

IDENTITY

Thomas Berry on Nature and Humans

[posted at www.loveshift.com]

The first thing to recognize in human-earth relationships is the Earth is primary and humans are derivative. Humans are for the perfection of the Earth rather than the Earth is here for the perfection of humans. Because the Earth project, reading people like Aristotle, some of the great classics and particularly for Aquinas in an earlier period in Western history mentions that the planet Earth or the universe is the ultimate and noblest perfection in things and everything in the universe is ultimately for the perfection of the universe. So, humans give to the universe a consciousness of itself. In fact, in a certain sense, humans are the way in which the universe creates itself because the human can be defined as that being in whom the universe reflects on and celebrates itself in a special mode of conscious self-awareness.

So in this manner, the first thing to recognize is that humans must become integral with the Earth. This is a very new approach to the Western world who have been so transfixed with the glory of the human and with the rights of humans that they have missed the point as regards humans and their relations with the Earth. We might summarize our present human situation by the simple statement: In the 20th century the glory of the human has become the desolation of the Earth and now the desolation of the Earth is becoming the destiny of the human. From here on, the primary judgment of all human institutions, professions, programs and activities will be determined by the extent to which they inhibit, ignore, or foster a mutually-enhancing human–Earth relationship.

When we inquire just how this will work out with the various aspects of our human existence, we might select four major areas that have authority over the human project: the political-social order, the educational order, the economic order, and the religious order. Now these four projects are all directly involved in this determination of the future. Religion has an awful lot to do with it if they would simply begin to be more aware of the revelatory significant of the natural work. The Education is such that children need to have contact with the natural life systems. Someone has written a book about the children and their need, for emotional and mental development, to have contact with the mountains, with the air, the sea, with the dawn, the sunset, the trees, the birds, the song of the birds. Children that don't have these experiences have no real idea of the world they live in. They live in a house, in a school, in a city, that's all manufactured. And they begin to be progressively isolated from the basis dynamics of what human life is all about. So that is a very clear situation. It has been suggested that this lack of contact leads to 'Nature Deficit Disorder' for children. So in this manner, the future of the children depends very directly on some more functional balance between the human presence and the functioning of the natural world.

Economics: We need to return to some sense of the natural life systems and realize that our disturbance of the Earth and our pollution processes are having a profound contact on the economy of our world. Then we have also the political order. The most absurd thing in modern times is the idea that only humans have rights. That's the most absurd and self-destructive thing imaginable because every being has rights. Rights come from existence. Rights is simply the giving to every being its due. That's a brief definition of rights. And every being has three rights: the right to be, the right to habitat, and the right to fulfill its role in the great community of existence. So in this manner a person has a very direct and immediate way of thinking about the 21st century. Because, if we don't respond to this by a better adjustment of human-Earth presence to each other, then we are in difficulty.

To a large extent our difficulty is a difficulty of language. People fail to realize that language is multivalent and also, particularly, when a person uses a word like 'rights,' for the non-human world, they think 'rights' in a single continuum. 'Rights' is an analogous term. It is an analogous term. It is alike and different. Like a person says-"A tree has rights"-the tree doesn't have human rights because human rights would be no good for a tree. A tree needs tree rights. Birds need bird rights. Plants need plant rights. This whole question of law and rights needs to recognize what we call the diversity within the continuity. It is a difference of quality, not of quantity. So it is not that the humans have more or less. Humans don't have more rights than birds do. They have different rights. So that it's this capacity to recognize the difference that pervades just an enormous amount of human affairs.

Short edited interview with Thomas Berry by Caroline Webb, filmed in February 2006.

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