

Thomas Berry's and Brian Swimme's Vision of the Ecozoic Era

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As described in Allysyn Kiplinger's essay in this issue, the term "Ecozoic era" was coined by Thomas Berry and was first expressed by Thomas in his lecture, "The Ecozoic Era," presented to the Schumacher Society in 1992.¹ It was next developed as the last chapter, titled "The Ecozoic Era," by Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry in their book, *The Universe Story*.² So in considering "What Is Ecozoic?" we would do well to pay attention to the initial presentations of this concept. The central message of both is that we humans have arrived at a critical moment in Earth's history and if we are to have a viable future, we must move into the Ecozoic era.

Below are excerpts from these two sources.

The Ecozoic Era: Eleventh Annual E. F. Schumacher Lecture by, Thomas Berry (1991)

The changes presently taking place in human and earthly affairs are beyond any parallel with historical change or cultural modification as these have occurred in the past. This is not like the transition from the classical period to the medieval period or from the medieval to the modern period. These changes reach far beyond the civilizational process, beyond even the human process, into the biosystems and even the geological structures of the Earth itself.

There are only two other moments in the history of this planet that offer us some sense of what is happening. These two moments are the

1. Thomas Berry, "The Ecozoic Era," Eleventh Annual E. F. Schumacher Lecture, October 1991, Great Barrington, Massachusetts, ed. Hildegarde Hannum, 1991. This lecture may be purchased in pamphlet form from the New Economics Institute 140 Jug End Road, Great Barrington, MA 01230 USA (413) 528-1737. You may obtain a copy of this lecture and listen to the audio recording of the original lecture here:

<http://neweconomy.net/publications/lectures/berry/thomas/the-ecozoic-era>

2. Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry, *The Universe Story: From the Primordial Flaring Forth to the Ecozoic Era* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992).

end of the Paleozoic era 220 million years ago, when some 90 percent of all species living at that time were extinguished, and the terminal phase of the Mesozoic era sixty-five million years ago, when there was also very extensive extinction.

Then, in the emerging Cenozoic era the story of life on this planet flowed over into what could be called the lyric period of Earth history. The trees had come before this, the mammals already existed in a rudimentary form, the flowers had appeared perhaps thirty million years earlier. But in the Cenozoic era, there was wave upon wave of life development, with the flowers, the birds, the trees, and the mammalian species particularly all leading to that luxuriant display of life upon Earth such as we have known it.

[Then we humans came.] We have thought our achievements to be of enormous benefit for the human process, but we now find that by disturbing the biosystems of the planet at the most basic level of their functioning we have endangered all that makes the planet Earth a suitable place for the integral development of human life itself.

Our problems are primarily problems of macrophase biology. Macrophase biology, the integral functioning of the entire complex of biosystems of the planet, is something biologists have given almost no attention....

Macrophase biology is concerned with five basic spheres: land, water, air, life—and how these interact with one another to enable the planet Earth to be what it is—and a very powerful sphere: the human mind....

It is also clear that the human mode of consciousness is capable of unique intrusion into the larger functioning of the planetary life systems. So powerful is this intrusion that the human has established an additional sphere that might be referred to as a technosphere, a way of controlling the functioning of the planet for the benefit of the human at the expense of the other modes of being. We might even consider that the technosphere in its subservience to industrial-commercial uses has become incompatible with the other spheres that constitute the basic functional context of the planet.

The biggest single question before us is the extent to which this technological-industrial-commercial context of human functioning can be made compatible with the integral functioning of the other



life systems of the planet. We are reluctant to think of our activities as inherently incompatible with the integral functioning of the various components of the planetary systems. It is not simply a matter of altering our ways of acting on a minor scale by recycling (which presupposes a cycling that is devastating in its original form), by mitigating pollution, reducing our energy consumption, limiting our use of the automobile, or by fewer development projects. Our efforts will be in vain if our purpose is to make the present industrial system acceptable. These steps must be taken, but according to my definition of the Ecozoic era there must be more: there must also be a new era in human-Earth relations....

Nature has its own technologies. The entire hydrological cycle can even be regarded as a huge engineering project, a project vastly greater than anything humans could devise with such beneficent consequences throughout the life systems of the planet. We can differentiate between an acceptable human technology and an unacceptable human technology quite simply: an acceptable one is compatible with the integral functioning of the technologies governing the natural systems; an unacceptable one is incompatible with the technologies of the natural world.

The error has been to think that we could distort the natural processes for some immediate human benefit without incurring immense penalties, penalties that might eventually endanger the well-being of the human as well as that of most other life forms. This is what has happened in the twentieth-century petroleum economy we have developed....

In evaluating our present situation I submit that we have already terminated the Cenozoic era of the geo-biological systems of the planet. Sixty-five million years of life development are terminated. Extinction is taking place throughout the life systems on a scale unequalled since the terminal phase of the Mesozoic era.

A renewal of life in some creative context requires that a new biological period come into being, a period when humans would dwell upon the Earth in a mutually enhancing manner. This new mode of being of the planet I describe as the Ecozoic era, the fourth in the succession of life eras thus far identified as the Paleozoic, the Mesozoic, and the Cenozoic. But when we propose that an Ecozoic era is suc-

ceeding the Cenozoic, we must define the unique character of this emergent era.

I suggest the name “Ecozoic” as a better designation than “Ecological.” Eco-logos refers to an understanding of the interaction of things. Eco-zoic is a more biological term that can be used to indicate the integral functioning of life systems in their mutually enhancing relations.

The Ecozoic era can be brought into being only by the integral life community itself. If other periods have been designated by such names as “Reptilian” or “Mammalian,” this Ecozoic period must be identified as the Era of the Integral Life Community. For this to emerge there are special conditions required on the part of the human, for although this era cannot be an anthropocentric life period, it can come into being only under certain conditions that dominantly concern human understanding, choice, and action.

When we consider the conditions required of humans for the emergence of such an Ecozoic era in Earth history, we might list these as follows:

The first condition is to understand that the universe is a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects. Every being has its own inner form, its own spontaneity, its own voice, its ability to declare itself and to be present to other components of the universe in a subject-to-subject relationship.

The second condition for entering the Ecozoic era is a realization that the Earth exists, and can survive, only in its integral functioning. It cannot survive in fragments any more than any organism can survive in fragments. Yet the earth is not a global sameness. It is a differentiated unity and must be sustained in the integrity and interrelations of its many bioregional contexts. This inner coherence of natural systems requires an immediacy of any human settlement with the life dynamics of the region. Within this region the human right to habitat must respect the right to habitat possessed by the other members of the life community. Only the full complex of life expression can sustain the vigor of any bioregion.

A third condition for entering the Ecozoic era is recognition that the Earth is a one-time endowment. We do not know the quantum of energy contained in the Earth, its possibilities or its limitations. We must

reasonably suppose that the Earth is subject to irreversible damage in the major patterns of its functioning and even to distortions in its possibilities of development. Although there was survival and further development after the great extinctions at the end of the Paleozoic and the Mesozoic eras, life was not so highly developed as it is now. Nor were the very conditions of life at those times negated by such changes as we have wrought through our toxification of the planet.

Life on Earth will surely survive the present decline of the Cenozoic, but we do not know at what level of its development. The single-cell life forms, the insects, the rodents, the plants, and a host of other forms of life found throughout the planet—these will surely survive. But the severity of the damage to the rain forests, to the fertility of the soils, to species diversity, and to the chances for survival of the more developed animals, the consequences throughout the animal world of the diminishment of the ozone shield, the extension of deserts, the pollution of the great freshwater lakes, the chemical imbalance of the atmosphere—all are signs of disturbance on a scale that might make restoration to their earlier grandeur impossible, certainly within any time frame that is conceivable to human modes of thinking or planning. Almost certainly we have witnessed in these past centuries a grand climax in the florescence of the Earth.

A fourth condition for entering the Ecozoic era is a realization that the Earth is primary and humans are derivative. The present distorted view is that humans are primary and the Earth and its integral functioning only a secondary consideration—thus the pathology manifest in our various human institutions. The only acceptable way for humans to function effectively is by giving first consideration to the Earth community and then dealing with humans as integral members of that community. The Earth must become the primary concern of every human institution, profession, program, and activity, including economics....

A fifth condition for the rise of the Ecozoic era is to realize that there is a single Earth community. There is no such thing as a human community in any manner separate from the Earth community. The human community and the natural world will go into the future as a single integral community or we will both experience disaster on the way. However differentiated in its modes of expression, there is only

one Earth community—one economic order, one health system, one moral order, one world of the sacred.

As I present this outline of an emerging Ecozoic era, I am quite aware that such a conception of the future, when humans would be present to the Earth in a mutually enhancing manner, is mythic in its form, just as such conceptions as the Paleozoic, Mesozoic, and Cenozoic are mythic modes of understanding a continuing process, even though this continuing process is marked by an indefinite number of discontinuities amid the continuity of the process itself.

My effort here is to articulate the outlines of a new mythic form that would evoke a creative entrancement to succeed the destructive entrancement that has taken possession of the Western soul in recent centuries. We can counter one entrancement only with another, a counter-entrancement. Only thus can we evoke the vision as well as the psychic energies needed to enable the Earth community to enter successfully upon its next great creative phase. The grandeur of the possibilities ahead of us must in some manner be experienced in anticipation. Otherwise we will not have the psychic energy to endure the pain of the required transformation.

Once we are sufficiently clear as to where we are headed and once we experience the urgency and the adventure of what we are about, we can get on with our historic task. We can accept and even ignore the difficulties to be resolved and the pain to be endured, for we are involved in a great work. In creating such a great work, the incidentals fall away. We can accept the pathos of our times, the sorrow that we will necessarily go through. We can, I think, assist the next generation as they take up this creative effort, mainly by indicating just where they can receive their instructions. It is the role of elders at the present time to assist them in fulfilling their role in this moment of transformation. We have a lot of older people but few elders....

I hope we will be able to guide and inspire our next generation as they attempt to shape the future. Otherwise they will simply survive with all their resentments amid the destroyed infrastructures of the industrial world and amid the ruins of the natural world itself. The challenge itself is already predetermined. There is no way for the new generation to escape this confrontation. The task to which they are called and the destiny that is before them are, however, not simply

theirs alone. The human is linked to every Earthly being, to the entire planet. The whole universe is involved. The successful emergence of the Ecozoic era can presently be considered the great creative task of the universe itself.

This destiny can be understood, however, only in the context of the Great Story of the universe. All peoples derive their understanding of themselves from their account of how the universe originally came into being, how it came to be as it is, and the role of the human in the story. We in our Euro-American traditions have in recent centuries, through our observational studies, created a new story of the universe. The difficulty is that this story was presented in the context of the mechanistic way of thinking about the world and so has been devoid of meaning. Supposedly, everything has happened in a random, meaningless process....

No one ever before could tell in such lyric language as we can now the story of the primordial flaring forth of the universe at the beginning, the shaping of the immense number of stars gathered into galaxies, the collapse of the first generation of stars to create the ninety-some elements, the gravitational gathering of scattered stardust into our solar system with its nine planets, the formation of the Earth with its seas and atmosphere and the continents crashing and rifting as they move over the asthenosphere, and the awakening of life.

Such a marvel is this fifteen billion year process; such infinite numbers of stars in the heavens and living beings on Earth, such limitless variety of flowering species and forms of animal life, such tropical luxuriance, such magnificent scenery in the mountains, and such springtime wonders as occur each year. Now we are experiencing the pathos of witnessing the desecration of this sublimity.

We now need to tell this story, meditate on it, and listen to it as it is told by every breeze that blows, by every cloud in the sky, by every mountain and river and woodland, and by the song of every cricket. We have lost contact with our story. Yet we can come together, all the peoples of Earth and all the various members of the great Earth community, only in this Great Story, the story of the universe. For there is no human community without the human community story, no Earth community without the Earth story, and no universe community without the universe story. These three constitute the Great

Story. Without it the various forces of the planet become mutually destructive rather than mutually coherent.

We need to listen to one another's way of telling the Great Story. But first we in the West, with our newly developed capacity to observe the universe through our vast telescopes and to hear its sounds as these come to us from the beginning of time and over some billions of years, need really to listen as our own special way of understanding and participating in the Great Story.

Earlier I mentioned five conditions for the integral emergence of the Ecozoic era. Here I would continue with a sixth condition: that we understand fully and respond effectively to our own human role in this new era. For while the Cenozoic era unfolded in its full splendor entirely apart from any role fulfilled by the human, almost nothing of major significance is likely to happen in the Ecozoic era that humans will not be involved in. The entire pattern of Earth's functioning is being altered in this transition from the Cenozoic to the Ecozoic. We did not even exist until the major developments of the Cenozoic were complete. In the Ecozoic, however, the human will have a pervasive influence on almost everything that happens. We are approaching a critical watershed in the entire modality of Earth's functioning. Our positive power of creativity in the natural life systems is minimal; our power of negating is immense. Whereas we cannot make a blade of grass, there is liable not to be a blade of grass unless it is accepted, fostered, and protected by the human. Protected mainly from ourselves so that the Earth can function from within its own dynamism.

There is, finally, the question of language. A new language, an Ecozoic language, is needed. Our late Cenozoic language is radically inadequate. The human mode of being is captured and destroyed by our present univalent, scientific, literal, unimaginative language. We need a multivalent language, one much richer in the symbolic meanings that language carried in its earlier forms when the human lived deep within the natural world and the entire range of Earth phenomena. As we recover this early experience in the emerging Ecozoic era, all the archetypes of the collective unconscious will attain a new validity as well as new patterns of functioning, especially in our understanding of the death-rebirth symbol and the symbols of the heroic journey, the Great Mother, the tree of life.

Every reality in the natural world is multivalent. Nothing is univalent. Everything has a multitude of aspects and meanings, the way sunlight carries within itself warmth and light and energy. Sunlight is not a single thing. It awakens the multitude of living forms in the springtime; it awakens poetry in the soul and evokes a sense of the divine. It is mercy and healing, affliction and death. Sunlight is irreducible to any scientific equation or any literal description.

But all these meanings are based on the physical experience of sunlight. If we were deprived of sunlight, the entire visible world would be lost to us and eventually immense realms of consciousness and all of life. We would be retarded in our inner development in proportion to our deprivation of the experience of natural phenomena, of mountains and rivers and forests and seacoasts and all their living inhabitants. The natural world itself is our primary language as it is our primary scripture, our primary awakening to the mysteries of existence. We might well put all our written scriptures on the shelf for twenty years until we learn what we are being told by unmediated experience of the world about us.

So too we might put Webster on the shelf until we revise the language of all our professions, especially law, medicine, and education. In ethics we need new words such as biocide and geocide, words that have not yet been adopted into the language. In law we need to define society in terms that include the larger community of living beings of the bioregion, of the Earth, and even of the universe. Certainly human society separated from such contexts is an abstraction. Life, liberty, habitat, and the pursuit of happiness are rights that should be granted to every living creature, each in accord with its own mode of being.

I might conclude with a reference to the Exodus symbol, which has exercised such great power over our Western civilization. Many peoples came to this country believing they were leaving a land of oppression and going to a land of liberation. We have always had a sense of transition. Progress supposedly is taking us from an undesirable situation to a kind of beatitude. So we might think of the transition from the terminal Cenozoic to the emerging Ecozoic as a kind of Exodus out of a period when humans are devastating the planet to a period when humans will begin to live on the Earth in a mutually enhancing manner.

There is a vast difference, however, in the case of this present transition, which is one not simply of the human but of the entire planet—its land, its air, its water, its biosystems, its human communities. This Exodus is a journey of the Earth entire. It is my hope that we will make the transition successfully. Whatever the future holds for us, however, it will be an experience shared by humans and every other earthly being. There is only one community, one destiny.

The Ecozoic Era: Final Chapter of *The Universe Story*, by Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry (1992)

The terminal phase of the Cenozoic was caused by a distorted aspect of the myth of progress.... Progress has been measured, not by the integral functioning and florescence of the Earth community, but by the extent of human control over the nonhuman world and the apparent benefits that emerged for humans. (241)

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This term progress is itself something of a parody of the inner dynamics of the universe.... That the uni-verse, in the diversity and abundance of its expression, has been so successful over vast periods of time is a wonder that we only now begin to appreciate. (242)

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Presently we seek to remedy the devastation of the planet by entry into a new period of creativity participated in by the entire Earth community. This new period we identify as the Ecozoic era, a fourth biological era to succeed the...Cenozoic. (242-43)

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That the universe is a communion of subjects rather than a collection of objects is the central commitment of the Ecozoic. Existence itself is derived from and sustained by this intimacy of each being with every other being of the universe. (243)

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Because of [its] organic quality, Earth cannot survive in fragments.... The integral functioning of the planet must be preserved.

To preserve the economic viability of the planet must be the first law of economics.

To preserve the health of the planet must be the first commitment of the medical profession.

To preserve the natural world as the primary revelation of the divine must be the basic concern of religion.

The well-being of the Earth is primary. Human well-being is derivative. (243)

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Without reciprocity the Earth could not survive. Failure to understand this is one of the reasons for the devastation of the late Cenozoic Era by its human component. (244)

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In the early civilizations the cosmological order was consistently experienced in terms of human society, and human social order was conceived in terms of the cosmological order.... When we propose that the future might be designated as the Ecozoic Era we have in mind the restoration, in a new context, of this primordial mode of human awareness. (245)

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It has been difficult for humans to appreciate that the planet is given to us as a one-time endowment. Although the Earth is resilient and has extensive powers of renewal, it also has a finite and a non-renewable aspect. (247)

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It is already clear that in the future the Earth will function differently than it has functioned in the past. In the future the entire complex of life systems of the planet will be influenced by the human in a comprehensive manner. (247)

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Only a comprehensive commitment to the Ecozoic can effectively counter the mystical commitment of our present commercial-industrial establishments to the Technozoic. There is a special need in this transitional phase out of the Cenozoic to awaken a consciousness of the sacred dimension of the Earth. (250)

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The immediate goal of the Ecozoic is not simply to diminish the devastation of the planet that is taking place at present. It is rather to alter the mode of consciousness that is responsible for such deadly activities. (251)

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The basic obligation of any historical moment is to continue the integrity of that creative process whence the universe derives, sustains itself, and continues its sequence of transformations. (251)

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The tendency to minimize the difficulties before us is the greatest obstruction to the radical change in human consciousness, a change at the order of magnitude required for entry in to the creative phase of the Ecozoic. This change requires something of a different order but equivalent to a new religious tradition. Our sense of the universe is itself a type of revelatory experience. Presently we are moving beyond any religious expression so far known to the human into a meta-

religious age, that seems to be a new comprehensive context for all religions. (255)

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The Ecozoic era requires a comprehensive human consensus. It needs such support for its planetwide programs. The entire planet would then be considered as a commons. (255)

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Religion begins to appreciate that the primary sacred community is the universe itself. In a more immediate perspective, the sacred community is the Earth community. The human community becomes sacred through its participation in the larger planetary community. (257)

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Beyond all this and in a sense more encompassing than any of these is the role of women in the future. The need presently is recognition of women in their capacity to interpret the human venture at its most basic level in the context of the universe and the planet Earth. (257)

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Our Cenozoic dictionary cannot deal adequately with the realities of existence in this new period. We need an Ecozoic dictionary. (258)

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Humans are becoming much more sensitive to the nonhuman languages of the surrounding world. We are learning the mountain language, river language, tree language, the languages of the birds and all the animals and insects, as well as the languages of the stars in the heavens. (258)

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What we seldom think about is the human as species. We will never come to appreciate the full significance of human adjustment in this new biological era until we begin to think of the human as a species among species.... Until we begin to think about our human story as integral with the larger life story and the larger Earth story we will not be fully into the Ecozoic period. (259-60)

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What the Ecozoic era seeks ultimately is to bring the human activities on the Earth into alignment with the other forces functioning throughout the planet so that a creative balance will be achieved. When the curvature of the universe, the curvature of the Earth, and the curvature of the human are once more in their proper relation, then Earth will have arrived at the celebratory experience that is the fulfillment of earthly existence. (261)