

**The Great Work
Our Way into the Future
by
Thomas Berry**

Three-part group study Tuesdays on Zoom November 19th, December 3rd, and December 17, 2024, 4:00 to 5:30pm

To the children, to all the children. To the children who swim beneath the waves of the sea, to those who live in the soils of the Earth, to the children of the flowers in the meadows and the trees in the forest, to all those children who roam over the land. And the winged ones who fly with the winds, to the human children too, that all the children may go together into the future in the full diversity of their regional communities.

Session 1: Tuesday, November 19th. Read Introduction and pp. 1 thru 71. Chapters 1-6.

Introduction:

Key themes: The effects of human presence on planet Earth; Creating a mutually enhancing mode of human dwelling on planet Earth; Reflecting on the wonder of Earth; Our future rests decisively on our capacity for intimacy in our human-Earth relations; the Universe is composed of Sacred subjects not objects to be exploited.

Chapter 1: The Great Work: pp. 1-11.

Key themes: Great Work moments in history; Assault on indigenous peoples of North America by the European occupation of this continent; Today's Great Work is to carry out the transition from a period of human devastation of the planet to a period when humans would be present to the planet in a mutually beneficial way; effects of industrialization and increased population growth on the planet; acknowledgement that there is a single integral community of the Earth including two-legged and all non-two legged; We were chosen by some power beyond ourselves to facilitate the transition of the human to a benign mode of presence on Earth; We have been given the gifts to address the problem.

Questions to Ponder:

Do you think we still have time to transition to a mutually enhancing mode of presence on Earth?

What feelings do you have regarding the state of the world, massive extinctions, and climate change disasters?

Chapter 2: The Meadow across the Creek: pp. 12-20.

Key themes: There is deep mystery of the Divine within nature; How moments in nature can affect our lives dramatically and influence us throughout a lifetime: If our economic, judicial, political, and religious actions foster sustainability and enhancement of the environment these actions are good and should be maintained. If they degrade the environment they should not be done; possibly the industrial age has cut us off from this deep mystery in nature; the indigenous peoples have an intimacy with the natural world that has been lost with industrialization; Many no longer read the “Big Book” of nature; We no longer coordinate our human celebrations with the great liturgy of the heavens; Children instinctively are attracted to profound experiences in the natural world. Education is key; Viewing the universe as a collection of objects rather than as a communion of subjects, the world has become an “it” rather than a “thou”; Humans have a great capacity for celebration and rituals that can realign us with the great liturgy of the universe; the present isn’t a time for desperation but for hopeful activity; The healing of the planet is a communal endeavor.

Questions to Ponder:

Have you ever experience a moment like Thomas Berry did as an 11 year old boy when he crossed that creek and observed the meadow with the blooming white lilies? If so, how did that moment resinate throughout your lifetime?

Reflective Exercise:

If you have had a mystical moment like Berry’s meadow experience, take some quiet time to just sit and reflect on the deep mystery within that moment and what the universe was trying to communicate to you.

Or, just find a spot in nature and take in the beauty and mystery that surrounds you, letting your mind calm and your breath slow down. Relax and enjoy the mystery of this marvelous creation we are part of.

Chapter 3: The Earth Story: pp. 21-32.

Key themes: Our Great Work involves a new understanding of the planet Earth; the high mountain ranges give the continents a foreboding majesty; Our planet is awesome; Modern science tells us that the Earth was born out of the larger processes of the universe but we are lacking in any deep feeling for the mystique of the Earth or any depth of understanding, we treat the Earth like a lumber yard; The indigenous cultures have a more intimate relationship with Earth as demonstrated through their ceremony and rituals; We lose intimacy with the natural world once we take on the attitude of the secular world; We cannot do without our earlier experiences of the numinous presence manifested in the great Cosmic Liturgy, our humanistic traditions, our art, poetry and literature; We ourselves, as intelligent beings, activate one of the

deepest dimensions of the universe; it is more important that we integrate upward; There is a psychic within to all things; The Law of Complexity/Consciousness is at work here; The universe is self organizing in an irreversible emergent process, and at every level there is a basic tendency towards self organization; The human is integral to the universe.

Questions to Ponder:

What do you think Berry is saying when he says “Our Great Work involves a new understanding of the planet Earth? How do you see us going forward to promote the transformation to a sustainable future?

Chapter 4: The North American Continent: pp. 33-47.

Key themes: We need to know the story of our continent (once Turtle Island, now North America); The Laurentian Hills (the Canadian Shield) in eastern Canada is the oldest rock core on our continent; Following the massive extinction some 67 million years ago (the end of dinosaurs), the trees, flowers, birds, and animals as we know them came into being; The vegetables of this continent altered the diet of the world; The Indigenous peoples spiritual insight into transhuman powers operating through the natural world established the religions of Native Americans as among the most impressive spiritual traditions we know; The First Nations rituals and ceremony point to their intimate relations with the natural world; The moment when the Europeans arrived on the North American continent could be considered as one of the more fateful moments in history, not only of this continent but of the entire planet; the concept of Private property came into being in North America via the Colonists.

Questions to Ponder:

How do you view the differences in views of the natural world between the European colonists and the Native Americans? How can we re-integrate some of these values of the First Peoples into our current culture? North America was gifted with one of most diverse and rich resource environments on the planet; how do you feel that it has been so abused and depleted in the past 200 years?

Chapter 5: The Wild and the Sacred: pp. 48-55

Key themes: We are not here to control, we are here to become integral with the larger earth community; The mystery of our world is far greater than ourselves; the community itself and each of its members has a wild and creative component that is its deepest reality, its most profound mystery; Wildness we might consider as the root of the authentic spontaneities of any being; Something in the wild depths of the human soul finds its fulfillment in the experience of nature’s violent moments; The human, perhaps could only have appeared in such a period of grandeur; for the inner life of the human depends immediately on the outer world of nature.

Questions to Ponder:

How can we humans recapture a sustainable relationship with the natural world and all of its mystery? How does the natural world influence your inner spiritual life?

Chapter 6: The Viable Human: pp. 56-71.

Key themes: We need to move from our human centered to an Earth centered norm of reality and value; The recovery of the natural world in its full splendor will require not only a new economic system but a conversion experience deep in the psychic structure of the human; Reflection on the question of possession and use of the Earth needs to be considered in a more profound manner than Western society has ever done previously; Going forward, our laws and court rulings must embrace a more mutually enhancing human-Earth relationship.

Questions to Ponder:

Why does our economic system lead to destruction of the natural world?; Do plants, trees, creeks, mountains and non-two legged's have rights? How does a conversion experience deep in the psychic structure of the human come to fruition?

Session 2: Tuesday, December 3rd; read pp. 72-135; Chapters 7-11.

Chapter 7: The University: pp. 72-85

Key themes: The university has a central role in the direction and fulfillment of the Great Work; The political, religious, intellectual, and economic establishments are failing in their basic purposes for the same reason. They all presume a radical discontinuity between the nonhuman and the human modes of being, with all the rights and all inherent values given to the human; the university now prepares students for their role in extending human domination over the natural world; Funding by large corporations influence research and studies within our universities; We are caught in a severe cultural disorientation that is sustained by the university; The U.S. Constitution in its present form and interpretation remain in support of the status quo that does not support the rights of the natural world; The United Nations World Charter is a powerful document that addresses social and ecological justice; The university may be one of the principle supports of the pathology that is so ruinous to the planet; Rene Decartes de-souled the Earth and led us towards the mechanization of the natural environment; It is time for the universities to rethink themselves and what they are teaching regarding the transition from the end of the Cenozoic Era to the Ecozoic Era.

Questions to Ponder:

How will universities change their curricula to teach sustainability and support of the natural world especially in the areas of law, economics, religious studies and education? Earth is a single reality composed of extraordinary diversity, complexity and beauty; To experience this wonder and to enter into intimate relations with the various life communities of all regions of the planet, seems to be the high purpose of human presence on the Earth? Have you considered the corporate influence and control of our universities? What if anything should be done about this corporate influence?

Chapter 8: Ecological Geography: pp. 86-99

Key themes: Earth is a single reality composed of a diversity beyond all understanding or description and this diversity gives Earth both its endless wonder and its functional integrity; To experience this wonder and to enter into intimate relations with the various life communities of the various Earth regions seems to be the high purpose of human presence on the Earth; Human intelligence gave the human the ability to adapt more extensively to the outer world, this same intelligence gave humans the capacity to fashion for themselves a variety of inner cultural worlds; These cultural realms would constitute not only the inner determination of the human, they would also determine the relation of the humans to the other modes of being. In a special manner humans, in their adaptation to geographical environment, would require a conscious understanding of the place of their dwelling; What also distinguished the human mode of being was the spirit powers present throughout the geographical region, this is a unique trait of the human; We need a "Total Earth Science; Earth's ability to self regulate, homeostasis; Humans are now altering the planet on the scale of glacial periods; The law of limits keep things in check; Property rights over land provided the basis for occupation and unrestrained exploitation of the land; Earth literacy is a term used for educational programs; Our study of ecology must lead to a greater intimacy with our natural surroundings, only intimacy can save us from our present commitment to a plundering industrial economy.

Questions to Ponder:

How familiar with your local and regional community are you and how it functions and the past history of the area, especially the indigenous peoples history on the local land?

Reflective Exercise:

Do a little research about the local area in which you live? (how it was formed geologically, the biology in the area, the Native American peoples who lived in your area?)

Chapter 9: Ethics and Ecology: pp. 100- 106

Key themes: The analogy of the Titanic to Earth and the wrong thinking that led to the Titanic tragedy; Macro power with Micro wisdom; We are experiencing a paralysis in critical judgement in how to deal with our planetary situation; Our European language is very anthropocentric; Our religions have placed a higher value on the human rather than the natural world; Our legal system fosters human rights over the rights of non-human entities; Commercial rights to profit dominate over the need for natural systems to survive; When in a position of grave danger we believe we will be saved by some trans earthly intervention within the functioning of the planet; We find difficulty in accepting life on life's terms; The technological fix had its roots in the 17th century and Francis Bacon, science will support us, through scientific manipulation; Descartes established an absolute separation of spiritual and material worlds; Isaac Newton added mechanization; What is being demanded now is a transformation of our attitudes that are deeply bound to our cultural patterns that to us seem to be part of our genetic coding; Are we experiencing a revelatory experience wherein human consciousness awakens to the grandeur and sacred quality of the Earth process?

Questions to ponder:

Where do you see signs that we may be experiencing an awakening of human consciousness around the grandeur and sacredness of the Earth processes?

Chapter 10: The New Political Alignment: pp. 107-116

Key themes: The older tension in human affairs between conservative and liberal based on social orientation is being replaced with the tension between developers and ecologists based on orientation toward the natural world, this tension is becoming the primary tension in human affairs; The political tension between the empires and the colonies is being replaced by an economic tension between village peoples of the world with their organic modes of agriculture and the transnational corporations with their industrial agriculture.

Questions to ponder:

What changes in our political system are needed to address what is happening to our environment, i.e., climate change, mass extinctions to name a few.

Chapter 11: The Corporation Story: pp. 117-135

Key themes: Among the more significant concerns of the transition period in the 21st century must be the modern industrial, commercial, and financial corporations.

Questions to Ponder:

Can corporations be transformed into organizations that support sustainability, healing of the environment or do they continue to focus on maximum profits for their CEO's and shareholders?

Session 3: Tuesday, December 17th: pp.136-201; Chapters 12-17

Reflective Exercise:

Reflect on your spiritual upbringing, did it resemble a static Cosmos paradigm (static) or a Cosmogogenesis paradigm? (dynamic)

Chapter 12: The Extractive Economy: pp. 136-149

Key themes: The biblical-Christian emphasis on the spirituality of the human joined with the traditions of Greek humanism to create an anthropocentric view of the universe; During the Black Plaque, the spiritual and humanistic alienation was deepened into a feeling that the natural world was an actual threat to both the physical and spiritual well-being of the human; During the last two decades of the 19th Century, there was a transition from an organic economy to an extractive economy, some of the largest corporations were founded during this period; the U.S. legal system bonded with the entrepreneurs and their commercial ventures; The industrial nations overpowered the smaller nations and used this to their advantage; Both private and public universities are heavily funded by large corporations; The ancient law of reciprocity, whoever receives must also give; Nature produces diversity;

Questions to ponder:

Is it possible to transform the large corporations into mutually enhancing organizations, what is the fate of international corporations?; Is it possible to move from non-renewable energy economy to a renewable energy economy?;

Chapter 13: The Petroleum Interval: pp. 150-158

Key themes: The petroleum industry has dominated the twentieth century; The story of the twenty-first century will be the termination of the petroleum phase and transition to renewable energy methods; The village of Gaviotas in Columbia may be a model for sustainable living; The history of the oil industry; Oil reserves are being depleted; Plastics derive from oil, the medical industry is heavily dependent on plastics; toxic wastes related to chemicals, etc. derived from petroleum.

Questions to ponder:

What can we do to lessen our dependence on fossil fuels? Are oil companies too large and politically powerful to move to non-renewable sources of energy?

Chapter 14: Reinventing the Human: pp. 159-165

Key themes: The historical mission of our times is to reinvent the human—at the species level, with critical reflection, within the community of life-systems, in a time-developmental context, by means of story and shared dream experience; Radical new cultural forms are needed; Bio-region economic models are needed; Humans need to develop reciprocal economic relationships with other life-forms to provide a pattern of mutual support; We need the art of intimate communion as well as technical knowledge of, the various components of the natural world; Re-invent the human within the community of the life systems; The human formation is governed by the 3 principles of differentiation, subjectivity, and communion; The sacred depth of the individual; We have moved from Cosmos to Cosmogogenesis;

Questions to Ponder:

Do you think re-inventing the human is possible, and how do we accomplish this re-invention:? Is an economic system that relies on a more regional and local approach possible? What is meant by a movement from Cosmos to Cosmogogenesis?

Chapter 15: The Dynamics of the Future: pp. 166-175

Key themes: As we move through the first quarter of the 21st century, we observe a widespread awakening to the wonder of the Earth; The human venture depends absolutely on the awe and reverence and joy in the Earth and all that lives and grows upon the Earth; The present danger to the planet is the first conscious intrusion on this scale into the natural rhythms of the Earth process; The early humans realized physical and psychic forms of energy were intimately related. They found the meaning of existence as they responded to the energies about them; In its human expression the universe is able to reflect on itself and enjoy the grandeur in a special mode of conscious self-awareness; As physical resources become less available, psychic energy must support the human project in a special manner; There is a reciprocal give and take between the human and the universe; The Universe must be experienced as the “Great Self”; Physical energy is depleted with use (entropy), psychic energy is amplified with use, (music, the arts, celebration, ritual, etc.); If the human is microcosmos, the cosmos is macroanthropos; We are not lacking in the dynamic forces to needed to create the future but these energies, in the ultimate sense, is ours not by domination but by invocation.

Questions to ponder:

Do you see a widespread awakening to the wonder of the Earth as you observe world events? What are your gifts or talents you give to the universe, what does the universe give you back?

Chapter 16: The Fourfold Wisdom pp. 176-195

Key themes: There is a fourfold wisdom available to us, wisdom of indigenous peoples, women, wisdom of classical traditions, and the wisdom of science; The small self of the individual reaches its completion in the Great Self of the universe; The human emerges from the larger universe and discovers itself in this universe; St. Paul in Colossians indicates that in the mystical Christ “all things hold together;” The guidance, the inspiration and the energy needed is available. The accomplishment of the Great Work is the task not simply of the human community but of the entire planet Earth. Even beyond Earth, it is the Great Work of the universe itself.

Questions to ponder:

Do you feel a part of the “Great Work? If so, how is that manifesting in your life? During these troubled times, how do you take care of yourself? Have you had experiences where you felt a unity with the entire universe? If you feel comfortable sharing these experiences please do so. Do you think as Thomas Berry does, that there is a fourfold wisdom available to us? Do you see psychic energy at work in your life, in your community? Where?

Chapter 17: Moments of Grace: pp. 196-201

Key themes: Today we are privileged to experience a cosmological, historical and religious moment of grace; We are experiencing a moment in history where concern for the environment must become “the central organizing principle of civilization.”; Every being is intimately present to and immediately influencing every other being; A new historical period is beginning, the Ecozoic Era; The transformation must take place rapidly or the moment of grace may pass us by; A successful transformation involves calling on the powers of the universe to support our efforts.

Questions to ponder:

How do you see your role in the transformation to a sustainable world?; Do you agree that we are experiencing a moment of grace? How do you feel about Thomas Berry’s entire premise in “The Great Work?”