

The Intellectual Legacy of Thomas Berry

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It was an early afternoon in May when I first wandered down the incline, crossed the creek and looked over the scene. The field was covered with white lilies rising above the thick grass. A magic moment, this experience gave me something that seems to explain my life at a...profound level. It was not only the lilies. It was the singing of the crickets and the woodlands in the distance and the clouds in a clear sky... this early experience has become normative for me throughout the entire range of my thinking.¹

—Thomas Berry

The purpose of this paper is to address the work of Thomas Berry in terms of the intellectual currents that are going forward in the texts he has left us. What is Berry's potential contribution to these intellectual currents? What is his legacy to the academy? Of course, it remains for the future to judge whether or not Berry created a new intellectual current himself. For the moment, however, it is highly important to keep his thought alive in whatever ways we can, including, but not exclusively, his very significant intellectual contributions. All of Berry's writings from the last half (at least) of his life, were dedicated to raising awareness and inspiring action to confront the ecological crisis. Keeping those texts alive is more and more critical as we approach the point of sensitivity to this horizon of ecological responsibility. While Berry himself encouraged almost all efforts one could take to confront these issues, his own writing engenders a specific way of engaging the crisis, one that he proposed as a critical and necessary way. So it is important to take his writ-

1. Thomas Berry, *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future* (New York: Bell Tower, 1999), 12.

ings seriously and to engage them seriously, to debate them, see their relevance, and propose new avenues of discussion, not for the sake of academic activity only, but primarily to serve the critical cause which he had made his own.

In this paper I propose two rather vibrant intellectual currents I see at present that have deep resonance with Berry's work. The first is ecopoetics. I deal with both the thematic content and methodology of ecopoetics in relation to Berry's work. The second arises from contemporary work on radical democracy by Romand Coles. He has related his work to the latest biological research on mirror neurons. It is this aspect of his work on radical democracy that I find has resonance with some of the concepts in Berry's texts.

While on the face of it these two intellectual currents do not seem to have much in common, together they enlighten important dimensions of Thomas Berry's intellectual contribution. They bring to the fore the central role that some of his early work plays in his later thinking, concepts such as deep intimacy with the natural world and notions of genetic and cultural coding. These concepts elucidate Berry's proposal of a 'Story of the Universe' and the 'Great Work' he hoped to engender. When superficially read without a consideration of the layered background of these concepts, they can easily face the dismissive categories of romanticism, primitivism, or structural determinism.

Before I take up these two intellectual currents, it is important to give at least a cursory account of the hermeneutical moment in which I am addressing Berry's work, including my own place in that moment. All interpretation arises from particular contexts, and the present context is not the same as the context in which Berry himself wrote. There are peculiarities in this moment that influence interpretation in that many of those interpreting the work, myself included, knew Berry and were influenced—transformed even—by him.

Berry's earliest writings, focusing on the ecological crisis, emerged within the first widespread awareness and conversations about the ecological crisis that led to the publication of the *Limits to Growth*² report to the Club of Rome in 1972. Rachel Carson,

2. Donella 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).

Barry Commoner, and E. Fritz Schumacher are among the greats who belonged to this era. There was alarm, made more concrete by the Club of Rome report, and a sense of urgency to mobilize and correct what was wrong. It was a time of intense and empowered social engagement. Berry's work constructs a vision, which he claimed should support and give depth and spiritual meaning to these efforts. As his work was not tied to a specific kind of activism, it endured throughout the rest of the century and onward, and motivated many ecological practices, academic courses, and so on.

Today we are in an alarmingly different moment. Scientific and statistical information indicate that the status of species, demographic trends, air, water, and soil, and climate continue to deteriorate. The deterioration is approaching (some say has already reached) unredeemable levels at a rate faster than anyone predicted. Despite improvements in individual local areas, we have not substantially changed the course of destruction. *The New York Times* recently interviewed Paul Kingsworth, political and environmental activist, and founder of Dark Mountain Project.³ Kingsworth is quite controversial in his view that environmental activism has been inadequate. We cannot now make a significant difference, he claims. As he poignantly puts it (and I paraphrase), we can only look into the darkness of despair and see what emerges. I do not refer to Kingsworth because he necessarily represents the dominant view of activists or my own view, but I believe he speaks for large segments of our societies who live in a kind of deep despair. In light of such gravity, we need to re-examine the meaning of hope and the source of our engagement with the natural world. Here existentially is where Berry's voice is most needed today.

Our personal stance towards Berry's texts is a second point to acknowledge. While we are attempting to interpret the text beyond the writer's intention, those of us who encountered Berry in his lifetime (whether briefly or over many years) carry that encounter into the reading of his texts. We are influenced in our interpretation by the manners in which he changed many of our lives. We

3. Daniel Smith, "It's the End of the World as We Know It...and He Feels Fine," *New York Times Magazine* (April 17, 2014), accessed April 18, 2014, <http://myti.ms/1gBbYpx>.

cannot escape hearing his voice (many of his writings were first given as talks). As Stephen Dunn has remarked in the Afterword to *The Intellectual Journey of Thomas Berry*, the ways in which each of us were influenced is different.⁴ It depends on such factors as what period of his life we were most associated with him and in what capacity.

I was a student of Berry in the early 1980s. As I prepared this paper, I recalled two events, which mark my association with him as quite influential: first, I recalled the suitcase full of books he presented me during my weekly appointments with him at Fordham University. He seemed never to run out of different books and, moreover, could introduce them all. Second, I remembered a most memorable time spent identifying and naming the trees around his dwelling place at the Riverdale Centre on the banks of the Hudson River in spring 1982. These memories speak within me as I contemplated the intellectual currents present in his work, and influenced my choice to dwell on Berry's aesthetic and contemplative sense of intimacy with the natural world in its concrete particularities. So in his work I find what Stanley Hauerwas has termed "the radical ordinary"—the very radical mystery of the seemingly everyday. In Berry's work the radical ordinary included the trees, the grasses, the flowers and all the other-than-human creatures which often go unnoticed in the encounters of our everyday life. They are, nevertheless, profoundly present.

Berry presents a great vision of the universe and its unfolding but this sense of the small and ordinary plays a significant part in the creation of this vision, and it is that sense that I primarily address.

The Eco-poetical Nature of Berry's Work

In my dissertation and first book on Berry, I identified his manner of writing as mainly descriptive (as opposed to the other type—explanation).⁵ These are ideal types, and all writing usually has ele-

4. Stephen Dunn, "Afterword: Postmodern Suggestions," *The Intellectual Journey of Thomas Berry: Imagining Earth Community*, ed. Heather Eaton (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014), 239-240.

5. Anne Marie Dalton, *A Theology for the Earth: The Contributions of Thomas*

ments of both description and explanation—certainly Berry’s does. In examining Berry’s work from the point of view of ecopoetics, I am building on this claim about the nature of his writing.

Berry had an amazing cross-cultural education in ancient texts in many traditions, as well as a deep education in his own Western-Christian tradition. He was also aware of different theories of knowledge beginning perhaps with his graduate work on Giambattista Vico.⁶ He could have written in a highly theoretic or scholastic mode (in the manner of Thomas Aquinas, or Aurobindo Ghose, or Ralph Waldo Emerson, or Karl Jung to name a few). But he did not. His texts employ descriptive language, designed to relate the content to the speaker and listener. They are written in an essay style addressing various publics (academic, religious, environmentalists, students, and generally mixed audiences). This is not to say, however, that the text is simple—in it Berry portrays a remarkable ability to present deep and complex thought in a descriptive style. (Such ability is perhaps not surprising as he was trained first and foremost in a religious community of missionary preachers!)

Ecopoetics enables us to examine more precisely the nature of Berry’s descriptive writing. To say that Berry’s work has a resonance with contemporary work in poetics is not to claim that he is writing poems (although he did write a few) or to say that all of his writing fits this designation.⁷ Poetics, in general, and ecopoetics in particular, deal with a wide notion of poetic language. The quotation given at the beginning of this paper is a sample of poetic writing. There is certain cadence to the text and an overflow of language, the use of language unnecessary to the literal meaning; there is a sense of intimacy and mystery at once. It plays with imagination and invites one in. Berry does not write merely “the inspiration from my life

Berry and Bernard Lonergan (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1993), 108-109.

6. Thomas Goddard Bergin and Max Harold Fisch, trans., *The New Science of Giambattista Vico*, 3rd ed., trans. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, 1968); Thomas Berry, *The Historical Theory of Giambattista Vico* [dissertation] (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1949).
7. See Thomas Berry, “Returning to our Native Place,” *Dream of the Earth* (San Francisco: Sierra Books, 1988), 1-5, for an example of an extended ecopoetic articulation.

work arose from the destruction of the natural world by the rise of industry.” No—he wandered (one pauses to dwell on this word) into the field (or meadow), saw not flowers or plants in general, but lilies arising above the thick grass—; and he heard not just insects but crickets. It was not merely a clear day—, there was a blue sky with drifting white clouds.

The manner we engage his descriptive text is different from how we engage an abstract statement. Most of Berry's texts contain such passages. Just to cite a few at random: We find in his essay “Wonderworld as Wasteworld,”⁸ “Scientists themselves are awakening to the wonder and the mystery of the universe, even to its numinous qualities.” Earlier in 1972, in an essay on “Traditional Religion in the Modern World,” we find a dramatic contrast: the optimistic role modern humans see themselves playing in the healing of the world, for example, is set against the tragedy of modern human despair: “This is mirrored profoundly,” he writes, “in the theatre and literature of the absurd where we find the revelation of the human as a despicable reality, ignoble even in his highest aspirations, a disoriented, deteriorated being.”⁹

Ecopoetics is a crossover of sorts between ecology-themed poetry and literary criticism.¹⁰ It belongs to the postmodern focus on textuality—the significance and life of a text on its own. Ecopoetics asks the question: “What is it that is addressed and created by the text itself?” The strictly postmodern literary critic focuses, however, on the text alone as real, based on the assumption that all reality is radically constructed. Ecopoetics, in contrast, holds that “nature is simultaneously real and constructed.”¹¹

For example, Scott Knickerbocker comments on Emily

8. Thomas Berry, “Wonderworld as Wasteworld: The Earth in Deficit,” *Cross Currents* 35 (Winter 1985-1986), 421.

9. Thomas Berry, “Traditional Religions in the Modern World,” *Cross Currents* 22 (Spring 1972), 136.

10. Introductions to ecopoetics can be found in several volumes including those by Rasula, Knickerbocker, and Killingsworth referenced below.

11. Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Harvard University Press, 1993), 7; cited in Scott Knickerbocker, *Ecopoetics: The Language of Nature, the Nature of Language* (Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012), 9.

Dickinson's poem, "A Bird came down the Walk." According to Knickerbocker, the bird is domesticated in the beginning of the poem, as inferred by Dickinson's language and familiar metaphors, but she repels that understanding in the latter part of the poem, a sense captured by the metaphors of distancing.¹² Again we relate to the otherness of nature in this dialectic of familiarity or intimacy against the mysterious otherness. David Abram expresses this sense in *The Spell of the Sensuous*, when he writes, "It is the inanimate earth that speaks: Human speech is but a part of that vaster discourse."¹³ Likewise, Gary Snyder concurs regarding the role of language as a natural phenomenon; he calls a book of his poetry *A Practice of the Wild*.¹⁴

So eco-poetics claims more than making nice language or talking about nature. It claims to represent nature as both constructed by as well as constructing humans. Nature has a being other than that which we create. Yet we are nature. Nature is, as Patrick Murphy contended, not really "other," but *ANother* to us.¹⁵ Eco-poetics challenges the notion that the map precedes the territory as the post-modern critic and public commentator, Jean Baudrillard, described our relationship to the world.¹⁶

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12. Knickerbocker, *Eco-poetics*, 10-13. Reference is to *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Variorum Edition*, ed. R.W. Franklin (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998).
 13. David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-than-Human World* (New York: Random House, 1996), 179; cited in Knickerbocker, *Eco-poetics*, 2. See Berry's description of the revelatory nature of the universe in Thomas Berry and Thomas Clarke, *Befriending the Earth: A Theology of Reconciliation between Humans and the Earth*, eds. Stephen Dunn and Anne Lonergan (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1991), 4-7, esp.7.
 14. Gary Snyder, *A Practice of the Wild* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 1990); cited in Jed Rasula, *This Compost: Ecological Imperatives in American Poetry* (Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 2002), 7.
 15. Patrick Murphy, "Anotherness and Inhabitation in Recent Multicultural American Literature" in *Writing the Environment: Ecocriticism and Literature*, ed. Richard Kerridge and Neil Sammells, (London and New York: Zed Books, 1998), 40-51.
 16. Richard Kerridge, "Small Rooms and the Ecosystem: Environmentalism and DeLillo's *White Noise*" in *Writing the Environment*, eds. Richard Kerridge

Furthermore, ecopoetics has an ethical edge—not in the preaching sense—but in the way in which language is understood to operate and is then intentionally employed. It asks from an environmental perspective: Where does language fit in? Can language weave us into nature? Can it open our hearts to the other that is the natural world? Or to use Berry's way of describing an appropriate relationship to the other, "The deepest values and most profound commitments of one seem to be challenged by the other. At this moment everything depends on mutual confidence and hospitality."¹⁷ In this quote, he was referring to the meeting of cultures, but the natural world became the sublime other in his later writings. "The ultimate goal of any renewal process," he writes in *Evening Thoughts*, "must be to establish a mutually enhancing mode of human-Earth relations."¹⁸

In its ethical dimension, ecopoetics examines the function of language as a vehicle of transformation. In his book, *Ecopoetics: The Language of Nature, the Nature of Language*, Scott Knickerbocker explains: "Environmental poets see themselves as curbing the excesses of post-structuralism (hermetically sealed textuality) that ignores the connection to the social, cultural and physical environment." He quotes Neil Evernden's words, "Environmentalism without poetry is merely regional planning."¹⁹ Hence, ecopoetic language or figuration, meaning poems, metaphors, stories, and other intentional forms, calls on the power of the imagination to re-create our manner of being in the world. It is, in a sense, a reaction against a techno-scientific world in which the humanities are confined to practices of leisure. In a manner akin to feminism, it challenges the dominant ideology of dividing the world according to dualistic categories. Poetic expression is not separate from science or politics any more than nature can be separated from human life, or an individu-

and Neil Sammells, 183. Reference is to Jean Baudrillard, "Simulacra and Simulations" in *Selected Writings*, ed. M. Poster (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988); 166.

17. Thomas Berry, "Education in a Multicultural World," in *Approaches to the Oriental Classics*, ed. Theodore DuBary (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959), 22.

18. Thomas Berry, *Evening Thoughts: Reflecting on Earth as Sacred Community*, ed. Mary Evelyn Tucker (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 2006), 22.

19. Knickerbocker, *Ecopoetics*, 103.

al's backyard can be immune from pollution.²⁰ Heidegger compared poetry to a dwelling place, or better to *the act* of dwelling, because he claimed poetics creates presence, a form of being, not merely a representation such as a map.²¹

So where in Berry's texts does one find resonance with ecopoetics both as a methodology and as thematic content? I have indicated a few examples above of poetic selections from Berry's writing. Most importantly, however, we find this reliance on the power of language to be the basis of his proposal to confront the ecological crisis. Berry's program for ecological responsibility is weighted heavily on the power of story. A quick reading of his proposal relates that proposal to a creation of worldviews. All cultures had stories, he observes, which answered the basic questions of life—where we come from, what we are doing here, where we are going, and what is important in life?²² Considered a little more deeply, however, what is it about a story that can create or change a worldview? The 'New Story' for the 'Ecozoic era' is based on the scientific evolutionary account; but as Berry significantly points out, this new story requires a certain way of telling. The scientific account needs a re-telling in a new language, one that captures imagination and promotes an intimacy with the natural world—science told in ecopoetics. In fact, he comments in several places that we need a new language.²³ "A new Ecozoic language is needed," he says in *Befriending the Earth*. Where is the source of this awareness of a different way to tell the story of the universe? We have to look at ancient stories to find the deeper layers of the language that Berry is proposing, and which he uses extensively.

I would argue the main source of the language relating humans to the natural world comes largely from his reading of the Asian traditions, set in the context of the existential turn happening as

20. Kerridge and Sammells, *Writing the Environment*, 7.

21. *Ibid.*, 55. Reference is to Martin Heidegger, "What are Poets for?" in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. A. Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1975).

22. Thomas Berry, "The New Story," *Dream of the Earth* (San Francisco: Sierra Books, 1988), 123-137.

23. Berry and Clarke, *Befriending the Earth*, 100. See also, Berry, *Dream of the Earth*, 136.

Berry pondered the role of humans in the mid-twentieth century. His writings from this period indicate a reliance on his reading of Asian traditions and how they captured a sense of intimacy with the natural world.²⁴ We find one example in a review he wrote of the series, *Religious Life of Man*, edited by Frederick Strang (1974).²⁵ Commenting on the Japanese volume by H. Byron Earhart, Berry notes Byron's neglect of the role of art and literature as expressions of Japanese religion.

The Japanese experience of reality is much more in the aesthetic realm than is the case in most societies. This special sensitivity of the Japanese results to a large extent from the type of communion that exists in Japan between humans and the surrounding natural world. The very land itself, the islands of Japan, have a sacred quality. While this sensitivity to nature is of the human order, it is also a way of communicating with the deeper forces of the real.... We have a prevailing mood of religious communion set deeply within the realm of human sensitivity.²⁶

Furthermore, Berry contends, and this is significant, that during the Tokagawa period (seventeenth to mid-nineteenth century), which was considered by Byron to be a time of stagnation, this sensitivity deepened and was the source of strength for later Japanese development.²⁷ What I note in this passage is the connection Berry makes between expressions of aesthetic sensitivity and the source of

24. Several chapters in Eaton, *The Intellectual Journey*, draw special attention to Berry's work on the Eastern traditions. Cf. chapters by Christopher Key Chapple, "Thomas Berry on Yoga, Buddhism and Karl Jung," 47-64 and Mary Evelyn Tucker, "The Influences of Confucianism on Thomas Berry's Thought," 65-80. Other chapters also contain sections on the influence of Asian thought on Berry's work.

25. Thomas Berry, "Review Article" in series *The Religious Life of Man*, ed. Frederick J. Strang, vols. 1-7, *Philosophy East and West*, XXIV, 1 (Jan. 1974), 99-110.

26. *Ibid.*, 105. Reference is to the volume by H. Byron Earhart, *Japanese Religion: Unity and Diversity*, (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2004).

27. *Ibid.*

that strength. If we jump ahead to *The Great Work*, we read passages such as “As our physical resources become less available, it is psychic energy that must support human existence in a special manner. This brings us a new reliance on the powers within the universe and also to experience within the deeper self... New fields of energy become available to support the human venture.”²⁸ Again the source of energy lies in the power of the psyche, which he has related to the aesthetic sensitivity to and intimacy with the natural world.

In a foreword to Dorothy McLean and Kathleen Thornod Carr’s *To Honor the Earth*, Berry betrays the concreteness of this intimacy. He writes:

Even though we foster ecological and environmental movements throughout the planet, even though we seek to save the rainforests and to renew the regions we have devastated, none of this will ultimately succeed unless it expresses a true intimacy with this larger Earth community. Such intimacy requires an awareness of the unique aspects of each region of the Earth. It requires a consciousness of the many varied species, and of the individuals within each species, as these speak to us from the inner depths of their reality... Every single life form has its own personality, its own voice, its own spirit reality. Each communicates its unique mystery that we never quite comprehend.²⁹

We recall the comment above on Emily Dickenson’s poem, “A Bird, came down the Walk.” The bird is both domesticated by our language and at the same time never totally comprehended. In *Evening Thoughts*, Berry speaks of the necessity of intimacy with the universe both in its largeness and in its smallness, and he adds, “More immediately present to our consciousness here on Earth are the landscape, the sky above, the Earth below, the grasses, the flow-

28. Berry, *The Great Work*, 170. The whole essay, “The Dynamics of the Future,” is an elaboration on this quotation. *Ibid.*, 166-175.

29. Thomas Berry, “Foreword,” Dorothy McLean and Kathleen Thornod, *To Honor the Earth: Reflections on Living in Harmony with Nature* (Forres, UK: Findhorn Press, 1990), iix.

ers, the forests, and the fauna that present themselves to our opening senses.”³⁰

So the sense of intimacy Berry revealed of himself in his account of the lilies in the meadow, the singing of the crickets, and so on, is strengthened by the resonance he felt with non-duality of heart and head, the sensitivity to the natural world in the Asian traditions. Here Berry found the power of a certain artistic expression to evoke transformation. Other sources, such as Augustine, Vico and Teilhard and Berry's general knowledge of cultural history, would translate this artistic articulation of intimacy into his preferred form—the story.³¹ This form would be the vehicle of the Great Work.

There is a lot more to be said about the potential for dialog between Berry's work and present developments within ecopoetics itself, but I move now to reflections on a second intellectual current—Romand Coles' physical-cultural foundations of *habitus* in creating radical democracy.

Berry and Romand Coles: Mirror Neurons, *Habitus* and Genetic-Cultural Coding

Berry contends the source of our strength arose from a combination of genetic coding and cultural coding—and furthermore attention to the genetic (or physical) coding has been neglected. For Berry, evidence that the interaction of these two codes existed in previous times and came down to us in different cultural traditions, especially in Asian traditions. In the Western tradition, he notes this interaction in the idea of the two books of revelation, the written scriptures, and the natural world.³² The sense Berry tried to capture in the notion of the two codes was most profoundly present in the worldviews of ancient and contemporary aboriginal peoples.³³ In an article in *Cross Currents* (1974) entitled, Contemporary

30. Berry, *Evening Thoughts*, 34.

31. Cf. Berry, “Introduction,” *The Dream of the Earth*, vii-ix.

32. Interestingly we find reference to these two books in ecopoetic literature as well. See Rasula, *This Compost*, 1. Rasula references 17th c. doctor, Thomas Browne *Religio Medici*, para. 15.

33. Cf. John Grim, “Thomas Berry and Indigenous Thought: First Nations and Communion with the Natural World” in Eaton, *The Intellectual Journey*,

Spirituality: The Journey of the Human Community,” Berry writes: “A broader communion is needed.... The more intimate, the more universal this communion becomes, the more sublime the presence of the human, the cosmic and the divine realms to each other.”³⁴ In *Monastic Studies* in 1976, this view is linked to primal humans. He observes of primal times, “Mankind [sic] lived in an ocean of energy in which the physical and psychic forms of energy were intimately related.... This is a period when there was a dominance of the unconscious depths of the human psyche, when the great visions took place.”³⁵ Later in the same piece he writes: “There is a need to be tender with the earth, for the suffering of the earth is the suffering of the human, exploitation of the earth is exploitation of the human, elimination of the aesthetic splendors of the earth is the diminishment of the human.”³⁶ And in a much employed refrain: “If we lived on the moon, for example, our sense of the divine would reflect that of the lunar landscape.... Our sensitivities would be dull because our inner world would reflect the outer world.”³⁷

In many places throughout Berry’s writing, we find reference to this physical as well as cultural basis for human societies in general and for the human relationship to the rest of the natural world. Here is where I find a resonance with Romand Coles’ accounts of mirror neurons and their role in the creation of a *habitus* for a “radical democracy.”³⁸

In similar fashion to Berry, Coles is concerned with the dynamics of transformation of attitude and behavior. For Coles, we are constructed for our manner of living in the world by way of prac-

123-148.

34. Thomas Berry, “Contemporary Spirituality: The Journey of the Human Community” *Cross Currents* (Summer/Fall 1974), 179.

35. Thomas Berry, “The Dynamics of the Future: Reflections on the Earth Process,” *Monastic Studies 12* (Michaelmas 1976), 163.

36. *Ibid.*, 173.

37. Berry, *Befriending the Earth*, 9.

38. I am drawing on Romand Coles, “The Neuropolitical Habitus of Resonant Receptive Democracy” *Ethics in Global Politics* 4, 4 (2011), and on Stanley Hauerwas and Romand Coles, *Christianity, Democracy and The Radical Ordinary: Conversations between a Radical Democrat and a Christian* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2008).

tices. These practices become embodied through the interaction of the psycho-physical self and the culture into which one enters. Radical democracy is the proposal to combat the current stultifying effects of the practices of contemporary capitalist democracy. These sophisticated and targeted practices, according to Coles, result in a culture of indifference in relationship to the accommodation of the “other” in society.³⁹ Furthermore, such practices are focused on the production of ourselves as consumers of the capitalist culture. Consideration of these practices leads him to consider mirror neurons and the creation of *habitus*.⁴⁰ So what exactly are mirror neurons; what is new in the research; and in what sense do we mean *habitus*? Finally, how do mirror neurons and *habitus* relate to genetic and cultural coding for an Ecozoic era?

Mirror neurons are those primal neurons that seem to embody the pre-lingual access to learning, both in terms of time and precedence. Mirror neurons work in encounters. The simplest expression of the work of mirror neurons is the way infants imitate the smiles and frowns of those around them and give back their own versions. Neuroscientific research on mirror neurons has discovered their flexibility, agility and changeability. The neurons self-organize in the process of encounter and interaction as we engage with the world. So there is a circular process of influences between physical structures and cultural expressions. The expression of mirror neurons as self-organizing and social sounds a lot like Berry's notion of genetic and cultural coding.⁴¹

Coles relates this understanding of the neurons to the traditional concept of *habitus*. The word *habitus* received its first systematic treatment in the work of Thomas Aquinas following usage by Aristotle. *Habitus*, for Aquinas, refers to the “state of possessing or having (habere) an acquired, trained disposition to engage in certain modes of activity when encountering particular objects or situations. *Habitus* is that which grounds the disposition to act morally or to be

39. Coles, “The Neuropolitcal *Habitus*,” 274.

40. *Ibid.*, 275-276.

41. Cf. Berry, *The Dream of the Earth*, 92-93. See also, Grim, “Thomas Berry and Indigenous Thought,” *Intellectual Journey*, 146, n. 43.

a virtuous person.⁴² The nature of one's *habitus* relies on the training one receives relative to moral and religious life.

For most of its historical tradition, the term was used rather loosely in social sciences to refer to the process of adaptation. While it still includes adaptiveness, the work of Pierre Bourdieu expanded its meaning. According to Bourdieu, *habitus* includes not only the arbitrary conditions of the world in which one experiences reality, adapts to it, and so acts in accordance, but also the non-arbitrary conditions into which one is born. Bourdieu sees little room to negotiate those non-arbitrary conditions.⁴³ The recent work on mirror neurons, however, challenges his view of the non-arbitrary as essentially stable. This challenge based on scientific findings prompted Coles to consider how a new *habitus* for a different form of democracy might be created.⁴⁴

It is clear mirror neurons do operate in the creation of *habitus*, but they are now understood to create conditions more arbitrary than Bourdieu imagined in his account. The *habitus* is substantially formed by the interaction of our psycho-physical being and our experience in the world. The *habitus* can be addressed and substantially constructed by sophisticated techniques such as those that form us into the capitalist, consumer, political ideologues, we habitually become. The *habitus* can also be changed, however, through ordinary encounters, what Hauerwas and Coles have called the radical ordinary of everyday life.⁴⁵ Here is where transformative practices can occur.

So what does this insight of Coles have to do with Berry's conceptions of genetic and cultural coding? Berry does not actually explain how this interaction of genetic and cultural coding happens. He observes that the human is genetically coded for culture; so he understands a direct relationship between the physical genetic makeup of humans and the psycho-spiritual expression of that makeup in culture. He understands also the ways in which the

42. Omar Lizardo, *Habitus*, January 7, 2012, accessed June 18, 2014, <http://www3.nd.edu/~olizardo/papers/habitus-entry.pdf>.

43. Coles, "The Neuropolitical *Habitus*", 288-290.

44. *Ibid.*

45. Hauerwas and Coles, *Christianity, Democracy and the Radical Ordinary*, 4.

historical development of cultures and religion affect the attitudes and behaviors of humans in relationship to the natural world, for example. The quotation above with respect to the aesthetic expressions of Japanese religion is ample evidence of his attention to the particular way in which genetic and cultural coding interact in different cultures. Likewise, his scathing critiques of Western cultural developments and its effect on human relationship to the natural world speak to the understanding that this interaction of cultural and genetic coding is agile, flexible, and even volatile.⁴⁶ Always this interaction works in forming that psycho-spiritual consciousness, the profoundly embodied space (*habitus*) from which one's deepest attitudes and actions emerge.⁴⁷

As I mentioned previously, Coles relates his vision of radical democracy to the richness of the ordinary, the ordinary practices, ordinary encounters with "the other," ordinary relationships. What is ordinary of course—the unnoticed—is the crux of the matter. Here is where the practices of life take place for better and/or for worse. It is here in the ordinary that the manner of our engagement with the world is constructed. Here, day to day, the mirror neurons form and are formed; hence the radicality of the ordinary. For Berry, of course, the ordinary includes, or ought to include, engagement with the natural world—awareness of the air, the water, this particular tree, that squirrel, and so on. In all probability Berry's wandering into the meadow and observing the lilies stand in for a young life surrounded by such expressions of the natural world. The scene was habitual in a sense and practiced. Hence it opened into an ethical life.⁴⁸

Clearly, much more examination of the relationship of Coles' work to that of Berry is in order but beyond the limitations of this account. I can merely suggest briefly how Coles' account of the action of the mirror neurons in creating a *habitus* resonated with my

46. This critique occurs in many places throughout Berry's writings. Cf. versions in Anne Lonergan and Caroline Richards, eds., *Thomas Berry and the New Cosmology*, (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1990), 15-17; and "The New Story," in *Dream of the Earth*, 123-137.

47. See Dalton, *A Theology for the Earth*, 117-118 and 181-182.

48. Berry alludes to this interpretation in *The Great Work*, 13.

understanding of Berry's account of the inter-crossing of genetic and cultural coding. The interaction of these two codes (genetic coding and cultural coding) creates a *habitus* for how humans relate to the natural world. Furthermore, the agility and evolving nature of the mirror neurons as they converse with cultural experience suggest that a new *habitus* can be created. We can un-learn and re-learn at the genetically-based cellular level as we practice encountering the radical ordinary anew.

Berry's proposal of a New Story with all the accompanying layers of meaning belongs to this *habitus*. Coles suggests that for radical democracy there must be a re-engagement with the other through the cultivation of new democratic practices across and beyond dominant ideologies. So too for Ecozoic transformation, a new engagement through new practices of intimacy with the "others" in the natural world is required. Herein genetic and cultural coding converse and a fitting *habitus* is created. Berry calls up the force of an ecopoetic form—the story of the universe—to engender and deeply ground such practices. This is what the primal peoples did, according to Berry, and they practiced the story in rituals. They lived in the radical ordinary of relatively wild nature and gave it poetic expression in ritual, in language, in story. It required and still requires poetic expression because there is no other way to practice a conversation with the ordinary tree, lily, cricket, rock, grass, moon, or star. There is no better way to capture the mysterious and numinous evolving process of the universe but in the poetics of story. Here is the vision of an eco-democracy in which the entire universe, especially in its earthly aesthetic expression, must be engaged, en-voiced and practiced if we are to evoke the psychic strength needed to face the present ecological challenges. As Thomas Berry writes, commenting on a book of verse for children in 1996:

So now we write our own
verses, bringing
the child and the universe
into their mutual fulfillment.

While the stars ring out in
the heavens.⁴⁹

It is a Great Work indeed.

49. Thomas Berry, "It Takes a Universe" (commenting on a book of verse for children, November 1996), n.p.