

## A College Essay for the Ecozoic

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(A College Student)

**D**uring the spring of my sixteenth year, I made a solitary ritual of venturing out into the last fleeting moments of the night to see the sun rise over the Appalachian mountains. I was attending the Outdoor Academy of the Southern Appalachians at the time and, although the natural world has always been an important presence in my life, the semester I spent in Pisgah Forest deepened my relationship to the Earth.

Returning home to suburban Greensboro, I felt bereft of the natural beauty that surrounded me in the mountains and wondered how I would nurture my newfound intimacy with the cosmos and Earth. I was comforted by a quote from Black Elk that would serve as a reference point for me as I returned home:

The first peace, which is the most important, is that which comes within the souls of people when they realize their relationship, their oneness, with the universe and all its powers, and when they realize that at the center of the universe dwells the Great Spirit, and that this center is really everywhere, it is within each of us.



In the fall of my junior year, I received an invitation to spend two days with Thomas Berry, world-renowned ecotheologian and author of *The Dream of the Earth*, *The Universe Story* and *The Great Work*. Thomas had been asked to provide a philosophical foundation for the Earth Guides Training Program at nearby Timberlake Farm and I had been invited to be a trainee. When I arrived at Timberlake to take part in the program, I found myself in the presence of a wise elder whose thoughts, from that moment forward, would have a profound influence on the evolution of my thinking.

Thomas's words, more than those of any other thinker, have given me a vocabulary for capturing the moments of presence I experienced in the Appalachian mountains. In essence, Thomas is saying that despite the distinct interiority of each living thing, there is no separation between them. They are all connected. From Thomas' perspective, there is a distinction between the human and the natural world, but not a separation. This concept of distinction rather than separation, fascinates me; it captures my actual experience of the natural world and gives me a whole new way of thinking about the interconnectedness of all life.

It is easy to see how human beings, lacking such a vision, have lapsed into an extractive and exploitative relationship to the earth. As long as we view ourselves as separate from Earth, we will continue to view Earth as a resource for our exploitation and use.

There is no greater need of our time than to create a new vision of human life as part of an unfolding universe story; there is no better way to begin than to make our own heartfelt connection to the living universe itself. As Thoreau says, in *Life Without Principle*, "Really to see the sun rise or go down every day, so to relate ourselves to a universal fact, would preserve us sane forever."

