asserts that the dream along with our ability for contemplative vision and practicing incense is what activates the part of ourselves that will see us through what most identify as our current crisis. Sister Miriam Therese MacGillis speaks to this and the long history of human development during which we have been refining our “most profound human capacities through the use of our senses, stories and meaning systems.”

MacGillis was a student of Thomas Berry, and has been addressing audiences about his teachings since the mid-1980s. Many credit her profound presentations as a turning point in their lives, as do I. Berry’s work really came alive for me when she screened *The Awakening Universe* and spoke at a conference I attended in 2010. The whole auditorium was in a state of awe. It was a true service that Sunday. Even though it was likely Bill Plotkin who first introduced me to Thomas Berry many years before in his book *Soulcraft* (2003), it was MacGillis’s embodiment of Berry’s

work that was my turning. From this point on, it seems that Thomas Berry was being quoted often in my readings.

MacGillis dedicated her life to bringing Thomas Berry's ideas out into the world by integrating his teachings into a model farm called Genesis Farm. Through speaking engagements and Earth literacy programs at the farm, she played a big role in propagating the New Story. Knowing farming, I want to recognize Miriam MacGillis's perseverance with Genesis Farm and for being such a dedicated practitioner of Berry's work.

Author Michael Ableman spoke clearly to the importance of places like Genesis Farm at a Bioneers conference:

The great thing is that there are many of us who are creating the models, who are preserving the sacred knowledge. Our farms are the repositories of this very important knowledge that has been disappearing, so that when the time comes, and awakening happens, there will be places in every single community around the world where folks can go to be guided in terms of how to shift this thing.

Janine Benyus, who co-founded the Biomimicry Institute (www.biomimicry.org) and popularized the term "biomimicry," calls these repositories eddies in a turbulent river. Getting a boat into an eddy is hard, just like transitioning to resilience "must be a deliberate choice to leave the linear surge of an extractive economy and enter a circulating renewable one."

I identify with how Miriam MacGillis represents the dream by having lived it. For a few years, I too was a farmer and did so through a love and respect for the farm-scape and living systems. This relationship is hard to describe; therefore, I borrow from Daniel Deffenbaugh, a professor and organic gardener. In his book, *Learning the Language of the Fields*, he portrays farming relationships and his notion of ecological integrity as a component of well-being.

We realize that the earth is a living being, just as we are. Tending earth's soil, plants, animals and landscapes is sacred work, the work of a farmer. Farms not only produce food, but are centres where we experience our society's culture and . . . know the life force that is in our food, farms and communities. Farmers who work on the land recognize that a spiritual practice is integral to the task of growing real food.

Writing about Thomas Berry's Work

Leveraging my experience in community animation and personal study in acclimatization (known more commonly today as land pedagogy), I returned to school in 2016 to pursue graduate studies. One of the first papers I wrote was about the greening of Catholicism, and Thomas Berry's and Miriam MacGillis's work. The green sisters, and I would also add green brothers, are developing ecological Earth-restoring projects like Genesis Farm and the Ignatius Jesuit Centre in Guelph, Ontario, which offers a farm and orchard, a "Stations of the Cosmos" (based on *The Universe Story*), and an old growth forest—real-time demonstrations of Thomas Berry's *dream*.

Berry's writings have provided me the language to express what I feel called to and sense. But how do we drive more action for Berry's dream? "The difficulty cannot be resolved simply by establishing a course or a program in ecology, for ecology is not a course or a program. Rather it is the foundation of all courses, all programs, and all professions because ecology is a functional cosmology." There is much to be done to engage others for increasing ecological integrity and helping a greener culture to emerge.

The Practice of Inscendence

What does Berry really mean by 'inscendence'? In *The Dream of the Earth* he implores us with his suggestion:

We must invent, or reinvent, a sustainable human culture by a descent into our pre-rational, our instinctive, resources. Our cultural resources have lost their integrity. They cannot be trusted. What is needed is not transcendence but "inscendence," not the brain but the gene.

What is needed is that we descend into our most primal selves, which I understand as getting out of our heads and back into our bodies, and coming to know and accept how our lower brain tends to respond instead of our observer brain. With this awareness, we can become creatures of creativity rather than creatures of reactivity.

I identify several approaches for inscendence within the broad scope of my reading. Peter Levine and Bessel van der Kolk introduced "interoception" for listening to the body. Carl Jung's practice of "active imagination" aims at tapping into the collective unconscious to encounter our soul image. Thomas Hübl is helping increase awareness of the pervasive-

ness of collective narratives, and he says that “when unresolved conflicts remain present, our ability to embrace the future is impacted. When this happens to a large group of people, we call it collective trauma.”

In a global meditation he hosted a few months ago, he guided us to come back from our habit of absencing (from feeling our pain) to tune our senses again: “I am noticing . . . also the beauty of living in this body . . . and having this experience right now. There is aliveness, intelligence and communication within, for me to experience, to perceive, to feel this moment of being alive.”

Barbara Holifield speaks to the ecological self that Arne Naess conceptualized in his writings about deep ecology: “Perhaps in this time of crisis there is an opportunity to develop a listening perspective that has a newfound curiosity about both the individual’s inner life and the interweaving of the individual-in-relation with the more-than-human-community, a listening for an ecological self.”

Holifield’s words sound to me like Berry’s dream of the Earth, how every culture needs to return to the source of its “nature coding.” All these approaches are like layers helping to realign culture with nature through practices for the “descent to soul.”

Sensibility and the Contemplative Gaze

Science has given us a new ability for gazing at the world. Put together with the gaze of intuitive knowing or trusting your inner resources, a new way of seeing is emerging. As Thomas Berry would say, “The outer world activates the inner world and causes, [or] brings forth that contemplative gaze and then the awesome capacity to imagine and to respond with feeling [from] the depth of what our human souls carry.” Using the tools of science, we can now see Earth from space, and we can also comprehend relationship at the quantum level. Add to this our capacity for contemplation, and we now understand that human beings are the universe looking back on itself.

Our ancestors could not know this in the same way, but they still believed and knew how to access Earth’s intelligence. “We are the eyes, the minds, and the hearts that the cosmos is evolving so that it can come to know itself ever more perfectly through us.” Or in the words of Sister MacGillis, “We need to realize that we are the universe in the form of the human.”

“Keep them in awe,” wrote Thomas Hobbes back in 1651, even

though he might not have meant this in the way I am suggesting here. But just look at the consistency of this message, said in so many ways:

- the Aztec commandment, “Thou shalt acknowledge the wonder.”
- a “kinship ethic,” coined by Edward Evans in 1897, that captures the weaving of sensory experience with scientific knowledge, which is at the core of the New Story.
- Aldo Leopold’s famous statement, “We can be ethical only in relation to something we see, feel, understand, love, or otherwise have faith in.”
- John O’Donohue’s “beauty is a human calling.”
- Satish Kumar’s “aesthetic renewal [and] inward freedom, achieved through spiritual transformation.”
- the practice of Tikkun Olam in Judaism meaning “world repair.”

Berry’s concept of inscendence has led me to the task of building what I am calling a new sensibility, a term I borrow from Susan Sontag, who critiqued her culture in the 1960s. The new sensibility becomes felt experience when taking in real art, poetry, and music that challenge and stretch the senses, and which hurt, she argued, while “literary intellectuals” frown upon it all, clinging to the comfort of their literature as the “central cultural act.” Since artists are usually ahead of their times in their very nature, they have the capacity to witness and express the new, “educating conscience and sensibility,” which is always uncomfortable to those who cling to old ways.

New possibility is opening before me as I, like others doing their *great work* (intentionally lower case) of the Self, unveil “the guiding vision for a lifetime, the mythopoetic template for personally belonging to the world,” in the way that evolution is nudging me to step forward into the world. My soul implores me to express my authentic self, because the universe brought us into being for a specific function. I am coming to understand this in the unique capacities given to me for “thought and speech, aesthetic appreciation, emotional sensitivity and moral judgment.” Through inscendence, I encounter my soul’s image, discern my path, embody my “coding” and take full responsibility as my “true adult” self. I am part of evolution and choose to contribute to the sustainability of our culture, our species, and our planet. I fully express my authentic self and join with other “evolutionary midwives” to do the Great Work.

I write about a newer sensibility, weaving in what some call Thomas Berry's Franciscan sensibilities in his chapter on "An Ecologically Sensitive Spirituality" in *The Sacred Universe*. I also take from cultural narratives, in-nature teachings, culinary arts, and a spiritual care therapeutic model, packaging it together into a praxis for inscendence that I call "re-awakening to the ecological Self." This is somewhat different than Bill Plotkin's books, but more importantly, my aim is to make these teachings more accessible. There are many processes available to us, including those termed right-brain practices (rather than the busy doing with the left brain), which are traditionally considered more feminine, and the experience of awe through reverence of beauty in nature. The intended result is to increase access to our creative energies.

Thomas Berry's Dream

Bill Plotkin wrote, "Thomas Berry told us that in order to invent new sustainable cultures, we must root our efforts not in our rational minds." It can be argued that the practice of inscendence—the descent to soul to realign ourselves with our "coding"—overlaps with the idea of archetypes that express through us as "root patterns, seed ideas and consciousness-shifting images," or as the dream of Earth, not dissimilar to Carl Jung's active imagination process, and to what Joseph Campbell is famous for in many books he has written—to "feel the rapture of being alive" rooted in our inner myth. "The dream becomes the myth that both guides and drives the action."

Thomas Berry was able to name and wrote extensively about the dream and a New Story. Bill Plotkin unpacked it in many writings and books that put Berry's work into practice. Miriam MacGillis applied Berry's teachings to a farm-scape and embodied them. Joanna Macy developed programs to address our grief experienced collectively for the degradation of Earth. Macy encourages us to "not be afraid of feeling pain for our world. . . . How else could we transform? The pain comes from love, our love for the world. Each of us has something incredible to bring to this great time to be alive."

Thomas Berry's dream is paving the way to an ecological Earth-restoring global community, and there is plenty of evidence that we are transitioning now into what he named the Ecozoic era. As we enter a new decade, we can already feel the acceleration as more of us do our homework to heal by practicing inscendence, transforming our grief, and setting intentions to act.

To conclude, I would like to suggest three practices for inscendence. The first one, interoception, honors the body as a container or sacred vessel of the wisdom that Berry says we access “by a descent into our pre-rational, our instinctive, resources.” Second, being in nature offers more than words can express.

Explore the process of interoception.

1. Go outside, and if you can, find a tree or many!
2. Tune your sense to creative expression (music, art, poetry).

And, as I opened with a poem written by Thomas Berry, I close with a poem by Adrienne Rich:

Prospective Immigrants Please Note

*Either you will
go through this door
or you will not go through.
If you go through
there is always the risk
of remembering your name.
Things look at you doubly
and you must look back
and let them happen.
If you do not go through
it is possible
to live worthily
to maintain your attitudes
to hold your position
to die bravely
but much will blind you,
much will evade you,
at what cost who knows?
The door itself
makes no promises.
It is only a door.*