

AN INTERVIEW WITH THOMAS BERRY

In an interview with Gerry Leonard in November 1990, Thomas Berry discussed his views about the tremendous crisis the world is experiencing as it moves out of the Cenozoic era into the Ecozoic. Berry believes that we must nurture the instinctive, natural response that children have to the environment and perpetuate it in adolescence so that as a people we can learn to commune with our natural surroundings rather than mindlessly manipulating them.

Gerry Leonard. How can we go about guiding adolescents so that they can find their place in the world today?

Thomas Berry. What we are talking about are roles, not in the sense of jobs, but in the sense of what used to be called vocations. The word vocation came to have a narrow meaning of some kind of religious or clerical function, but the real idea is that a person is called for or is inwardly guided toward some functional aspect of the human social order so that whatever they do in life, they need to feel that it's not something that's just a chance choice of their own but rather something that is guided by a deeper destiny that they are chosen for. That is very important.

What is also important is that our generation did not choose to be here at the end of the 20th century. Children did not choose to be born at this time. They have to feel that they are given the power and are capable of dealing with the issues of these times. I call it the grace of the moment—not exactly in a traditionally religious sense, but in the sense of the historical moment which brings with it the powers to deal with the issues that a person must deal with. So that's part of my own approach to this particular period.

*Thomas Berry, author, theologian and Catholic priest, was born in Greensboro, North Carolina. He has lived in Japan, China, the Philippines, North Africa, and the Middle East, and has written on Buddhism and the religions of India. He was president of the American Teilhard Association for 10 years. In 1970 he established the Riverdale Center for Religious Research in New York. His research has focused on the impact of the human on the world's ecosystems. In 1989 he published *The Dream of the Earth*.*

Gerard Leonard directs the adolescent program at Whitby School in Greenwich, Connecticut. Mr. Leonard received his AMI primary and elementary training at Sion Hill College in Dublin, Ireland. He is currently interested in the development of a regional Erkindar in New England.

GL. How best do you see us helping children, especially the adolescents who are moving towards taking their place in the greater community and discovering what their particular role or vocation is, what their particular place is, in these times when the educational structures that are there don't seem to give them that opportunity?

TB. My own view of what's happening is that we are at the terminal phase of the Cenozoic—that's the last 65 million years—and at the emergent period of the Ecozoic. Somehow adolescents need to understand the order of the magnitude of the issues that they will have to deal with, the order of the creativity that they must bring forth, and the conditions under which they can succeed in this process. They can't succeed in the process by ignoring the past, in fact they need to know the past. I think that this experience that Maria Montessori talks about (i.e., the Erdkinder) with the land, with the earth, is of the utmost importance because you have to rebuild a sense of human community on a very elementary level. Sometimes people talk about going back, but it's not going back to anything unless it's a recovery.

Somehow adolescents need to understand the order of the magnitude of the issues that they will have to deal with, the order of the creativity that they must bring forth, and the conditions under which they can succeed in this process.

You go back to health when you've had a disease or you go back to health when you're into a pathology, and we're into a deep cultural pathology. To come out of that pathology back to or forward to mental balance is what's involved. So somehow we need to deal with the order of magnitude of change that is going to take place. For instance, our children are going to see the end of the petroleum period while all they see about them now is caught up in the petroleum period. What they need to learn is that while they are fascinated with the gas-driven automobile, the gas-driven automobile is already an anachronism, and the type of society that they are surrounded with is not going to support them in their larger life development.

GL. They won't survive.

TB. It's not going to support them either economically or spiritually or in their creative talents, whatever they are.

GL. But how do we help them understand the magnitude of change they will experience? It's incredible that Montessori was saying this half a century

ago, predicting the end of an era, a geological era.

TB. She used that term?

GL. Yes

TB. Amazing!

GL. She said it would be a catastrophe reminiscent of the prophecy of the Apocalypse if man does not wake up to what's happening here. In the light of this, how do we maintain hope and not despair at the devastation? In contrast to this, you also speak in your writings of the grandeur of man. Montessori spoke much of man's grandeur, too.

TB. Let me point out a passage to you in *The Dream of the Earth*. This passage has to do with knowledge of how the universe functions. It's the end of the new story, you'll remember it. I suggest that we might have a basic vote of confidence in the future based on this:

If the dynamics of the universe from the beginning shaped the course of the heavens, lighted the sun, and formed the earth, if this same dynamism brought forth the continents and seas and atmosphere, if it awakened life in the primordial cell and then brought into being and guided us safely through the turbulent centuries, there is reason to believe that this same guiding process is precisely what has awakened in us our present understanding of ourselves and our relation to this stupendous process. Sensitized to such guidance from the very structure and functioning of the universe, we can have confidence in the future that awaits the human venture.

GL. So there is a reason why we are here?

TB. The main thing is that the universe has gone through these crisis moments before, although this is a unique crisis. This particular kind of crisis the universe has never experienced before, as far as we know, certainly the planet earth hasn't. So it's based on past experience that we can have a certain assurance that the energies are there, if we will let these energies function, and that our role is to be sensitized to the process that the universe is unfolding.

GL. Could I ask you a little about that? You talk in one place in your book about being sensitized. You talk about the shamanic personality and that particular way of capturing the dream or vision and really understanding the interconnectedness with all living beings. I think that the adolescent is at an age of vision or of potential vision. Montessori calls this time "the period of the desert" when the child can construct a vision for life. Do you see this as being something that we can implement with adolescents in these times?

TB. Most certainly. That goes along with my suggestion that “the historical mission of our times is to reinvent the human at the species level with critical reflection, within the community of life systems, in a time developmental context by means of story and shared dream experience.” Now childhood is a period of dreams, and adolescence particularly is a period of aspiration, an awakening to new emotional experiences, some new types of relatedness. The awakening of sexuality is occurring. This is a cosmic power that they are awakening to, and it’s a question of girls and boys being able to join together in a common venture. That’s why it’s important that in their love relationships they are creative, that it is not just a kind of indulgence in each other but in support of a common task, a common work. The forces that are functioning in sexuality are the forces that build the universe, so that needs to be encompassed in this process. Also this Erdkinder experience of Maria Montessori’s, the idea of working with the land and concern for the food issue is very important. That’s why in my piece, “Coming of Age in the Ecozoic Era,” I mention that our children need to learn gardening. The reasons for this reach deep into their mental and emotional as well as into their physical survival. Gardening is an active participation in the deepest mysteries of the universe. By gardening, children learn that they are connected with all growing things in a single community of life.

They learn to nurture and be nurtured and that the universe is always precarious but ultimately benign. This process of enabling the young to establish an identity with the total functioning of the planet is enormously important.

GL. Do you feel that gardening and farming, which is work with a cultivated ecosystem, is enough to help the child embody the life processes of the whole planet?

TB. I have another piece which identifies the conditions for developing the Ecozoic era. The first is that the universe is a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects. I isolate this as regards the Ecozoic because my generation has been an autistic generation. We never heard the voices, there was no communion with the natural world, and that is what is needed. We have to commune with the natural world and in a sense this is something beyond gardening. Gardening is a kind of interaction and a rapport with the natural world—but this is more immediate—with the mountains and the winds and waters, the rain and the clouds and the flowers and the birds.

GL. So how does one go back, or perhaps go forward, to that kind of intense participation?

TB. It's an awakening experience that children have when they are very young. When you see animals and young humans, they play together and have a wonderful rapport. Children have that instinctive response to flowers and to the rain, they love to be out in the rain, they love to be in the mud. They have a feeling relationship. I talk about this feeling of relationship, of having a communal experience rather than treating the planet as a collection of objects to be manipulated. It must be communed with. That's where, I think, it's important for people not merely to garden but to go into the wilderness and experience it. That is most important because if that's not done, then I don't think anything is going to work. We need to have this sense of community between the natural and the human world, the sense that there is a single community. What's happening now is that when we speak of a sense of community, we mean human community. We talk about society, about a sense of justice and freedom; these things are human and do not encompass a larger realm, and that is the cause of our difficulty.

GL. I see in the children already that there is a different sense of community from what I had and, of late, even a different sense in comparison to children five years ago. It's not just superficial learning that they've picked up, it's more than that, there are really deep feelings about what's happening and what they can and should do.

TB. I think they are beginning to feel the pathos of their times. In the cities they don't have any ecstatic experiences. This feeling of desolation is a part of the drug pathology and because of some of the other things that are happening. The only two ways which they can get this experience outside of living with nature are either by sex or drugs. Sex is the only natural experience that is available to them. They can't have the experience of being in a forest or hearing birds or being with animals. They only have concrete and bars and wheels and mechanisms and manipulated processes. So their whole emotional life is stifled, their imaginative life is stifled, and so, in order to get it out of them, they invent rock and roll, delirious music, so loud that it blocks out one mode of consciousness and throws them into some loss of consciousness, into some ecstatic mode.

GL. So let's say the children are on an Erdkinder, in a farm community

Gardening is an active participation in the deepest mysteries of the universe. By gardening, children learn that they are connected with all growing things in a single community of life.

which is trying to become a self-sustaining community in relationship with the plants, the animals, the landscape, the humans on the farm, and also with the local communities. But it's also necessary that there be a relationship with the global community right now. How would you see the connection being made or being part of an Erdkinder school?

TB. I think that we've overdone the idea of participating in this larger area. For instance in the European community, I am rather much against the agricultural policy because I don't think that food should be a matter of trade any more than is necessary, and that food should be locally grown and locally consumed. There is necessarily an interchange with the city populations, but by the time food is selected and processed and made beautiful and packaged and frozen and transported and dried out, food loses its nutritious quality. So I don't see any sense in the agricultural dimensions of the Common Market.

GL. I know it hasn't been of great benefit to my own country, Ireland. The Common Market has brought in the great chemical/industrial system of agriculture which wasn't there to any large extent before.

TB. Agriculture becomes business, money oriented and trade oriented, and that's the end of the rapport with the land, the rapport with food. This way you throw away about 40 percent of the food because there's some blemish; it has to conform esthetically to some artificial standard of what a fruit should be, and if it's not the right color and it's not the right size, you throw it away.

GL. So would you then look to the bioregion rather than to the larger perspective?

TB. Definitely toward the bioregional community and as far as possible to self-subsisting. The principle is that what can best be done at a local level should not be taken over at a higher level. What the family can do should not be taken over by the community. What the local community does should not be taken over by a higher political authority. In other words, it's to preserve the integrity and the spontaneities and immediacies of life itself; otherwise, things get caught in a dead, bureaucratic, administrative process and they lose their vitality. And the great variety of things becomes lost. Now that's why Europe is so wonderful, because the different countries are so different. I'm afraid in this Common Market they are just going to be different versions of the same thing. The Italians were so different from the French, from the English, from the Germans, the Belgians, and so forth. Now they are throwing all this together and saying, let's make it a single thing. It does make a fantastically powerful economic block for the present, but ultimately it's bound to have its

difficulties.

Now there is a tendency to do away with tensions by eliminating difference rather than harmonizing difference and intensifying difference. I well remember when I was studying history in graduate school, the professor had a map on the board with different colors for the different countries. He was trying to explain wars and conflicts and he said that wars happen because there are all these different nations. Somehow he had the idea that if you didn't have these differences, you wouldn't have wars. Now it's true that nation states that by definition recognize no higher authority than the nation are disastrous. The answer is to recognize the community of differentiation, that communion should intensify difference, and unless difference is intensified there is an absolute loss to the whole and to each part of the whole.

The idea is not to denounce localism. We tend to think of localism and yokelism as the same thing, but the idea is rather to enrich the local creativity. When I go back to North Carolina now I find it is not half as beautiful as when I grew up. I was born in 1914. I remember the late teens and the twenties, the roads were just being paved. From then on the devastation took off and now we have all these enormous highways. We have parking lots, corporation centers, factories, and industrial plants that have devastated the state. So there's the problem of when we get into the larger industrial world and become a power that we are no longer ourselves. North Carolina does not want to be itself. I say, North Carolina, come home to yourself. Stop inviting in these big corporations. They'll give us jobs, they say, but we ought to have sense enough to make jobs ourselves. We should have our own internal economy. We have the mountains, the hill section, the coastal plain, the estuary region. We have the basis for an internal economy, an internal culture, even a rich mountain culture, a plains culture, a coastal culture. Let's develop an education for this but not for some vague otherness. Let's be in contact with the rest of the world, but let us have something of our own that we can offer the world. Let us not lose our own specific creativity. So, going back to this question of localism and bioregionalism, it's a terrific urgency to have sustainable local communities.

*Agriculture
becomes
business, money
oriented and
trade oriented,
and that's the
end of the
rapport with the
land...*

GL. Like the idea of the community farm?

TB. Yes. The important thing is to associate the specific culture with this so

that it's satisfying. One of the difficulties with this and with farms is that we have never developed a village culture in the local villages. In Europe, when Montessori was living, there was a peasant culture, a village culture, a low culture and a high culture. We have the high culture but not the village culture, and the village culture really is the basis of the high culture in all countries.

This shows up in the language; it shows up in poetry. You have the local village poet and local artists. Every village has its woodcarvers and its metalworkers. The children learn the arts, they learn smithing, and they learn the various crafts and skills of carpentry. At one time in this country, in the village, there was an integral, sustainable complex of crafts and skills. Now these things have become so specialized that you can't get things done unless you're in contact with the bigger cities because there's nobody who can do them locally.

But one of the reasons why people are not there is that from the beginning our villages were agribusinesses, they were money-making centers, not founded as communities for cultural purposes. They were founded like the railroads. When the railroads of this country were built, they purchased enormous plots of land alongside the tracks. They sent agents all over Europe to pay people to come here to settle on the land to grow the grain so the railroad would make money hauling the grain. And that was how the settlements took place. That's why, from the beginning, they were planting not for integral, sustainable life processes, but they were growing for business. It was not a mystique, a culture.

GL. That in a sense makes it even harder for an Erdkinder school, located in a particular town or on the outskirts of some city or even by a village, to develop a rich cultural life which is really the flowering of what is going on with the earth.

TB. That's right, it does. Do you remember the Black Mountain School in North Carolina? It functioned, I think, in the '30s and '40s, maybe the '50s. It was a center where the students grew their own food. I don't know if they were paid anything, but they did their own work, and they were trained in the arts. It was a remarkable thing but it doesn't exist any longer. Now, there's no reason why we couldn't have schools for adolescents where the children would live and make their own village like Montessori was saying. They could build their houses, learn carpentry, grow their food, and get an integral education. They could also learn social things—how to make decisions, learn political participation, learn the arts, and develop rapport with land. They could learn where they fit in history.

GL. So is there a place there then for, say, the humanities?

TB. Well, definitely.

GL. You've talked about the fact that we need to go beyond the cultural heritage right down to our genetic coding, that we now need to go beyond our religious and our humanistic culture.

TB. That's our high culture, what we call our humanistic culture. It has its glories, and it also has a kind of human arrogance. It's like our religious traditions. It has a lot to offer, but it has a certain inadequate spirituality associated with it just like there's the humanistic arrogance as regards the natural world in much of our literature. Much of our culture and our education has educated people out of this relationship with the soil rather than enabling them to integrate with the natural world. It's also true that the best of our literature really extols this relationship.

GL. Maybe there's a thread that could form a course of study there.

TB. Yes, there is much. It's like Bach and other musicians who took the motifs of their music from the folk traditions. They took the folk melodies and worked them into a higher expression. These two are not antagonistic to each other, and we need to know how to relate these. But the greatest loss that we have now is the uprooting of the biological vitalities of our existence because of the mechanistic processes that we have invented. We're losing the genetic variety...

GL. Yes, and many have incredible adaptations and different characteristics that have been developed over time. They're not statistically near where they need to be in the United States to know even how many of them are left—in some cases it is very few. It strikes me that the Erdkinder could be a kind of Ark for these animals.

TB. Yes, for the animals and also for the seeds. They are the basis of our food supply. Our wheat strains, our corn, there are just a couple of varieties at the present time. We have lost over half the varieties, and we are destined to lose another half of the remainder in the immediate future because of the specialization process and because supposedly certain strains produce more so everybody plants them and they abandon all the others. Then that becomes vulnerable and the others are lost. But the strains will have to be strengthened by the association of varieties. If you lose the differences, you lose the strength of the process. So the students in their actual practice will be learning these principles.

GL. They will be learning to respect diversity by working with it. You talk about the role of the human being to celebrate, to take glory in being the one who is consciously able to reflect on the universe, on the wonder of it all. Montessori talks about the cosmic task of creatures and the elements (air, water, etc.) in terms of their reciprocal relationships within the whole. Montessori goes on to ask what, then, is the cosmic task of man? Is he the first parasite to inhabit the earth? She does not believe this to be so. She has great hope for the human and she talks of the task of man as being, somehow, the further evolution of the earth; that there is some great mission for the human species.

TB. The human is that being in whom the universe reflects and celebrates itself in its numinous origins in a special mode of conscious self-awareness. It's a loss to the universe to lose this type of celebration that is particular to the human. Of course the universe celebrates itself in the songs of birds and their coloration and the mating rituals, and in the clouds and the rain. Everything celebrates, but the human has achieved a special mode of conscious self-awareness, and we have power that the other species don't have. Right now though, we are in a deep cultural pathology which is being imposed on the planet in a comprehensive way so that it's throwing the planet into a planetary pathology. The planet itself is distraught and is suffering from the influence of the pathology of the human. It's participating in the pathology of the human. Reconstructing the process requires that both the human and the natural world undergo this therapy. I say it this way, and I use the exodus metaphor because the exodus is our basic religious metaphor, our basic cultural metaphor. In fact, this country was founded on an exodus experience and metaphor. The original exodus was from Egypt to the Promised Land. Then there was the exodus of the Christians into the Empire. The exodus into the Middle Ages and then into the Renaissance and then out into the whole world. Now there is an exodus from the terminal Cenozoic into the Ecozoic. It's an exodus of the planet itself. It's a planetary transformation that's taking place. I'll say it this way—that the human community and the natural world will go into the future as a single, sacred community or we will both perish in the desert. Of course the natural world won't perish absolutely; it will perish in many of its finest achievements because as the human goes or becomes degraded, the planet itself will participate in the degradation or breakdown. And as soon as breakdown starts, you don't know where it will stop or what forces can possibly stop it.

GL. Are you, yourself, hopeful at this point in time?

TB. Well, I believe that something can be done and we ought to do it, and beyond that I am encouraged by the extent to which a broad span of people are becoming aware of the issue and show a willingness to make serious efforts to alter the destructive process. Although the destructive process is so highly institutionalized at the present, I am very dubious, or I have forebodings about the future. My forebodings are not exactly about extinction, which some people fear, but of degradation. If we're going to have a degraded planet, we will have degraded humans. Now the planet will never again function as it has functioned up to now. That happened independently of the human. From here on almost nothing is going to happen that does not involve the human.

GL. So we're talking about stewardship...

TB. I don't like the word stewardship. We're talking about a human component of the process.

GL. We must understand ourselves as a component of the process.

TB. Yes, a component of the process and to some extent a determinant of the process. But the process is not something that we can do. It's something that the planet has to do. But I say it this way—we can't make a blade of grass, but there's liable not to be a blade of grass unless we accept it, protect it, and foster it. The protection is mainly protection from human intrusion on natural processes. To some extent it is a stepping back

from the devastation so that the natural powers can function. Right now we have to foster, to heal. There are many instances where we can heal. There are those people who are healing the damaged marine environment by planting seas grasses. They bring back the sea life forms. We now have to build nests for the eagles. There's an awful lot of this kind of thing that we need to do. Our main task is to see that human technologies foster rather than destroy nature. There is a lot we can do, and our education needs to prepare us for that role. That has to be the dominant role of the future.

GL. What would you say to the teachers?

TB. Teachers need to appreciate above all this larger context of what we're doing. They need to foster the context in which the student can function. The main task of the teacher right now is to establish the context of understanding that will enable the students, to begin to appreciate the challenge that they face.

*My forebodings
are not exactly
about extinction,
which some
people fear, but
of degradation.
If we're going to
have a degraded
planet, we will
have degraded
humans.*

GL. Now, what about traditional spiritual values? We don't have religion in our schools any more, and it seems that we can hardly talk about spirituality to the children.

TB. Well, I think this is the spirituality of the future. In other words, I think that this sense of the sacredness of this process is what needs to be communicated, and I myself would not be much concerned about continuing past traditions. They are necessary, and the students need to understand some of that, but there is the problem of how to accomplish it that will depend largely on family context. I don't know what the role of the teacher would be. I think it is more important right now for the students to learn a general sensitivity to the universe in its sacred dimension than it is to learn the technicalities of past traditions because there will be a sufficient amount of this, I would think, in the literature and the art and in their family context and in their general learning context. But as regards their sacramental type of participation, I don't think that's exactly the role of the teacher.

GL. What about rituals for this type of community of adolescents, or celebrations?

TB. I think we need a new set of celebrations. We need to appreciate that the process of the universe is a spiritual one from the beginning. That is most important—that it is not just a mechanistic process, that there's a mystique at work. I think that the book that Brian Swimme and I are writing will provide a context in which the story of the universe can be communicated. We hope to do a version for the adolescent and one for very young children that would be mostly paintings and very little text, and perhaps one for the college student. I plan a variety of expressions of the universe story. It will be out in 1992. It's a brilliant telling of the story. There are a lot of lyric dimensions to it; it's a beautiful thing.

