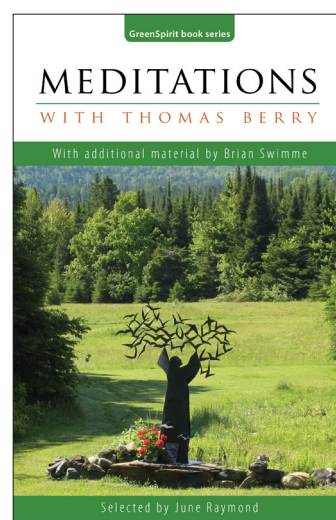


INTRODUCTION

When Thomas Berry was eleven years old his parents moved to the country and he had an experience which was to stay with him all his life. He wandered down to a creek and saw beyond it a meadow covered in white lilies rising above thick grass. There were crickets singing and woodlands in the distance and clouds in a clear sky. The effects of this moment, he said, lay behind all his philosophy and religious awareness. When he was twenty he became a Passionist priest and later an academic specialising in cultural history. However, the fundamental direction of his life remained his commitment to the environment as the primary manifestation of the divine and to the need to prevent its destruction.



Berry developed a profound knowledge of Asian thought and was much influenced by the Asian scholar, Theodore de Bary of Columbia University. He also learnt from Teilhard de Chardin who had seen the world as one in which spirituality was not the province of the human alone but something which from the beginning had pervaded the whole. For Berry the well-being of the Earth was fundamental and he suggested that we should go to creation as the primary revelation and our primary connection with the divine. In 1970 he founded the Riverdale Center of Religious Research in Riverdale, New York, a base from which he further developed his thinking on human-Earth relationships.

Berry believed that we are on the cusp of a new way of being on our planet. Our present era is the Cenozoic, the last 65 million years in which the creativity of the Earth blossomed, leading to the coming of humanity. But as we have taken over Earth's ecology we have been responsible for such environmental destruction that this Cenozoic era is coming to an end. The next era Berry believed is the Ecozoic, in which the future of the Earth will depend on our having a completely different relationship with it. Instead of our influence being one of exploitation and destruction, it is to be one of an 'integral participation' with all other members of our planetary community. He found in indigenous peoples such as Native Americans something of the spiritual communion with all beings that he saw as essential.

Unlike some modern thinkers, Berry did not regard humanity as a mistake the universe has made but as an important part of the whole. He understood that as the universe unfolds it follows three fundamental tendencies: differentiation, subjectivity or inner awareness, and ever deepening communion. In humanity these processes reached a moment in which the universe became aware of itself and its own beauty.

But the human race has become fragmented and divorced from its true relationship with creation and Berry believed we need a new story, one that would unite human beings instead of dividing them and would restore us to our place in the cosmos rather than separating us from it. This new unifying story is that of the cosmos itself. In 1992 he published *The Universe Story* with cosmologist Brian Swimme. They drew on contemporary scientific knowledge to trace the story 'from the primordial flaring forth to the Ecozoic era' in what they describe as 'a celebration of the unfolding cosmos'.

Thomas Berry also had very practical ideas about how we might avert global catastrophe and begin the process of restoring human society to its rightful place in the cosmic community. If we are able to replace a narrow human perspective with a recognition that our wellbeing is dependent on the wellbeing of the whole Earth community, every branch of learning can be transformed. Berry considered economics to be particularly dysfunctional; the Earth is our primary capital and when we plunder it we too are in deficit. However he reserved his sternest criticism for the two institutions which he considered had most responsibility; the churches and the universities. Both he saw as aggravating the problem, teaching and encouraging people to exploit the natural world. Other areas which he considered needed reinventing were law, medicine and technology.

Berry felt that it is difficult for us to change our ways as we have become paralysed by a destructive, addictive and pathological lifestyle. He was nevertheless an optimist. Looking at the history of the cosmos and understanding the divine essence we share with creation, he believed that we can go forward as a positive part of Earth's unfolding and fulfilment.

A suggested way of using these meditations

You can obviously use the book in any way that suits you, however for those who find it helpful here is a suggested way of meditating.

Find a quiet place where you will not be disturbed. You may like to choose a spot which looks out onto the world outside. Some people light a candle. Sit in a comfortable chair with a straight back and both feet on the ground, otherwise as relaxed and peaceful as possible. Now look at the place you are in, both in the room and what is going on outside. Spend time on this but try simply to observe where you are without making any judgements.

Close your eyes and become aware of every sound, again both inside and outside your room. Finally notice your own body and how it feels. If you find anything distracting notice but don't try to change it, just be aware and then let go.

Now go back to your sense of the place you are in. This is a vibrant moment of creation, everything filled with life down to the vibrating of atoms. This moment and this space are a sacred manifestation of Earth's life. It is dependent on all that has gone before, to create it and all else that is, to hold it in being. You are part of it, not an alien, but intrinsic to the whole. Stay with an awareness of being held in this moment by all that is.

Now go to the meditations and slowly read a single page. Stay with any words or ideas that speak to you. Give yourself time to feel your way in to understanding and exploring this awareness until you become part of the cosmos knowing itself.

At the end of your meditation send your thanksgiving and blessing back to the universe and especially to our own Earth.

~ JUNE RAYMOND