

Cultivating an Ecozoic Consciousness

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On the verge of self-publishing a book of reflections and photographs of the San Francisco Bay Area, I discovered my photographer had unintentionally erased all his high-resolution images. Even after taking his computer to our local Mac repair expert, we couldn't retrieve the files. Subjected to the most sophisticated recovery program, the computer sat in the shop for two days. The images were gone. Permanently.

I sat with the pain for several days, mourning the loss of the spectacular photographs: the young osprey in his nest staring curiously at a visiting hummingbird; the hungry bobcat searching for food; the amazing grace of kites, hawks, and egrets. It was difficult to let them go. Yet these were just photographs—more could be made simply by the photographer patiently taking his time. They were a human creation on a human time scale. Not so for actual species.

Scientists tell us we are living through the sixth mass extinction, only this one is of our own making. Human activity on the planet is destroying as many as 30,000 species each year. While I had read this many times, the loss of the photographs brought me to the edge of despair, allowed me to experience the real loss of life in a deeper way. A ferocious loneliness took hold of me.

The capacity to wake up—to open our hearts to the horrors we have committed in the name of so-called progress—is an essential first step in our shift to what Thomas Berry calls the Ecozoic era. This is a time when humans will transition from being a destructive presence on the planet to living in a mutually enhancing relationship with the entire community of life.

To achieve this new intimacy with Earth, we will need to sit with our grief: The vast primordial forests, now cut down; passenger pigeons filling the skies for miles on end, now extinct; seas churning with the froth and foam from billions of creatures, now rife with chemically-induced dead zones. As one woman lamented watching a coal company decapitate a mountain above her Appalachian home,

“It took 300 million years to create that mountain, and it’s never coming back.”

The Cenozoic era is coming to an end. Berry calls this sixty-five million year period the “most brilliant phase of life’s expansion on the planet”—the era of flowering plants, trees, the rise of mammals, and the great bio-diverse rainforests. It is necessary for us to recognize the damage humans have wrought in these final stages of the Cenozoic. It is even more necessary for us to cast off the core belief that has allowed humans to create such planetary devastation—the belief that we are separate and superior to the natural world. This is a very recent and very unusual form of consciousness. Only in modern industrial times have humans viewed the Earth as a mere resource.

At its core then, the shift to the Ecozoic era is a shift of human consciousness. We are called to understand, as Berry writes, “Nothing survives by itself. Nothing is fulfilled in itself. Nothing has existence or meaning or fulfillment except in union with the larger community of existence.”¹

This is an old awareness, grasped intuitively by indigenous people and mystics, and realized afresh by the scientific understanding of the Universe Story. Through our 14 billion year evolutionary history we find we are connected to all beings throughout all time. It is the universe and Earth that are primary; we are derivative. We arose from Earth as surely as the mountain and the oak tree.

In ushering in the Ecozoic era, we are tasked with sharing our common origin story—the Universe Story. How we are connected to everything else in the universe. How the foundation of every human endeavor must be rooted in this New Story. Through song, dance, poetry and ritual, we invite the story into the depth of our beings. How can we align with the dynamics of the planet so that its deep creativity might unfold within us? As we absorb this new understanding of what it is to be human, we are being drawn into a new intimacy with life.

The Ecozoic era offers a unique opportunity to reclaim the enchantment of the Cenozoic era, not by retrieving the abundance of species we have lost, for this is impossible, but through a passionate

1. Thomas Berry, *The Sacred Universe* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 138.

engagement with all life forms. “We discover the Earth in the depths of our being through participation, not through isolation or exploitation,” Berry writes.

In my work with poetry and journal therapy, I have come to see the primary text of the world as the world itself—our book of wisdom. With every species that is eliminated, pages of learning disappear. There is no time to waste. Earth’s destruction is our own destruction. We must feel our grief, assume our responsibility, and move toward a future in which intimacy with Earth is primary, informing the unfolding of this new era in every respect, from economics and religion to arts and science.

Thomas Berry preferred the term ecozoic to ecological, because it places the coming geobiological period in its proper context, as part of the sequencing of the ages of Earth. It also implies a call for humanity to fully participate in aligning with the evolutionary impulse of the universe in ushering in this new Earth period. This is an audacious and daunting challenge. But we are supported on this sacred journey by billions of years of cosmological evolution and the symphony of life it has produced.

Today, we are learning how fragile Earth is, and simultaneously just how infinitely precious. Thomas Berry reminds us that Earth is a one-time endowment. There are no computer experts or nature photographers to help us recover from irreversible damage to bio-systems or extinction of species. Cherishing Earth is at the heart of the Ecozoic era.