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# The Historical Mission of Our Times

## Extract from The Collected Works of Thomas Berry

Editor's note: In 1998 a six-hour recording of Thomas Berry responding to questions posed by Brian Swimme was made available in cassette through the Center for the Story of the Universe (1-800-273-3720; \$49.95). You will find both vintage and cutting-edge Berry in the selections, his ideas beautifully rendered in the spoken word. Stunningly beautiful as well is Thomas's recitation of some of his own poems (including *It Takes a Universe* and *The Quiet Hills of Carolina*, the latter appearing here in a sidebar). The extract below is drawn from the final tape.



**Brian Swimme:** Thomas, if you look at the universe and its evolution, there are certain moments when a particular creativity is called for. We have the moment of galactic formation and the moment of the supernova. In history, too, there are moments when a particular work—you've been talking about the Great Work—is called for. Could you say something about what this moment today is calling for?

**Thomas Berry:** In thinking about this moment, I sometimes put it in three sentences: *In the twentieth century, the glory of the human has become the desolation of the Earth.* Second sentence: *The desolation of the Earth is becoming the destiny of the human.* Third sentence: *All human institutions, professions, programs, and activities must now be judged primarily by the extent to which they inhibit, ignore, or foster a mutually enhancing human-Earth relationship.*

Now this idea of human-Earth relationship as mutually enhancing—that is, where

the human is supported in its most sublime aspects and the entire Earth Community is fostered in its finest aspects—this leads us to something that might be identified as the historical mission of our times. Each period, each century, each generation has what might be called a historical mission. There is something to be done, something essential to the period. The historical mission as I identify it is the mission of moving from a terminal Cenozoic period to an emerging Ecozoic period—that is, from a period when humans were a disturbing presence to the planet to a period when humans are benignly present to the planet; from a period of exploitation of the planet to a period of celebration with the planet.

A person might phrase this in a sentence this way: *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.*

I use the phrase “reinvent the human” because the transition from a terminal destructive period into an emerging creative period requires a rethinking of the human. We must reinvent ourselves. It's that deep. We're at that level of estrangement. We're at that level of destructiveness. The human has developed a pathology that has terribly distorted the whole human mode of being. So we must reinvent the human, our ideals of what a human being is. None of them are adequate any longer, or at least they have not been effective in avoiding the devastation of things. So I say, “reinvent the human.”

We have to rethink ourselves at such a level that we have never had to do before. We have to think through our adjustment to the planet Earth in a way that we've never had to do before. So we have to rethink the human, or reinvent what it is to be a human being, in a mode that is coherent with the integrity of the planet Earth. We have to do this at the species level, which is the second phrase, because none of the cultures of the planet at the present time are adequate to deal with the problems that we face at the present. They were dealing with other problems when they took on their shape.

None of these traditions can deal with the sense of the universe that we now have. They were built on a completely different sense of the universe and a different way of thinking. They had not developed the scientific modality to the extent that we have. We can't find in any of the traditional cultures the answers that we need. We have to go back to our genetic coding—what makes us human. We can't invent ourselves as human, because that has to be genetic. But we cannot be adequately human simply out of the genetic determination. We have

to develop a self formation that we call cultural development.

So at the present time, we have to develop by conscious reflection and insight a way of dealing with our role in the universe that we know by empirical reasoning and that we understand as an evolutionary epic process that has gone through a sequence of irreversible transformation, moving in general from lesser to greater complexity, from lesser to greater consciousness, from lesser to greater freedoms. To understand ourselves in this process is something radically new to the human endeavor. That's what is causing our difficulties at the present time, because we don't know how to integrate the human life in this context.

But the guides that we have in doing this are in our nature. There is implanted in our nature from the beginning tendencies—that are sometimes called archetypes—there are tendencies toward certain modes of expression. For instance, we are not free to think or not to think; we are genetically coded to think, and we are going to think. But how we think and what we think and the use we put our thinking to: that's cultural coding. We are going to have affective relationships. How we shape those relationships we do culturally. We are going to live in society; that's genetic. How we shape our society is cultural. And so at the present time we have to reshape our cultural ideals, and how we think, the values we put on our thinking, how we shape affectivity, how we relate to the natural world.

So, right now, we have to do something we have never done before. We have to do all this in a new period that I call the Ecozoic Era, where we understand ourselves in an evolutionary sequence of development and shape new ways of integrating with this type of world....

[We must do this] by means of story and shared dream experience. When I say "by means of story," I have in mind the understanding of where we are and the general direction in which we need to go, which must be guided by our understanding of the story of the evolutionary process. And we need to celebrate this story because the uni-

verse is, in this sense, this story, this sequence, this diversity of events that have taken place in time. The former events are still present now; in a sense nothing ever disappears. Each thing survives in its integrity throughout the total course of the process. Because for a story, like a musical phrase, the first notes have to be there when the last notes are played. You don't understand the musical composition unless you hear the melody or know the sequence, because every following note changes the meaning of the previous note. You don't know the meaning of the first note until you play the last note. And so with a sentence and so with any process. The earth is the integrity of the process. The universe is the integrity of this comprehensive process.

monies, death processes—it's all placed in the context of the Story. The Story is the real source of psychic energy.

It's the feeling of fidelity to the Story that we need to advert to in our dedication of our own lives. Making sense of our own lives is found within the Story. It's a heroic Story. Our participation in the heroic Story is of utmost importance. We cannot do anything without the Story. Through the Story we establish ourselves in a world of meaning.

And then the last phrase is "shared dream experience." The dream drives the action is the phrase commonly used in thinking about creativity. The poet dreams the poem. The musician dreams the melody. The artist dreams the picture. The political

creator dreams the government and the destinies of the people that are to be guided. The teacher dreams the way to guide the young. The scholar has to dream the role that the scholar plays. The architect dreams the building. There's a dream dimension in all creativity. There's a dream inspiration. The dream sustains the young.

In a sense, that's the whole way into the Ecozoic: through the Story and the Dream—the story of the past, the dream of the future. The Ecozoic Era has to take possession of a person the way a dream takes possession of a person. It has to be an entrancement, a fascination. It has to be an ideal.

This is the only way we can escape the dark side of the period in which we find ourselves. The dark side has to lead us to dream of this ecstatic side, this fulfillment phase. It's so attractive in itself to think of a world where humans would be present to

the planet and to all the various forms of life in a mutually enhancing way—to the flowers, the birds, the trees, the streams, the mountains, the oceans, the marine life. All of these are so enormously attractive. And so the only proper way is to know the Story, to have the Dream, and to Celebrate, because the dream is the context of the celebration. If we do that, then we have the design and the context in which we can fulfill the historical destiny of our times. ☺

## The Quiet Hills of Carolina

by Thomas Berry

There's a hush that comes over the Appalachian Mountains of North Carolina in late summer.  
A blue mist settles over the hills,  
while the wind softens in the evening.  
It is a moment of quiet, when every ensouled being feels a vast surge of existence that emerges from the primordial beginnings of time.  
A moment when the wild depths of the universe take over our beings in a great tide that sweeps over us, and we experience our participation in the distant liturgy of the stars.  
Just then, we feel lost in an immense loneliness of soul that we can sustain only by a shared presence of someone who also has known such a moment.

The evening hush of the Carolina Hills.

So, when I say, "by means of story," there's power in the Story. The Story is what enables us to know where we are and how we came into being, the direction that the process is going in, *and our role in the Story*. It's only the Story that gives us our intelligibility. And that's why the creation story, with each people, is the narrative that's recited at any initiation process or any meaningful ceremony. At any meaningful ceremony, such as the introduction of the infant into the world, the maturation cere-