

Knowing Who and Where We Are Among the White Lilies:

The Vision of Thomas Berry and Pope Francis

By Nancy G. Wright

Thomas Berry

. I remember most of all Thomas Berry's voice and his kindness. He was a bard, a teller of tales, an evocateur of wonder, a weaver of lament and woe, a grand designer of a new vision of beautiful immensity and intimacy. I use a word that is not in the dictionary, "evocateur," to convey his visionary writings, and compelling power toward change.

Sixteen-year old climate activist Greta Thunberg asks her TED talk audience..."Can you hear me?" Due to her diagnosis of Asperger's syndrome, she speaks only when necessary. Now she is driven by an essential question: why does virtually no one act as though we are in the catastrophe that we are in? As an evocateur, Thomas Berry asks similarly urgent questions. As I trace the development of Berry's vision, I also hear a strong resonance with the urgent voice of Pope Francis, who writes, "I urgently appeal...for a new dialogue about how we are shaping the future of our planet."¹ Just as for Thunberg, the question for us about Thomas Berry and Pope Francis is, can we really hear them? I am reminded that God calls to Adam and Eve in the Garden (Gen. 3:9), "Where are you?" Can we discover where we are and who we are through really hearing these three prophets?

A good place to start is with Berry's experience of lilies, which answered his questions about who he was and where he was on a particular May afternoon:

My own understanding of the Great Work began when I was quite young. At the time I was some eleven years old....the [new] house, ..., was situated on a slight incline. Down below was a

¹ Pope Francis, *Encyclical on Climate Change & Inequality: On Care for Our Common Home* Brooklyn, NY: Melville House Publishing, 2015), 10.

small creek and there across the creek was a meadow. It was an 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....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.²

What exactly is this feeling for what is “real and worthwhile in life”?

Thomas Berry was a person of both feeling and intellect, evoking the same in others. This combination defines his spiritual orientation. He writes, “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.”³

Thus, we learn from Berry that “natural cycles of transformation” deserve respect, and the freedom to follow their own courses. Perceptions of the essential rights of flourishing ecosystems such as meadows as wholes and in their innumerable parts often conveys an awareness both of wonder and a deep sense of companionship and meaning, basic to spiritual or religious orientation.

Notably, awestruck wonder doesn’t require vast landscapes for its evocation. As many meditation teachers suggest, Berry’s meadow shows that small scenes can inspire deeply meaningful experiences. This in part has to do with the capacities of the viewer. “The more meaning a person finds in the Maytime blooming of the lilies, the more awestruck a person might be in simply looking out over this little patch of meadowland.”⁴ Thus, apparently, seeing deeply and well into the small enlarges vision’s capacity.

² Thomas Berry, *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future* (New York: The Bell Tower), 12-13.

³ Berry, *The Great Work*, 13.

⁴ Berry, *The Great Work*, 13.

For Barry, a person who finds such meaning and awe in “this little meadow,” has, perhaps unknowingly, entered into an experience at the heart of religion. “Religion ...takes its origin here in the deep mystery of this setting.”⁵ Not only awareness of mystery, but of “the magnificence of life as celebration” are evoked by receptivity to the lilies in the meadow. Entrance into an experience of the mysterious, which elicits if only for a moment an awareness of life itself as celebratory, nourished in Barry a commitment to protect what has now been rightly seen as of ultimate value.

Wonder, a profound sense of meaning, and life as celebration, then, mark Berry’s feeling and intellectual vision. This quality of awareness remained critically important as he evolved from describing himself as a cultural historian to a “geologist,” who traced history in relation to evolutionary time and events. Berry well knew that such experiences of wonder and awe echoed religious expressions through centuries, expressed in the Western tradition in biblical scripture. Psalm 8:3-4 from a wide angled vision: “When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them.” Jesus, focusing on the close up, responded to lilies’ beauty with a profound awareness about God’s benevolent care and foresight to clothe them in such beauty, leading him to postulate that God constantly also has in mind and heart the necessity to meet the physical needs of human beings (Matt. 6:28-30).

These feelings of awe-struck wonder were evoked in Thomas Berry not only by landscapes such as the meadow with lilies or later the Hudson River but also by scientific discoveries about the evolving universe. Small back to large: “My suggestion is that just as Christianity in its developing phase established itself in intimate relations with the structure and functioning of the universe in its liturgical processes, so now there is a need to adopt a new sense of a self-emergent universe as a sacred mode

⁵ Berry, *The Great Work*, 13.

whereby the divine becomes present to the human community.”⁶ Thus, whether captivated by a dragonfly’s beauty as she hovers over a shimmering summer pond or by the immensity of the Milky Way viewed on a winter’s night, or perhaps by grief at the felling of a beloved grove of trees, as Gerard Manley Hopkins memorialized in “Binsey Poplars” *Felled 1879*, the divine comes close to a person with an open eye, mind, and heart.

What, then, might harm the feeling of being awe-struck at the meadow? It is what harms the meadow, itself. Berry (and we) know that beloved meadows, wetlands, groves, streams, ponds, rivers, and the oceans are degraded or lost as they are cut down, drained over, paved, or despoiled. People who love their landscapes and have a sense of awe and identification with them often come to grieve their loss; love and pain inextricably linked. Humans who lack a sense of mystery, and the beauty of life may not care. For Berry, this means they need to rediscover Earth and the web of life felt as sacred or at least as of value beyond apparent use, beyond immediate compare.

Many people no longer have an intimate presence with natural surroundings and can no longer read the Book of Nature. Though children inherit a natural attraction to nature, adults are so misguided that “we must make our children unfeeling in their relation with the natural world”⁷, to indoctrinate them into a contrived, predatory economic system and an increasingly toxic environment. Though we are creating the Sixth Great Extinction, few are aware. Thomas Berry “interpreted this massive assault on Earth processes as manifesting the colonial age and its sense of humans as a ‘master species’ subjecting

⁶ Thomas Berry, *The Christian Future and the Fate of Earth*, ed. Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books), 115.

⁷ Berry, *The Great Work*, 15.

all other species to its rational calculations.”⁸, all of which is rooted in a “deep inner rage of Western society against its earthly condition.”⁹

To impress a feeling of wonder and celebration broad societal structures must be reoriented to a beneficial relation to Earth. The forces that harm or preserve the meadow are cultural, political, industrial, and economic. Berry addresses the need for universities, corporations, and other systems to reorient goals and activities to include preservation of natural life systems. The consumer economic system sees nature as providing natural resources to create consumer goods which are then “passed on to the junk heap, where the remains are useless at best and at worst toxic to every living thing.”¹⁰ The Great Work, is nothing less than conversion. In Berry’s famous, evocative phrase, “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.”¹¹

For those with a capacity for suffering from awareness of human Earth alienation, it is helpful to know that lamentation is essential to change. Grief may lead to new awareness, repentance, and a vision that fosters life. Further, establishing a “flourishing and sustainable human mode of being”¹² within earth’s evolving, diverse bioregions is the one thing necessary, requiring identifying “the sacred depth of the individual,”¹³ bonded within the evolving universe. Berry suggests (and I found this breathtakingly hopeful) that Earth herself, will provide impetus for humanity to grow to true maturity and a beneficial human-Earth relation.

⁸ Mary Evelyn Tucker, John Grim, and Andrew Angyal, *Thomas Berry: A Biography* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 199.

⁹ Berry, *The Great Work*, 165.

¹⁰ Berry, *The Great Work*, 161.

¹¹ Berry, *The Great Work*, 159.

¹² Berry, *The Great Work*, 162.

¹³ Berry, *The Great Work*, 163.

The Great Work, thus, blends scientific consciousness, wonder, and compassion, integrating a deep knowing of “the universe as composed of subjects to be communed with, not as objects to be exploited.”¹⁴ It is a new self-realization, “a reinvention of *ourselves* as participating in our genetic relatedness to Earth, as well as in the material elements of the universe.”¹⁵

Now, Earth, as the primary energy, mandates “that the human community assume a responsibility never assigned to any previous generation....[as] passing from its stage of childhood into its adult stage of life.”¹⁶ The “dream of the Earth” will give us guidance. As nighttime dreams often provide structure and meaning, so too, the dream of the Earth is “our way into the future.”¹⁷ Dreaming with Earth’s processes and structures, allows the dreams to instruct and transform us, eliciting a mature vision akin to shamanic consciousness. Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim, in their biography, note that Berry “saw himself as a shamanic type, one who entered deeply into the powers of the universe and Earth and brought back an integrative vision for the community.” They continue, “He sensed that this role was part of his psyche and thus vital for his spiritual journey.”¹⁸ Yet, Berry asserted that this leadership involves everyone in responsibility.¹⁹

We and hopefully many other people will grow to be shamanic leaders who have integrated four wisdoms: of indigenous people, of women, of the traditions, and of science. Christian shamanic leaders may helpfully integrate their vision with that of Teilhard de Chardin, as does also Pope Francis. Tucker and Grim note that there existed a hope in “the human as part of the whole of cosmic emergence that

¹⁴ Berry, *The Great Work*, x-xi.

¹⁵ Tucker, Grim, and Angyal, *Thomas Berry*, 192.

¹⁶ Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1990), 47.

¹⁷ Berry, *The Dream of the Earth*, 194.

¹⁸ Tucker, Grim, and Angyal, *Thomas Berry*, 39.

¹⁹ Berry, *The Dream of the Earth*, 47-49.

gave Teilhard and Thomas a common sense of vision and purpose.”²⁰ Helpful to us, as would-be shamans, such hope, proffers a “zest for life”²¹ infusing energy for the Great Work ahead.

Pope Francis

In the context of these efforts to bring energy and urgency to the Great Work, many groups and individuals around the world have celebrated the publication of Pope Francis’s *Laudato Si: On Care for Our Common Home*. It was admired by UN leaders, scientists, and the journal *Nature*, among many other groups. In my experience, the Roman Catholic bishop of Vermont sent it to all the churches; our Lutheran bishop of New England wrote a joint statement with the Roman Catholic bishop of Boston commending its reading. I heard it beautifully read in a worship service at The Riverside Church on Manhattan’s Upper Westside, simultaneously as the Pope addressed the United Nations. It is critically important as a moral statement for our time.

The encyclical is an “appeal...for a new dialogue about how we are shaping the future of our planet...which includes everyone, since the environmental challenge we are undergoing, and its human roots, concern and affect us all.”²² The Franciscan sensibilities of simplicity and concern that all parts of creation are experienced as kin under God’s care infuse *Laudato Si*.

Pope Francis writes that we have not shown ourselves worthy of gracious abundance and care extended to us by Earth, who is both mother and sister. “This sister now cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has

²⁰ Tucker, Grim, and Angyal, *Thomas Berry*, 203.

²¹ Tucker, Grim, and Angyal, *Thomas Berry*, 203.

²² Pope Francis, *Encyclical*, 10.

endowed her.”²³ In concert with Thomas Berry, Pope Francis writes that an urgent change is needed on all societal levels to reclaim our family life.

Creation speaks of God and thus has inherent dignity and value. All creation not only “shows forth the inexhaustible riches of God”²⁴ but the creation also is a “a locus of [God’s] presence...”²⁵ All creatures are “linked by unseen bonds and together form a kind of universal family, a sublime communion which fills us with a sacred, affectionate and humble respect.”²⁶

The misuse and abuse of Mother Earth stems from violence and power over vulnerable people and nature. The encyclical especially emphasizes abusive power relationships. Many humans fail to see or to feel the sacred dimension of humanity or of the more-than-human creation. “If we approach nature and the environment without this openness to awe and wonder [as exemplified by St. Francis], ...our attitude will be that of masters, consumers, ruthless exploiters, unable to set limits on their immediate needs.”²⁷

For Pope Francis, a people “united under God,” will be truly united with the more than human world in an intimate familial sense. In common with Berry, who spoke of a devastating “technological trance,” Pope Francis laments “the globalization of the technocratic paradigm.”²⁸ This paradigm has altered relationships among human beings and “material objects” from one of friendship to confrontation. Such reductionism is dictated by the “interests of certain powerful groups.”²⁹ Technological, scientific, and economic power is not often used wisely for the common good. Power over others excludes awareness of the dignity and value of all creatures and ecosystems created by God.

²³ Pope Francis, *Encyclical*, 2.

²⁴ Pope Francis, *Encyclical*, 54.

²⁵ Pope Francis, *Encyclical*, 55.

²⁶ Pope Francis, *Encyclical*, 55-56.

²⁷ Pope Francis, *Encyclical*, 9.

²⁸ Pope Francis, *Encyclical*, 66.

²⁹ Pope Francis, *Encyclical*, 67.

Further, expectation for the market to solve environmental problems reveals the market's narrowness in not considering "balanced levels of production, a better distribution of wealth, concern for the environment and the rights of future generations."³⁰ Global regulatory norms and systems of government are needed to mitigate unacceptable actions by powerful economic and political entities, assist the poor, and protect the global commons.

Pope Francis urges us to "generate resistance to the assault of the technocratic paradigm....so to continue to wonder about the purpose and meaning of everything."³¹

An integrated approach that addresses both the environmental and social crises is needed. Pope Francis writes "we cannot presume to heal our relationship with nature and the environment without healing all fundamental human relationships."³² With an echo of Berry's call for reinvention of the human at the species level, Pope Francis decries a schizophrenic anthropocentrism, which not only sees no "intrinsic value" in created things but disregards "the message contained in the structures of nature itself."³³

The encyclical calls out the effects of climate change and species extinction as the most serious environmental issues that compound others, such as access to clean water. Poverty, injustice, and abuses of creation intertwine. "We have to realize that a true ecological approach *always* becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear *both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor*."³⁴ Thus, Pope Francis echoes many liberation theologians in analysis of social and environmental injustice.

³⁰ Pope Francis, *Encyclical*, 69.

³¹ Pope Francis, *Encyclical*, 70-71.

³² Pope Francis, *Encyclical*, 74.

³³ Pope Francis, *Encyclical*, 73.

³⁴ Pope Francis, *Encyclical*, 30.

A person who feels the sacred, family-like connection with all creation will feel the pain of environmental abuse “almost as a physical ailment.”³⁵ Such pain, with the virtues of simplicity, faith in God, appreciation of beauty, and compassion—all will bring us to know Earth as home and truly know and be ourselves. Science and all realms of human endeavor will become aligned with justice and care for Earth’s ecosystems. Special awareness and care for the most vulnerable within the human family and creation admits humans into their “vocation to be protectors of God’s handiwork...essential to a life of virtue.”³⁶ They have discovered who and where they are and can answer God’s voice in the garden, “Where are you?”

Conclusion

Berry and Pope Francis relocate the promotion of human progress and Earth’s flourishing within a theological, salvific framework strongly away from other-worldly to this-worldly, this planetary, this universe concerns. Their writings contribute to healing the tragic science/religion rift promoted by some Christian groups, and foster humanity’s conversion on all levels to Earth care by linking deep spiritual integrity to Earth’s well-being.

For Pope Francis the final centering point is God (“each organism, as a creature of God, is good and admirable in itself”;³⁷ for Berry the emphasis may be more strongly on Earth “The natural world is the fundamental locus for the meeting of the divine and the human.”³⁸ Yet the distinction in emphasis may be very small, and both see as illuminative the cosmic Christ portrayed in the New Testament, through whom all things are made and hold together.³⁹

³⁵ Pope Francis, *Encyclical*, 56.

³⁶ Pope Francis, *Encyclical*, 133.

³⁷ Pope Francis, *Encyclical*, 87

³⁸ Berry, *The Christian Future*, 49.

³⁹ John 1:1-18, Colossians 1:15-20. Berry notes that, “As regards the universe, then, Christ is considered to satisfy the need for both individual and universe identity, since Christ is considered the Cosmic Person through whom everything is sustained and given ultimate meaning (*The Christian Future*, 105.) In their introduction, Tucker and

Both urge a deep transformation. Human identity must convert for Berry into shamanic consciousness and for Pope Francis into a prophetic contemplative awareness of kinship with all creatures, all such conversions followed by action. Both link the well-being of humanity with the well-being of Earth, expressed as an integral ecology. Berry: “intimacy with the planet in its wonder and beauty and the full depth of its meaning is what enables an integral human relationship with the planet to function.”⁴⁰ Pope Francis: “strategies for a solution demand an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature.”⁴¹

With Thomas Berry and Pope Francis as our prophetic guides, not only for life orientation and meaning but for action, we find ourselves able more readily to answer the 16-year-old prophet’s question “do you hear me,” and God’s question “Where are you?” with the answers, “Yes,” and “We are home.”

Grim note that for Berry “the promise inherent in Christianity [to adequately respond to our situation] is still to be fully acknowledged and expressed” (*The Christian Future*, xv). Pope Francis prays in “A Christian Prayer in Union with Creation,” “Son of God, Jesus/through you all things were made./You were formed in the womb of Mary our Mother,/you became part of this earth,/and you gazed upon this world with human eyes./Today you are alive in every creature/in your risen glory./Praise be to you!” (*Encyclical*, 150).

⁴⁰ Berry, *The Great Work*, xi.

⁴¹ Pope Francis, *Encyclical*, 86.