

Thomas Berry: Harbinger of a Communal Spirituality, Rooted in Earth and Cosmos as Revelatory

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Today, I wish to reflect on Thomas Berry's contributions to an emerging spirituality—or perhaps better, an emerging inter-spirituality, a spirituality that is multi-lingual, able to recognize that the Great Mystery has many names and no adequate name. A spirituality that is communal throughout.

Let me begin where Thomas began. Here is his story:

My own understanding of the Great Work began when I was quite young. At the time I was some eleven years old. [This would have been in 1925.] My family was moving from a more settled part of a small southern town out to the edge of town where the new house was being built. The house, not yet finished, was situated on a slight incline. Down below was a small creek and there across the creek was a meadow. It was early afternoon in late May when I first wandered down the incline, crossed the creek, and looked out over the scene.

The field was covered with white lilies rising above the thick grass. A magic moment, this experience gave to my life something that seems to explain my thinking at a more profound level than almost any other experience I can remember. It was not only the lilies. It was the singing of the crickets and the woodlands in the distance and the clouds in a clear sky. It was not something conscious that happened just then. I went on about my life as any young person might do. Perhaps it was not simply this moment that made such a deep impression on me. Perhaps it was a sensitivity that was developed throughout my childhood. Yet as the years pass, this moment returns to me, and whenever I think about my basic life attitude and the whole trend of my mind and the causes to which I have given my efforts, I seem to come back to this moment and the impact it has had on my feeling for what is real and worthwhile in life.

This early experience, it seems, has become normative for me throughout the entire range of my thinking. Whatever preserves and enhances this meadow in the natural cycles of its transformation is good; whatever opposes this meadow or negates it is not good. My life orientation is that simple. It is also that pervasive. It applies in economics and political orientation as well as in education and religion.¹

So from start to finish, an experience of the natural world with all its life-forms becomes normative. I shall return to this again. But before I do, let me introduce my notion of spiritually or, in our day, interspirituality. I shall do this by delving more deeply into what I call the “lake analogy.”

I begin with a fundamental distinction: (a) *between what is happening*, and (b) *how I am relating to what is happening*. Coming to awareness of such a distinction is often spoken of as awakening *the observing, listening witness self*. There is a mode of consciousness and a way of living prior to this awakening. There are modes of consciousness and ways of living that are possible after the observing, listening witness self awakens. The simplest framework I know likens the states of awareness to the levels of a lake.²

Let me invite you on a fantasy trip. Imagine that your core self detaches from your body and floats effortlessly out over your present city, out over a primal forest. In the distance, you see a lake. A gentle breeze stirs the waters. There are ripples on the surface of the lake. Suppose you touch down and become a ripple self. You think in ripple ways, with ripple worries, ripple concerns, making ripple comparisons. “Am I a good ripple? How am I doing compared to other ripples?” And so on. At this level of non-awareness, you are asleep in your life, enslaved by old habits, with no space between incoming stimulus and outgoing response—the very definition of being reactive. You are embedded in a collective trance and do not

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1. Thomas Berry, *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future* (New York: Bell Tower, 1999), 12-13 (italics and bold added).
 2. For more detail on this lake analogy, see my book, *Living Large: Transformative Work at the Intersection of Ethics and Spirituality* (Laurel, MD: Tai Sophia Press, 2004), 58-62.

realize that this is the case.³

Now imagine that, on the surface of the lake, you continue your ripple life. However, a part of you detaches from your ripple self and descends into the lake, coming to rest at the mid-level of the lake. Call this “Going to Z.” Drawing the letter “Z” requires us to go from one level (the surface) to a deeper level—this is what the wisdom traditions call the observing, listening, witness self. So think now of Going to Z—to the midpoint of the lake. You are completely safe under the water. You breathe easily. You can turn in any direction, like an astronaut in weightlessness. You can let the water cradle you as if in a hammock. You can look up, from below, and see your ripple self on the surface caught in the cultural trance of fear and desire. Your gaze is a loving one. No harsh judgment. Rather you are filled with compassion for this “little you” who has served you diligently, if often unskillfully. You are watching yourself as a ripple, much as you would watch a cartoon version of yourself, with detachment and gentle humor, with love and compassion.

This middle-level-of-the-lake state is called the “observing self.”⁴ It invokes the part of you that, with practice, can observe not only *what is happening in the outer world*, but also (a) *how you are interpreting*, and (b) *how you are emotionally responding* to what is before you. In this way you become aware of both outer and inner weather. When you call forth this observing/listening self, you find you have some distance from your thoughts and emotions. You are not your thoughts; you are not your emotions. You generate thoughts; you generate emotions. You “have” thoughts and emotions; you are not identified with your thoughts and emotions. In the mode of observing, listening compassionate witness, you reduce the amount of clinging and condemning and identifying in your life.⁵ You notice

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3. As Socrates would say, you and I (at this stage) are doubly ignorant. We do not know what is real (ignorance #1) and we do not know we do not know (ignorance #2)!
 4. See, for example, Arthur J. Deikman, *The Observing Self: Mysticism and Psychotherapy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1982). In some traditions, this level of awareness is called “the witness self.”
 5. These are the three poisons of Buddhism, also known as our greed, our hatred, and our confusion or ignorance. The three poisons might also be rendered as our clinging, condemning, and identifying (identifying with less than we are at core).

your stories and notice your reactivity; you realize that they are only stories, only emotional states. You gain some freedom to shift your language and to choose your response.⁶ Meditation is a tested way of cultivating this observing, listening self.⁷

Now with your ripple self still on the surface and your observing self at the mid-level, imagine that again a part of you disengages and moves toward the depth of the lake. Here you move into darkness and navigate more by listening than by sight. You begin to hear longer rhythms as if the lake is connected to the great ocean and you are sensing deeper and more subtle currents. Perhaps, in an instant, you realize that all is water—the depth and the mid-level and the surface ripples. All is one and you are that! How foolish to think of yourself as separate! How clear at this moment that “yours” and “mine” are but marks on water.⁸

At the depth, we are companioned by the sages and saints, the mystics and poets, the great-souled ones, known and unknown. At the depth, we learn to live in a way that is more transparent to the great powers moving through us, ever-heeding the call of the great ocean.

At whatever our stage or season of life, we can begin by remembering: *Stop, Look, and Listen!*

First, STOP—Detach from the ripple level of life where we are

6. For more on these matters, see Chalmers Brothers, *Language and the Pursuit of Happiness* (Naples, Florida: New Possibilities Press, 2005).

7. The Zenrin Kushu likens meditative mind with a still lake with wild geese flying overhead. The wild geese do not intend to cast their reflection. The water has no mind to receive their image.

Such a wonderful image of meditative mind. Thoughts and sensations, desires and emotions are like the geese. They arise and fly over the mirror of meditative mind. The mind does not invite them in. The mind does not push them out. They come and go. We observe their comings and goings, their appearing and disappearing. We are not led to repress them. Nor are we led compulsively to act them out. Yet more importantly, we do not identify with the thoughts and emotions. We do not allow them to fill the entire screen of our consciousness. The observing/ listening self both what is occurring without and also how quickly we label the phenomena and how quickly with generate likes and dislikes.

8. These deeper levels of awareness move toward what mystics call “unitive consciousness.”

un-free and reactive. (Call this highly dualistic ripple state, “level Y.”)⁹ Here we are not free to choose our response; we are on automatic pilot, repeating the unexamined conventional wisdom/foolishness of our culture.

Second, LOOK—Go to the mid-level. Here we begin to experience some freedom to choose our response. We stop living only at the surface. We detach from identifying with the surface disturbances. We receive our life gratefully. We look at our cartoon selves caught in the tides of conventional opinion, conventional rules and roles and ideologies. We see our ripple selves with compassionate eyes, with compassionate hearts. “How interesting!” “There we go again!” And we love that little us! We look at what is happening in outside weather. And, with practice, we also listen to our inner conversations and emotional charges. We notice how we are labeling phenomena; we realize that we can shift our story. We notice how we are generating likes and dislikes; we begin to realize we can neutralize some of this emotional charge and then choose our response. We receive. We release. We return to who we are at the infinite depth.

Third, LISTEN—Realize that there are still deeper levels of union and communion. My wisdom chant goes like this: There are at least *two* ways to relate to *anything*, a small-minded way and a large-minded way. Choose large mind!¹⁰ We start by invoking the witness self.

No matter what age or stage of life we visit, we can convert life events to tasks and convert tasks to practices consciously undertaken and learned from.¹¹ The image of the lake connected to the great waters calls to us at each season or stage of life.

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9. In a whimsical way, I think of the letter Y as reminding me of how dualistic the ripple level is!
 10. This chant can be acted out. There are at least two ways (arms wide with fingers making a two sign) to relate to *anything*: A small-mind way (hands to head, head down) and a large minded way (head up, hands up and wide) Choose Large mind! Finger pointed forward.
 11. Whether we are on the arc of ascent or the arc of descent bringing an observing/listening self to bear is the first step toward freedom—freedom to choose and to learn from choices. Finally, catching glimpses of the deeper oceanic forces helps us to remember how deeply we are interconnected. To see the whole in each holy particular person, creature, and event.

So, to summarize: I am using the term practice in a particular way—a way illuminated by the lake analogy. The term, as I am using it, includes the usual sense of practicing a sport, i.e., doing over and over what is required for mastery. Yet practice here invokes something more. We need to Go to Z, that is, we need to release from identifying with the surface events and commentaries. The first release is to actualize the observing/listening, compassionate witness self. Perhaps we may think of three R's:

- *Receive* life in abundance, gratefully.
- *Release*—in two steps: First release from the surface to activate the observing self—Go to Z. Move from the mind to the heart. Move to the midpoint of the lake. Second, having become aware of both outer events and how quickly we add interpretation and emotional reactions, release from those constricting stories and negative emotions that no longer serve.
- *Return* to the core of who we are and always have been—always loved, already forgiven, forever a part of all that is.

When we are awake and alert, we travel a path with a heart, a spiral path where time and the timeless intersect. It is a path where we can bring the mind into the heart and discover daily that “There is a polish for everything, and the polish for the heart is remembrance of the One.”¹²

Now, with this long prologue to set the context for thinking of spirituality, what does Thomas Berry bring to this? First, Thomas writes:

The earth itself is
the primary physician,
the primary lawgiver,

12. The saying: There is a polish for everything and the polish for the heart is remembrance of God—or “of the One” as I am rendering it—comes from the Prophet Muhammad. See Kabir Edmund Helminski, *Living Presence: A Sufi Way to Mindfulness and the Essential Self* (New York: Jeremy P. Tacher/Perigee Books, 1992), 67.

the primary revelation of the divine,
 primary scientist,
 primary technologist,
 primary commercial venture,
 primary artist,
 primary educator, and primary agent in whichever other activity
 we find in human affairs.¹³

Here we hear Thomas's declaration that Earth is the primary exemplar and teacher in every area of human concern. It is revelatory. So much so that Thomas came to call himself a "geologian." Earth—though now in the context of an evolving cosmos—is again at the center.

Spirituality always tends to union/communion—union with our deepest ground and highest goal. Communion with all our kin...of all species. Spirituality has not always been thought of as communal through and through. Far less has it been thought of as radically arising from love of Earth and all creatures. But Thomas certainly saw it thus.

The Vietnamese Buddhist teacher, Thich Nhat Hanh, coined the term "interbeing" in order to highlight this radically relational approach. He wrote:

If you are a poet, you will see clearly that there is a cloud floating in this sheet of paper. Without a cloud, there will be no rain; without rain, the trees cannot grow; without trees, we cannot make paper.... So we can say that the cloud and the paper *inter-are*. "Interbeing" is a word that is not in the dictionary yet, but if we combine the prefix "inter-" with the verb "to be," we have a new verb, inter-be.¹⁴

I believe we can take this approach further. Call it the movement from the five seductive S's—to the five Illustrious Inters:

13. Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1988), 107.

14. Thich Nhat Hanh, *Peace is Every Step* (New York: Bantam Books, 1991), 95.

1. from *scarcity*—to—*intersufficiency*;
2. from *separateness*—to—*interbeing*
(interconnection, interdependence)
3. from *seen only*—to—*interweaving of seen and subtle dimensions*;
4. from *short-term only*—to—*intergenerational time*;
5. from *superiority over*—to—*interdoing*
(intercollaboration with, or intersynergy)

The lake analogy emphasizes turning tasks into spiritual practices. Thomas does not present us with such practices. And this is a limitation. He does, however, lay the groundwork by coming from a cross-cultural frame, one that honors East and West and that has place both for the wisdom of first peoples and the teachings of the great wisdom ways that have arisen in multiple centers over vast stretches of time. And Thomas wished for new rituals, not only following the cycles of seasons, but also, as he points out in *The Universe Story*, the transformative moments in Earth's unfolding.

Furthermore, Thomas recognized that all of our enterprises and all of our systems of guidance are *semper reformanda*—ever in need of reform and renewal. Without this faiths of all sorts become rigid ideologies which then seek to resort to force and violence to win their way. The way forward is captured in what I call the Great Work mantra:

I do not do the Great Work for myself alone.
 I do not do the Great Work by myself alone.
 I do not do the Great Work by my own powers alone.

I wish to end my tribute to Thomas's view of interspirituality with a story from Rilke. The tale begins in a churchyard. The narrator is talking to a gravedigger.

"You know," he says, "in olden times people prayed like this"—he

spread his arm wide, involuntarily feeling his breast expand at the gesture.

In those days God would cast himself into all these human abysses, full of despair and darkness, and only reluctantly did he return into his heavens, which unnoticed, he drew down ever closer over Earth.

But a new faith began. As it could not make humans understand wherein its new God differed from their old one (for as soon as they began to praise him, they promptly recognized the one old God here too), the promulgator of the new commandment changed the manner of praying. He taught the folding of hands and declared: See, *thus* does our God wish to be implored.... Now when God next looked down upon Earth, he was frightened. Besides the many folded hands, many Gothic cathedrals had been built, and so the hands and the roofs, alike steep and sharp, stretched pointing towards him like the weapons of an enemy.... God turned back into his heavens, and when he saw that the steeples and the new prayers were growing in pursuit of him, he departed out of his domain at the other side and thus eluded the chase. He was himself astonished to find, out beyond his radiant home, a beginning darkness that received him silently, and with a curious feeling he went on and on in this dusk that reminded him of the hearts of humans.

Then for the first time it occurred to him that the heads of humans are lucid, but their hearts full of a similar darkness; and a longing came over him to dwell in the hearts of humans and no longer to move through the clear, cold wakefulness of their thinking. Well, God has continued on his way. Ever denser grows the darkness around him, and the night through which he presses on has something of the fragrant warmth of fecund clods of Earth. And in a little while the roots will reach out towards him with the old beautiful gesture of wide prayer. There is nothing wiser than the circle.¹⁵

15. Rainer Maria Rilke, "A Tale of Death and a Strange Postscript Thereto" in *Stories of God*, trans. M. D. Herter Norton (New York: W.W. Norton &

The key is this: the emergent will be communal through and through—like the communion of saints or the mystical body, a vast communion of the living and the dead and of all beings known and unknown. The emergent will not be me but a *we* vast as the universe and specific as each event or creature that comes to us.

I close with the poem “Wild Geese” by Mary Oliver:

You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees
for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your body
love what it loves.
Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.
Meanwhile the world goes on.
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain
Are moving across the landscapes,
Over the prairies and the rivers.
Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,
Are heading home again.
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
The world offers itself to your imagination,
Calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting—
Over and over announcing your place
in the family of things.¹⁶

Company, Inc., 1932) 87-89 (modified for gender inclusiveness).

16. Mary Oliver, “Wild Geese,” in *Risking Everything: 110 Poems of Love and Revelation*, ed. Roger Housden (New York: Harmony Books, 2003), 6.