

Gail Worcelo

“Sisters of Earth and the Legacy of Thomas Berry”

Episode 25 of The Advent of Evolutionary Christianity

EvolutionaryChristianity.com



Gail Worcelo is a Catholic nun who co-founded Green Mountain Monastery (with the late Thomas Berry) — a new monastic community dedicated to the healing and protection of Earth and its life systems. A leader in the “Sisters of Earth” movement, Sr. Gail is working toward grounding religious life within the context of the Universe Story.

HIGHLIGHTS

Gail Worcelo, a Catholic nun of the Passionist order, is a clear, impassioned, and **leading voice** in helping Christianity remain relevant in this time of **amplified ecological crises**. This is our **top-recommended episode** for learning about the ideas and impact of Catholic “geologian” (theologian of the Earth) and cultural historian **Thomas Berry**, and it is our **strongest session for examining Christianity in light of our human impact on the planet**. It is also a superb introduction to the work and importance of **Catholic religious communities**, especially those of **women**, throughout the Christian era—including their **ecological activism** during the past three decades, culminating in the “**Sisters of Earth**” movement and **Green Mountain Monastery**. Sister Gail is also a **premier storyteller** in this series, so this audio abounds in **rich metaphor** and **poignant narrative**—including her own story of **three sequential awakenings**: of the heart, head, and body.

SUGGESTED AUDIENCES

Highly recommended for discussion groups of any religious or secular orientation because of its dynamic storytelling and focus on making Christianity and Christian communities a powerful force in restoring ecological balance. Also, because Sister Gail talks about her forthcoming book about the emergence and growth of women religious communities within the Catholic tradition (including that of her own ecologically focused community today), this interview is especially recommended for Catholic audiences and women’s groups—as well as all other Christian or secular viewpoints. It may, however, be too radical for listeners who look upon much (or all) of the Bible as literal truth. Seminaries and other teaching institutions will find this

episode ideally suited for introducing students to the key ideas of Thomas Berry—and in exceedingly inspiring and memorable ways. Note: Thomas Berry (1914–2009) is buried onsite at Green Mountain Monastery, Vermont.

BLOG COMMENTS

Mark Laxer says:

This is a beautiful journey and soul deep. It brings to mind the first time I visited Sisters Gail and Bernadette at the Green Mountain Monastery. In many ways I felt as though I found a home in these two remarkable women's vision, heart, and deeds. Thank you, Michael, for this interview, and thank you Michael and Gail and others in this movement for sharing Thomas Berry's insight and wisdom.

Helen Hunter says:

I was inspired and moved by Gail's conversation with you, Michael. I am gradually listening to all the conversations when I have the chance. But with this conversation I particularly realized that my spiritual understanding of how I relate to the whole created world needed to be readjusted.

KEYWORD TOPICS

Catholicism (monastic communities), **new cosmology / epic of evolution**, **Thomas Berry**, **geophany**, **“incendent”** (a mix of transcendent and immanent), **women's studies**, **ecological crises** (Christian response to), **reciprocity** (as ecospiritual value), **Confucius**, **reverence for life**, **evolution** (human participation in), **mysticism** (ecologically Christian forms of), **unitive experience**, **Earth Community**, **geophany**, **stories** (of awakening to the Epic of Evolution), **monastic traditions** (history of in Christianity), **Teilhard de Chardin**, **integral philosophy**, (the) **Great Work**, **Green Mountain Monastery** (in Vermont), **Sisters of Earth** (an organization of Catholic nuns and lay women), **Teilhard de Chardin**, the **“Great Story”** (of the universe), **“moments of grace”**, **Great Story beads**, **integral philosophy**, **Parliament of World Religions**, **“Eozoic Era”**, **enlightenment**, **Universe Story**, **awakenings** (spiritual), **cultural pathology**, **“millennial myth”** (critique of), **right relationship** (with the planet), **“Earth community”**, **“dream of the Earth”**, **human role/identity** (within the Earth community)

BIOGRAPHY

Sr. Gail Worcelo is one of the leaders in bringing ecological sensitivity into Catholic religious orders and their work in the world. She is a founder of the “Sisters of Earth” movement and of Green Mountain Monastery (in Vermont, USA), which is the first women's religious community

dedicated to ecological healing of Earth. She is a retreat leader, teacher, and lecturer, with degrees in clinical psychology and Christian spirituality. She is also a writer and dancer. During her novitiate in 1984, Gail began her studies with Thomas Berry in the areas of cosmology and the history of the religious life tradition, with an awareness that all of the religious traditions of the planet were heading toward a new “moment of grace” and entering into their planetary / cosmological phase.

Gail’s particular passion has been the re-founding of religious life within the context of the Universe Story. She has been delivering retreats and lectures on this theme for the past twenty years to groups throughout the United States, Europe, Australia, Asia, Canada, and South America. She is currently working on a book, *Moments of Grace*, which honors the extraordinary lineage of Catholic women’s religious communities and which explores the current evolutionary breakthrough of these communities as they emerge into greater Christ consciousness.

Professional webpage for Gail Worcelo on The Green Mountain Monastery website:
<http://www.greenmountainmonastery.org/sister-gail/>

SUPPLEMENTARY VIDEO

For a 9-minute VIDEO of Gail Worcelo onsite at Green Mountain Monastery in which she talks about their work, the inspiration of Thomas Berry, and about the six grace moments in religious communities in the West, see: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JJiVIOyj2xI>

Supplementary 3-minute AUDIO: To accompany Question 1, you may wish to listen to Thomas Berry recite a passage from his book *The Great Work*, where he speaks of his childhood experience in the meadow of lilies. Click on “Lilies of Youth” audio on this page: <http://www.thegreatstory.org/tb-audio.html>

SUPPLEMENTARY WEBPAGE

Listener comments to this audio can be found, and new ones added, at the following url: <http://evolutionarychristianity.com/blog/general/gail-worcelo-thomas-berrys-legacy-sisters-of-earth/>

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

Part A – Gail Worcelo’s life work and experiences

1. Spiritual awakenings that guide one’s life.

Question 1A: *What did you find most helpful, interesting, or inspiring in this conversation?*

Question 1B: Gail Worcelo briefly describes **three spiritual awakenings** that have guided her life, as well as a **spiritual awakening** early in the life of her mentor, **Thomas Berry**. *Without re-listening to the audio or re-reading the transcript, what (if anything) do you remember about (a) **the context** of each awakening, and (b) what **the identity, relational, or value shift** was?*

*Next, use this dataset to identify and evaluate what seem to be **the basic elements in the art of storytelling** that are vital for making a story memorable and meaningful to a listener.*

Question 1C: *Gail Worcelo’s telling of her three awakenings, along with the childhood awakening of Thomas Berry, indicate that she has deeply thought through the meaning of those experiences — and that she has told the stories a number of times previously. **Choose one “awakening” in your own life, give it a title, and briefly describe your experience.***

Supplementary: You may wish to **listen to Thomas Berry recite a passage** from his book *The Great Work*, where he speaks of his childhood experience in the meadow of lilies. Click on “Lilies of Youth” audio on this page: <http://www.thegreatstory.org/tb-audio.html>.

2. **Post-hoc meaning-making.** In describing the impact of her first awakening, as a 6-year-old, Gail describes its felt meaning this way:

I remember I had this incredible experience of **the veils between worlds being torn asunder**. And I just knew in that moment: it was a mystical moment of enlightenment. I had the experience of realizing that I am not my body, but I am the fullness of all that is. **I am vastness and I am one with all of reality.**

Question 2A: *To what extent did you notice and appreciate (or not) Gail’s use of **adult language and concepts** in her telling of her childhood experience? Please elaborate.*

Question 2B: *Mundane events in one’s life that later turn out to have been major turning points — such as first encounter with one’s future mate, a job experience that sets the course for a career, and so on — are, by definition, usually **not** experienced as life-changing in the moment. But what about “spiritual awakenings”? Reflecting on your own experience, and the stories told by Gail Worcelo, **would a spiritual awakening, by its very nature, feel significant in the moment of its occurrence?** Or not necessarily? Please elaborate.*

3. **Moments of Grace.** **Thomas Berry** is depicted by Gail as having told the epic story of cosmic, Earth, and human history as a sequence of “**moments of grace**.” She adds that such moments may have a “**sacrificial**” quality to them — they may entail great **suffering**, but a kind of suffering out of which something new and wonderful is born. Gail explains:

Thomas talked about “moments of grace” as privileged moments in which the future is defined in some enduring pattern. He would say that moments of grace have a **sacrificial** aspect associated with them. And in a moment of grace, the world is born into a radically new phase of existence. So, in his conceptual framework, he certainly talked about **cosmological moments of grace**—those great moments in the story of the universe that set the stage for further unfolding, such as the **Big Bang**,

or the **supernova** explosion that gave birth to our solar system, or the moment of **photosynthesis**, etc. Thus, he gave a sense of *cosmological* moments of grace in the sweep of time. As a cultural historian, he also was well aware of **historical moments of grace** that set the course of *human* history and defined it in some enduring pattern. And then, bringing forth **personal moments of grace**: we can understand those moments in our own lives where the world is born into a radically new phase of existence.

Question 3A: *How might reinterpreting cosmic, Earth, and human **history** from the standpoint of “moments of grace” help you to find a **sacred quality** in the flow of time — that is, as something more than merely secular or scientific history? Do you find this helpful, or not, and why?*

Question 3B: *What about the prospect of reinterpreting the **great transitions in your own life** as “moments of grace,” as Gail Worcelo suggests? What might this reframe of **personal suffering** offer emotionally for moving through the challenges of today and tomorrow?*

4. **“Moments of Grace” in the Christian monastic tradition.** Gail Worcelo identifies a sequence of **6 “moments of grace”** in what has become the monastic tradition in Catholicism. In order of their appearance, the six are: **desert solitaries, community tradition, mendicant impulse, intellectual pursuit, activist mode, and planetary leap.** She explains,

One can consider that the tradition has an **evolutionary trajectory.** Those elements of the tradition that have been folded in are like the backbone or the spine of the tradition itself. They are like guiding impulses that are active and alive in our lives at this present moment. So, **I think to be fully Christian in a certain sense, we need to lean into desert, into community, into mendicant, into the intellectual, into the activist—and now the next leap, into the planetary.** That is an **Integral framework** for the Christian life tradition, and it is showing its connectivity to the rest of its story. So that this leap into the planetary isn’t something that is out of alignment, since there have been these moments of grace all through the tradition’s history. We are simply at a new moment. . . .

I totally appreciate the sense in that trajectory of a moment [being] transcended—but yet it is included in the whole unfolding. So it doesn’t go anywhere; it just gets folded in and activated. Or, in a sense, once activated, it is folded in. . . . What I see in it is a **capacity to embrace multiple perspectives.** I see in this trajectory of unfolding **the falling away of old structures and forms at each of the moments of grace. So when an old structure is transcended, it remains in the psychic memory—but it necessarily has to fall away in terms of form.**

Question 4A: *Gail Worcelo is explicitly drawing upon a philosophy that several other speakers in this series also use. It is called **Integral theory**, or *Integral philosophy*, and it celebrates a sense of progress in spirit and nature that is not one of replacement but of “transcending and including.” How might this practice of “transcend and include” help us to mature our individual and collective stories, so that **instead of regarding prior stages as inferior, we see them as valuable in a developmental way, and still ‘with’ us in an important way?***

Question 4B: Gail gives an example in which “transcend and include” results in an “**old structure**” falling away in form but remaining in the “**psychic memory.**” How would this apply to an individual life? (If you can think of an example in your own life story in which this mode of “transcend and include” would apply, please share it with group.)

5. **Navigating through disappointments.** Gail Worcelo tells the story of her attempt to **persuade a Catholic bishop** that a monastery dedicated to Earth healing was worthy of his support. She recalls,

I remember in one conversation that I had with the bishop here, he began by saying, “Well, **I don’t really need environmental nuns** in my diocese. What I need sisters to do is teach. I think the sisters belong in the classroom, not out there with the trees.” He then went on to talk about **his impressions of environmentalists as people who don’t care about life in the womb** and who care more for trees than the child in the womb. He went into all kinds of issues around abortion and the like. And I just remember stopping him and saying,

*What we are talking about here is abortion on a tremendous scale. We’re talking here about **planetary abortion—about the killing of the life systems of the planet**, and this is what we need to look at. We’re talking at a level that **includes but transcends** the child in the womb. Even at that, the child in the womb is being assaulted with mercury and lead and other things that are moving into the child’s body through the mother’s placenta, which doesn’t filter out those chemicals.*

I must say, it was a good conversation. I could actually see the shift in his consciousness taking place at that moment. He was actually able to see that there was a bigger picture here.

However, **the bishop later had a change of heart**, and so Gail Worcelo was, for the moment, set back in her quest to establish a new form of monastic community within the structure of Catholicism.

Question 5: When Gail told the story of her disappointment with the bishop, she did so with lightness and laughter — without anger or defeat. Standing in her shoes, do you think you would have been able to do that? As well, how important is it to remind ourselves of stories such as Gail’s, in order to **prevent our own sinking into resignation** when we encounter obstacles? Please elaborate.

6. **Your hero’s journey: spiritual awakenings, challenges, and moments of grace.** In sum, Gail Worcelo interprets her life trajectory using three key features: spiritual awakenings, moments of grace, and challenges/obstacles.

Question 6A: *How important do you feel it is for a person to interpret their life mythically?* How do you typically think about your own life trajectory? Do you highlight the awakenings, the challenges, and the moments of grace in your experience? Why or why not?

Question 6B: *To what extent have you chosen to **interpret pivotal events and challenges in your life in ways that empower** rather than disable or victimize you? As well, if you sense that giving some extra attention to how you tell the story of your life may be of benefit, what might be a next step for you to take in that direction?*

Question 6C: *As mythologist **Joseph Campbell** urged, there is benefit for each of us to think about our own life trajectory as a “hero’s journey” — complete with enormous challenges and life lessons. In so doing, we can see a **legacy** building; there is something about our life journey that sends forth into the future a positive impact. To what extent does such a “hero’s journey” exercise of retelling your life story attract you — and why or why not?*

Question 6D: *Ultimately, how we choose to interpret our past and tell our life story has an impact not only on those who hear it, but **foremost on ourselves** — on the kinds of choices we make going into the **future**, and on the sacrifices and disappointments we persevere through and the risks we take. Reflect on the extent to which a **rewrite of your own life story** as mythic might make a difference in your attitude about your life and the future choices you will make. Then discuss.*

Part B – The Legacy of Thomas Berry

7. **Thomas Berry.** The host, Michael Dowd, assesses this particular interview as one of the best, most accessible, and inspiring introductions to the work of Thomas Berry. In his first question, Dowd asks Sister Gail to **sum up the work and importance of Thomas Berry**, who was her great mentor (and who is now buried onsite at Green Mountain Monastery in Vermont USA, where Gail lives and works.) Gail says,

Thomas Berry was a cultural historian and a Catholic priest in the Passionist Order. In the last twenty-five years of his life, he became a **historian of Earth and actually called himself a geologist**. He moved from human history to cosmological history, and it was out of his concern for the direction of human–Earth history that he developed the seminal piece entitled *The New Story*, which came out in 1978.

Then, in 1988 followed his book *The Dream of the Earth*. I think his aim in both was to evoke our psychic, spiritual resources in order to establish a **new reciprocity between ourselves and the planet, because his whole vision was for a flourishing Earth community**. And I believe he thought that with a **change in worldview**, we would come up with a comprehensive ethic for **reverence for life and the planet**—and that by understanding our place in the unfolding universe, an awareness would emerge of our role in guiding the evolutionary process forward.

I was thinking about a **story that Thomas told** us one day regarding **Confucius**. At one point Confucius was teaching his students, and his students said to him, “You tell us all of these things; you overwhelm us. Couldn’t you just make it simple?” And Confucius said, “Okay, I’ll give it all to you in one word: **reciprocity**.” And then Confucius went on to say, “If you take, you must give” and that the first principle in our relationship to Earth is reciprocity. I think that sums up Thomas Berry’s sentiments and particularly his mysticism.

Question 7: For those who have previously heard of **Thomas Berry** and his ideas, did you find this interview to be a helpful reminder of this man's legacy? And what additional text or Internet materials pertaining to his work might you recommend to others? For those unfamiliar with Thomas Berry and his ideas, does this conversation make you want to learn more? And for all, what aspects of Thomas's worldview and ideas most pique your interest or inspire you?

8. **The historic mission of our time.** Gail Worcelo recites a famous statement by **Thomas Berry** and then talks about what it means and why it is important. The quotation is this:

The historic 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.

Question 8: Was this section of the dialogue meaningful to you? In what ways (or why not)?

9. **Human role / identity.** A number of speakers in this series talk enthusiastically about a sense of **what our role as a species is** — what we contribute to the Universe, to Earth, to the whole long journey of life. In this particular interview, **Michael Dowd** (the host) articulates such a view. Near the end of the conversation, after he and Gail have discussed Thomas Berry's focus on "**the dream of the Earth,**" Dowd says,

As we dream of how to be in **right relationship to the planet**—as human beings individually and collectively envision humanity living in right relationship to reality—in a mutually-enhancing relationship with the air, water, soil, life, and other species of this planet—we *are* the dream of the Earth. We are the Earth dreaming. **We are an expression of this planet moving into the future** with consciousness, with awareness, and with a commitment to its own health and wellbeing.

Question 9: What is your response to Dowd's articulation of "dream of the Earth" and our species role?

10. **Earth is primary and humans are derivative.** **Thomas Berry** was well known for advocating a strong **ecological ethics** that is grounded not in a lessening of human identity, but in an expansion of it — as in the way that **Michael Dowd** recalled his understanding of that ethic [*in the quotation above*]. At the same time, Thomas Berry urged a foundational *humility*. Gail Worcelo, in this regard, quotes a central principle voiced by Thomas Berry that expresses this humility. Thomas Berry said, "**Earth is primary and humans are derivative.**"

Question 10A: Based on this part of Gail and Michael's conversation, can you grasp how Thomas Berry urged us to regard our species in both a more expansive sense (that is, in having **great work** to do) while also casting us in a supporting role? Does **this perspective** seem to you a necessary reframe of who we, as humans, are? Or is it too radical or in error, as judged through your own values and priorities? Please elaborate.

Question 10B: *What role (if any) should **religious leaders and institutions** play in advocating the kinds of ideas that Thomas Berry put forth—and that Gail Worcelo and Michael Dowd seem inspired by?*

11. **Reciprocity.** Gail Worcelo speaks of a central principle voiced by **Thomas Berry**, which they both propose should govern our relationship with the total Earth Community. It is the principle of reciprocity.

Question 11A: *How important is “reciprocity,” implicitly or explicitly, in your personal and cultural contexts — and how do you (or could you) reciprocate the **ecological gifts** of Earth?*

Question 11B: *What about the **cultural gifts** that were passed forward to you by previous generations? How might you live your life so as to reciprocate the gifts you were given when you were born, during your education, and throughout your life?*

12. **The Great Work.** Gail Worcelo and the host, Michael Dowd, dialogue about **Thomas Berry’s concept of “The Great Work”** — which includes both the Great Work (capital letters) of our species, and the “great work” (small letters) of us as individuals. Michael Dowd offers an exercise for each of us to begin searching for a vocational or avocational expression of our own great work, and the exercise entails getting in touch with our gifts, on the one hand, and our deep concerns for the planet or our communities, on the other. Finally, our task is to search for interconnections between the two.

Question 12: *Is participation in a form of “great work” something you feel you are doing now—or that perhaps you would like to undertake more deeply in some way in the future?*

13. **Environmental ethics within a cosmological context.** Gail Worcelo talks of how **Thomas Berry** inspired her to work toward **the founding of Green Mountain Monastery**. She explains,

I remember Thomas saying that **women’s communities and men’s communities** over the ages have been founded to minister to the human community—and yet there has been no community founded that would gear its energies towards the **Earth community**. And while that would have been unthinkable in former times, it’s unthinkable that there aren’t many doing that at the present. . . .

Thomas said the single greatest contribution that **women’s religious communities** can make to the larger destiny of the human, Christian, and Earth community would be **a recovery of our intimacy with the entire cosmic process**. So he challenged women’s communities to dedicate themselves to the **healing and protection of the planet**.

So, Bernadette and I took up that challenge, and that’s one of the avenues into the founding of Green Mountain Monastery. But there has been an explosion in the Catholic women’s religious orders, as well as in the men’s, to take up Thomas’ challenge and orient towards Earth healing.

Question 13: *Do you sense how those attracted to the work of Thomas Berry, such as Gail Worcelo, find **new motivation and inspiration for tackling environmental problems** within the context of the evolutionary journey of Earth and Cosmos? What would it be like if more people—religious and non-religious alike—held this perspective? Please elaborate.*

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