

## Gail Worcelo

### “Sisters of Earth and the Legacy of Thomas Berry”

Episode 25 (transcript of audio) of The Advent of Evolutionary Christianity  
[EvolutionaryChristianity.com](http://EvolutionaryChristianity.com)

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**Michael Dowd (host):** Welcome to Episode 25 of “[The Advent of Evolutionary Christianity: Conversations at the Leading Edge of Faith](#).” I’m [Michael Dowd](#), and I’m your host for this series, which can be accessed via [EvolutionaryChristianity.com](http://EvolutionaryChristianity.com), where you too can add your voice to the conversation.

Today, [Gail Worcelo](#) is our featured guest. [Sister Gail](#) is a Catholic nun and co-founder with [Thomas Berry](#) of the [Green Mountain Monastery](#), the first Catholic community of women specifically dedicated to living in right relationship with our planet and supporting others in doing the same. She holds degrees in clinical psychology and Christian spirituality and is working on a new book, *Moments of Grace*, which explores the current evolutionary breakthrough in the long lineage of Catholic women’s communities. Toward the end of our conversation, you will hear Sister Gail extend an invitation to women whose hearts are on fire with the love of God and who desire to contribute their gifts to the whole Earth community. If you’re a young woman and this conversation with Sister Gail speaks to your heart as much as it did mine, [please do reach out to her at Green Mountain Monastery](#). I’ll include contact information in [my blogpost on our dialogue](#) (also [here](#)).

**Host:** Hello Gail Worcelo, and thank you for joining this conversation on evolutionary Christianity.

**Gail:** Thank you, Michael. It’s great to be here.

**Host:** Gail, since the summer of 2009, quite a few people have been journeying to your Green Mountain Monastery in Vermont—not just for the workshops and the retreats that you hold there, but also because a mentor to you and to so many of us in this movement requested to be buried on the grounds. Could you say a bit about that—about [Thomas Berry Sanctuary](#)?

**Gail:** Sure. I’d like to honor the man, [Thomas Berry](#), who has been mentor to so many of us and who has advanced our thinking in terms of evolutionary cosmology and spirituality. 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](#) (YouTube clip, [here](#)). 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.

**Host:** Please say more about his mysticism, as it was so central to his life and to many of us who have been following in his footsteps.

**Gail:** Sure. I remember that on the first day of class with Thomas Berry when I was a novice, he began by telling us the story of his encounter with a meadow, which became for him a revelatory moment that shaped his mysticism. I remember him saying, “Whenever I think about my life attitude and the whole trend of my mind and the causes to which I’ve given my life, I come back to the meadow and the impact that it has had on my feeling for what is real and worthwhile.” The meadow was an experience that Thomas Berry had as a boy of eleven when, in his hometown of Greensboro, North Carolina, he was outdoors and came to a creek. He crossed over, and after the creek he came into a meadow that was covered with white lilies rising above thick grass. It was a magic moment for Thomas. I just imagine him falling to his knees in that moment and in his North Carolinian drawl, crying out, “O altitudo sapientiae!” which means, how deep—how immense—is the wisdom of God!

When I reflect on his meadow experience as he communicated it to us, I think that at that moment Thomas had not so much an epiphany but a geophany, which is the sudden revelation of the presence of the divine penetrating the Earth and all of reality. I think that in that vision, Thomas had a shattering of boundary- or separation-consciousness. And that’s what laid the foundation for his mysticism of the cosmos. Thomas would say, “Whatever preserves and enhances the meadow in its natural cycles of transformation is good. Whatever opposes or negates the meadow is not good.”

I believe the meadow became for Thomas the archetype for the entire Earth community. In this experience, Thomas took a deep dive into the unitive experience with the meadow. When he came up, he was actually able to translate the experience and challenge the four great establishments: Government, Religion, Economics, and Education, by saying, “A good

jurisprudence would recognize the rights of the meadow. A good religion would celebrate the deep mystery of the meadow. A good economics would keep the balance of the meadow. And a good education would study the meadow and model its basic pattern.”

So, in the end, Thomas is saying, “Whatever preserves the meadow is good; whatever opposes the meadow is not good.” And I think that’s foundational to an understanding of his mysticism of the cosmos.

**Host:** Wow! That was great! In fact, I’d never heard (until this conversation) the word ‘geophany’ before. That’s a wonderful one! One of the other phrases that I think he coined and that I have found really useful—and many of us have—is moving beyond the dichotomy of transcendence or immanence. Thomas created this term: the *incsendence* of the divine—that God is incendent, the beyond within. Again, it’s that idea of being a geologist, a theologian of the Earth, a theologian of the natural world. . .

**Gail:** Yes. I was thinking, too, of my first encounter with Thomas in 1984. At that time, I was a novice with the congregation of the [Passionists](#), a religious order in the Catholic Church. The novice directors had set up an institute of learning, and they invited scholars and others to share their expertise with us through lectures and classes. Thomas Berry was a seasoned member of the Passionist Order and had been a member for forty-eight years. So, he was invited to come and give us classes. In hindsight, I think it was odd that Thomas would have been invited to speak to a group of novices, because he was considered in the congregation to be a wild monk on the cosmic fringe. And yet, he was recognized as a man of towering intellect. But his message at the time was barely comprehended by the Order and probably by many that he preached to.

I remember him preaching a sermon to the Order challenging them on preaching about the passion of Christ, saying, “How can you preach about the passion of Christ when the passion of the Earth is undergoing irreversible damage?” The day before we had taken a visit to the coal mines in the northeast region of Pennsylvania, which is where my monastery was and where the class was held. We had been in the anthracite valley of that region, and we picked up some anthracite. So on the day of the class, Thomas picked up this [\[anthracite\]](#) stone and he placed it in [the sweeping periodization of history](#). That was so characteristic of his style—taking that stone and contextualizing it within [the great story of the universe](#). He took it and held it up, and he said, “It took fourteen billion years to make this stone!” Then he proceeded to go through the great sweeps of time, from Galactic, to Earth, to Life, to Human. And I think that was another characteristic of Thomas’ style and of also bringing the immanent and the transcendent into the numinosity of matter.

**Host:** Yes. Many people refer to [Thomas Berry](#) as “the [Teilhard de Chardin](#) of today.”

**Gail:** Right.

**Host:** Well, Gail, would you also say something about Father Thomas and his focus on “moments of grace”? In fact, on my ‘[Great Story Beads](#)’, where each bead represents some significant transformational moment in the history of the universe, I have often referred to them as moments of grace, as a result of being influenced by Thomas. Say a little bit about that concept.

**Gail:** 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.

But for myself (and in terms of our discussion), I was reflecting on moments of grace in light of the Christian tradition. The tradition itself has had significant moments of grace in an ever upward pull of becoming. The image I use is of a ‘Slinky’ toy we played with as kids. It gives that sense of levels of unfolding. In terms of the tradition, we see that the tradition itself has gone through significant moments of grace. I’d like to just mention, very briefly, six that shaped the course of the Catholic religious life tradition, which has in turn shaped the Christian tradition. I see in these moments of grace the evolution of Spirit through the ages and the deepening of Christ consciousness. I consider them to be like the spine of the tradition.

For example, the [desert tradition](#) in the 3<sup>rd</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> centuries (C.E.) was the tradition where men and women went into the deserts of Egypt and Syria in order to be transformed into the full image of the Divine. So they folded that experience into the tradition, which was a belief that one could be transformed into the full image of the divine—fully ‘Christified.’ And they went out into the desert as solitaries to do that.

But then, we had another leap, or moment of grace, in the tradition. In the 6<sup>th</sup> Century [St. Benedict](#) and [Scholastica](#) created the great edifice of [Benedictine monasticism](#). That was a new moment of grace. In that moment, we didn’t lose the desert impulse. It just got transcended and included now in a new impulse, where Benedict and Scholastica said that *community* would be the vehicle for our deification.

And then we took another leap into the 13<sup>th</sup> Century with the [mendicant](#) impulse—a new moment of grace with Saints [Francis of Assisi](#) and [Claire](#), [Dominic](#), and [Catherine of Sienna](#), where the religious life tradition became mobile. The mendicants went out and preached the gospel. The aspect of [St. Francis of Assisi](#) leaning into self-giving and self-sacrificing connotes this. Next, we took a leap in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century with [St. Ignatius of Loyola](#). He folded into the

tradition the *intellectual* pursuit: the pursuit of study in the search for God. And then, we jumped in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century to St. Vincent and many of the foundresses of women's communities who folded into the tradition the *activist* mode. Right now, I see that the next leap or moment of grace is the *planetary*—and that has been ushered in by people like [Teilhard de Chardin](#) and [Thomas Berry](#).

What I would like to point out, and why I think this is so important, is 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.

**Host:** That's beautiful! I love the way that you just painted that sweep in history and given us a sense, within the Christian tradition, of these inner transformations that also exhibited and expressed themselves institutionally.

**Gail:** 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.

**Host:** I love it. It rings true to what I also know of [Integral philosophy](#): the understanding that one stage moves to the next through a transcend-and-include process that values the earlier learnings, yet also expresses itself in a new way such that the tradition continues to evolve along with everything else in the universe.

**Gail:** Right. And then we open up to a lot more manifestation, and we open up to a greater capacity for living the Christian life. 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.

**Host:** Yes. I see this moment of grace that you spoke of now in terms of really embracing the whole planet and all species and this larger body of life that we're all a part of. I see that happening in a lot of different ways and in a lot of different traditions, even beyond Christianity. It's really the evolution of spirit, consciousness, culture—it can be spoken of in different ways. But certainly this conversation series, '[The Advent of Evolutionary Christianity: Conversations at](#)

[The Leading Edge of Faith](#)', this whole process is part of the new moment of grace you just spoke of. At least, I hope so.

**Gail:** Yes. In terms of the bigger picture, I just gave a condensed version of what happened in the Catholic religious life tradition. But to broaden it out, last December [2009], I attended the [fifth Parliament of the World's Religions](#), which was held in Melbourne, Australia. What I found fascinating about it was that [the first parliament happened in 1893](#) and, obviously, it was a pioneering moment, a moment of grace where east and west came together to initiate respectful dialogue. At that time it was so new that the parliament didn't happen again for a hundred years. [The next parliament took place in 1993](#). And at that parliament Thomas Berry presented a paper where he challenged the religions of the world to enter into what he called the *Ecozoic Era* and to start addressing the crisis that was happening on the planet. His was only one of a few papers that were presented at that parliament in 1993. But [in the parliament of 2009, the actual theme was "hearing each other, healing Earth."](#) That was a huge leap. In the space of sixteen years, when only a few papers were first presented on the theme, the entire parliament now was focusing on that particular theme of healing Earth. So you get the sense that the religions of the planet are entering into their cosmological and planetary phase. And it is a great moment!

**Host:** Amen! ... Gail, so many of us in this series and beyond have been influenced, blessed, informed, educated, and mentored by Thomas Berry. You and Sister Bernadette have taken on, in a very conscious and deliberate way, carrying the legacy of Thomas Berry. We titled this conversation, "Sisters of Earth and the Legacy of Thomas Berry." Could you share a little about the [Sisters of Earth](#)?

**Gail:** [The Sisters of Earth is an informal network of women, and it began in 1994. It was a gathering, initially, of Catholic sisters who were influenced by the work of Thomas Berry and who were working for the Earth in some capacity.](#) Everyone was scattered at that time, so several women decided to call a conference and bring everyone together. That conference took place at my former monastery in Pennsylvania in 1994. And since that time, Sisters of Earth has been gathering every two years. It's open to women who share a deep concern for the Earth community and its healing. Sisters of Earth are women who are engaged in many kinds of activities. For example, there are those involved in farming or working at the United Nations as N.G.O. representatives. There are women who are academics, women who are working on water issues or dealing with Monsanto or working on transition towns. There are artists and musicians. And it is open, as I said, to all women who would fit into its mission of deep Earth healing.

**Host:** All women, meaning, not just women religious?

**Gail:** Yes. It began as women religious coming together, but it opened up after the first gathering in 1994. In terms of Catholic sisters, in 1993, the year before that gathering, Thomas Berry profoundly influenced the Catholic religious tradition of women by writing a seminal paper that was entitled, *Women Religious: Their Future Role*. That paper was seminal for me because in it he applauded the work of women religious over the centuries—their immense work in education, healthcare, social work, and spiritual guidance etc. He also highlighted the role that Catholic sisters have played in shaping and transforming the lives of millions of people and also the social and humanitarian core of our own nation, here in the United States. He said in that paper that, if in past centuries the role of sisters has been to work principally with the human community, the primary role of women’s communities in the present is to preserve the Earth from further devastation. He 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.

In that paper, 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. So, [Sr. 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](#).

**Host:** Wow! Gail, as you were speaking just now, my eyes got all moist and teary. I am just feeling so much love and appreciation for Father Thomas—and missing him.

**Gail:** Yes.

**Host:** Could you speak a little about Sister Bernadette and your founding, with the help of Thomas Berry, of the Green Mountain Monastery? Help our listeners have a better feel for what the Green Mountain Monastery is really all about,

**Gail:** The Green Mountain Monastery really was born out of our work with Thomas. Thomas has been a mentor since that first class that I took with him in 1984. I remember so clearly in that first class when he began speaking, I knew that I was going to dedicate the rest of my life to, as he called it, “the Great Work”. It was the second awakening that I had; there were three awakenings—mystical awakenings—that I had in my process.

The first happened when I was six years old. I call that *the awakening of the heart*. My mother had sent me up to bed to take a nap. So I am lying in bed and I’m thinking to myself, “What does it mean to be *me*? What does it mean to be me in this flesh? I’m a human!” I

remember pushing the question; I wouldn't let it go. What am I? Who am I? 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.

**Host:** At the age of six?!

**Gail:** Yes, at the age of six! It was an explosion into the vastness of the eternal. And, of course, I couldn't explain it as I am doing it now—but it *never* left. It was so deep; it just shattered my psychic separation!

So that was for me an *awakening of the heart*—and so much so, that I remember growing up, even to this day, really feeling the capacity to feel the life pulse of reality—almost like the breath of God breathing through everything that is. I had this extreme sensitivity to life. I could never kill an insect because I could feel the pulse in the insect. But anyway, that was my awakening of the heart. And it was an enlightenment, a mystical enlightenment.

Then, when I met [Thomas Berry](#) in 1984 and he picked up that anthracite stone and he contextualized it in [its sweeping periodization of history within the context of the Universe story](#). I had an *awakening of the head*. It was like an empirical mystical awakening, where my mind broke open into the reality of the unity of all that is. I'm sure many people, in listening to Thomas, had the sense that, in hearing him speak of the story of the universe, we recognized that we were bound together in an inseparable relationship with all that is, through space and time. That was my second awakening.

Then the third, I consider as the *awakening of the body*. So, it was the heart, it was the head, and now it's the body. And the body has to do with taking the first two awakenings and bringing them into form. The form is Green Mountain Monastery. So we're creating a monastery that is integral with itself at all levels of itself, based on what we know to be true. And what I know to be true are those two awakenings. So Green Mountain Monastery flows out of the first two awakenings: the awakening of the heart and the awakening of the head. And now, this is the embodied awakening—which is creating a structure that manifests in its physicality a realization of our relationality with the total life community.

What that means practically is the creation of a monastery that has a sensitivity to the food it serves and how that food is grown—in organic and bio-dynamic contexts. So the spiritual nourishment we give people who come here is not just in terms of retreat or program, but it's in terms of the food that comes from our land: what we're modeling in terms of sustainable architecture, of energy use, of liturgy and sacrament.

So, I think I'm making myself clear here: that the awakenings of heart and head needed to be manifested in matter and embodied. Embodiment is part of the gift that we are bringing, in terms of creating a structure that represents our understandings.



**Host:** Could you tell us about how Green Mountain Monastery first came to you—the vision. And then how you and Sister Bernadette brought it into existence—and some of the obstacles that you had to overcome.

**Gail:** [Green Mountain Monastery](#) came into existence after years of study with [Thomas Berry](#). Then in 1999, my former community was going through its own discernment process—and was asking questions: How are we going forward? How do we see ourselves moving into the future? How is the future pressing in on us at the moment? What is trying to emerge here? And so we were asked to submit proposals, and I submitted a proposal asking to be missioned to begin a new community that would solely be dedicated to a new mission of carrying forth the work of Thomas Berry in the religious life tradition, specifically. My community gave me the permission to do that: We were missioned by that community to establish a new community in the religious life tradition. So, it was a moment of grace, right?—a moment of grace to begin another movement in the church with a specific dedication.

We had to apply to different dioceses in the country. We really wanted to come to Vermont because we resonate with the landscape here, the people, and the politics, and knew we would find support in this wonderful state. So we contacted the Bishop of Vermont and asked if we could come and told him a bit about our mission. We were then welcomed here by that bishop. Shortly after though, he retired. So we needed to re-establish ourselves with the current bishop—and it's been an interesting process. *[laughter]* I think [the Bishop's] end of the spectrum is certainly not living in this worldview. That's been my experience in my encounters with several of the hierarchy in chancery offices that they are *not here at all* in this moment of grace.

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.

**Host:** That's beautiful! Wow!—and especially to watch that transformation happen before your very eyes. It is so rare that we're privileged to see that.

**Gail:** Yes!

**Host:** And it speaks to his humility to be able to let that in to his heart and have his heart and mind expand in that moment—in your presence.

**Gail:** Yes, absolutely! I had so much respect for him because I could actually see the glass being shattered, like a chink, or at least an opening happen. It said something to me about this man who could allow something that he had never thought of, something so different—to allow that *in* to his consciousness.

**Host:** So how did things unfold from that point?

**Gail:** Well, I think it got in at the moment, but then it left before stopping! [laughter]

**Host:** I think that is true for many of us: one step forward, two steps back.

**Gail:** It is just going to take some time. So at the moment, things are just at a standstill. Nonetheless, you just have to move on. And I was thinking of this in terms of how I am so *proud* of the religious life tradition—because women have been going through this for eons in the Catholic Church. Since the early years of women’s religious communities, there’s been an effort to put the energy of women into pre-determined molds, or to conform women back into a certain uniformity or predictability.

I remember reading about a [papal edict that came out in 1298. It was called \*Pericoloso\*](#), and that edict said that all nuns were to be perpetually enclosed. The writer of that edict said something to the effect: “We desire to remedy the dangerous and scandalous conditions of certain nuns.” So, it was this effort to curb the *initiatives* of Catholic sisters, which have often been controversial and not comforting, but nonetheless that have shaped the Church in many ways.

**Host:** Yes. What you are reminding me of, Gail, is that Connie and I have been asked many times over the last nine years of living on the road about the [evolutionary] movement as a whole: When did people start really awakening to the fact that we are not separate from nature, that we are not separate from the universe—that we *are* the universe becoming aware of itself? How has that consciousness seeped in to religious life and religious orders and religious denominations? And I can’t tell you how many times people have expressed surprise when one or the both of us will say, “*Oh, the Catholic nuns have been the ones leading this movement for decades.*” And part of that is because Thomas Berry inspired an entire generation of Catholic sisters—and also, I think, because there is a sensibility, a sensitivity to the plight of not just the poor and the oppressed but also the Earth, which is suffering in some of those same kinds of ways.

I remember when [Miriam MacGillis' Fate of the Earth audiotape](#) made its rounds among thousands and thousands of Catholic sisters. And so there's this awakening consciousness that happened much earlier within the Catholic women's religious communities than in any other part of religion in the West.

**Gail:** Right. I know from my historical reading that Catholic sisters have always been on the leading edge of consciousness and culture. And now we come to this new moment of grace, and the sisters have once again, as you said, been on the leading edge—and from very early on. These women were reading and attending the lectures and really probing into how we take this out into the world in our activism.

**Host:** Yes, exactly. We have been speaking a lot about Thomas Berry, and I am so glad that we have. Another thing that was central to his thinking around evolutionary Christianity was his notion of the western pathology—a cultural pathology—and thus a [cultural therapy](#) being needed. Could you speak to that?

**Gail:** Yes. Thomas would say that we are undergoing a severe cultural pathology. He referred to his own generation as an *autistic* generation and noted that there was a huge epidemic of alienation in a world of presence. He would describe cultural pathology as that which is counter-productive, addictive, paralyzing—a distorted energy that takes control of us. He related the cultural pathology to what he called the "[millennial myth](#)". He talked about the millennial myth as a myth or a vision that was taken from the apocalyptic tradition of the Bible. That tradition said that there would be a cataclysm to wash away evil, and that washing away would be followed by a thousand years of relief from the human condition. And he said that the millennial myth was absorbed into and expressed in the modern *doctrine of progress*. So, he said that, the millennial myth was translated into the creation of technology to transcend the human condition. In other words, we're going to make this a better world than the natural world—and we're going to create a "[wonderworld](#)" based on our technologies.

I remember him using the example of an ad he saw for a car. The car was called Infinity, and the ad said, "Just slip into the driver's seat and be happy ever after!" It was representative, to Thomas, of this millennial vision.

So his critique of the millennial vision was how he came to articulate it as being the cause of a cultural pathology. And what is needed to heal that pathology is a new cultural therapy. You probably remember that the remedy—the cultural therapy—was his famous statement on "The Historic Mission of Our Times."

**Host:** Oh, yes! Go ahead and state it.

**Gail:** [As Thomas Berry wrote,] “[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.”

Unpacking that statement, the cultural therapy we need is to reinvent ourselves at the species level, using our critical reflection. Moreover, we have to do that not only within the human community but within the community of life systems, in a deep-time context. And we need to do that by means of story and shared dream experience.

**Host:** Say a little bit about “shared dream experience.”

**Gail:** Thomas was referring to the evocation of the poetic wisdom and dreams that reside within ourselves, as part of the coming together within the context of re-inventing ourselves with critical reflection within the community of life. [This would be] a coming together with what he referred to as “the Great Work of our time,” which would give us the capacity to bring forth a new way of *being* on the planet.

Thomas told a story of three men carrying stones. The first was asked, “What are you doing?” And he said, “I’m carrying stones.” The second was asked, “Well, what are you doing?” He said, “I’m supporting my family.” Then, the third was asked, “What are *you* doing?” And he said, “I’m building a cathedral.” And then Thomas said, “We all carry stones; we all support families; but beyond all of that is the building of a cathedral” — which was the building of a meaningful structure to symbolize how our lives are truly fulfilled in some depth. And this is part of the Great Work: to build new structures of consciousness and culture that will lay the foundations for what he called the [Ecozoic Era](#). That is part of what he meant by “shared dream experience.”

**Host:** Yes. And his book, of course, [The Dream of the Earth](#), was in large part furthering this vision, this understanding. 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.

**Gail:** Yes. Beautiful!

**Host:** The other thing I was reminded of when you were speaking of the *Ecozoic Era*—for those who aren’t familiar with that term—if you could describe how Thomas used that language, because I think it really is *central* to an understanding that helps us think in larger spheres of time and moments of grace than perhaps we are used to thinking.

**Gail:** Yes. Thomas brought forward the word ‘[Ecozoic](#)’ in the sense of contextualizing the moment within the large sweeps of Earth history time. So, we had the Paleozoic, the Mesozoic, and then the last sixty-five million years of Earth unfolding is called the Cenozoic. ‘Zoa’ means life and ‘eco’ means house. So the translation of *Ecozoic* could be consideration of the planet as our house of life: an era when we come back home.

Thomas pointed out that we were terminating the Cenozoic Era, which was the last sixty-five million years of unfolding. Scientists have called it the “lyric period” of the planet, where wave after wave of life unfolded to set the stage for human emergence. With our emergence now in this new moment, the unfolding is not just automatically pushing forward. We have a shared responsibility, in terms of the planet moving forward, because we have such a comprehensive influence on almost everything that happens.

So, when Thomas challenged his listeners to enter into the Ecozoic Era, he presented aspects of what he saw that era to be. These aspects include understanding the Earth as a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects. He pointed out that the Earth can survive only in its integral functioning, not in fragments (anymore than an organism can survive in fragments). He also said that the Earth is a one-time endowment, and that it is subject to irreversible damage in the major patterns of its functioning. Also, there is a sense that the Earth is primary and we, as humans, are derivative.

**Host:** That last piece is huge for a lot of people when they really *get* that planet Earth is primary and humans are derivative. We derive from, we emerge out of this body, the Earth.

**Gail:** Right. Another thing in terms of the [Ecozoic](#): Thomas pointed out that new ethical principles must emerge in this time—where we recognize the absolute evils of biocide and geocide, as well as other evils that are concerned more directly with the human community. So he set forth challenging propositions for entering into this new era.

**Host:** And yet in *my* experience, there’s no greater joy in life than to be following where my joy and the world’s needs intersect. There’s an exercise that I have often done with groups. I invite people to take a piece of paper and draw a line down the middle so there are two columns. On the left-hand side, list all of the activities, the projects, the things that light them up, turn them on, give them joy, energy, a sense of contribution, happiness: the things that you’re good at, the things that other people tell you that you’re good at, etc. You list all that on one side.

And then on the other side of the paper you list all the things that you are aware of in the world where you *feel* the world’s needs—not just where you *intellectually* know about what’s needed. But where does it really hit you—where you *feel* it. Where do you feel frustration, anger, compassion—especially compassion. And list all those things.

Then pay attention to your heart. You just bring the focus of your mind to the region of your heart. And so, when we pay attention to our heart, and we’ve got our two lists: Basically, what you are trying to do is play mix-and-match. Where are the intersections between what lights

you up, what gives you joy, what gives you energy, and what the world's needs are, or the community's needs, or the future's needs—as you *feel* them.

And those places of intersection — where your great joy and the world's great needs intersect—that's your calling. That's your mission. That's your vocation. That's *your role* in this Great Work. It's like your little 'g' and your small 'w' great work within the larger Great Work of our species: the work of humans coming into right relationship with this planet and the whole endeavor moving forward in a healthy way.

**Gail:** That's beautiful, Michael. As you were speaking, I could feel myself just resonating with that. And I am sure the listeners would find an opening right there, too, *into* the Great Work. Because all of us are needed. The self-sense I had in hearing you is that we all are needed in it and we all have gifts to contribute.

**Host:** Yes. And each of our gifts is like a different function within this larger body of life. Even people who have a very different perspective than I do: they're playing a very different role in the body. You know, your heart cells, if they could judge what the kidney cells or liver cells are doing, would probably say, "No, you're not doing it right!" However, having that perspective has allowed me to actually be grateful for the role that other people are playing in the body—even though they've got different beliefs and they are doing different things, and sometimes seeming at polar opposites!

**Gail:** That's beautiful. As you are speaking, I am thinking of how that fits so perfectly into the fundamental principles of the Universe: differentiation, interiority, and communion—those three fundamental principles. [And through which] we come into the fullness of the gift we have to offer, and it gets folded into the whole. So, there's this sense of the larger Self: our contribution to the *communion*, as we go into our own differentiated potentialities.

I always think that as the communion heightens, the differentiation tightens. When we are living into, as you said before, what our passion, our joy, and our heart's desire is, and when we put that into the whole, the whole strengthens. It tightens, or heightens, right? And vice versa.

**Host:** Fabulous! . . . Gail, are there any last things you would like to share with our listeners?

**Gail:** I do. I have a few last things I would like to put forth. First, I would simply like to offer a fresh invitation to younger women, to consider carrying forth the great legacy of the Catholic religious life tradition as it enters into its cosmological phase. I would like to invite women out there who seek to live in a vital awareness of the Divine—and who are passionate about being transformed into Christ for the sake of becoming people who are expressions of love in action, and who would like to carry the legacy of Thomas Berry forward—to consider placing their gifts at the service of the Earth community through the Catholic religious life tradition. So I would like to extend that invitation and let younger women know that there are sisters all over the

country and around the world whose focus is in this arena—and we would love to open up and invite women who would be interested to be part of the continuing legacy of this great religious life tradition. And particularly, Green Mountain Monastery would love to welcome such women into our new community.

Second, I would like to let the listeners know about Sisters of Earth. More information on that organization and our next conference can be found online at [sistersofearth.net](http://sistersofearth.net).

Third, I would like to make people aware of the travelling exhibit about the Catholic nuns who have shaped the nation's social and cultural landscape. It is titled, [\*Women and Spirit: Catholic Sisters in America\*](#). That exhibit is right now being shown at the Ellis Island Immigration Museum at the Statue of Liberty. And it's a wonderful exhibit about the history of Catholic nuns in America.

Lastly, I'd like to tell that listeners that there is a feature-length documentary film that will be released in 2011, entitled, [\*Journey of the Universe\*](#). It's inspired by *The New Story* of Thomas Berry's that I referred to earlier. That film is being put out by [Mary Evelyn Tucker](#) and [Brian Swimme](#).

**Host:** That's great! And, of course, Mary Evelyn Tucker and Brian Swimme are two of the "memetic" children of Thomas Berry.

**Gail:** Right.

**Host:** Well, Sister Gail, thank you so much for presencing Thomas Berry and his spirit and his ideas so powerfully in this conversation. And thanks for sharing what you are doing at Green Mountain Monastery and in Sisters of Earth, and the way you are carrying this legacy in such a beautiful and powerful way. And thank you especially for sharing all of this with our listeners today here on the leading edge of faith.

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