

We Are the Earth: Like It or Not!

—by Diarmuid O’Murchu

As humans, we are born of the Earth, nourished by the Earth, healed by the Earth. The earlier mystique of the Earth seems to have vanished from human consciousness. - Thomas Berry

Christianity has long emphasised that humans are not meant to be too attached to the material world, and to the organic web of life. Frequently, it is portrayed as a vale of tears, the realm of sin and temptation, a human abode in which we are not meant to feel at home, a base from which we are meant to escape to true happiness and fulfilment in another world. Elements of this other-world escapist spirituality can be detected in most of the major religions known to humanity today, often preventing us from embracing the more spiritually-informed wisdom furnished by the sciences in our time.



Photo by Thomas Schemper

Despite advances in earth sciences in recent decades—geology, geophysics, oceanography, biology—humans still exhibit an extensive ignorance about the living Earth and its organic dynamics. The embodied nature of planet Earth is still a relatively new idea to millions of humans. As a corporeal entity, it exhibits all the organic processes upon which the human body thrives. These insights are much better understood in our time thanks to the pioneering work of James Lovelock on what is now known as the *Gaia Theory*.

Initially formulated in the 1970s, the Gaia Theory posits that the organic and inorganic aspects of planet Earth have evolved together as a single, living, self-regulating system. Equipped with an inner wisdom—akin to the immune system of the human body—the earth-body automatically controls elements like global temperature, atmospheric content, ocean salinity, and other factors, to the benefit of its growth and development. For instance, even though the luminosity of the sun—the Earth’s heat source—has increased by about 30 percent since life began almost four billion years ago, the living system has reacted as a whole to maintain temperatures at levels suitable for life.

EDITOR'S LETTER

In our 2014 spring and autumn editions of *SpiritEarth*, we celebrate the life and wisdom of Thomas Berry who would have turned 100 years old this year. In this issue, we're very excited to offer a piece from Diarmuid O'Muchu, adapted for us from his book *God in the Midst of Change* (Orbis 2012, pp. 84-88). Diarmuid, along with Cynthia Bourgeault, will be presenters at The Well Spirituality Center's 6th annual Summer Institute in June. Fuller details are below.

Also in this issue, we offer reflections generously shared by two co-evolutionaries, Lynn Fleming and Pat Monahan, CSJ, both of whom have been awakened as a result of their experiences of Thomas and then enlivened by their own participation in what Thomas called "the Great Work."

The autumn edition of *SpiritEarth* will commemorate the fifth anniversary of Thomas's June 2009 passing by offering some of his evocative poetry along with a look at what progress has been made in the Great Work since 2009.

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Mission Statement

SpiritEarth is a publication that expands and advances The Well Spirituality Center's mission as a regional center for telling and engaging our Sacred Universe Story and fostering the evolving role of humankind in this great drama.

Reflecting on Thomas Berry: Six Transcendences

—by Lynn Fleming

A typhoon the size of America ravages the island nation leaving a path of rubble and children clutching their bellies. The island's representative at the UN climate talks, wiping away tears for his lost home and missing relatives, begs that something be done about climate change and the rising ocean temperatures that spawned the monstrous storm.

Mammoth droughts and floods, wildfires and landslides, tornadoes and hurricanes are now expected occurrences; yet, many religious people continue to deny climate change when they could be leading the way in caring for creation. In “Myths of Stability, Putting Capitalism Before Creation” (Orion Magazine, Nov./Dec. 2013), Jay Griffiths discusses evangelical religious groups that see the concept of climate change as a threat to their spirituality. Change doesn't fit with their biblical notions of a *fixed* universe created by an omniscient, all-powerful, all-sustaining, immutable creator.

Denying both evolution and climate change, many Christians defend literal biblical cosmology against the dragon of modern climate science. To better understand the mythic consciousness of radical fundamentalists, we return to the wisdom of Thomas Berry, in “The Place of the Human” (*Evening Thoughts*, 2006). Here he identifies six transcendences—core beliefs—in our creation myths and traditions that have led Western civilization to plunge Earth into her sixth geological extinction.

✧ **A transcendent, personal, monotheistic, creative deity**

Clearly, the religious elite who brought us the Genesis stories created a transcendent patriarchal sky god with an abhorrence of feminine Earth based spiritualities. As a result, women were subjugated, and we lost the primary manifestation of divine immanence in its cosmological manifestations.

✧ **The transcendent spiritual nature of the human**

We came to believe that we are spiritual and the natural world is material rather than sacred. This worldview drew us away from the deep knowing of our oneness with creation. Placing humans over and above creation enabled the natural world to be seen as objects for our use (exploitation).

✧ **The primacy of our transcendent belief in redemption**

Indoctrinated in a theology of redemption, we lost our primordial innocence and the sense of ourselves as original blessings. We needed to be redeemed not only from sin, but from the natural world itself. Striving for salvation elsewhere, a self-understanding as Earthlings was lost to us.

✧ **The transcendence of mind**

In the 1600's, Rene Descartes desouled the world with his “I think therefore I am” philosophy. Before his time, the human community knew every being as ensouled, having spirit and anima. Descartes divided the world into mind and matter, and thus began the whole mechanistic trend of the modern world. With mind enthroned, we suppressed our intuitive gut- and heart-centered wisdom.

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Because the earth-body is so endowed, then all corporeal organisms carry the same life-enhancing properties and potentialities. And without this foundational empowerment, not even human beings could survive or flourish on Earth. We are the Earth in every dimension of our truest selves.

The Earthiness of the Human Body

For healthy functioning, the human body relies not merely on the Earth, but on the entire universe, a notion captured elegantly by Judy Cannato (*Radical Amazement*, 65) when she writes:

The water in your body contains primordial hydrogen formed in the first seconds of the Big Bang. The carbon atoms that formed you came together after the explosion of a supernova. The concentration of salt in your body matches the concentration of salt in the ancient seas. Your cells are direct descendants of unicellular organisms that developed billions of years ago. You see because chlorophyll molecules mutated, so that like plant leaves, your eyes can capture the light from the sun. And in your mother's womb your tiny body repeated the whole process of multi-cellular life on earth, beginning with a single cell, and then developing greater and greater complexity.

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The Awakener

—by Patricia Monahan, CSJ

It was Thomas Berry who awakened me to the realization that “the human is that being in whom the universe comes to itself in a special mode of conscious self-reflection. His principles of DIFFERENTIATION, SUBJECTIVITY, and COMMUNION became a lens through which I began to transform my sense of reality and reshape my vocation in life. I began to appreciate that everything is intimately present to and related to everything else. What I do affects everyone and everything else. I began to appreciate more clearly the impact I was having on our fragile planet. To the extent that I diminish or destroy the grandeur of the world around me, I diminish and destroy myself and everything else. Sitting reflectively beside the Bronx River one spring day, I became one with the river, the geese, ducks, and sparrows, the woodland with its wildflowers, the cloudless azure sky, the refreshing breeze, and even the people who stopped to admire my perch beside the river. I had become a sister of Earth.

As an educator in the 80s and 90s, I applied Thomas's three principles as my classroom behavior code. We used them as a lens through which to judge the injustice of slavery in history, the use of animals in experimentation, and the taunting of a new girl from Kenya, Africa. It provided an impetus for my middle school students to rally the county legislature to vote for a recycling center instead of an incinerator. The same principles motivated Kids for Earth, my ecology group, to clean

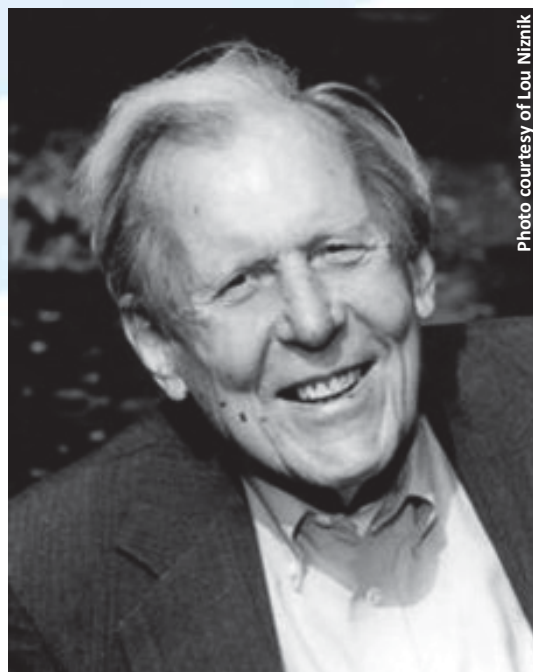


Photo courtesy of Lou Niznik

We are about the Great Work. We all have our particular work to do and the particular lives we lead; we have a Great Work that everyone is involved in and no one is exempt from. That is the great work of moving on from the terminal Cenozoic to an emerging Ecozoic Era in the story of planet Earth.—Thomas Berry

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✧ Our transcendent technology

Our technological advances enabled us to transcend the basic biological laws that limited species. We learned how to preserve life and delay death. We mined Earth's body, extinguished other life forms, subverted chemical balances, and polluted our only home. We turned the Earth community over to industrial corporations that control our elections, national policies, courts, and economy. Each year billions of dollars are spent to debunk the science of climate change and block eco-justice.

✧ A transcendent historical destiny

We grew up believing that our destiny is in some other world—the trans-phenomenal world. For this reason, many religious believers have little concern for the integrity and survival of this world, believing they are meant for another. Christians who hold a millennial vision, the dominant view of the scriptures, await the time when the human condition will be transcended. Many welcome today's degradation of the planet as the sign of fulfillment of end-day prophecies.

An invitation

Joseph Campbell, in the *Power of Myth*, states, "Every god, every mythology, every religion is true, in this sense. It is true as metaphorical of the human and cosmic mystery." By turning transcendent mystery into a transcendent human destiny, our species has brought the Cenozoic Era to an end. We need to see our moment for what it is, a time of epic chaos on Earth. Awakening to this reality, we are called to be agents of change, fostering the transition to the Ecozoic Era.

We can effect change only by changing ourselves. Rather than pointing our fingers in frustration at other Christians, we have an invitation to look within and sort out our personal belief systems. The negative aspects of transcendent hierarchies can be so subconsciously embedded within our cultural DNA that, while espousing the New Cosmology, we may be unaware of the hold those hierarchies have on us. As evolutionaries, it is important that we dig deeply, at cellular levels, to identify and uproot core beliefs that may still bind us to the Old Cosmology.

For reflection

- ∞ *Which of the six transcendences do I unwittingly cling to?*
- ∞ *In what ways does patriarchy have a hold on me?*
- ∞ *How has evolutionary spirituality changed my images of the divine?*
- ∞ *Is there a part of me that still wants to be over and above creation?*
- ∞ *Are there ways in which I objectify nature?*
- ∞ *Do I see myself as an original blessing? As an Earthling?*
- ∞ *In what ways do I place mind over matter? Mind over heart and gut knowing?*
- ∞ *Have I allowed technology to shut me off from the natural world?*
- ∞ *Do I see my destiny as somewhere else?*
- ∞ *Am I willing to take action for Mother Earth? For eco-justice?*
- ∞ *When have I experienced transcendent mystery?*
- ∞ *Do I own my oneness with all creation?*

Earth is primary and humans are derivative.—Thomas Berry

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The book of Genesis captures something of this earthy organicity in the very naming of the first human, Adam, which in Hebrew means “of the earth.” And the earliest uses of the name in Genesis is not to denote a significant male, but to both the male and female of the earth-species. In Genesis 1:27, "Adam" is used in the collective sense, denoting all humankind. And in Genesis 5:2, we read "Male and female God created them; and blessed them, and called their name Adam..."

Resonant with our Earthy Identity

For well over 90 percent of our time on Earth, humans lived close to the Earth, and interacted with the earth-body in a convivial, interdependent mode. The flow of daily life, from sunrise till sunset, and the rhythm of seasonal changes were reflected in the lifestyle and values that humans adopted. We ate foods that belong uniquely to the seasons, having extracted them directly from the living Earth itself.

We used potions and medicines congruent with the Earth’s own healing potential.

Cloths were woven from the ingredients of the local environment. Consciously, or otherwise, we befriended local bioregions in their natural growth and development. Humanity and Earth were intimately interconnected.

Indigenous peoples of our time vaguely reflect this interactive organicity. While still echoing an inherited sense of this ancient sacredness, even tribal, first-nations peoples exhibit a modern consciousness that undermines in practice what they hold in theory. They speak freely and elegantly of the sacredness of the Earth, yet they often adopt highly patriarchal social structures, and in not a few cases are being decimated by diseases and addictions characteristic of the “advanced” culture of Western society.

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Today, an estimated 80 percent of human beings live in cities and little or no connection to the natural environment... Humans are starved for Earth intimacy, while the Earth itself is being brutalized for human wealth and gain.

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up the Hutchinson River “so the ducks could have their babies safely” and to plant the Children’s Organic Garden at Genesis Farm in Blairstown, New Jersey.

Students asked “Why do grownups throw all this garbage in the river?” I explained, “...because they don’t know any better...but we do.” I am still in touch with many of those students whose lives were changed by that brief exposure to a new way of seeing themselves in the world.

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The disconnection can be traced back some 8,000 years to the shadow side of the Agricultural Revolution, when a

new rational philosophy denounced humans for being too enmeshed in the surrounding creation and encouraged them to differentiate into the separate, autonomous creatures they were meant to be under the rulership of a patriarchal sky God. In historical and cultural terms we can now understand that move to have been a type of cultural stillbirth in which humans were brutally separated from the sustaining womb of the Earth itself. Even to this day it has left us with a numbed sense of painful disconnection, perhaps something like a child that has never known its real mother. In our estrangement, we search for a fulfilment that always seems to elude us, and all too easily we succumb to the naive religious belief that it will all be rectified in a life hereafter.

The problem is not with what will happen hereafter, but with the here and now. We are not at home where the creative God (what the indigenous peoples call the Great Spirit) has birthed us, with all the resources at our disposal to grow and flourish, to evolve and become whole. Earth is our true home—in both evolutionary and spiritual terms. Paradoxically, more and more people are beginning to realise this. Human

intuition and imagination are reawakening a wisdom deep within. What to do with that wisdom is where the problem often becomes acute.

Back to the Earth

Our sense of disconnection is further exacerbated by our urban lifestyles. Today, an estimated 80 percent of human beings live in cities and little or no connection to the natural environment. Such conditions are inimical to soulful living. Within a few kilometres of such degradation, other forms of Earth depletion take place: logging of woodland, stripping of top-soil, excessive exploitation of mineral resources. It happens in Brazil, in the Philippines and in several African nations. Humans are starved for Earth intimacy, while the Earth itself is being brutalized for human wealth and gain.

And we wonder why people are so unhappy, and why human alienation is so widespread at this time! How could any species, so disconnected from its nourishing womb, know happiness or fulfilment? Our earthiness is not some material object apart from, or over against, our true selves. It is inherently and intimately part and parcel of who we are and what we are. It is central to our God-given identity and the entire meaning of our existence. Re-appropriating our connection with the living Earth will remain one of the single greatest challenges for humanity as we move deeper into the 21st century.

(This article is an adaptation of Section 14 of Diarmuid’s book, *God in the Midst of Change*, Orbis 2012, pp. 84-88.)



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Photo by Pat Irr, osf

**Every being exists in intimate relationship with other beings...
and a mutual sharing in the grand venture of the universe itself.**

Thomas Berry—*Evening Thoughts*