
Restoring a Ruined Earth

The Heroic Mission of Thomas Berry

By Vincent Di Stefano

Industrial civilisation has changed everything. At the dawn of the petrochemical age in 1750, atmospheric levels of carbon dioxide were estimated to be 280 parts per million (ppm). In 1960, they were around 360 ppm. In July 2011, levels of atmospheric carbon dioxide were over 392 ppm. The oceans of the earth are presently becoming more acidic at ten times the rate that preceded the last mass extinction event at the end of the Cenozoic era tens of millions of years ago. And while Arctic sea ice cover has been steadily declining in recent years, NASA scientists have confirmed that the Greenland and Antarctic ice sheets are losing mass at a rapidly accelerating rate.

There are many who have read the warning signs. Half a century ago, Rachel Carson, author of *Silent Spring*, alerted us to the damaging consequences of industrial methods of agriculture on ecosystems everywhere. Soon after, Fritz Schumacher urged us to rethink economics in view of the rapacious influence of corporate globalisation. And both Rosalie Bertell and Helen Caldicott have long warned of the silent, slow and spectrous death emanating from the nuclear industry.

The UN Climate Conferences at Copenhagen in 2009 and Mexico City in 2010 were effectively neutered by the influence of mining and energy companies acting through Western governments, notably the US and Canada. Closer to home, in Australia both Liberal and Labour parties are desperately outreaching each other in promised tax cuts while arguing about how best to lower carbon emissions by a sad 5% by 2020.

Meanwhile, 250 million tons of coal - over 10 tons for every man, woman and child living in this country - and 10,000 tons of yellow cake - uranium oxide - continue to be shipped out of Australia each year as part of a non-negotiable assault on the earth, felicitously described as a "mining boom", that has replaced the sheep's back on which the Australian economy was once carried.

Those who have understood the magnitude of the environmental situation that presently confronts us are faced with a two-fold task. The first is to clearly identify the nature of those forces that have brought us to where we are. The second is to envision the changes needed - both in our thinking and in our actions - that might reverse the dangerous situation within which we find ourselves, or at the least, prepare future generations for living on the earth in a very different manner.

One of our most articulate and visionary allies in this task is the late Thomas Berry, theologian, mystic and cultural historian. Berry combines prophetic clarity with a penetrative erudition grounded in the intellectual and spiritual traditions of both West and East.

His vision was slowly formed through many decades of studying the wisdom traditions and through observing the effects of industrial civilisation on the earth's ecosystems during the twentieth century. Thomas Berry offers a truly heroic vision

to counter the pathologies of distraction and trivialisation borne of the post-modern enthrallment with transience and distaste for grand narratives.

The Turning Wheel

The grandness of Berry's scope was first given impetus through his early immersion in the *Scienza Nuova* of Giambattista Vico which was published in 1725. Berry's doctoral thesis in the 1940s was based on Vico's work. It introduced him to a way of thinking about history that was mythic in its dimensions.

Vico's study was in part a response to the declaration by Descartes a century earlier that the world and the creatures within it were as clock-work mechanisms that could be manipulated and controlled by the rational intellect. Like William Blake, Giambattista Vico balked at the constriction of such a view and sought to restore the centrality of poetic wisdom and creative imagination to human purpose and experience.

Vico was of the view that there is a cohesiveness within history, that history is not a random and contingent cascade of events and circumstances, but rather carries an inherent pattern and order that can be discerned through careful examination and reflection. This view mirrored the intuition of many indigenous cultures and the central understandings of Hinduism, Buddhism and Taoism, all of which hold a cyclical rather than a linear view of history.

Vico developed his insight into a formal structure, describing the history of humanity as a repeating cycle of ages. He called the first of these periods *The Age of the Gods*. Such periods are characterised by theocratic systems of government maintained by clearly articulated and widely accepted mythologies and belief systems. The second age or epoch he named *The Age of the Heroes*. Such times are characterised by the rule of hereditary monarchies and their associated aristocracies and are usually marked by the presence of defined social classes, including a slave caste. The third phase described by Vico is *The Age of Men* which is characterised by a preference for more democratic forms of government and a valuing of rationality and human freedom. Implicit in this third phase is a tendency to increasing decadence and the consequent rise of a barbarism that brings about the progressive dissolution of all the social and institutional structures that had enabled its development. According to Vico's understanding, the collapse of this third age is once again followed by a return of the prototypical *Age of the Gods*. And thus the wheel of time and human history rolls on.

Following Vico, Berry elaborated his own system which incorporated much of the new knowledge that had emerged since Vico's time. Berry describes the prototypical age as *Tribal-Shamanic*, wherein the world is experienced as a field of living potencies and fluid energies. This is followed by the *Traditional-*

Civilisational epoch, where human life is shaped by well-defined cultural patterns and directed by hierarchical institutions. Berry identifies the third age as the *Scientific-Technological*, the time within which we presently find ourselves.

During this *Scientific-Technological* phase, all previously established cultural forms, rituals and practices are subordinated to the norms of an allegedly “enlightened” rationality. All earlier ways of knowing are usurped by “scientific” epistemologies that have become the sole arbiters determining whole new sets of beliefs, practices and technologies. Like Vico, Thomas Berry views this third age as carrying the seeds of its own demise. But rather than being followed by a return to another prototypical *Tribal-Shamanic* age, Berry suggests that we are now poised to transition to a fourth age, an age he calls *The Ecozoic Era*.

On the Ecozoic Era

According to Thomas Berry, we are presently hovering on the edge of an immense cultural and existential abyss. He is of the view that only a change of epic dimensions will enable us to successfully navigate our way through the accumulated detritus of a dying industrial civilisation. He proposes that this can only be accomplished by consciously envisioning the task ahead, a task which he refers to as *The Great Work*. The changes to be made are not so much in our methods, but in our minds and more particularly, in our relationship with the earth’s living systems. The rest will then follow.

Thomas Berry believes that we are at a crucial point in the history of humanity. The activities of industrial civilisation have irreversibly altered the character of life on earth. This has occurred at every level from forest to prairie ecosystems, inland lakes and waterways to intercontinental oceans, and animal and human habitats everywhere. He reflects:

“We are changing not simply the human. We are changing the chemistry of the planet. Even the geological structure and functioning of the planet. We are disturbing the atmosphere, the hydrosphere and the geosphere all in a manner that is undoing the work of nature over some hundreds of millions, even billions of years. The genetic strains we have extinguished will never return.”

Such profound disturbances herald a progressive collapse both of the physical and institutional structures that are associated with the Scientific-Technical age and the fixed mindset that has blinded us to the unanticipated consequences of industrial civilisation.

Rather than preparing for a return to primitive conditions that such a collapse might suggest, Berry suggests that we harness our new-found understanding of how the phenomenal world was formed and is maintained and direct that understanding towards living with the Earth in a mutually enhancing manner. Such co-operative participation with the natural world represents, for Berry, the quintessential change that will bring about the Ecozoic Era.

The Ecozoic Era therefore represents a potency within the human imagination that can heal the divided consciousness that has overseen the destruction of numerous ecosystems and caused great damage to delicate systems of dynamic interdependence that have emerged over periods of hundreds of millions of years. Berry is not proposing that we beaver away with recycling systems,

Hawkes Bay Branch Meetings

Where:

Bay Espresso,
141 Karamu Rd,
Hastings

When:

Date: Mon 7th Nov
Time: 1pm - 2.30pm

Awesome news! NZAMH Branch Meetings are now being held regularly in the Hawkes Bay region. The first one will be in early November at Bay Espresso just out of Hastings. Venue/s for future meetings will be arranged collectively at this meeting.

Come along and be part of the creative process - we envisage herbal discussion groups, presentations and maybe even film evenings and trips to local gardens. Your presence and input is very welcome.

You do not have to be an NZAMH member to come along, but if you are, attendance goes towards your NZAMH CPE hours.



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energy efficiency and pollution controls, important though these may be. He reminds us that the primary change needs to occur in our minds, in our relationships with each other and the world, in our sensitivity to and awareness of the fragility of natural systems, and in our recovery of a sense of awe and wonder for the created world. The rest will then follow.

Tributaries

Berry's intellectual and spiritual development were strongly shaped by his long-standing study of both Asian thought and indigenous cultures. After serving as a US Army Chaplain in Germany from 1951 to 1954, he spent the next three decades teaching in a number of American universities. During that time, he established programs in Asian religions at Seton Hall, St. John's University, Fordham University, Columbia University, and the University of San Diego. His programs encompassed Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism.

Thomas Berry was also strongly influenced by the ideas of anthropologist and fellow priest Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. Berry served as president of the American Teilhard Association over a 12 year period from 1975 to 1987. He shared Teilhard's view that consciousness is an attribute of the evolutionary process itself, and not merely a peculiar physiological epiphenomenon associated with the activity of neurotransmitters. For both Teilhard de Chardin and Thomas Berry, the world was charged with energies as alive as any of the creatures within it.

Thomas Berry holds that each of us has the capacity to enter into deep communion with rivers, with clouds, with forests and with mountains, but that most of us have lost that capacity in the present time. This alienation from the natural world has contributed to the objectification of its living and non-living components and a myopic disregard of the effects of our actions on the earth and its living systems.

Berry believes that the roots of our present attitude are to be found in the anthropocentrism of the biblical and the Greek humanist traditions. Both found meaning and purpose in the human community and dismissed or neglected the "primary sacred community", the phenomenal world itself.

This separation from nature was intensified by the influence of the sixteenth century English proto-scientist Francis Bacon who was among the first to formally objectify and commodify the world. Bacon's radical revisioning of the scope of human agency was furthered by the proclamations of Rene Descartes on the nature of mind and matter and the subsequent adoption of his views and methods by an emerging scientific community. The phenomenal world and the living things within it were increasingly viewed as objects to be explored and exploited in whatever way was deemed useful for human purposes.

We have built up then destroyed cities, cut deep into mountains and hauled out coal and metals, cut down rainforests and created new wastelands, dammed great rivers and ruined wetland ecosystems, drilled dry deserts and contracted armies to protect pipelines, mindlessly disgorged our accumulated wastes into the air, the earth and the sea without regard for anything but our own benefit.

We have had no philosophical or ethical system in place that would urge sensitivity, caution or restraint in such matters. Neither religion nor humanistic ethics warned us of the folly and the danger of continuing this relentless assault upon the earth. Berry reflects:

"We have a moral sense of suicide, homicide and genocide, but no moral sense of biocide, the killing of the life systems themselves and even the killing of the earth"

The Tragic Climax

The activities of industrial civilisation have seriously undermined the earth's capacity to maintain the delicately balanced regulatory systems that were slowly perfected over symphonic time periods. These systems have enabled life to expand and flourish in all its profusion through the 65 million years of the Cenozoic Era, an era that, according to Berry, now approaches its tragic climax.

Thomas Berry likens the present situation to only two other events in the history of the earth. The first was the termination of the Palaeozoic Era 220 million years ago when 90% of all living species were extinguished. The second was the termination of the Mesozoic Era 65 million years ago when a second mass extinction of species occurred. The changes we are presently witnessing are not fortuitous. They are a direct consequence of the activities of industrial civilisation.

Industrial civilisation has largely been fuelled by the energy locked in the massive deposits of fossil fuels that have been extracted, fractionated and burned up in a short century and a half. Carbon is the basis for all life as we know it. The earth has miraculously maintained atmospheric carbon at a steady level by storing it in the great forests of the earth, within the oceans of the world, and in the underground coal, oil and gas deposits that have locked solar energy into the ubiquitous benzene ring fashioned within the cells of ancient trees.

The great forests of the Europe have been felled and those of the new world are rapidly disappearing. The carbon they held, and that released by the burning of fossil fuels in coal-fired power stations and internal combustion engines now thickens the earth's atmosphere and increases the acidity of the oceans of the world. Berry reflects:

"Our present system, based on the plundering of the Earth's resources, is certainly coming to an end. It cannot continue."

Yet politicians, industrialists, bankers and consumers are searching for ways to stave off the inevitable. We will find ways of sequestering carbon. We will build hydrogen-fuelled cars. We will make lots of money through carbon trading schemes. We will recycle our bottles. We will recycle our water. We will remove the salt from sea water when our rivers and reservoirs dry up. We will create wind farms and solar arrays. We may even decide to close down our coal-fired power stations and replace them with new generations of nuclear reactors.

"...This alienation from the natural world has contributed to the objectification of its living and non-living components and a myopic disregard of the effects of our actions on the earth and its living systems ." (Vincent Di Stefano)

“The earth is primary and humans are derivative. The present distorted view is that humans are primary and the earth and its integral functioning only a secondary consideration...” (Thomas Berry)

But the damage has already been done and we remain perversely fixed in our ways. For many political leaders, our way of life, predicated as it is on a highly productive industrial system and a global economy, is simply not negotiable. Most discussions centre on ways that will enable us to “grow the economy” while continuing on our present trajectory.

Although the increase of carbon dioxide levels in the atmosphere is a major factor in creating climate change, it is but one of the many constellations of deleterious influence created by industrial civilisation. Background radiation levels have been progressively rising since Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The methods of industrial-scale broad acre farming have destroyed the arable top-soils in most nations. The widespread use of agricultural chemicals has vitiated insect life and encumbered both human and animal metabolisms. Groundwater has everywhere been depleted or poisoned. The fish stocks of the oceans continue to fall. The point was made and has been reiterated many times since Rachel Carson lamented the coming of a *Silent Spring* in 1962. Thomas Berry calls it as it is:

“The earth cannot sustain such an industrial system or its devastating technologies. In the future, the industrial system will have its moments of apparent recovery, but these will be minor and momentary. The impact of our present technology is beyond what the earth can endure.”

Towards the Future

So where does this leave us? Where are we to find solutions? Are there, in fact, any solutions? Clearly, we have no choice but to prepare ourselves and our children for what lies ahead. At another level, we need to prepare the ground for another way of being on the earth, a way that acknowledges not only our potential for mastery, but one that accords with our essential dependence on the forces that drive and sustain the natural world. This will require a fundamental change in our consciousness. That change will not be generated by diving deeper into the furious flow of information and sensation that drives the technosphere, but rather by a sensitive consideration of our circumstances and an active seeking out of the sources of wisdom that are both ever-present and ever-elusive.

Berry’s Ecozoic Era is predicated on a reacquisition of those sensitivities and sensibilities that will enable participatory continuity within our human communities and the ecosystems within which we are situated. We will need to develop a deeper understanding of our relationship with the natural world. We will need to make more intelligent choices in the way that we live individually that is reflected in the way that we live collectively so that the immense disparities that presently divide humanity will be avoided in the future. We will need to conform our actions to the limits of fairness and respect for the needs of our

fellow creatures - both human and non-human - and of the earth itself. We will need to learn to do things differently. Berry reminds us that:

“The earth is primary and humans are derivative. The present distorted view is that humans are primary and the earth and its integral functioning only a secondary consideration. The Earth must become the primary concern of every human institution, profession, program, and activity, including economics.”

Despite the prognostications of aerospace engineers and their starry-eyed space cadets, we will neither be mining the asteroids nor peopling other planets in the foreseeable future. Our collective energies will be needed to cope with increasingly uncertain weather patterns, food production and distribution, resource availability, economic stability, and social, political and personal freedoms.

In the meantime, our politicians will continue to balk and bicker, mining and energy companies will continue to squeeze every last drop from what little is left, global corporations will continue to manipulate governments and bleed consumers, investment bankers will continue to chase easy money.

Let us not fall into the folly of expecting change from above - politically or metaphorically. Let us change what can be changed in our own lives, draw strength and inspiration from those striving to bring about a more sustainable future, and work in whatever ways we can to prepare our children for life in a very different world. ✿

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Vincent Di Stefano is a retired practitioner of natural medicine and former lecturer in Western Herbal Medicine, History and Philosophy of Medicine and Qualitative Research Methods.

He has an ongoing commitment to healing at personal, social, spiritual and environmental levels.

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