

*Geographies of Earth, Sea and Spirit:  
Teilhard de Chardin, Thomas Berry and the Great Work*

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October 31, 2019

As we come together to consider the visionary work of Thomas Berry, we are bringing with us different geographies of land, sea and spirit. We carry these places into the room, and, whatever and wherever they are, they are palpable. They are guiding and informing our discussion. They are, I imagine, places of indescribable beauty which invoke within you a sense of exaltation. At the same time, they may be places of extreme vulnerability, for which you may ache and even weep. Our memories of the Earth may seem intangible and immaterial. Yet, the actual places remain. Even if they are altered or covered up by human construction, the physical places we know and remember are speaking to us, and they are doing so with urgency. They are inspiring our part, no matter how small, in the Great Work.

Geography matters. I mean, the particular places on the surface of the planet that we carry within us matter. They matter in practical ways. The places we know and hold onto become pathways into the collective journey of the universe, into the great communion of which Berry spoke. For Berry, it was a particular meadow across the creek from his home in North Carolina through which he first found himself as an 11-year old child falling into the larger cosmos, and from which he would never leave.<sup>1</sup> From that point he was always within this place, and this place was always within him. Place, person, memory, and spirit became indistinguishable. This was the intersection of time and space through which he viewed and understood the Great Work. It became his portal into the cosmos. I imagine he is still there in that living meadow and that this living meadow is still within him.

Whether we experience one clear, distinct or even mystical encounter with the Earth such as the one between young Thomas and his meadow, or whether we are formed by a dim and perhaps indistinguishable collection of places, there is no doubt that these places are formative and that they are still communicating to us. Even if we are immersed in modern, disconnected, urban, and conventional ways of living and thinking, and we cannot hear as our bodies are designed to hear, the geographies within our lives are speaking to us in particular ways and at significant moments.

What then is your geography, the one that brought you into this room and into this moment? Is there a living meadow inside of you? Have you been back to it? I mean, have your thoughts returned to it? Has this place returned to you? This is not an abstract question or a simple exercise in remembrance. We are here because we are inspired and guided by the work of Thomas Berry. We can be certain that both Thomas Berry, and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin before him, were listening carefully to the geographies of earth, sea and spirit which informed and moved through their writings. These geographies are moving through us now like the propagation of energy in waves. I imagine we could gather together the writings of Teilhard and Berry and follow each one back to its source in the rock, the soil, the water and the misty air.

Given the ways in which geography inspired and guided Thomas Berry and his Great Work, it is natural for us to consider our own encounter with the Earth at this particular moment. I invite you to feel the fullness of yourself within the room: your body against the chairs and your feet against the floor; to consider where you are in this room made by human design: layers of brick, metal, stone and wood that are strong, orderly and protective; within the illumination of artificial light; and immersed in the vibrations of our human-made systems. This is our built environment and our self-made enclosure within it. Beneath this room and Copley Hall, we can give thanks to the ancestral lands of the indigenous peoples of the Anacostia and Potomac River watersheds.<sup>2</sup> We acknowledge within these lands the layers and layers of ancient Earth: the soil that is dynamic, alive and regenerative; the groundwater coursing through it; the rocky deposits and bedrock telling an older story, and an earthly creativity emerging across millions of years in the molten rock far below. Above this building, we can imagine the infinite realm of energy and matter that is moving, creating, destroying and forming. This very room provides a pathway into the cosmos, and we are emerging and rising into it.

In *The Human Phenomenon*, Teilhard describes manifestations of matter and spirit in which the creativity of the universe becomes visible. He writes, “Surely something is accumulating somewhere, ready to spring up for another leap forward.”<sup>3</sup> This is a powerful statement. Beyond a simple expression of optimism or faith, these words are rooted in the bedrock, the soil, and the movements of the cosmos. They exude a confidence as well as a kind of beauty. Within the vast, integrated web of all things, something is accumulating within the collective consciousness of humanity and all things. Through the nuanced language Teilhard and Berry use in their work, the substance of their physical being, and the dynamic movement of the universe within them, there is something is forming, rising up and shining through. Teilhard spoke of a creative power within the universe, the omega, and the idea that the future is already in the present. Omega, he writes, “... already exists and is at work right here and now in the deepest part of the thinking mass...”<sup>4</sup> If, as he claims, something is coming together somewhere, ready to spring up, perhaps even right here in this room, there is an emergence. There is in our gathering a common purpose and understanding, as well as a movement forward. There is, therefore, an awakening and a transformation. As Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry write in *The Universe Story*, a great conversation is taking place within the universe community.<sup>5</sup>

Different geographies illuminate this conversation in unique ways. A few months ago, I moved to the circumpolar north. Alaska is a place that is often seen through a romanticized lens. It offers vistas of dramatic mountain chains, long-lasting sunsets, spectacular displays of the aurora borealis, pristine landscapes, and a sparse human population.<sup>6</sup> Yet, moving to the city of Anchorage, and taking with me the words and vision of Teilhard and Berry, I have encountered the earth, sea and cosmos with a bold and uncommon urgency. I find Teilhard and Berry are speaking to me in new ways. Immersed within earthly vibrations more powerful even than those on the coast of Maine, my own childhood version of Thomas’ living meadow, I am entering into deeper geographies of place and spirit.

The mountains themselves invite an experience of awe that demands a response and a search for meaning. Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry describe mountains as agencies that participate in the universe: “A human being... can climb the mountain and get hit by something so profound, at so deep a level, that the human will never be quite the same... The dynamic of the mountain is accomplishing something in the universe, is acting, is altering reality.”<sup>7</sup> If the mountains indeed have agency and they are accomplishing something, even altering our reality, they are doing so through our human encounter with them. This is an earthly language that is primal, engaging and revelatory. This is, as Berry writes in *The Dream of the Earth*, “the continuing revelation that takes place in and through the Earth.”<sup>8</sup>

Even within the city of Anchorage, the revelatory mountains are overpowering. One loses sight of any boundary between urban environment and wilderness. There is the close proximity to what is wild, the sense of remoteness, the strong and ancient presence of land and water, and the independent lifestyle. The energy of the urban landscape is unique with the constant drone of the air traffic, the hectic pace set by fast-moving cars, multi-lane roadways, and crowded intersections alongside enormous wilderness spaces. Deep inside this geography lies an ancient and indigenous presence, a palpable sense of suffering and injustice, and the needs of a great many people on the margins. This is a human and earthly terrain that is both profoundly beautiful and extremely fragile.

The circumpolar north represents the “ground zero” of the climate crisis.<sup>9</sup> This is a geography in which human beings who are attuned to the Earth peer directly into the catastrophe unfolding before them, while others seek new opportunities for access and exploitation. It is increasingly subject to resource extraction and human ignorance. It finds its place on the map no longer because of an outdated, romantic worldview but because it is considered to be “pivotal.”<sup>10</sup> To those who are listening, the particular geography of Alaska delivers a narrative with layers of earthly and human history, spirituality, and political tension.<sup>11</sup> This is also a place that tells its story within an earthly and human lament: through the melting of glaciers and the erosion of the land along the Arctic coast. It is speaking through indigenous communities, in the disappearing villages of Newtok and Kivalina where evacuations and re-locations are replacing the spiritual and physical reality of being in one place after generations. For ancient human communities, sacred geographies are literally crumbling into the sea.<sup>12</sup>

Within this particular geography I am falling into the future. It is as if time is accelerating and a veil is lifting. I can see clearly what I could only glimpse before, and I recall the ancient reference to the limits of human vision: “For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.”<sup>13</sup> Instead of existing in an obscure realm of the now, I am moving through the physical world into the clarity of the future. I don’t see through a darkened glass anymore. Instead, I am face to face with something larger than me, and I cannot escape. I am being swept along, seeing firsthand so many things melting, changing, and suffering. I stand on the rock left by a disappearing ice-field, walk along streams of glacial meltwater, and feel the premature release of ancient energy from the Earth. Walking into the remains of a recent ice field, I bear witness to the evaporation of an earthly

testimony. My human body becomes the tiny container of a great, emergent story, and I hear in the wind the lament moving through the empty valley and across the rock.

According to both Teilhard and Berry, we are living at a turning point. Teilhard writes, "... there is a fundamental change of course for the world under way in us, and it threatens to crush us."<sup>14</sup> The accelerating pace of the climate crisis is just one of the ways we are being crushed. Confronted with a planet in peril, however, humanity is also changing. Berry describes a comprehensive change in consciousness coming over the human community.<sup>15</sup> He describes a new vision and a new energy coming into being.<sup>16</sup> Within the crisis of the Earth, there is an awakening. Life itself as a rise in consciousness according to Teilhard: "... internal energy is secretly rising at certain points beneath the mantle of the Earth in bloom."<sup>17</sup> Teilhard was writing well before the current extent of the Earth crisis. Yet, the realization that internal energy is rising up within the mantle of the Earth, and that the Earth is blooming even within crisis, offers a moving testament. We can glimpse something happening within human consciousness. Within the alarming dimensions of our earthly story there is in our contemporary existence a sense of hope.

Perhaps this is what Berry would describe as a moment of grace.<sup>18</sup> The physical realities of the climate crisis, such as the receding glaciers and eroding coastlines, offer a place of confrontation with our earthly home but not only in the catastrophic sense. If humanity is entering into a phase of consciousness in which it can see itself as part of the earth and the universe, if it can embrace "the communion of subjects"<sup>19</sup> of which it is a part, then perhaps human beings are entering a moment of grace that they cannot yet see. This sense of change and movement is the Great Work in all realms of our human endeavor. Berry expresses this optimism with his visionary and hopeful proclamation: "We are not lacking in the dynamic forces needed to create the future. We live immersed in a sea of energy beyond all comprehension."<sup>20</sup>

If we return our attention to this room and our presence within it, we can consider once again where we are: grounded in the soil and rock below us and integrated within the cosmos around us. We can sense that we are immersed in a sea of energy beyond our comprehension. Teilhard describes critical points, leaps, and changes of state in the course of development. In every domain, he writes, intuition is bursting upon the accumulation of facts.<sup>21</sup> As we listen to each other and to the Earth, gaining in knowledge and growing in awareness, our collective intuition is rising up within the mantle of our planet in bloom. With the work of Teilhard and Berry speaking through us, and the geographies of this world moving within us, we are part of a deep interior current. Despite the overwhelming nature of our situation and the many ways we feel we are being 'crushed,' what we do matters. Every connection, inspiration and conversation is drawing us together and forward. Each one of us is carrying the vision of Teilhard and Berry into our own particular context and participating in a little moment of cosmological, historical or religious grace. The future is moving already in the present. This is a profoundly hopeful vision of an emergent reality, rooted in the vast, cosmic energy which we might call love, and offered to us in the darkest of times as a touchstone for what is real.

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Berry, *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future*, Reprint edition (New York: Broadway Books, 2000); p. 12.

<sup>2</sup> Indigenous Tribes of Washington, D.C.,” April 17, 2019, <http://www.ala.org/aboutala/indigenous-tribes-washington-dc>.

<sup>3</sup> Pierre Teilhard De Chardin, *Human Phenomenon: A New Edition and Translation of Le Phénomène Humain* by Sarah Appleton-Weber, trans. Sarah Appleton-Weber (Sussex Academic Press, 2003); p. 100.

<sup>4</sup> Teilhard, *The Human Phenomenon*, p. 209.

<sup>5</sup> “For animals and plants, the universe is a chorus of voices. Only by heeding these can they find any chance of fulfillment in life. Only through a sensitivity to the voices of the forest can they find their way. But we are also beginning to understand in detail how the great conversation takes place within the universe community.” Swimme, Brian, and Thomas Berry. *The Universe Story*. 1st ed. San Francisco, Calif: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992. Chapter 2: Galaxies; p. 42.

<sup>6</sup> Julie Decker, *True North. Contemporary Art of the Circumpolar North*. Anchorage Museum, exhibit catalogue, 2012; p. 6.

<sup>7</sup> Swimme, Brian, and Thomas Berry. *The Universe Story*; p. 41.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth*. Reprint edition (Counterpoint, 2015); p. 137.

<sup>9</sup> Julie Decker, *True North. Contemporary Art of the Circumpolar North*; p. 6.

<sup>10</sup> Julie Decker, *True North. Contemporary Art of the Circumpolar North*; p. 7.

<sup>11</sup> Julie Decker, *True North. Contemporary Art of the Circumpolar North*; p. 6.

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.relocate-ak.org/>, accessed October 15, 2019; “Residents Of An Eroded Alaskan Village Are Pioneering A New One, In Phases,” <https://www.npr.org/2019/11/02/774791091/residents-of-an-eroded-alaskan-village-are-pioneering-a-new-one-in-phases>, accessed November 2, 2019.

<sup>13</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:12, King James Version.

<sup>14</sup> Teilhard, *The Human Phenomenon*, p. 148.

<sup>15</sup> “A comprehensive change in consciousness is coming over the human community... along with an enticing view of the possibilities before us.” Thomas Berry, *The Great Work*, p. 200.

<sup>16</sup> Thomas Berry, *The Great Work*, p. 198.

<sup>17</sup> Teilhard, *The Human Phenomenon*, p. 100.

<sup>18</sup> “There are cosmological and historical moments of grace as well as religious moments of grace. The present is one of those moments of transformation that can be considered as a cosmological, as well as a historical and a religious moment of grace.” Thomas Berry, *The Great Work*, p. 196.

<sup>19</sup> Berry, Thomas. *Evening Thoughts: Reflecting on Earth as Sacred Community* (pp. 18-19). Counterpoint Press. Kindle Edition.

<sup>20</sup> Thomas Berry, *The Great Work*, p. 175.

<sup>21</sup> “In every domain, when the magnitude of something has increased enough it abruptly changes its appearance, state, or nature. The curve doubles back, the surface reduces to a point, the solid crumbles, the liquid boils, the egg segments, intuition bursts upon the accumulated facts. There are all kinds of leaps in the course of development - critical points, changes of state, level of grade; this from now on is the only, but still true, way for science to conceive of a “first moment” and to detect it.” Teilhard, *The Human Phenomenon*, p. 42; This bursting of intuition is what Teilhard also describes as the “rise of inner sap spreading out in a forest of consolidated instincts.” Teilhard, *The Human Phenomenon*, p. 99.