

From Demonic Dream toward a New Story: Reflection on Thomas Berry's Instructions for Reorienting the Human Project

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What specific instructions does Thomas Berry offer for reinventing the four core institutions governing human affairs for “the emerging Ecozoic era?” To answer this question, a closer reading of his three most influential works—*The Dream of the Earth*,¹ *The Universe Story*,² and *The Great Work*³—is required. The theme that emerges is this: in spite of how radical a shift Thomas seems to be urging our species to undertake, at least when it comes to the structures of organized religion, government and the university, his instructions suggest more of an evolution than a revolution. He says quite clearly that existing institutions can be retooled; they need not be done away with in order to start over from scratch. The only one of the core institutions for which he suggests a more fundamental reshaping is corporations—since in their present form they are the chief plunderers of the planet and the chief progenitors of our entrancement with what he calls a “distorted dream.”⁴

I came to know Thomas thanks to my father, who, after moving to Greensboro, North Carolina in 1986, became involved in environmental issues. He was part of the successful push to start the city's municipal recycling program in the early 1990s and worked to fight sprawl-inducing highway and water projects.

My father was invited to connect with Thomas, and when he did,

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1. Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth* (San Francisco, CA: Sierra Club Books, 1988).
 2. Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry, *The Universe Story: From the Primordial Flaring Forth to the Ecozoic Era—A Celebration of the Unfolding of the Cosmos* (San Francisco, CA: Harper-Collins, 1994), 209.
 3. Thomas Berry, *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future* (New York: Bell Tower, 1999), 201.
 4. *Ibid.*, 201.

he brought me along for what became regular monthly lunchtime visits. Eventually, Thomas came to serve as a personal professor and learning guide, giving me broad reading assignments and, as he could do like nobody else, offering me an encompassing context in which to view what I was learning in history, literature and science.

I was moved by the depth of his analysis and of his spiritual sense of the unity of all things. I continued to join him for lunch on a regular basis right up until his death in 2009, which happened just after I moved to Washington, DC. I returned to Greensboro to give a eulogy at his funeral.

The word “context” best encapsulates the core of what Thomas sought to convey to his students and his audiences. To virtually any question asked of Thomas, his answer would draw on lessons from history, science, or world religions. His critique of the dominant modern notion of human progress was based in these vast intellectual repositories.

Cultural Coding and the Demonic Dream

The root of modern society’s ills is its disconnect from the context in which our species evolved and through which we find meaning in our lives. The trajectory of human thought away from being grounded in the natural world was cemented following the Bubonic Plague in 13th-century Europe. Thomas repeatedly emphasized just what a cataclysmic historical event the Plague was. It instilled in Westerners a “hidden rage against those inner as well as outer forces that create limits on our activities,” driving Western civilization to seek a new foundational mythology.⁵

In *The Universe Story*, Thomas cites Disney World as the living embodiment of this perverted ideal: “a nonthreatening world of fabricated imitations, or caricatures of the universe and all its living manifestations” and “an artificial world where nothing is left of the original spontaneities of nature.”⁶ Thomas calls this entrancing myth “as pure a superstition as was ever professed by humans.”⁷ This

5. Ibid., 67.

6. Swimme and Berry, 209.

7. Berry, *Dream of the Earth*, 41.

myth of linear “progress” that drives Western civilization thrives by disguising itself as something inevitable, as rational behavior, as the only way to satisfy everyone’s needs and desires with no real alternative, and even as a sacred task.

“We thought we were elevating the human,” Thomas declares, “when in reality we were alienating ourselves from the only context in which human life has any satisfying meaning.”⁸

Perhaps a way to begin to chip away at the techno-industrial mythology is by exposing and ridiculing its absurdities. Maybe a century or two from now, when children are told that people used to think they were on a separate plain from the rest of creation, they’ll laugh and say “that’s ridiculous.” One example of such an attempt to illustrate the true nature of the present industrial economy is the Story of Stuff Project (www.storyofstuff.org). This video explains the process feeding consumer culture and the waste it creates in a way that clarifies its absurdity.

Casual observers tend to glom most “radical” strains of thought on ecological matters as wanting humans to be treated not as a unique beings, but as just one of many animals sharing Earth. Thomas’s philosophy, however, does set humans apart as the beings in which the universe reflects upon itself.⁹ The uniqueness of humans comes from our capacity to reflect on, exalt, and serve as stewards and protectors of the Earth community. Instead of being uniquely apart from the rest of the living world, we are uniquely a part of it. We have a special role within the living world.

Thomas also diverges from mainstream science by reading into the pattern of Earth and life’s evolution a purposeful creative force seeking greater diversity, complexity and the individuality of each being, while binding it all together in communion. The particular creative tension between forces within the universe drives its quest to enrich and better know itself through greater complexity. The universe, according to Thomas, is not simply a static cosmos, but also a

8. *Ibid.*, 115.

9. *Ibid.*, 56: “Here, in this human mode, the universe reflects on and celebrates itself in a unique mode of conscious self-awareness.”

dynamic, evolving cosmogenesis¹⁰; and it is creative.¹¹

As beings grow, multiply, and come into contact with one another, they tend to express a multitude of separate identities (differentiation), act upon their own inner guidance and express self-organizing dynamics (subjectivity), and form enduring relationships with all other beings with which they interact, interactions that shape their form and function (communion).¹² In lectures, Thomas would illustrate how important communion is to life by pointing out that nearly all people, and many animals, would consider it torture to be confined in a position where they are unable to interact with anyone or anything.

Unlike other animals, humans don't receive all the instructions we need for a fulfilling life from our genes. Instead, to figure out how to be human, we rely on the handed-down learning that takes place during childhood, which is quite prolonged in humans compared to other animals. Thomas calls this process "cultural coding,"¹³ and says it shapes us just as much as the coding in our DNA. To reincorporate the ongoing leadings of the universe into our cultural coding, we need to learn to be humble and filled with gratitude towards the forces and web of life that sustains us, and we also need to learn to better recognize and respond to our inner spontaneities.

Thomas defines "cosmology" as the framework in which we understand our relationship to the universe—a framework that prescribes the proper roles of science and religion within it.¹⁴ As Thomas said to me many times, "science cannot tell us how to use science;" science and organized religion become destructively self-important in the absence of a guiding cosmology.

We draw our inspiration from the wild and untamed, which is the wellspring of creativity. The key to reorienting our guiding mythology is to incorporate a sense of the sacred dimensions of the natural world into our cultural coding, thereby establishing a "functional

10. Swimme and Berry, 67.

11. *Ibid.*, 52-56

12. Berry, *The Great Work*, 159-164.

13. *Ibid.*, 91.

14. Thomas Berry, *Evening Thoughts: Reflecting on Earth as Sacred Community*, ed. Mary Evelyn Tucker (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 2006), 96.

cosmology.”

One of Thomas’s pithiest sayings, which he often repeated in talks towards the end of his life, is “the churches are too pious; the corporations are too greedy; the government is too subservient to the corporations; and the universities should know better.”¹⁵ His sense of the needed functional cosmology leads him to a few conclusions about how to rebuild the foundations of these four institutions, but he leaves it to us and future generations to figure out the rest.

Reforming Religious Institutions

The church’s liturgy was once based on celebrating God as revealed through seasonal acts of creation and renewal. In a short timespan following the bubonic plague of the 14th century, however, Christian liturgy began to center on the historical life of Jesus, and the church’s core teaching turned to redemption theology: the idea that our home is not in this world, but rather in a heaven reached through a personal relationship with a divine savior who came to Earth in human form to lead us home. With this transformation, the natural world became a mere backdrop for religious life, rather than a focal point that revealed God’s continued presence on Earth.

“Emphasis on the verbal revelation to neglect the manifestation of the divine in the natural world,” Thomas admonishes in *The Great Work*, “is to mistake the entire revelatory process.” The church has erred in emphasizing “redemption processes to the neglect of creation processes.”¹⁶

Reorienting the established religions so that they attend to the divine omnipresence in the cosmos around us requires a return to rituals that tie our lives to nature’s processes. It also entails adopting the Universe Story as a guiding mythos for all religions. Thomas says we must observe the spiritual aspect of all beings, regard other

15. A variation of this appeared in *ibid.*, 79-80, where Thomas expresses the view that the universities should lead the way: “Here I propose the religions are too pious, the corporations too plundering, the government too subservient to provide adequate remedy. The universities, however, should have the insight and the freedom to provide the guidance needed by the human community.”

16. Berry, *The Great Work*, 75.

animals as relatives, and regard the universe itself—rather than an anthropomorphic deity—as that which judges us. But Thomas fails to fully address all the challenges such shifts would encounter, hurdles that include credence in the Universe Story and recognition of our kinship with all life—the developmental processes of the cosmos and the chain of human evolution. There are many other possible cultural consequences relative to not taking scriptures literally. Convincing religious fundamentalists to accept what science has revealed about how everything came to be, and convincing scientists to consider the spiritual aspect of the universe, will both be daunting tasks that will take many generations.

Thomas also fails to consider how atheists, agnostics and humanists are to be “brought into the fold” to work in concert with people of faith on the tremendous species-wide project of detoxifying ourselves from the demonic dream and laying a foundation for the Ecozoic era. There are many who disavow the existence of a spiritual realm, acknowledging the existence only of matter and mind, who nevertheless are hard-core ecologists and realize the dangers inherent in the Western industrialist mindset. Somehow they will need to be made part of the Ecozoic project, in spite of not subscribing to the spiritual aspects of the work.

Rights vs. Commons

Thomas argues that the supreme fallacy in the principles on which most modern nation-states are founded is that nonhumans are excluded from enjoying rights, thus giving humans the absolute right to do what they want with nonhumans, treating them as property and resources to be used to human ends. This is ultimately self-destructive, he maintains, as it is the community of living and nonliving beings that gives us physical, psychic and spiritual sustenance. Thomas's two key instructions for reforming government are to grant legal rights to all beings and to remove the legal frameworks, such as corporate personhood, that make government subservient to industrial corporations.¹⁷

17. *Ibid.*, 74 (legal rights for nonhumans), and 216 (the legal power of corporations).

There seems to be a tension between these two ideas that Thomas holds: first, that all of Earth's components are a commons to be shared by all Earthlings according to need, and second, that inviolable individual rights are to be accorded to all human and nonhuman beings, both individually and collectively.¹⁸ Is a river, for example, both part of the commons and a being with rights? Are there cases when an individual's rights must be violated in order to preserve or improve the community's well-being? Is it possible to truly respect the rights of all individuals?

Thomas seems to subscribe to a more relativist notion of rights, rather than an absolutist one. But the idea of other beings having rights presupposes that we humans should conduct ourselves based on the proposition that other beings have inherent value based on the reality of their existence and expression of themselves, instead of acting out of a sense of kindness or moral obligation on our part, or acting in our species' broader self-interest. In other words, other beings have value independent of human judgment, determined simply by their existence. But nature's balance seems to require the sacrifice of certain rights for the good of others or of the community. So this value is not absolute. For example, all animals must kill—either plants or other animals—to have food. This denies their prey the right to be.

Thus, I posit that Thomas would err on the side of the integrity of a community, of an ecosystem, or of a species taking precedence over the absolute right of each member of the community, ecosystem or species to live, to have a suitable place to live, and to fulfill the role assigned by the niche it has made in the community.

Thomas himself had no qualms about eating meat. He is more concerned with human actions that impair or negate other beings' ability to function in a more permanent or substantial manner, such as poisoning them or their surroundings, than the act of a human killing an animal to eat. Therefore, he would probably say that humans do not meaningfully violate the rights of other animals by killing them for sustenance, as long as humans take simply what they need for food, clothing, or shelter in a way that doesn't disturb species survival or an ecosystem's ability to renew itself and con-

18. *Ibid.*, 62 (sharing of property), and 161 (inviolable rights).

tinue to function and flourish. Thomas's notion of rights is more cosmological, whereas most modern rights theories are tied to the individual, with the degree of an individual's rights being based on the degree to which the individual is capable of suffering or of experiencing harm done to it.

Viewing rights in a cosmological sense seems to imply viewing them through a more relativistic lens. The modern notion of rights, being inherently tied to the individual, leads to arguments that the greater good is served by denying an individual something that is considered to be a right. Thomas insists, "The Great Commons of the planet Earth" should be "shared in proportion to need among all members of the Earth community."¹⁹ For this to work in a way that maintains ecological balance, it is obvious that some redefinition of human needs will be required. People who are accustomed to all the modern conveniences have trouble conceiving of life without them; thus these "creature comforts" tend to rise to the level of need rather than simply desire. Those working to attract more people to be a part of the Ecozoic transition must be careful to present it as providing a richer and more meaningful life; they must convince people that the fulfillment we think we get from the consumption of resources for our Western lifestyles is empty in comparison. Attention must also be given to how to conceive of the needs of nonhumans, and to the obligation of humans to actively help other creatures meet their needs, rather than simply avoiding actions that interfere with their needs being met.

Thomas doesn't seem to go along with ecologists who call for doing away with the idea of private property. Instead, he states, "The basic elements of personal security and personal property would be protected, although the sense of ownership would be a limited personal relation to property, which would demand use according to the well-being of the property and the well-being of the community, along with the well-being of the individual owner."²⁰ He seems to accept that, because the idea of private property is so ingrained in the Western mindset, retaining it in a limited form, rather than replacing it with a strictly communitarian ethic, offers the more feasible path forward.

19. *Ibid.*, 61.

20. *Ibid.*, 62.

Bioregional Governance

A deep human flaw is that we have macrophase power but only a microphase sense of ethics and responsibility, and even that is generally limited to how we treat other humans.²¹ Thomas urges us to consider our responsibility to maintain the integrity of the entire Earth process and all its interrelated components, particularly at the bioregional level.

Thomas defines a bioregion as “an identifiable geographical area of interacting life systems that is relatively self-sustaining in the ever-renewing processes of nature” and as a “self-propagating, self-nourishing, self-educating, self-governing, self-healing and self-fulfilling community.”²² To redraw the lines separating government jurisdictions—counties, states, nations, for example—to align with bioregion boundaries would be a monumental task fraught with differing interpretations. It would be incumbent upon each person to learn, through being taught in school or independently, about the geography, fungi, plants and animals in their bioregion and their interactions undertaken in order to establish a suitable way of life within this community. Beyond insisting that bioregion-states be governed in a biocentric, rather than anthropocentric, manner, he does not offer specific instructions for how to govern them. Perhaps he intends to leave it up to the population of each bioregion and its leaders to figure this out for themselves, being guided by their enhanced understanding of their unique habitat’s biological, geological and hydrological dynamics.

Ecozoic Transportation

Much of my career has been devoted to improving transportation, which is one of few areas in which Thomas offers this more specific suggestion: “A bioregional roadway will allow walking, bicycling and horseback riding, and would accommodate animal-drawn carriages. The tyranny of the automobile can no longer be

21. *Ibid.*, 101.

22. *Ibid.*, 162

accepted.”²³ Automobile dependence is indeed untenable, even if cars are renewably-fueled, because of the sheer amount of land devoted to roads and parking lots in an auto-centric society. But it is strange that Thomas would emphasize the use of horses and animal-drawn carriages and not mention much more energy-efficient and space-efficient electrified railroads. Despite railroads’ historical role as enablers of resource exploitation, humans have yet to devise a technology capable of moving larger quantities of people and goods efficiently using only electricity—which can be produced from renewable sources such as solar and wind. Railroads do this using minimal land compared to highways and airports. To minimize steep gradients, they tend to be built in harmony with the land’s contours.

Robust passenger train service fosters the development of dense, walkable communities around stations that make a car unnecessary for most travel. And, aside from walking and cycling (both of which generally require paths to be cleared), train travel gives one a unique and intimate view of landscapes through which the train passes, and lends itself to socializing among passengers, thus aiding social cohesion of disparate populations. I see railroads as a fine example of an industrial technology that can be adapted to play a benign role in the Ecozoic era. Being reliant on railroads for the longer-distance movement of people and goods—beyond the range within which our feet or bicycles can carry us—forces a healthy discipline. The unfettered ability to go as far as we want when we want that automobiles and trucks provide leads to a hyper-inflated sense of the possible, which thus begets sprawling development patterns that gobble up land and fuel. And while the automobile isolates people inside their own moving steel fortresses, the train brings its passengers together in ways that buses and airplanes do not, fostering a more egalitarian sensibility.

Fixing the US Constitution

The US Constitution “represents the height of good aspects of the modern world, but it’s also a deadly document,” Thomas says in the printed form of a 2003 lecture before the E.F. Schumacher Society

23. Berry, *The Dream of the Earth*, 68.

.entitled “Every Being Has Rights.” “It is deadly to give humans such exaltation, such freedom to own property and do with it whatever they want. The government can’t stop them. Nothing can stop them.”²⁴ So the US Constitution must change, but will simply amending it be sufficient? Thomas seems open to this approach, but to infuse the document with a sense of humans’ more humble place in the Earth community, when it thoroughly exalts the human in its current state, will require a great deal of tinkering.

Thomas repeatedly holds up the United Nations’ 1982 World Charter for Nature as a model.²⁵ This is a foundation from which we can work to reshape government for the Ecozoic era. We are, however, still fighting merely to establish that corporations are not people and money is not speech. We should all get behind the effort to amend the Constitution in order to undo the doctrine of corporate personhood. “Big corporations require big government—unless the people are willing to accept the corporations as the government,” Thomas admonishes in *The Great Work*. Not only is government necessary to limit the power of corporations, it also provides the basic conditions in which corporations can perform and operate: “almost every industry has come into being and survives with support from public lands and public funds.”²⁶

Finally, Thomas seems firmly aligned with the current media reform movement being led by groups like Free Press (www.free-press.org). They seek safeguards for the neutrality of content across Internet service providers and rules that protect community-serving journalism and local voices, and ensure that those with viewpoints opposed to those of the corporate overlords of mainstream media have space on the airwaves. This cause, fortunately, has the US Constitution and American traditions on its side. “The commercial-industrial control of the media can be considered among the most effective forces thwarting and remedial action to save the disintegrating planet,”²⁷ Thomas laments.

24. Thomas Berry, “Every Being Has Rights,” pamphlet ed. Hildegard Hannum (Stockbridge, MA: E.F. Schumacher Society, 2003).

25. United Nations General Assembly, World Charter for Nature (1982), accessed June 22, 2017, <http://www.un.org/documents/ga/res/37/a37r007.htm>.

26. Berry, *The Great Work*, 131.

27. *Ibid.*, 68.

The Roots of Corporate Power

Corporations are the chief purveyors of the demonic dream. “The corporations have taken possession of human consciousness in order to evoke the deepest of psychic compulsions towards limitless consumption,”²⁸ Thomas puts it succinctly. They entice us with promises of a “Wonderland” achieved through “the ever-increasing exploitation of the earth through our amazing technologies” and “consumption of products that have been taken violently from the Earth or that react violently with the Earth.”²⁹

The United States of America is the first nation-state in history in which large corporations became the dominant organizing principle of the economy, thus coming to a position of influence over the decisions made by an at least structurally, if not functionally democratic government. Some multinational corporations are simply too large for effective oversight. If a corporation is “too big to fail,” as leading US politicians have claimed of some major banks, manufacturers and retailers, perhaps it is just too big, period.

The elements fueling corporations’ ability to become so massive are modern communications technologies and, above all, cheap and abundant petroleum. When petroleum inevitably becomes too scarce and expensive to be widely used, corporations will be unable to maintain supply chains as they currently do. Thomas, adhering to E.F. Schumacher’s “small is beautiful” philosophy, thinks more economic activity should move to the local and regional levels.³⁰ But he does not directly address the inevitability of a return to smaller-scale economies as petroleum dries up as a cheap, plentiful commodity.

Possible tactics for right-sizing economies and dethroning mega-corporations include the following:

- Use the power of the corporate charter. In the early days of the American republic, companies were chartered to fulfill a limited, public purpose, such as constructing a bridge or

28. *Ibid.*, 120.

29. Berry, *The Dream of the Earth*.

30. E.F. Schumacher, *Small is Beautiful: A Study of Economics as If People Mattered* (London: Blond & Briggs, 1973).

canal. Upon the completion of the designated project, the firm would fold. But towards the middle of the nineteenth century, firms came to be chartered for broader, unlimited purposes. It remains the case, nevertheless, that no company can legally do business without a charter from the state where it is headquartered. Governments do have the power of “life and death” over corporate “bodies.” If a corporation abuses the public trust or acts in a way detrimental to people and/or the planet, the state government ought to revoke its charter.³¹

- Counter corporate propaganda about government’s role. Through their power to finance campaigns for elected office, corporations come to treat government the same way they do “natural resources” and labor: something to be manipulated for the greatest profit. They milk subsidies out of government, but otherwise want very little government. They ally themselves with right-wing groups, championing the cause of personal liberty and small government. Additionally, they convince the rank-and-file of these groups that “big government” is a greater threat to individuals’ well-being than the consolidation of wealth and political power in the hands of fewer and fewer corporations and very rich individuals.
- Animate the body politic in functionally democratic countries to be able to see through the corporate propaganda machine. Part of the solution lies in establishing think-tanks to write an effective counter-narrative to that pushed by the corporate-funded libertarian ones. Another solution is to champion public financing of campaigns, so that money is not such a barrier to running for office, and corporations cannot simply “pay to play” in legislatures.
- Expand the “triple bottom line” mentality, and foster green- and socially-minded entrepreneurs. As Thomas declares in

31. One discussion of this is found in Charles Cray, “Revisiting Corporate Charters,” Summit on the Future of the Corporation,” Paper No. 7 (2007), 67-76, accessed February 25, 2016, <http://www.corporatepolicy.org/pdf/charters.pdf>.

The Great Work, “opposition between the industrial-commercial entrepreneur and the ecologist can be considered as both the central human issue and the central Earth issue of the twenty-first century.”³² But these need not be diametric opposites; green entrepreneurs offer a bridge for this gap. Most of the leaders of today’s mega-corporations are not so much entrepreneurial as oligarchical. Perhaps the word “entrepreneur” in Thomas’s declaration is better replaced with “oligarch.” The term entrepreneur connotes a smaller-scale businessperson who is experimenting with novel ways to make money while providing a good or service for which there exists a perceived demand. While some entrepreneurs see their businesses grow to become large corporations, or are acquired by or absorbed into large corporations, nevertheless we should seek a framework in which successful entrepreneurs do not strive to become oligarchs.

There are a significant number of entrepreneurs, especially amongst my Millennial generation, who start businesses that offer ecologically beneficial products or services, or who seek to demonstrate that business can be done in a way that is ecologically sound, while also treating workers and consumers fairly and ethically. There is a growing movement of B Corporations (www.bcorporation.net) or ‘triple bottom line’ businesses: people, planet and profit. Green America (www.greenamerica.org) is a national organization working to nurture and promote ethical and sustainable businesses. The theory is no responsible business should pursue one of these bottom lines at the expense of the others, and each bottom line is of equal importance. B Corporation leaders see themselves as both entrepreneurs and ecologists. A band of triple bottom line entrepreneurs may be necessary in order to weaken the oligarchs by providing goods and services as alternatives to those made by large corporations.

Critics say the triple bottom line concept is a form of greenwashing, and these businesses are only doing small favors to people and the planet while primarily seeking profit.

32. Berry, *The Great Work*, 59.

Regardless of how some self-described triple-bottom-line businesses may be acting in practice now, I hold that the triple bottom line concept offers a valuable framework in which business managers should be made to consider all the consequences of their affairs. It should become unthinkable for any company not to be a triple bottom line business.

Thomas gives no indication that corporations will cease to exist at the dawn of the Ecozoic era. Given this, any concept that trains corporate leaders to think in terms of the contexts in which they operate or instills the idea that other considerations are as important as turning a profit is one that should be developed and broadened. Thus, corporations can become a more benign presence while still serving as an effective organizing principle for providing people's material needs. I submit that the B Corporation offers a model for the way a corporation that would exist in the Ecozoic era: primarily on a small, local scale as an integral component and servant of its human and biological community.

- Use natural processes as models for industrial methods. Thomas touts the idea of “living machines” as a seed for a viable form of industry, and says our technologies should defend us against nature's destructive forces without themselves being destructive.³³ Principles on which these can be modeled include the following:
 1. No being nurtures itself—thus every process's waste should become food or fuel for another.
 2. The well-being of the soil and the plants that grow there is paramount.
 3. Because the sun is the primary power source, solar energy technologies must be scaled up.
 4. Nature abhors uniformity. We have to refine our idea of “economies of scale” and the thinking that sees efficiency and cost savings in such practices as monocultures and mass production.
 5. The economy must function in accord with a new-found human intimacy with all other modes of being

33. *Ibid.*, 65.

and deep awe and reverence for the depths of the universe's mystery—not only its pleasant and joyous side, but also its violent and dynamic aspects.

6. Treat capitalism as a tool, not an ideology: In the Eozoic era's organic economy, businesses would see the limitations imposed by nature as “strengthening discipline” rather than obstacles to be overcome.³⁴ Economic cycles of production, use and deposition would be in line with the ever-renewing cycles of nature, with every waste product becoming useful food or fuel for another organism or process. Thomas suggests all existing political and economic institutions will continue, but will function in ways that enhance one another, the community, ecosystems and the planet.³⁵

Capitalism is simply a tool, and tools can be used for beneficial ends as easily as they can be for malicious ones. The trouble is capitalism has come to be seen as an ideology in and of itself and, as such, has become destructive. What is missing is an overarching, cosmology-based set of norms and expectations that both governments and individual consumers enforce.

With such a context in place to guide use of the tool that is capitalism, capitalism can exist and serve a useful purpose. Entrepreneurs should be able to acquire wealth in the pursuit of providing assets (goods and services) in an ecologically beneficial way. The guiding laws and set of norms will prevent the creation and acquisition of wealth from being seen as the constitutive purpose of business—the fallacy at the root of the modern corporate structure.

Perhaps the national government would grow to a point where it reins in the mega-corporations, then shrink to serve limited functions of overseeing migration and commerce between states and regions. Such a proposed government may likewise provide for basic standards of exchange and a larger-scale transportation and infrastructure network, as the centers of power reorganize along biore-

34. Berry, *The Great Work*, 67.

35. *Ibid.*, 62.

gional lines. Nonprofits would seem to have a central role in the re-education effort: many universities and academies are themselves nonprofits. They are also effective means of organizing people for collective action through a legal body freed from the obligation to turn a profit for shareholders.

A New Framework for Education

It is difficult to overstate Thomas's emphasis on education. Currently, "our concern for the natural world is one of utility or as an object to satisfy intellectual curiosity or aesthetic feeling."³⁶ Because of this alienation, humanity "has lost its own meaning." "Education," he writes, "is the activation of the possibilities of the planet [necessarily through] human intelligence and the entire range of human activities."³⁷ Thus, the university is the only institution capable of helping humanity rediscover its meaning in a cosmological context.

Human education is part of Earth's self-education, because humans are "the psychic component of the earth in its most complete expression."³⁸ Educating people is how we pass on our cultural coding, which does for humans what genetic coding does for all other species. Education relies on the humanistic traditions, because "[science] has been unable to understand the significance of its own achievements. As a consequence, the cultural coding could not be established in an integral form; education remained dependent on its earlier structures for its humanistic meaning."³⁹ Or, as Thomas told me more succinctly, "science doesn't tell us how to use science."

Our species' coming to know the true story of the universe's unfolding since the Great Flaring Forth, through scientific inquiry, is "the greatest religious, moral and spiritual event that has taken place in these centuries,"⁴⁰ as it has helped the universe to get to know itself in an entirely new and much deeper way. It is this grand

36. Berry, *The Dream of the Earth*, 90.

37. *Ibid.*, 92.

38. *Ibid.*, 90.

39. *Ibid.*, 95.

40. *Ibid.*

story, of which all other stories are a part, that gives context and meaning to our lives. Thus, Thomas declares the Universe Story must become the basis for all curricula in all subjects in schools, colleges and universities: “Our greatest single need is to accept this story of the universe as we now know this as our sacred story.”⁴¹ To this end, astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson’s television program *Cosmos* is very much on the right track.⁴²

Cosmology as Reconciler of Science and Religion

Ecology, Thomas says, must become the foundation for all courses, programs and professions.⁴³ Ecological economics, for example, is the only true and viable form of economics. The human economy is a subset of the Earth economy and must be considered as such, rather than as a regime that humans impose on the Earth.

Universities, together with religious institutions that also embrace the Universe Story—thus integrating scientific understanding into theology—must lead the transformation to the Ecozoic era. Only the university retains a significant degree of independence from the influence of corporations and their mode of thinking, and the university is the institution housing the body of scientific knowledge. The university also gives scientists the space and means to pursue knowledge and understanding for its own sake instead of needing to justify its exploitative utility to a corporate funder—a requirement that, sadly, occurs too often in today’s universities. This freedom that the university enjoys is necessary, and puts it in position to guide the human community out of the terminal Cenozoic era.

“What is needed...is the completion of the story of the physical dimensions of the universe by an account of the numinous and psychic dimensions of the universe.”⁴⁴ Through this dialectic between

41. Berry, *The Great Work*, 83.

42. *Cosmos: A Spacetime Odyssey*, television program aired on the Fox network in the United States in 2014, produced by Livia Hanich, Steve Holtzman, Bill Pope, Brannon Braga, Neil deGrasse Tyson, Alan Silvestri, Carl Sagan, Ann Druyan, and Steven Soter.

43. Berry, *The Great Work*, 84.

44. Epigraph, Sean Esbjörn-Hargens, *Ecological Interiority: Thomas Berry’s Integral Ecology Legacy*,” in Ervin Laszlo and Allan Combs, eds., *Thomas*

science, religion, and humanities, spurred by the constantly growing and evolving body of knowledge and understanding each possesses, humanity may come to develop a new cosmology: an overarching sense of the nature of the universe that gives context to scientific, religious, and humanitarian enterprises. The lack of cosmology as the overarching context leaves all three trivialized.

Holistic Education

Thomas envisions schools and universities becoming places where the universe reflects on itself through the full creative expression of human intelligence. Art, music, literature, and poetry classes, he declares, should be at least as important, if not more so, as the “hard” sciences and social sciences.⁴⁵ Perhaps the artistic and the investigative, the creative and the analytical halves of the education sphere will come to better align with the structure of the human brain, in which they are integrated, and join together. In such a re-conceived educational model, artistic expression of concepts taught in a science class, for example, would not be unusual. In such a system, it would become difficult to judge students’ performance objectively and compare one student to others based on uniform metrics. School and class sizes would necessarily become smaller, and teachers would guide students individually to discover their place in the cosmological order and the Earth community. Schools would teach students about their bioregion, its history and functioning. They would guide them to know on multiple levels all beings with whom they share their home area. They would give students the tools needed to live and thrive in an ecologically integral way and guide them in acting on their inner spontaneities.

Education is more than formal schooling. It is perhaps the primary activity that makes us human. It is a pervasive life experience, something we do throughout our lives. Yet formal schooling is necessary to provide the integrating context for each person’s own learning journey. Students, Thomas suggests, should feel involved in a major historical and personal process.

Berry: *Dreamer of the Earth* (Rochester Vermont: Inner Traditions, 2011), 92.

45. Berry, *The Great Work*, 73; Berry, *The Dream of the Earth*, 94-95.

If the purpose of school were presented in this way from inception, as part of a great unfolding mythological journey—a story of adventure—perhaps fewer young people would rebel against teachers and school authorities, and truancy and dropout rates would cease to be problems. In too many schools, anything beyond what is necessary to allow the student to function as part of the industrial economy is treated as secondary, “elective” or “extracurricular.” Such schools, therefore, do not activate the student in the full wholeness of his or her being.

Formal schooling should guide students into replacing their entrancement with technology with enchantment by the rush of waves, the flights of birds, the power of thunderstorms, the beauty and endurance of trees, and the ways of wild animals. Then let them think about and imagine what life would be like if humans immersed themselves in and truly celebrated these processes. “The feel for life, the skills for creative interaction with the earth process,” Thomas indicates, “these have been suppressed over a series of generations.”⁴⁶ Such reawakening would provide the basis for a viable alternative to the demonic dream. This mystique, Thomas says, must be associated with three commitments: to the Earth as an irreversible process, to the Ecozoic era as the only viable form of the millennial ideal, and to a sense of progress that includes the natural as well as the human world.⁴⁷

A New Vocabulary and the Four Archetypes

“We do not presently have a terminology suited to a serious consideration of the earth,”⁴⁸ Thomas laments. We must start by redefining existing words, such as “progress” and “profit,” words laden with hyper-natural meaning in the context of our collective entrancement with the demonic dream. Moving away from this, the intellectual basis for the present industrial society, we will be like addicts going through withdrawal. But somehow—it is difficult to fathom how this process will look as the creation of a language takes

46. Berry, *The Dream of the Earth*.

47. *Ibid.*, 16.

48. *Ibid.*

place over centuries—a new language must come about. The new language would be less explicitly human and more Earthly. It would contain more words for natural phenomena and their interactions, and a vocabulary broader than “beautiful,” “sublime,” “awesome,” “fearsome,” or “mysterious” to describe the way the universe, its elements, and their powers present themselves to us. English and other Western languages are useful for dissecting and describing specific parts of things, but not so good at naming and explaining wholeness and interrelatedness.

Thomas offers these four archetypes that would be brought forward in schools:

- The Great Mother: the maternal principle inherent in the universe
- The Tree of Life: a symbol of the interconnectedness of earthly life and its common ancestry
- The Hero’s Journey: a way of seeing one’s life journey as a microcosm of the Universe Story
- Death/Rebirth: the reality that new life comes from death in life’s constant transformation⁴⁹

He suggests the following as core courses to be taught in universities:

- The universe’s unfolding prior to human emergence, presented so that the student gets a sense of what it took to make that student’s life possible
- The great classical cultures’ contributions to human development
- The development of science and technology, leading to an awareness of how this all came to be and an understanding of the power that now rests in human hands
- An Ecozoic era course, which would serve to reestablish the human in its context, heal the damage done, foster a renewing economic order, and, finally, to identify values to

49. *Ibid.*, 192.

inspire the renewed civilizational energy needed to forge the Ecozoic era. Within this course, Earth economics would emphasize the concept of externalities, or of “the tragedy of the commons.” These concepts get at the idea that environmentally detrimental actions tend to come back to bite those who take part in them, and the real costs they impose are borne by others not party to the transaction. But the course would go beyond that, to first teaching how the Earth economy reuses and conserves matter and energy, then exploring ways that human technologies can fit into or mimic these processes.⁵⁰

- Learning From the Fourfold Wisdom.⁵¹

As reflected in the Chinese character that stands for both ‘crisis’ and ‘opportunity,’ catastrophic moments are also creative moments. This is one of many profound insights Thomas has discerned as his mind melded deep study of so many aspects of earth and human history. As we face the most catastrophic time in Earth’s history, Thomas calls upon people to heed the wisdoms of four strains of thought, teachings that have been either forgotten or perverted as we Westerners have disconnected ourselves from our roots: indigenous peoples, women, classical traditions, and science.

We need to blend all four of these wisdoms as we start to tell the new story that will give us the context to cope with the enveloping consequences of industrial civilization’s excesses and build a resilient human framework that is integrated with the dynamics and ever-renewing processes of nature.

Thomas saw patterns that nobody else saw before, and they led him to some amazing conclusions, but also some deeply troubling ones. The general lack of specific instructions in Thomas’s writings is perhaps partially intentional: he opened a door and began to lay put forth a path towards a civilizational trajectory that leads away from destruction and towards celebration and fulfillment. But he left it to succeeding generations to lay different paths that diverge from the main path, the way a tree’s branches diverge from its trunk. For we

50 Berry, *Dream of the Earth*, 99-105.

51. Thomas Berry, “The Fourfold Wisdom,” in *The Great Work*, 176-95.

all must branch out and flower in our own way, but we are all rooted to the same trunk from which we, and ultimately every other being, originated. While Thomas began to depict what the next branch might look like, more importantly, he helped us to see the trunk and appreciate the whole of the still-growing tree.

To conclude, *The Dream of the Earth* offers a hopeful note for the reconciliation of our technology and industry with the demands and limits of the planet: “The purpose of all our science, technology, industry, manufacturing, commerce, and finance is celebration, planetary celebration.... The final norm of judgment concerning the success or failure of our technologies is the extent to which they enable us to participate more fully in this grand festival.”⁵²

52. Berry, *The Dream of the Earth*, 69.