

**Reading** "Reinventing the Human" from The Great Work by Thomas Berry

We might describe the challenge before us by the following sentence. The historical mission of our times is to reinvent the human – at the species level, with critical reflection, within the community of life-systems, by means of story and shared dream experience.

I say reinvent the human being because humans, more than any other living form, invent themselves. Other species receive their basic instructions at the time of their birth. With this endowment they know how to obtain their food, how to defend themselves, how to obtain shelter, how to carry on their mating rituals, how to care for their young. [Compare this] to the extent of teaching and acculturation that humans need to arrive at maturity. The acculturation process is the purpose of the long childhood distinctive of humans.

We need to reinvent the human at the species level because the issues we are concerned with seem to be beyond the competence of our present cultural traditions. What is needed is something beyond existing traditions to bring us back to the most fundamental aspect of the human: giving shape to ourselves. The human is at a cultural impasse. In our efforts to reduce the other-than-human components of the planet to subservience, we have brought the entire set of life-systems of the planet, including the human, to an extremely dangerous situation. Radical new cultural forms are needed. These new cultural forms would place the human within the dynamics of the planet rather than place the planet within the dynamics of the human.

At such a moment a new revelatory experience is needed, an experience wherein human consciousness awakens to the grandeur and sacred quality of the Earth process. This awakening is our human participation in the dream of the Earth, the dream that is carried in its integrity ... in the depths of our genetic coding. The Earth functions at a depth beyond our capacity for active thought. We probably have not had such participation in the dream of the Earth since earlier times, but therein lies our hope for ourselves and for the entire Earth community.



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## Sermon

We know that there is a problem with the way we are living. We know that as North Americans we consume a huge percentage of the world's energy and resources and that this is unsustainable. When we started talking about the environment 40 years ago, this was new controversial information and so there was an urgent sense of having to prove its truth. We don't need to do that anymore. It's been proven.

We also know that we humans are responsible for the warming of the earth. I'm not even going to debate that because all the so-called scientific evidence that questions global warming is paid for by industries protecting their bottom line. We are causing global warming and we know it's not o.k..

We also know what we have to do about it. We've known for a long time. So this sermon isn't going to be about how we need to recycle or how we have to get away from fossil fuels. It's not going to be about how much better off our earth would be if we bought our food from local markets, wore 100% organic cotton clothing, turned our thermostats down in the winter and up in the summer, took public transit, and hung our laundry out to dry. We know all this.

This sermon is about how we are trapped in a cycle where we can't seem to do what we know we need to do. We have the scientific knowledge. We have the technology. We have the money. Even in this recession, the financial resources are there. And yet for all this, we seem to be stuck. And I'm sorry to be so dismal about it, because up until now this has been a pretty upbeat amazing service with great energy and beautiful music.

I've certainly felt uplifted by what has happened here today. Even though this is technically my job, my spirit needs to be here on Sunday morning, praying, singing, being with the people I care about. But, our living religious tradition is not just about raising our spirits for one hour a week. It's about the Monday factor. It is about truth telling, even when it hurts. We're not supposed to turn away from things that make us uncomfortable, and this is a truth that makes us uncomfortable: we are in trouble. We as a species have the ability to dig ourselves and this earth out of the mess we have created, and we're not doing it. So obviously having the resources, having the technology, having the money, isn't enough. What do we not have that we need to get us off our butts and doing this important sacred work?



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Ecotheologian Thomas Berry believes that the reason we aren't making headway is because we are fundamentally missing part of the equation. We've got the technological and scientific processes figured out. What we're missing, collectively, is the cultural and religious piece. We are meaning making creatures, and facts don't mean anything to us until there is meaning behind them. So it means nothing that hundreds of species go extinct every year. It means nothing that our world is warming and that the oceans are rising until there is a cultural and religious meaning that makes it real for us, and so far, that hasn't happened for the majority of the human race, especially in North America.

For Thomas Berry, our environmental crisis started with a cultural and spiritual falling apart, and no intellectual knowledge is going to change anything until we are living and breathing the deeper reality that exists beneath the knowledge. Simply put, our heads know what the problem is, but our hearts and spirits aren't at the same place.

Thomas Berry believes that the nature of modern humanity is one in which we are taught two things.

One: We are taught that we are not part of the earth in which we live. Western culture has created what we call the mind/body split. It's the fundamental Platonist dualism that is the foundation of our way of thinking. We have separated the mind from the body and made the mind superior. Think about the saying, "Mind over matter." It's based on the assumption that we are capable of the mastery of our physical world, including our bodies, through our minds, and that this mastery is a good and moral thing. This started with the ancient Greeks and became fully realized during the Enlightenment which began about 300 years ago. In this dualism, our minds are superior to our bodies, and we can master anything, including the earth, which means we're really not part of it. And the bigger reality of this way of thinking is that the destruction of our physical world is seen as simple collateral damage that doesn't have real worth. So it really doesn't matter that species are going extinct or that the ocean is rising because in this metanarrative, that's a fancy word for world view, in this metanarrative nothing that happens on this earth means anything because we aren't part of it. We are masters over it.

You can see this metanarrative everywhere, even in Unitarian Universalism to a degree. We really privilege the intellect as the most valid form of knowing. We are much more comfortable being in our heads than in our



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bodies. Can you imagine if one morning I danced around the sanctuary doing a prayer with my body instead of my voice? How would you feel? What if during joys and concerns I asked you to communicate your joy or concern in song? How many of you would be uncomfortable? We privilege thought as experienced though the mind as the location of knowledge, truth, and wisdom, much more than our bodies. This is a reflection of our culture's mind/body split, where we see the mind and body as fundamentally different things, and it reinforces that we indeed see ourselves as separate from the earth and masters over it.

The second teaching is that we are superior to anything that is non-human. Plants, animals, even the weather, are less than we are with our great brains and our ability to be reasoned and rational and our technological ability to protect ourselves from the elements. Everything non-human thing is there to improve the quality of human life. Because the earth is separate from us and inferior to us, we have a right to everything on it, no matter the consequence, because we matter more than anything else.

This way of looking at the world is present everywhere, so much so that we usually are unaware of it. It just seems normal. But if you know what you're looking for, then suddenly you can see how prevalent this is. Let me give you an example of a recent television ad that most of us are probably familiar with and see if you can find both these truths: 1) that we are separate from the Earth and 2) that we are superior to anything non-human.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6bJOIqVAD-s>

"Gimme back that filet o fish. Gimme that fish. Gimme back that filet o fish. Gimme that Fish. What if it were you hanging up on this wall, if it were you in that sandwich you wouldn't be laughing at all! Gimme back that filet o fish. Gimme that fish. Gimme back that filet o fish Gimme that Fish. "You can get your very own crispy golden fillet o fish with medium fries and an ice cold soft drink for just \$3.99!" What if it were you hanging up on this wall, if it were you in that sandwich you wouldn't be laughing at all!"

Alright, let's deconstruct this! If you've seen this McDonald's ad, you will know that it features a trophy fish hanging on the wall singing to two guys who just bought a fillet o fish. So what does a trophy fish mean in our culture? A trophy fish is a symbol of human mastery over nature. You have a living thing that you've caught,

killed, stuffed, and hung on your wall. You mastered nature, which in the mind/body dualistic metanarrative or worldview is a moral obligation.

In this McDonald's ad, you have an animal that has been conquered by humans demanding its body back. Really, asking for its life back. And at a deeper level, it's asking to be recognized as a being of worth and dignity, and it's doing that by asking you to identify with its plight. "What if it were you hanging up on this wall, if it were you in that sandwich you wouldn't be laughing at all." The fish is asking us to see that we are connected to him. "I'm suffering, if you were in my place, you'd be suffering. So please give me my life back." And how do the humans in the ad respond? The fish is annoying, he's to be laughed at, he's a mild source of amusement. In the original ad, one guy starts bobbing his head to the music with a Mona Lisa type smile on his face while he eats a fillet o fish. And then you are invited to get your very own fillet o fish. In a later ad, the fish appears on the other guy's cell phone screen as he goes through the McDonald's drive thru, and the guy actually throws the phone out his car window.

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DIq92yp\\_a0c&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DIq92yp_a0c&feature=related)

The message is that the fish is not worth listening to and should be silenced, because his message makes the guy uncomfortable eating his fillet o fish, and heaven help if anything should stand between a man and his fillet o fish.

Heaven help if anything should stand between human being and what they want. Can you see how this ad reflects those two things that Berry says we are taught: One, we are not part of the earth. Two, we are superior to all non-human forms of life.

What makes this ad so fascinating is that it's playing off the energy of today's culture war regarding our relationship to the earth. You have one voice, a voice that is getting stronger, saying that we are all one, that all life forms count, and that we are all connected. This voice is backed up by hard science and adaptive technology. This voice is threatening the more powerful voice of human dominance and entitlement which can no longer be backed up by science and technology. But still, in this ad it's clear who wins. And when you look at our world today, it is also clear who is still winning.



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The reason that Thomas Berry says we have to reinvent the human is because we are so in the grip of the world view of dominance and entitlement that it doesn't matter how much we know about what is happening to the earth. We won't be motivated as a species to make real change until those worldviews are broken and we are back in our bodies, which know in a very different way that we are all connected and that our very survival is threatened by our chosen worldview of dominance and entitlement. We're so stuck in these ways it's hard for most of us, even those of us who are concerned about the environment, to truly perceive that the worldview of dominance and entitlement is not only losing, it's threatening our future chances of survival. We so believe in our superiority, it's so ingrained in us at an unconscious level that I don't think we really believe that our standard of living could actually decline or end altogether because of how we are affecting our environment.

The missing piece is religious, spiritual, and mystical. It is in the realm of faith, religion, community and love. It includes dance, song, poetry, drums, and the experience of being uplifted. The science and technology will lay dormant, unless our whole beings are changed at a species. Until that time all the distractions offered by opponents of environmental responsibility will win, as they have for 40 years. If you look at every song we sing in this chapel week after week, you will see that the work we are doing is this kind of reinvention. If you look at our chalice lightings, our joys and concerns, our benediction, our prayers, even the conversations we have during coffee hour, we are doing the work of reinventing ourselves. We not just having Drum Circle today because it's fun, it's because we are asking ourselves to change through them. The question is... will this just last for an uplifting few hours on Sunday, or will it hit the Monday factor. Will we throw the cell phone out the window or can we listen to that tacky fish singing on the wall?