

Ecology Is the New Theology

- by Michael Dowd and Connie Barlow

Thomas Berry died four years ago, but his guidance is needed now more than ever. Not only are the contours of “the Great Work” of our time becoming ever more compelling, but the spiritual work of shifting beyond our instinctive small-self concerns toward a Great Self identity is now an imperative. Only by expanding our sense of who we are might we fulfill our deepest and most urgent callings.

In times of turmoil, the small self reacts in fear, seeking shelter for oneself and one’s own. There is another way. The reach of our concerns can expand in space and in time, even as chaos descends. Thrust out of our sleepwalking comfort, we become global citizens, members of one body, a beloved Earth Community. We experience our own brief lives less as nodes of anxious concern than as links in an immense and sacred gradient of time. And thus we stand in a lineage of life, temporary caretakers of an evolutionary impulse, a green ball of fire passed joyously or effortfully hand-to-hand, from one generation to the next. The youngest among us have just received the green fire — and may be wondering what to do with it! — while the oldest are graciously tipping their hands toward the future so that the fire may roll ever onward.

Those who choose to occupy their precious slot in time with a Great Self perspective can thrive even through downturns and confusion by bearing in mind the sufferings and strivings of ancestors—both known and imagined. Equally, a Great Self perspective evokes gratitude for the achievements of Big History: from the elemental creativity of stars to the musical creativity of songsters in every

inhabited landscape. Consider what is commonly available today to readers of this publication: an immense assortment of musical delights digitally available on demand; hot water for cleaning and bathing at the mere turn of a tap; refrigeration; corrective lenses for aging eyes; fresh apples in February.

As well, we easily communicate with people twelve time zones away. We have immediate access to information

and education on a dizzying array of topics. Thanks to science, we possess an expanding photo album of our Universe’s infancy and growth. Then, too, there is the heart-stopping realization that Earth itself is sensing and feeling and creating through our own mortal bodies and minds.

All these achievements, however, have come at a cost. As Thomas

Berry cautioned, humanity has now become a geological force — and a blundering one at that. It is humanity that is melting the polar ice cap, weakening the jet stream, amplifying the power of hurricanes. Indeed, none of us alive today can shirk this frightening fact: there are personal and collective actions that if taken — or not taken — will amplify for good or ill far into the future. On our watch, the green ball of fire will pass forward in a highly altered state.

That is why ecology truly is the new theology. “Earth is primary; humans are derivative.” This teaching of Thomas Berry’s must become the foundation of all religious and secular responses to the crises of today and tomorrow. Thomas urges us, moreover, to act not out of fear but with the calm certitude that, “The world we live in is an honorable world. To refuse this deepest instinct of our



being, to deny honor where honor is due, to withdraw reverence from divine manifestation, is to place ourselves on a head-on collision course with the ultimate forces of the Universe.”

As educators, activists, artists, farmers, caregivers, and other participants in the Great Work of our time, we all will do well to calibrate our efforts as Thomas advised, “Only the sense of the violated honor of Earth, and the need to restore that honor, will awaken in us the energies needed to renew the planet in any effective manner.”