

A Sacramental Approach to Ecology An Ecumenical discussion on the Responsibility of People of Faith to the Earth's Life Support System, in honour of Patriarch Bartholomew, TWU Dept. of Geography and Environment, Dept. of Philosophy, All Saints Monastery, Northwest Auditorium

Session II Listening to Prophetic Voices in the Christian Tradition

11:00-11:20 D. Clements | 11:20-11:40 J. Doede | 11:40-12:00 E. Grimm (15 min. 8 pages, 1950 words)

**Weather Watching in the Ecozoic Era,
or how Thomas Berry restored hope
Dr. Erica Grimm**

Thank you to the organizers, to Dave, Jennifer and to the Sto:lo people, on whose traditional, ancestral and unceded territory we gather.

This has been a season of weather watching. Wildfires swirled out of control in our interior, in the peat fields of Greenland and throughout Europe. Whirlwinds Franklin, Harvey, Irma, + Maria, wreaked category 5 fury, meanwhile 1/3 of Bangladesh sat under water. A warmer ocean is like a giant engine that uses warm moist air as fuel (NASA) Record high temperatures—three years running—warmed the ocean, melted ice caps, and scorched the earth. Rising sea levels produced by ice cap melt exacerbate flooding, while bone-dry areas burned. Extreme weather, increasing in frequency and severity is our new normal. It is clear from the scientific evidence that human beings have changed the chemistry and physics of the planet—the ocean has acidified, warmed, lost oxygen—shifting global weather cycles; ushering in a new geological age some call the Anthropocene (the current geological epoch beginning in the 18th century when for the first time, human activities have changed global climate and ecosystems).

No one here needs to be convinced of the urgency of our global environmental situation, or the irony of Francis Bacon's conviction that nature could be conquered (*Novum Organum*, 1620). Rene Descartes believed science would make humans *masters, possessors and dominators of nature*. In retrospect, this sounds shocking in its arrogance. Now, weather and science tell us otherwise. Never masters, we are an integral part of nature. *Laudato Si* addressed the churches devastating misunderstanding of the word "dominate", identifying the ecological crisis as a spiritual problem (Pope Francis, *On The Care For Our Common Home*). Decoupling scientific and humanistic-spiritual traditions while possessing, mastering and dominating the earth has created what some are calling the 6th Extinction. "*Irreversible end of civilization*" and "*the size of the remnant depends on how much we change now*" are phrases seared into my memory (Seizing An Alternative: Toward an Ecological Civilization). Profound loss is the sorry legacy of a mechanistic model of the universe, loss of forests, loss of ice, loss of cold, loss of species—according to the wildlife conservancy ¼ of the earth's species will be extinct by 2050. Extinct is forever. Human caused climate change has halted the fecundity of what can only be described as the paradisaic flourishing of the Cenozoic Era (dozens of millions of years).

This summer I listened to the wildfire reports from my own garden paradise. Living beside a forest, my herbs, figs, and flowers, a perennial border between urban + wild, I felt helpless. Contemplated. Prayed. Asked if I still believed the conclusions that Gerard Manley Hopkins came 1918? Do I still believe that:

*The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
Crushed.
Why do men then now not wreck his rod?
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with
toil;
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the
soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And for all this, nature is never spent;*

Do I still believe that nature is never spent? That it will be renewed unlike all those extinct species? I ask myself what it would mean to be totally present in this place, at this moment in time, in my own skin? How might I Stop, pause, and recognize what is here—the suchness, the sacrament, the miracle of this present moment? The mystery of billions of years of unfolding that has resulted in life now? That oxygen is. How might I wake up, see what is? That the sun rising causes a neural cascade of healing and safety in my garden? How might I embrace, draw close, hold tenderly the collective grief, and my own? How might I be flexible, responsive, rather than reactive, in the face of change? These are the questions I bring with me into my artist studio.

Can walking into my studio do anything in the face of such a reality? Can the arts transdisciplinary nature and methodological complexity change anything? Can embodied sensory perception—exercising haptic, emotional, intuitive, and tacit knowing—complicate and complete the thought-construct that Descartes work inaugurated? Is it possible that reinstating sensory perception along side reasoned knowing, can balance the reductive influence of Descartes; re-enchant the academy? Save the world? Can balancing percept with concept wake us up to what is happening to our common home? Can widening ways of knowing beyond the narrowly analytical, possibly allow access to wicked problems such as the global eco-crisis? Although I feel paralyzed after a season of research into ocean change, I do actually believe these things. I believe the active interior practices of the studio and the retreat center both wake us up us to see clearly this moment, prepare us for what ahead, and manifest in action, healthy lives, powerful art. I believe that these marginalized interior practices, otherwise known as prayer, the examine of conscience and the interior attentiveness

that arts practices like drawing cultivate—those technologies of the Soul that Foucault was so curious about at the end of his life—are vital to reclaim and remember. They are key to waking up and key to imagining a better way.

Reading Steven Pinker and Thomas Berry gave me hope. In *The Better Angels of Our Nature, Why Violence Has Declined*, Pinker found that despite seemingly endless murderous events, levels of violence have been going down—inexorably, consistently and systematically, across all means of measuring it. Has been for decades. Despite the unspeakable violence still occurring, the species has found a way to reduce violence (although he does say this trend can be reversed...Trump). Pinker's tome examines, the many reasons for violence decreasing, one of which is that artists have been creating tools to widen our collective, empathetic/compassionate capacity. Helping everyone to imagine another's life, a better future.

But it was reading Thomas Berry that changed everything for me, released me from paralysis/despair. Berry, fiery prophet, visionary mystic of the ecological age, also looked to *poesis* and story to call us to our senses, wake us up to the peril and great work of our age. Like Francis, Berry issued a summons to care for our common home, global in scope. Thirty years ago, Berry wrote:

...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. These events, no less than the Fall of Rome, require a new historical vision to guide and inspire a new creative period not only in the human community, but also in the functioning of the earth itself... (Dream of the Earth xiii)

Berry linked the loss of inner consciousness/vision to the havoc wrecked on Earth. “A terrifying assault, irrationally stunning in its enormity... to strip the world of its subjectivity is to strip humans of same.... Berry thought that every age had a “great work to do”, the previous great work was to get over tribalism, ours was to dis/cover re/cover intimacy with the earth (the Great Work; Dream of the Earth), healing the human soul that we might heal the earth:

“We will recover our sense of wonder and our sense of the sacred only if we appreciate the universe beyond ourselves as a revelatory experience of that numinous presence whence all things came into being. Indeed, the universe is the primary sacred reality. We become sacred by our participation in this more sublime dimension of the world around us.”

He goes on to warn:

In our present context, failure in creativity would be an absolute failure. A present failure at this order of magnitude cannot be remedied later by a larger success. In this context a completely new type of creativity is needed. This creativity must have as its primary concern the survival of the earth in its functional integrity. Concern for the well-being of the planet is the one concern that, it is hoped, will bring the nations of the world into an international community. Since the earth functions as an absolute unity, any dysfunctioning of the planet imperils every nation on the planet (218)

Berry, as I am sure you all know, was the priest, cultural historian, religious scholar, geologist, who recognising the genius of Teilhard de Chardin, and arranged for the post-humous publication of his work. Teilhard unified science and religion, seeing evolution as sacramental, a continuous unfolding of the universe continually differentiating. Teilhard was oblivious to the ecological situation since his work predates Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* thus he was overly optimistic about technology. In many ways Berry carried on Teilhard's work but with the realism of how the industrial revolution allowed humans to cross the threshold into a new reality of our own making—the amazing and devastating achievement of being able to dominate the earth—putting the natural world's very survival in our hands, bringing to an end the past 67 million years of unrepeatably biodiversity and geological stability, the planetary flourishing called the Cenozoic Age. Aware that we are totally unprepared to navigate the enormity of this change, Berry identified *poesis* as the only way to insight.

His call was to recover the sacred within creation, and re-story the miracle of the universe unfolding. Berry trusted in the sacramental life force within the earth, the vibrant potential of the unfolding universe, convinced that the wisdom/miracle that resulted in life at this moment would continue to draw out of us what is needed to survive the change ahead, even flourish. In equal measures poetic and prophetic, he wove with physicist Brian Swimme, a lyrical story of the splendour of the cosmos, taking into account scientific knowledge. *The Universe Story, From the Primordial Flaring Forth to the Ecozoic Age, A Celebration of the Unfolding of the Cosmos*, was a narrative that invited a shift in earth/human relations, a new story for a mythic age, our task to recover the universe as sacred, numinous, and heal the dualisms between science/humanities and between earth/humanity. For Berry the universe was marked by differentiation, a massive manifestation of diversity; and by subjectivity. The universe was a communion of subjects a— not a collection of objects. Alert to the creative life force that comes from the initial flaring forth and continues to unfold in an irreversible sequence of transforming events/episodes, the unfolding is the self-emergent, self-sustaining, self healing, self fulfilling, self-organizing power within all of creation. He called this the Cosmogonic Principle—or the form producing power of the universe, the inexhaustible fecundity at the root of reality, whose interior is its essence. The creation is therefore numinous mystery, reverence, everything is a sentience, a Thou, a presence, an irreplaceable voice.

Art arises in the generative gap between subjectivity and where one has landed (south of the Fraser, near the Salish Sea) in a particular, dynamic relationship with history, culture + environment: amazed at the fecundity of my urban/wild territory, still terrified, but also alert to how environmental consciousness and initiatives are arising seemingly everywhere I look. All around, change is happening, yes, in the daily examples of extreme weather, but also in the environmental consciousness that keeps growing. The Paris Accord was ratified, environmental groups keep growing, the tipping point of understanding seems nearer. Berry called for all religions to enact an environmental phase and thought we would be judged by how thoroughly an ecological consciousness infuses every aspect of society

My project started by being drawn by the ocean. It started as a proposal for an exhibition on the ocean as source and symbol of healing. Being near the ocean's rhythmic tidal suck and pull, inhaling its briny benediction, makes all of us feel better. Tears, amniotic fluid, blood plasma and the ocean are chemically almost identical, having the identical specific gravity-identical saturations of salt. Quickly I awoke to the degree to which the ocean was sick. Bringing our *lived experiences and perceiving embodied selves* unapologetically to creative/critical/scholarly tasks, arts-based practices are lived inquiries, ecologies of the everyday, where our deepest curiosities meet our world's deepest need (Parker Palmer). That we cannot escape our subjectivity is recognized, that we cannot escape what is happening in our world today is also true. An emergent, active practice through which we come to our senses, art making synthesizes new ideas and forges connections between disciplines. Artists are trained to condense and crystalize, draw on tacit knowledge, trust the intuition, scrutinize emotions, pay attention to sensory perception, lean into chaos. Art can wake us up from a collective anesthetized state of grief. As Pinker observed, art increases the potential for empathy/compassion, it sends the otherwise ego-driven self-out. Above all right now we need the collective ability to stop, change course, and imagine a new way forward. Can we tackle the violence that remains- the violence enacted against the earth that we have been blind to? In denial of? Blindly groping into "the unfamiliar" is a place of displacement, liminality and fecundity. It is a fearful place. But in order to make something that was not there before, or to imagine a world differently, artists (all of us) need to trust this place of unknowing. Neurobiologists tell us we are hardwired for optimism. *And after reading Berry I find that I do still dream and I do still agree with Hopkins, and hope it may still be true that*

There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
And though the last lights off the black West went
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs—
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.