

Fr. Thomas Berry's dream for the Earth: Ten ways to achieve it

Rich Heffern | Jan. 10, 2011 Eco Catholic

The late Fr. Thomas Berry is one of the key figures that have shaped the Catholic ecology movement. This is the second of a series of articles that explore his thought and writings.

In the early 1990s *NCR*'s editor Tom Fox flew Fr. Thomas Berry to Kansas City for a few days to speak with the staff. We assembled in the third-floor conference room and Fr. Berry talked to us all day long. The night before this day-long seminar, though, Tom invited a selected group of people from all over town to his home to meet with Fr. Tom Berry and hear him speak for a short time.

As we gathered in Tom and his wife Hoa's living room, Berry sat in a chair by the window with a glass of water. Just before he began his talk for the evening, he looked out at the thirty or so gathered and, with that lopsided grin of his, said simply: "Just about everything has to change."

My wife and I were there and talked with him briefly as he signed our copy of his first book, *The Dream of the Earth*, just published by Sierra Club Books. But I'll never forget his statement about how just about everything has to change.

What he meant, I think, can be understood in terms of his statement of what that "dream of the Earth" actually is. The dream is for what Berry called "a mutually-enhancing human-Earth presence." In other words, all our actions and public policies, institutions "education, law, religion, politics" should have as their goal that the Earth enterprise does not fall into deficit as a result of our presence.

One of the best articulations of a path to this mutually-enhancing human-Earth presence



I have ever seen is contained in what is called "The Ten Key Values" of the

worldwide Green political parties. These values were formulated in the mid-1980s by a group of thinkers, writers, environmentalists, feminists, people from the bioregional movement, and others.

Instead of developing the values in a series of statements, they were expressed as questions. The answers to these questions formulate an overall strategy and political platform for transforming the human presence on the planet. No one has all the answers; the "great work" is in finding our way to practical ways and means to implement the values.

The Greens who formulated the Values felt that the issues they raise were not being addressed adequately by the political left or right. They invited -- and still invite ? all of us to join in refining the values, sharpening the questions -- and translating these perspectives into practical and effective political actions.

Ecological Wisdom

How can we operate human societies with the understanding that we are PART of nature, not on top of it? How can we live within the ecological and resource limits of the planet, applying our technological knowledge to the challenge of an energy-efficient economy? How can we build a better relationship between cities and countryside? How can we guarantee the rights of non-human species? How can we promote sustainable agriculture and respect for self-regulating natural systems? How can we further biocentric wisdom in all spheres of life?

Grassroots Democracy

How can we develop systems that allow and encourage us to control the decisions that affect our lives? How can we ensure that representatives will be fully accountable to the people who elected them? How can we develop planning mechanisms that would allow citizens to develop and implement their own preferences for policies and spending priorities? How can we encourage and assist the ?mediating institutions? -- family, neighborhood organization, church group, voluntary association, ethnic club -- to recover some of the functions now performed by government? How can we relearn the best insights from American traditions of civic vitality, voluntary action and community responsibility?

Personal and Social Responsibility

How can we respond to human suffering in ways that promote dignity?

How can we encourage people to commit themselves to lifestyles that promote their own health? How can we have a community-controlled education system that effectively teaches our children academic skills, ecological wisdom, social responsibility and personal growth? How can we resolve personal and intergroup conflicts without just turning them over to lawyers and judges?

How can we take responsibility for reducing the crime rate in our neighborhoods? How can we encourage such values as simplicity and moderation?

Nonviolence

How can we, as a society, develop effective alternatives to our current patterns of violence at all levels, from the family and the street to nations and the world? How can we eliminate nuclear weapons from the face of the Earth without being naive about the intentions of other governments?

How can we most constructively use nonviolent methods to oppose practices and policies with which we disagree, and in the process reduce the atmosphere of polarization and selfishness that is itself a source of violence?

Decentralization

How can we restore power and responsibility to individuals, institutions, communities and regions? How can we encourage the flourishing of regionally-based cultures, as distinct from a dominant monoculture? How can we locate the power of our political, economic and social institutions closer to home in ways that are efficient and practical? How can we reconcile the need for community and regional self-determination with the need for appropriate centralized regulation in certain matters?

Community-Based Economics

How can we redesign our work structures to encourage employee ownership and workplace democracy? How can we develop new economic activities and institutions that will allow us to use our new technologies in ways that are humane, freeing, ecological, and responsive to communities? How can we establish some form of basic

economic security, open to all? How can we move beyond the narrow 'job ethic' to new definitions of work, jobs and income that reflect the changing economy? How can we change our income distribution pattern to reflect the wealth created by those outside the formal, monetary economy -- those who take responsibility for parenting, housekeeping, home gardening, doing community volunteer work, etc.? How can we restrict the size and concentrated power of corporations without discouraging superior efficiency or technological innovation?

Postpatriarchal Values

How can we replace the cultural ethos of dominance and control with more cooperative ways of interacting? How can we encourage people to care about persons outside their own group? How can we promote the building of respectful, positive and responsive relationships across the lines of gender and other divisions? How can we encourage a rich, diverse political culture that respects feelings as well as rationalist approaches? How can we proceed with as much respect for the means as the end, the process as well as the product? How can we learn to respect the contemplative, inner part of life as much as the outer activities?

Respect for Diversity

How can we honor cultural, ethnic, racial, sexual, religious and spiritual diversity within the context of individual responsibility toward all beings?

While honoring diversity, how can we reclaim our country's finest shared ideals -- the dignity of the individual, democratic participation, and liberty and justice for all?

Global Responsibility

How can we be of genuine assistance to the grassroots groups in the Third World -- and what can WE learn from such groups? How can we help other countries make a transition to self-sufficiency in food and other basic necessities? How can we cut our defense budget while maintaining an adequate defense? How can we promote these ten Green values in reshaping our global order? How can we reshape the global order without creating [the equivalent of] just another enormous nation-state?

Future Focus

How can we induce people and institutions to think in terms of the long-range future, and not just in terms of their short-range selfish interest?

How can we encourage people to develop their own visions of the future and move more effectively toward them? How can we judge whether new technologies are socially useful -- and use those judgments to shape our society? How can we induce our government and other institutions to practice fiscal responsibility? How can we make the quality of life, rather than open-ended economic growth, the focus of future thinking?

Implementing these values in our personal and civic lives, teaching them to our children, advancing their practice in every sphere would go a long way in achieving Fr. Thomas Berry's dream for the Earth.

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