

The Dream of the Earth

by [Thomas Berry](#)

One of the more remarkable achievements of the 20th century was our ability to tell the story of the universe from empirical observation and with amazing insight into the sequence of transformations that has brought into being the Earth, the living world and the human community. There seems, however, to be little realization of just what this story means in terms of the larger interpretation of the human venture.

For peoples, generally, their story of the universe and the human role in the universe is their primary source of intelligibility and value. Only through this story of how the universe came to be in the beginning and how it came to be as it is, does a person come to appreciate the meaning of life or to derive the psychic energy needed to deal effectively with those crisis moments that occur in the life of the individual and the life of the society. Such a story is the basis of ritual initiations throughout the world. It communicates the most sacred of mysteries.



Khor Yug (Environment) / Calligraphy by Thrangu Rinpoche

The deepest crises experienced by any society are those moments of change when the story becomes inadequate for meeting the survival demands of a present situation. Such, it seems, is the situation we must deal with now.

The great historical vision of Saint Augustine in *The City of God*, written in response to the burning of Rome by the Goths in 410 C.E., provided much of the guidance and energy for bringing forth European medieval civilization, and in that manner, for creating the Western world as we know it, both in its grandeur and in its disturbing qualities...Even in those medieval times, it was already clear that a rising money economy was diverting the human community from its more authentic destiny.

In the late 16th and early 17th centuries, another historical vision was introduced by Francis Bacon - the vision of a better order in earthly affairs through scientific control over the functioning of the natural world, a vision first articulated as the doctrine of "progress" by Bernard Fontenelle in the following century. This vision found its fulfillment in the the industrial age of the past two centuries. Whatever their differences, both liberal capitalism and Marxist socialism committed themselves totally to this vision of industrial progress, which more than any other single cause has brought the disintegration that is taking place throughout the entire planet. By a supreme irony, this closing down of the basic life systems of the Earth has resulted from a commitment to the betterment of the human condition, to "progress".

If these earlier patterns of historical interpretation have arisen in times of stress to guide and inspire the course of human affairs, so now a new historical vision is emerging to guide us on our way to a more creative future...The issue now is of a much greater order of magnitude, for we have changed in a deleterious manner not simply the structure and functioning of human society: we have changed the very chemistry of the planet, we have altered the biosystems, we have changed the topography and even the geological structure of the planet, structures and functions that have taken hundreds of millions and even billions of years to bring into existence. Such an order of change in its nature and in its order of magnitude has never before entered either into Earth history or into human consciousness.

Only in recent times has such a vision become possible. We never knew enough. Nor were we sufficiently intimate with all our cousins in the great family of the Earth. Nor could we listen to the various creatures of Earth, each one telling its own story. The time has now come, however, when we will listen or we will die. The time has come to lower our voices, to cease imposing our mechanistic patterns on the biological processes of the Earth, to resist the impulse to control, to command, to force, to oppress, and to begin quite humbly to follow the guidance of the larger Earth community, for this is the larger dimension of our being. Our human destiny is integral with the destiny of the Earth.

I am concerned with the Earth not as the object of some human dream, but with the Earth itself and its inherent powers in bringing forth this marvellous display of beauty in such unending profusion, a display so overwhelming to human consciousness that we might very well speak of it as being dreamed into existence. Our own dreams of a more viable mode of being for ourselves and for the planet Earth can only be distant expressions of this primordial source of the universe itself in its fullest extent in space and in the long sequence of its transformations in time.

Such a fantastic universe, with its great spiralling galaxies, its supernovas, our solar system, and this privileged planet Earth! All this is held together in the vast curvature of space, poised so precisely in holding all things together in the one embrace and yet so lightly that the creative expression of the universe might continue on into the future. We ourselves, with our distinctive capacities for reflexive thinking, are the most recent wonder of the universe, a special mode of reflecting the larger curvature of the universe itself. If in recent centuries we have sought to collapse this larger creative curve within the horizons of our own limited being, we must now understand that our own well-being can be achieved only through the well-being of the entire natural world about us. The greater curvature of the universe and of the planet Earth must govern the curvature of our own being. In the coincidence of these three curves lies the way into a creative future.

The above synopsis was extracted from Dr Berry's introduction to his book, *The Dream of the Earth*. It has been called "quite possibly one of the ten most important books of the 20th century".

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