

ADVANCING ECOLOGY AND CULTURE AS THE ORGANIZING PRINCIPLES OF SOCIETIES

By Herman Greene

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Easter Tide

Please pass this paper on for
somebody else to read, or
return to: Rev. Finley Schaeff
Park Slope Methodist, 410 6
AV., BROOKLYN 11215, tel 768-
3093. Very few copies available.

Thank you,

Finley

The Spirituality of the Earth

Thomas Berry

I first came into contact with Thomas Berry in 1982 when Finley Schaeff, who was my pastor at Park Slope (Brooklyn, New York) United Methodist Church, led a group study on Thomas's paper, "The Spirituality of the Earth." I still have my original copy of that paper. It changed my life.

When I read the paper, I was in a setting I never imagined I would be in—New York City in a Wall Street law firm practicing international tax law. I had graduated from law school at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 1979. I was 33 when I graduated and almost 34 when I moved with my wife and two sons to Brooklyn to begin this surprising and intimidating job.

I was born in Raleigh, North Carolina. Both my parents grew up on farms. My father was a professor of agricultural economics at North Carolina State University. When I was three years old, we moved to Gainesville, Florida, where my father joined the faculty of the University of Florida. I remained in Gainesville until I graduated from that university in 1966. The world of high finance, wealth, and the Northeast es-

tablishment seemed very far away when I grew up. “The world” seemed very far away when I grew up.

I was a good student and in two other life changing events, I was fortunate to be granted a Woodrow Wilson Fellowship and I was admitted to graduate school at Stanford University to undertake doctoral studies in political science. Though I had attended high school and college in Gainesville during the time of the civil rights movement and other significant historical events, I was little touched by issues of social justice or social activism. There must have been activities by the NAACP and social protest in Gainesville, but I was not aware of them. While I was at the University of Florida, it was a far cry from Berkeley.

Stanford was not Berkeley either, but it was still a far cry from where I had come from. I was in the San Francisco Bay Area in the '60s. David Harris was elected student body president, the New Left was ascending, the Vietnam war was raging, and the civil rights movement was in full swing. Decolonization was taking place around the world and there was “a tide of rising expectations.” I was brought into the issues of the day by my graduate studies and by the exceptional people in or connected to the campus ministry at Stanford—B. Davie Napier, Dean of the Chapel; Stuart Parsons, campus minister; Robert McAfee Brown, a professor of religion; and Michael Novak, who taught in the humanities program. I remember stirring sermons at the Stanford Chapel by Hans Küng and William Sloane Coffin. No longer sheltered, I was pummeled with questions I had never asked and issues I had never faced.

At Stanford I felt I met *the world*. I questioned the society in which I had grown up and its values. I came to see the Vietnam war as cruel and a grave error. Racial and economic justice in the United States and the conditions and uprisings in American cities brought anguish to me. The Vietnam war was especially troubling as I was an ROTC graduate, a Second Lieutenant in the US Army on deferment to attend graduate school. High school and college classmates of mine were dying in Vietnam.

I left Stanford after a year to attend the University of Chicago Divinity School. My academic studies of politics at Stanford were unsatisfying especially as increasing emphasis was placed on empirical studies and survey methodologies. It seemed to me we were being taught to be neutral observers of politics, not active participants in the issues we were studying. I went to Divinity School to study social ethics and to be engaged

in activism in the way I had seen the ministry staff at Stanford and other church leaders of the time be engaged.

I was also drawn to Chicago by a retreat I had attended in California led by the Ecumenical Institute (EI) of Chicago. The leaders of the retreat called on the church to live at the edge of history and bring justice. EI was located in an African-American inner city neighborhood on the westside of Chicago and they were involved in an urban renewal project called "Fifth City." I went to a summer program, "Summer '67," at EI prior to entering Divinity School and I ended up living and working at EI during my years of study at the University of Chicago. In the summer of 1967 urban riots broke out in the United States. Many activists were becoming militant. It was the time of black rage, black power, the Weather Underground, SNCC and Stokely Carmichael, and more. As I experienced it, all hell broke loose in 1968 following the death of Martin Luther King, Jr., on April 4. Riots, fires, and looting engulfed our neighborhood. Robert Kennedy was killed not long thereafter, and in August the fateful Democratic convention was held in Chicago. Protesters, National Guard troops, and police clashed. Armored personnel carriers patrolled our neighborhood and military helicopters flew overhead.

In all this, I continued my studies, not at all sheltered from the issues of the day.

All my studies at the Divinity School were rich. It was my finest educational experience. My teachers were brilliant, at the top of their fields. One course stood out for me. It was a year-long seminar on "Christian faith and Process Philosophy"—primarily the philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead. Whitehead called his philosophy a philosophy of organism, but it has become known as process philosophy because it prioritizes becoming over being. Everything is in a state of creative becoming. It has similarities with Buddhism, nothing is permanent and the new arises from nothingness (in Whitehead this nothingness is creativity, the ontological ultimate). The teleology of the universe is the production of beauty. Teilhard de Chardin, whom I also studied at Chicago, is considered a process thinker. He wrote of the universe moving to complexity-consciousness. I have combined Chardin and Whitehead by saying the teleology of the universe is toward complexity, consciousness, and richness of experience.

When the first Earth Day occurred on April 22, 1970, I was deeply involved in issues of social justice, conditions in American inner city

ies, and the Vietnam war. On that date, twenty million people in the United States poured out into the streets and one billion worldwide. Environmentalism was on the rise. Shortly thereafter the United States brought the Environmental Protection Agency into being and key environmental legislation was passed. Similar things happened in other countries and the United Nations started the United Nations Environmental Program and held the first global conference on the environment in Stockholm.

This all passed me by, just as the civil rights issues had passed me by when I was growing up in Gainesville. Earth Day seemed like a picnic to me. The good cheer of the gatherings in parks, the balloons flying in the air, and the giant Earth balls being tossed by the crowds . . . this was not at all like Chicago's inner city. The *real issues*, I thought, involved social justice. The environment would wait and was taking care of itself.

I remained with the Ecumenical Institute for five years after I completed my studies at the Divinity School. In 1975 I moved to North Carolina with the intention of going to law school. In 1976 I was admitted to the law school at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and in September of that year began a new program of study. We had our second child in 1977. Raising a young family, my studies in law school, my wife's studies in special education, and keeping afloat economically filled the years through my graduation and move to New York in 1979.

I do not know how my pastor in Brooklyn, Finley Schaefer, met Thomas Berry or learned of his work. I do know that Finley brought ecology into his sermons and as noted above introduced me to the writings of Thomas.

There were two sentences in the paper "The Spirituality of the Earth" that, when I read them, changed my life forever. The paper began as follows:

The subject we are concerned with is the Spirituality of Earth. By this I do not mean a spirituality directed toward an appreciation of Earth. *I speak of Earth as subject, not as object. I am concerned with the maternal principle out of which humans were born and whence they derive all that they are and all that they have* (emphasis added).

Contrary to what I was reading, I had always thought of Earth and nature as objects. Spirituality in relation to Earth had meant apprecia-

tion for the Earth, not communion with the spirituality of Earth. Still, my studies of process philosophy had prepared me for the understanding of Earth as a subject, for in Whitehead's thought every aspect of the universe has subjectivity.

Berry's paper continued, "Humans in their totality are born of Earth. We are Earthlings. Earth is our origin, our nourishment, our support, our guide. Our spirituality itself is Earth-derived. If there is no spirituality in Earth, then there is no spirituality in us. Humans are a dimension of Earth. These two are totally implicated each in the other." Intuitively, I knew at once that this was true. I was no longer on Earth, but rather was in Earth and inseparably bound to it as a generative physical-spiritual source.

After I read that paper, Finley preached a sermon in which he said, "World War III has already begun. It is the war of humans against the Earth."

Between Thomas's writing and Finley's preaching, I became a process human ecologist. Ecology moved from being a peripheral concern for me to being my primary concern and the overarching context for my social concerns. This conviction was further strengthened when Thomas Berry came to preach at my church two times, and I read additional copies of his Riverdale Papers.

While I underwent a profound shift in consciousness through my encounters with Thomas and his writings, at this time I was still not able to devote much time to anything but my family and my very demanding law practice. It was not until I had moved to Denver to practice with another large firm, gone through a painful divorce, been moved by this law firm back to New York City without my children, served in the Office of Public Responsibility of American Express Company, and returned to Raleigh, North Carolina, in 1992 that things changed.

When I arrived in Raleigh, I knew that Jim Berry, Thomas's brother, lived there. Jim had also preached a couple of times at the Methodist church I attended in Brooklyn. I wanted to meet with Jim, but I did not know how to get in touch with him. One day a friend told me she had been to a retreat that Jim had led. Through her I found out how to contact him. As I remember it, I wrote a long essay on my theological, social, and ecological concerns for my church, and I mailed it to Jim. After he read it, he called me or wrote me and invited me to come over. I did and as a result of my visit, he named me to the Board of his nonprofit,

which had the unusual name of the Center for Reflection on the Second Law—the law of entropy. He chose that name after the oil crisis of the late 1970s. He was influenced by a book Jeremy Rifkin written, perhaps in response to that crisis, on entropy, and more importantly by Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen's *The Entropy Law and the Economic Process*, a book many credit with starting the field of ecological economics. Jim's group held annual conferences, which I began to attend, and Thomas often attended the conferences either as a speaker or a guest.

On November 9, 1994, Thomas celebrated his 80th birthday. Attendant to becoming an octogenarian, he closed his Riverdale Center for Religious Studies in the Bronx and moved to Greensboro, North Carolina, where he had grown up. When I had returned to North Carolina I had not known that Thomas was from North Carolina. Later I found out that he was one of thirteen Berry children who were raised in North Carolina and he had a vast number of relatives in the area. Margaret Berry, his sister, once told me of a family reunion where more than 150 of the Berry relatives were present.

On New Year's Eve of 1994, I went to a party at Jim Berry's house. Thomas was there and I engaged him in conversation. I asked him if I could come visit him at his new home in Greensboro. His home, the "Hermitage," was a converted carriage house on his brother's property on the outskirts of Greensboro. It consisted of a simple living room, kitchen, study, and small bedroom, all on the second floor and only accessible by climbing a long flight of stairs. How I trembled when I first walked up those stairs in early 1995 to visit the Great Thomas Berry.

I was to have almost monthly visits with Thomas from that time on. My last visit was three days before he died. With Thomas's permission, I had invited Henry McKoy, founder of a firm that financed green businesses, to visit Thomas with me. While Thomas was surely compromised when we visited, he was totally present and wanted to know all about Henry.

Thomas died on June 1, 2009, and in September 2009, in time for Thomas's memorial service at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City, CES published *A Tribute to Thomas Berry*, which was composed of one hundred fifty-one tributes from followers of Thomas. Henry had not known Thomas or read his work before visiting with him, but he wanted his tribute to be in this volume. He titled his tribute "One Hour Changed My Life Forever," and it began as follows:

I have been alive for 319,740 hours (give or take a few hours) at the time I am writing this. That makes me 36-and-a-half years old for those who do not wish to do the math. Of those almost 320,000 hours, I only knew Thomas Berry for one. But in that single hour, my life was changed.

There were many stories in that Tribute to Thomas Berry issue (and also in this issue of the *Ecozoic Journal*) of people whose lives were similarly changed forever by Thomas. I do not know of anyone else who had the power to change lives more than Thomas Berry. He did not do it because he was famous or in a position of authority. He did it by taking an interest in people and identifying their unique gifts and speaking to them where they were. Thomas role was not to be a Messiah like Jesus, but Thomas helped me to understand the humble authority of Jesus who began his ministry in Galilee. There he saw Peter and his brother Andrew “cast their net into the sea—for they were fisherman. And he said to them ‘Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.’ Immediately they left their nets and followed him.” (Matthew 18-19, NRSV)

Thomas could do that too. He called people to the Great Work, the epic task of moving humanity from a devastating industrial mode of being to benign presence . . . and they changed their lives and started to work.

My changed life took the form of wanting to start an organization to promote Thomas Berry’s ideas. I took the first step in this by writing a letter to Thomas in 1996 about forming the “Berry Society.” I had been a member of the Jung Society in several cities, and I thought there should be such a society for Thomas. Thomas’s response was, “No. Not a good idea.” A few months later I proposed forming an organization called “The Ecozoic Society.” His feeling about this was the ecozoic society was something much larger than could be represented by any one organization. (This name has lived on, however, as I have heard many people call CES the ecozoic society even though we have not encouraged this or taken any formal steps to be recognized as such.) Next, working with Sue Tideman and Albert Hardy, I developed a handbook for “Building Support Groups for the Ecozoic Society.” We advertised this in *Earthlight Magazine* and received requests for copies and several support groups were formed. This effort continued for two years.

I continued to brood on an organization to advance Thomas’s thought

with emphases on his ideas on social reform and the Ecozoic era. On July 4, 1999, I outlined a plan for “The Center for the Ecozoic Era,” which was to fulfill the following tasks:

- To provide and influence education concerning the “Ecozoic Era” and how it may be realized through the “Great Work,” so that these terms and their meanings might become well established within the global lexicon;
- To enable the sharing of stories and dream experiences concerning the Ecozoic Era;
- To bring into being groups that would offer support for individuals, families, and communities in their transitions to ecozoic modes of being, understanding, and acting; and
- To provide networking opportunities for people who share a commitment to the realization of the Ecozoic Era.

In August 1999, I decided the name of the proposed organization should be the Center for Ecozoic Studies and I wrote a long essay setting forth “The Foundational Ideas of the Center for Ecozoic Studies,” which has been slightly revised and renamed “The Initial Ideas for the Center for Ecozoic Studies,” and still guides our work. On January 1, 2000, people gathered over a New Year’s Day dinner to officially begin this new organization. Thomas Berry was our featured speaker.

Since that time, CES has been at the center of my life and work. In the summer of 1999, Thomas gave me the unedited manuscript of *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future*. Over months I pondered the key ideas in the book and wrote a paper called “Thomas Berry’s Great Work.” It became the lead article in our first publication, *The Ecozoic Reader*, which we launched in Fall 2000. We subsequently published many issues of that and other periodicals. Hundreds of people in the Berry community have written for them and I had a hand in editing almost all of the articles we have published. Alice Loyd played a very important role over many years in CES. She was co-editor of most of our publications as well as the author of many articles.

Through my connection with the community of Whiteheadian scholars, I took the message of the ecozoic to China, Korea, Japan, India, England, Austria, Portugal, Brazil, and various places in the United States. I served as a consultant for Sr. Pat Siemen, OP, when she founded the Earth Jurisprudence Center at St. Thomas University Law School and Barry University Law School, both in Florida. Establishment of the

Rights of Nature was a prominent concern for Thomas toward the end of his life and he encouraged me to work in the reform of law. I was pleased when I was given the opportunity in the summer of 2018 to work on the first legal textbook on Earth Law. The book was published this year (2021) with the title *Earth Law: Emerging Ecocentric Law—A Practitioner’s Guide*. Tony Zelle, Grant Wilson, Rachele Adam, and I were the co-authors and co-editors of the book.

I have also done a lot of work in Christian faith and ecology through the churches in which I have been a member and in environmental philosophy through an international association of Whiteheadian scholars known as the International Process Network.

I am seventy-five at the time of this writing and CES has completed the first twenty years of its existence. I will lead CES for a while longer. I will, also, be an active volunteer for the Earth Law Center where I will continue to develop Earth law and be an active member of my faith community where I will continue to advance ecological theology and spirituality.

CES has entered a new phase and others are taking on leadership roles. I will probably take on more teaching roles to transmit the body of ideas we have developed over all of these years. In addition I will actively participate in a series of studies to develop ecozoic guides. We currently have an “Ecozoic Energy Study Group,” the members of which will work for a year on an “Ecozoic Guide to Climate Change and the Energy Transition.” We tentatively will follow this with similar year-long efforts to develop study guides for the biosphere, economics, governance, and culture.

Publications have been at the heart of the work of CES. We will move more into educational programming and formation of ecozoic conversation groups (not unlike the old support groups for the ecozoic society) and development of integral ecological practices.

My feeling about the Great Work is that it has become more urgent—CO₂ concentrations have just passed 420 parts per million and the door is closing on avoiding catastrophic climate change—and at the same time there are more signs of hope than ever before. People and nations have become aware of Earth as an integrated system and the perils we all face, and legions of people of every age, station, and walks of life are taking the steps needed to bring into being a time of mutually enhancing relations among humans and the larger community of life, in other words, the Ecozoic era.

I see this as moving from societies where the most important decisions are made on the basis of economics and industrial development to societies where ecology (the flourishing of Earth's life) and culture (full human development) are keys. Hence, the mission of CES and my mission is to advance ecology and culture as the organizing principles of societies.

Thomas Berry's influence is greater than ever because of the influence he has had on so many people. He changed their lives forever. I am more and more amazed that Thomas's writings never become old. New developments only show his prescience. He continues to inform, guide, inspire, and comfort. His legacy lives: It lives through me and through many others whose lives were changed by him. And it will live through those who today meet or later will meet him through his work and find that their lives have been changed forever.