

## LOVING WATER: THOMAS BERRY'S INSPIRATION FOR AN INTEGRAL WATER ETHIC

By Elizabeth McAnally

Thomas Berry has influenced so many of us in myriad ways. In my own life, Berry's work has inspired my thinking about an "integral water ethic," by which I mean the practice of cultivating love and compassion for water and learning to see water as a loving and compassionate member of the Earth community who nourishes all beings. I give an extensive account of this idea in my new book, *Loving Water across Religions: Contributions to an Integral Water Ethic*. The brief reflections that follow provide an overview of an integral water ethic and explore how this idea is rooted in Berry's work.

I never had the opportunity to meet Thomas Berry in person, but I have felt his presence reverberate throughout the life of my teachers, Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim, who were long-time students of Berry and recently published a comprehensive biography about his life and work. I received my first memorable introduction of Berry in 2006 in a World Religions and Ecology class with Tucker and Grim when they came to the California Institute of Integral Studies as visiting scholars. I remember a particularly striking moment occurred in class as we watched the film, *Thomas Berry: The Great Story*. In it, Berry says the following:

Last night the moon was shining on this wonderful bay. And I asked the moon "What should I say?" And the moon said, "Tell them the story." And I asked the wind, "What should I say?" He said, "Tell them the story." And I asked the clover out on the lawn, "What should I say?" And the clover said, "Tell them the story—my story, the mountain's story, the river's story, your story, the Indians' story, the Great Story."

These words struck me at my core. I heard them as a call, as an opportunity to learn how to tell the story of water. At that point in my life, studying environmental ethics and the philosophy of water at the University of North Texas, I had been learning about water for a few years, and I was in the middle of writing my master's thesis about the pollution and damming of the Ganges River. Through the work of Thomas Berry, I was coming to understand the value of listening to the voices of water and the many different stories of water—the stories of creeks, rivers, oceans, raindrops.

As I pursued my doctoral studies, I continued to find many sources of inspiration from Berry that influenced my thinking about an integral water ethic. One key concept is that of the Great Work, the crucial task of our time “to carry out the transition from a period of human devastation of the Earth to a period when humans would be present to the planet in a mutually beneficial manner.” In terms of an integral water ethic, the Great Work is to cultivate a mutually enhancing relationship between humans and water and our whole Earth Community. An integral water ethic holds that water is not a mere resource, commodity, and sewer, but is instead a sacred source of life. Water is not a passive object to be controlled and manipulated, but is an active, vital member of the Earth community that deserves our respect and care. Water can help us in this Great Work to open our hearts and minds and learn to be in communion with all beings. Water is a liquid, elemental thread that weaves together our Earth community. Water gives us life and nourishes all beings. Loving water can help us love all things in the world.

An integral water ethic is grounded in integral ecology, the transdisciplinary field of study that brings together multiple perspectives—natural sciences, social sciences, and the humanities—in order to address environmental issues in comprehensive ways. Berry was one of the first people to use the phrase “integral ecology,” viewing humans as integral to the Earth community. He writes, “We need an ecological spirituality with an integral ecologist as spiritual guide.”

In *The Universe Story*, Brian Thomas Swimme and Thomas Berry discuss the cosmogenetic principle, which holds that all things in the universe are evolving to greater degrees of complexity, consciousness, and interrelatedness.

As Swimme and Berry explain,

The cosmogenetic principle states that the evolution of the universe will be characterized by *differentiation*, *autopoiesis*, and *communion* throughout time and space and at every level of reality. . . . Some synonyms for differentiation are diversity, complexity, variation, disparity, multiform nature, heterogeneity, articulation. Different words that point to the second feature are autopoiesis, subjectivity, self-manifestation, sentience, self-organization, dynamic centers of experience, presence, identity, inner principle of being, voice, interiority. And for the third feature, communion, interrelatedness, interdependence, kinship, mutuality, internal relatedness, reciprocity, complementarity,

interconnectivity, and affiliation all point to the same dynamic of cosmic evolution.

Water, like all things in the universe, is an integral being that functions in terms of the cosmogenetic principle. Water has a unique chemical and physical structure that differentiates it from other beings within the universe. Water has self-organizing dynamics evident in particular patterns like whirlpools, eddies, snowflakes, and waves. And water is in interdependent relationships with all other beings throughout the Earth community. Water is life.

Berry expresses the cosmogenetic principle through his famous aphorism: “the universe is a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects.” How can we learn to commune with water? How can we cultivate a beneficial relationship with water? To address these questions, I draw inspiration from religious traditions. In *Loving Water across Religions*, I consider three of the world’s religions—Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism—as well as contemplative practices. With Christianity, I examine the ritual of baptism and a sacramental consciousness of water. By cultivating a sacramental consciousness, we can learn to have a reverential relationship with baptismal waters and the waters that flow throughout the world. With Hinduism, I explore the Yamuna River of India, a river that is considered to be a sacred goddess of love but is at the same time severely polluted. Loving service (*seva*) is currently being used to promote the ecological restoration of the river, and I hold that an attitude of loving service can be of great benefit for all waters. With Buddhism, I take a look at the compassionate wisdom of the bodhisattva, one who vows to attain enlightenment for the benefit of all beings. If we can see water as a bodhisattva, we can learn how to develop a respectful relationship with this compassionate being who serves us all. I also consider contemplative practices to cultivate intimacy and empathy with water. For example, I discuss being mindful when drinking water, flowing like water through practices of taiji, and taking gratitude walks to see water as a living being with whom we can maintain an intimate relationship.

Religious traditions and contemplative practices can help us listen to the voices of water. By tuning in to our own personal and collective experiences, we can see that we are water reflecting on itself, just as we are the universe thinking itself. As Berry writes, “The human is that being in whom the universe reflects on and celebrates itself and its numinous origin in its own, unique mode of conscious self-awareness. . . . It is not

that we think on the universe; the universe, rather, thinks *itself*, in us and through us.”

Our Great Work is to love water and all beings. Water can teach us comprehensive compassion, opening our hearts to all members of the Earth community. As Brian Thomas Swimme and Mary Evelyn Tucker describe in *Journey of the Universe*, oceans can teach us about empathy and intimacy. The oceans will be our guide as we journey into the future. The ocean is a power that can dissolve things into itself. Even the hardest rocks, given enough time, will become one with the ocean’s waves.

With our symbolic consciousness, we are very much like the ocean with its power to pour through boundaries. What we long for is profound intimacy of relationship. . . . With the emergence of humans, we have arrived at an evolutionary breakthrough for being able to develop compassion, not just for our offspring, but for all beings of every order of existence. With this alone, Earth gave rise to the possibility of an empathetic being who could flow into and become one with the intimate feelings of any being.

Our human destiny is to become the heart of the universe that embraces the whole of the Earth community. We are just a speck in the universe, but we are beings with the capacity to feel comprehensive compassion in the midst of an ocean of intimacy. That is the direction of our becoming more fully human.

Through the guidance of water, we can practice cultivating comprehensive compassion. Loving water can help us love all beings. The Neo-Confucian scholar Tu Weiming explains that humans can embody the cosmos in our heart and mind, in our conscience and consciousness. He writes, “the uniqueness of being human is the intrinsic capacity of the mind to ‘embody’ (*t’i*) the cosmos in its conscience and consciousness. Through this embodying, the mind realizes its own sensitivity, manifests true humanity and assists in the cosmic transformation of Heaven and Earth.”

We can discover how to do this with water as our guide. Embodying water in our conscience and consciousness with the help of religious traditions and contemplative practices can assist us in becoming more fully human. By learning to love water, we can learn to love all members of our Earth community. Listening to water as a source of inspiration can facilitate the Great Work of creating a flourishing future for all beings.