

CREEKS AND TADPOLES, RAIN AND SUNRISES

By Betty Luceigh, PhD

There were tadpoles in the creek near my childhood home. I thought they were so cute wiggling through the water. I was about seven years old (1940s) and enjoyed my solitary exploration of the creek's plants and critters. One day I brought back some tadpoles that I caught in a small jar. Once home, I found a big glass bowl, added water from the kitchen sink, poured in the tadpoles and put the bowl on top of my dresser. I was fascinated watching them swimming so energetically.

I was shocked, however, when within hours I found them all floating dead. I asked Mother, "Why did they die?" She told me, "The water from the faucet is different than the water in the creek. You need to clean the faucet water first before adding tadpoles." I was horrified that I had actually *killed* them! At that age I certainly did not know the words ecology or eco-systems. I also did not know that water from one place might be somehow different than water from another.

The experience is still vivid to me. I look back on what I did *not* know then as a measure of what I have learned since. I didn't know the nature of the relationship of living things with their surroundings. I was oblivious to chemistry, biology, and climate. I didn't know that taking something alive out of its natural habitat might kill it. I didn't know about responsibility, stewardship, evolution, adaptation, and so much more. What I did seem to know plenty about was curiosity.

It is now over sixty-five years later. Recently, I had a very different experience with nature. I live on hillside acreage in a small rural community in the foothills of a mountain range. It was a day near the end of a dry, hot summer. It was pre-dawn. Not even the birds were up yet. I was about to take a walk on my land while it was cool when there was an unexpected brief rain. The fresh smell of the wet soil and the magnificence of clouds reflecting the light of the anticipated sun drew me to walk outside immediately. I wanted to participate in the treasured moment. It was exceptionally quiet, and I felt as if I were the only human on the planet. I was not alone, however, because I was with the mountains, trees, sun, rain, clouds, river, and hidden critters. Unlike in my youth, I had many words to describe my natural environment. More importantly, realizing myself as a living being on a planet within a universe, I was aware of my connections and interdependence to everything else. I had

no interest in taking anything back to my house because I was already present in our shared natural home.

Between those events with nature described above, I developed physically, emotionally, and spiritually from a child to a senior adult. All events taken together form what seems a continuum I call *my life*. I was highly educated and had a profession; I had relationships that came and went; I had spiritual understandings that evolved through many stages. I have my unique perspective formed by unpredictable situations, traumas and joys, creative work, spiritual awakenings, and the shared discoveries of a culture shifting emphasis from manual to mechanical to digital. My profession was organic chemistry, and my delight was playing the piano and writing poems. Throughout it all, I kept my love of creeks and tadpoles, rain, and sunrises.

Many people during my life significantly influenced me, but I want to honor one special person here: Thomas Berry. I never met him in person, only through his writings. After I retired and moved to the country, I joined a nearby group of spiritual explorers organized by Jann McGuire. Once I read one of my poems for Jann's group; it was titled "*The Longing*" (c. 2005). In it I explored the idea of a *longing* that was born with the birth of the universe. Afterwards, as Jann pulled a book from her collection, she said, "You *really* must read this book." It was *The Universe Story* by Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry.

As I read *The Universe Story*, it was as if the pieces I already had of a puzzle I had never put together were at last joined. I began to see the whole picture. My innate curiosity had driven me to explore many basic concepts and terminologies of subjects separated by traditional classifications: chemistry, physics, biology, astronomy, archeology, and other sciences, as well as several spiritual traditions. Though many of my self-studies were narrow in scope, overall I had the basis of a broad foundation. *The Universe Story* described the interwoven relationships of many of my interests. It was elegantly written and guided me to an integrated understanding of our universe, Earth, and living beings. The deeper realization was one of connections, directions, meaningfulness, and an awareness of the human role, including spiritual, in the future of Earth and human culture. Chapter by chapter, it expanded my awareness of existence in a palpable way. Swimme and Berry's book provided a missing template for me to interlace observations of our current status as a species on Earth.

Over time, I read at least five books by Thomas Berry. Clearly, Berry had significantly touched my life. At Jann's suggestion, I learned about the Center for Ecozoic Studies (CES) and made contact with Herman Greene. This connection has lasted more than fourteen years. Early within that span Thomas Berry passed (2009). He left his life's work in the pages of his books and in the hearts and minds of those who knew him personally. Thankfully, Herman has energetically continued to sustain and expand Berry's legacy. For me, and no doubt others, Herman has been a dedicated contributor to and connector of people to Berry's original writings and insights.

My own years of inquiry that included Berry's work have coincided with increasing scientific observations of the causes and impact of climate change and an expansion of philosophical and practical ideas of how civilization will need to adapt to a new era, called the "Ecozoic era" by Berry. I am thus one participant with my own story that is within a bigger and expanding story. The deep and broad concepts of Berry have been an uplifting guide for me as I seek to identify and contribute whatever my unique gifts are to that which is greater than me alone. Among the "Twelve Understandings for the Ecozoic Era," all of which I support, my strongest personal response is to "Ecological Spirituality."

Thomas Berry's book, *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future*, calls upon all of us to offer our gifts toward humanity's future on Earth. He describes the "Great Work" as an activity to "carry out the transition from a period of human devastation of the Earth to a period when humans will be present to the planet in a mutually beneficial manner." In the end of his chapter on "The Wild and the Sacred," he touched my heart with his lyrical description of nature and its impact on our souls:

Only if the human imagination is activated by the flight of the great soaring birds in the heavens, by the blossoming flowers of Earth, by the sight of the sea, by lightning and thunder of the great storms that break through the heat of summer, only then will the deep inner experiences be evoked within the human soul.

Berry touched me deeply as well in his chapter on "The Fourfold Wisdom" when he identified several spiritual traditions with characteristics embraced by my own experiences. Upon first reading of one section (p. 185), I marked the margin with one word, "WOW!":

The wisdom of the classical traditions is based on revelatory experiences of a spiritual realm both transcendent and imminent to the visible worlds about us and in *the capacity of humans to participate in that world to achieve the fullness of their own mode of being.*

Within this context I find harmony with my own need to contribute from what I experience as “the longing” of the universe expressing itself through me. I believe my goals will evolve as I involve myself. The first step is summoning the courage to make my best statement of its present form.

I long for my voice to join with others for the awakening of humanity’s most profound spiritual awareness. For me, one’s spirituality is the deepest inner commonality that can link us together with all of life. As we encounter events related to climate, politics, social structures, economics, and other long-standing systems, it seems more than likely that we will have major differences in personal and communal objectives. We will be challenged by both the difficulty and the value of our diversity of expression. Sacrifices may be demanded when deeply ingrained prior systems can no longer apply. Without a durable common ground of connections, we may be overwhelmed into inaction by chaos and instability as this transformation proceeds.

Through my inner eye, I see an image of every human connected at his/her spiritual core to the Universal Ground of Being (Source, God, or other name one might choose). I see each human arising uniquely as his/her form flows from that Ground of Being. The resultant multiplicity of human forms creates a complex, dynamic system from which novel structures and processes can emerge. I see the *ease* of that emergence enhanced by each participant being self-aware of his/her own spiritual source. I see the *effectiveness* of that emergence enhanced by communication based on a shared understanding of fundamental values from that source—e.g., of the Good (heart/morality), the True (mind/rationality), and the Beautiful (art/essence connector).

Without elaboration here, my contemplative emphasis is on “Universal Beauty” as a facet of the Ground of Being. My experiential reason happened long before being introduced to Thomas Berry’s work. Yet, it is Berry’s connection to and understanding of nature that is one of the key influential and inspiring aspects of his writings for me. If I feel I am drifting from my intentions, reading Berry’s works reconnects me to

the fundamentals of the natural world. Every human needs the time to watch tadpoles in a creek or walk in the rain of a morning dawn.

Imagine if Berry had never shared his observations and understandings of the universe, Earth, and the role of humans. What a loss that would have been! So it is with each of us offering to contribute through our own “work.” Would any of us really want to hold back on giving our own legacy, not as competition with anyone but as cooperation with everyone in a mystery beyond our egoic identities? By reflecting on Berry’s work, a part of him dwells within our own work—we are working together.

I see CES as a multifaceted hub for those of us contributing to “The Great Work.” For me, it is especially a hub for our shared spirit. I will continue to address the role of beauty, particularly in our spiritual connections. When we connect to CES with our hearts as well as our ideas and actions, we help inspire each other. We know we are not alone in this work. CES began with the heartfelt wisdom of Thomas Berry’s teachings. Herman has expanded that heart to include all of us and has encouraged us to play a role in “The Great Work.” Whether we want to share excitement of our activities, seek insights for difficulties, be better informed of the status of ongoing projects, or any other related reason, when we click on the website of CES we are affirming we are connected within the *we* of a future being created by the legacy we leave there along with Thomas Berry’s.