

In Communion with Creation ... Who We Are

A Retreat with Thomas Berry

The Thomas Berry Project
Loyola Institute for Ministry • Loyola University New Orleans

Group Retreat Guide

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Note: This retreat guide is designed for both in-person and online gatherings. There is a corresponding PowerPoint. The opening and closing prayers, use and number of readers, and the leader script are suggestions. Adjust as needed for the intended audience.

Note to retreat leader: As participants arrive, ask for six volunteer readers. Depending on the number of readers you plan to use, you may want to have handouts with the readings to distribute to the readers. For zoom retreats, you will need to call on the readers at the appropriate time.

Retreat Design

Timeline for Retreat (times are approximate)

2 minutes	Introduction to the Reflection
1	Opening Prayer
5	Introduction to the Video Clip
12	Watch video clip #1 from "The Cosmic Liturgy"
10	Silent reflection and journaling using discussion questions
20	Break out in small groups to discuss
5	Large group sharing
5	Introduction to Lectio Divina Exercise
25	Lectio Divina
10	Silent Reflection and journaling using discussion questions
20	Break out in small groups to discuss
5	Closing
5	Closing Prayer

TOTAL TIME: 125 minutes

Introduction to the Reflection (2 minutes)

The leader begins by posting the overall question to be explored and then asking participants to keep this question in mind throughout the session:

How do we come to understand our individual identity—our “small self”—in relation to our cosmic identity—the “Great Self”—and can we truly know who we are without recognizing our deep communion with the whole community of creation that brings us into being and sustains us?

Note: *This question is not meant to be answered at the beginning. Individual answers to this question are meant to be explored throughout the session.*

Opening Prayer (1 minutes)

As we enter into this time together, we thank you, God, for this universe in which we live our lives.

Awaken us to our place in the world.

Help us to see the gifts we have to share.

Lead us to communion with each other and all beings

and teach us to be open to the gifts that others have to share with us.

Amen.

Introduction to the Video Clip (5 minutes)

Reader #1: Everything in the vast universe is necessary for each individual thing of the universe. So for us to be who we are, everything else has to be what it is. And what is important in this type of an understanding of the universe is that everything comes into being in relation to everything else. I am not me unless you are you and the differences are most important. We are bonded together. We live or die together. (Thomas Berry, from a 1994 interview with Barbara Fleischer)

Leader: We all carry around different identities: an individual identity, a social identity, a cultural identity, and an Earth or cosmic identity. These are ways of understanding ourselves in the world. They include our personality and talents, our interests, the social and religious communities in which we participate, and the qualities that make each of us a unique individual. These are important because the way that we see ourselves affects what we believe, how we spend our time, and how we act in the world. For Thomas Berry, the identity that we are most lacking awareness of in our time is our cosmic identity, our participation in what he refers to as the “Great Self.” Berry calls us to realize that, yes, we each have an individual identity with all of its associated characteristics. He also wants to highlight our cosmic identity and, through it, our link both to the Great Self, which is the community of all created beings, and to God. (Cue Reader #2)

Reader #2: It's what I call the Great Self and the small self. A person might wonder why do we go to the mountains? Or why do we go to the shore? Well, ultimately, we go there to attain our larger Self, because through our presence there, our small self experiences the larger dimension of the universe. Nothing is itself without everything else, because it took everything else to produce each thing. (Thomas Berry, Greenville interview with Kathleen O'Gorman)

Leader: We grow in our understanding of who we are as we grow in recognition of how deeply connected we are to all of creation; in our coming into awareness that we form a single community with all beings – animate and inanimate. It is in our experience of this communion that we come to fully understand and know ourselves and that we understand and relate to the Divine. It is in our encounters with creation that we experience beauty, awe, and wonder and where we use our gifts for the betterment of all. It is in relationship that we find our true identity and our true fulfillment. We each have a unique identity within the community of creation, the Great Self, but without an understanding of our cosmic identity, we can't become fully who we are called by God to be. (Cue Reader #3)

Reader #3: Why are we so delighted with the mountains, or so delighted with the sea, or so blessed and ecstatic at the sight of a butterfly? Well, it's because that's where our greater Self is. The Great Self is not simply in this little being we call ourselves. Our greater Self is our true self, and that's why we have this intimacy of relationship with the outer world because that is who we are. We are not ourselves without each other. We discover ourselves in each other. We discover ourselves in the rainbow. We discover ourselves in the various animals. We discover ourselves in this gorgeous planet in which we live. ... We have no inner life of the smaller self without the outer life of the Great Self. We don't exist in the sense of having some intellectual power until our imagination is evoked by the outside world, that is, the larger Self. So whether it is our imagination or our mind, our smaller self is activated by our larger Self. (Thomas Berry, "Recovery from Western Civilization")

Introduction to Video (5 minutes)

Leader: In this video clip, Thomas Berry speaks of some of the indigenous rituals that have existed over time in which the people express their intimate connection with the Great Self and are present to this larger Self, looking to it for guidance and meaning.

View Video (12 minutes)

Watch video clip from "The Cosmic Liturgy"

Silent Reflection and Journaling (10 minutes)

Leader: We are now going to take some time for silent reflection and journaling followed by group sharing. The following questions are meant to guide this time. We will take 10 minutes of silence, after which we will move into breakout groups for 20 minutes to share.

Show the following questions on the accompanying PowerPoint. Suggest that participants pick one or two for reflection.

- How might seeing the natural world as a “cosmic liturgy” change the way we experience something as ordinary as a sunset or the turning of the seasons? How do you respond to the liturgies Thomas Berry offered that are based on a recognition of the Divine presence in the natural world?
- Berry suggests that to tell the story of each person is to tell the story of the universe itself. How does this idea challenge or expand your understanding of personal identity and purpose?
- How might you cultivate your own “personal intimacy,” your own personal presence to the Earth and to others?

Small Group Sharing (20 minutes)

Leader: We are now going to move into small breakout groups for 20 minutes. I invite you to share some of the insights you gained from the video and your subsequent reflection. Use the questions for guiding your discussion.

***Note:** If you are in person, suggest that participants break up into groups of 3 or 4. If you are on zoom, create groups of 3 or 4 in which to send participants.*

Large Group Sharing (5 minutes)

Leader: I invite one person from two or three groups to share an insight from their group’s discussion.

Introduction to Lectio Divina Exercise (5 minutes)

Leader: Thomas Berry spoke of the three basic tendencies of the universe, tendencies that exist in every individual being: differentiation (no two of anything is the same), communion (the bondedness of all things), and spontaneity (the inner voice, the subject-ness, of everything). We are going to read and reflect together on three selections from Loyola’s Thomas Berry collection that speak to these and help us to contemplate our own identity within the larger community of existence.

Leader: After we read each clip, we will take a few moments of silence. I will then invite you to share a word or phrase or brief idea that resonated with you as you listened.

Lectio reflections on Differentiation, Communion, and Subjectivity (25 minutes)

Differentiation: the importance of our uniqueness

Reader #4: The primary direction of the universe is towards differentiating. ... Every being is a unique being. There are no two realities the same. There are no two leaves on a tree the same.

There are no two drops of rain, no two snowflakes, no two atoms, no two of anything that are the same. Sameness is a deficiency. It is the uniqueness that establishes the high value of things so that each being contributes something to the universe that no other being ever could contribute or ever will contribute. Difference is primary, and in the human order, difference is such that each individual seems almost to be a different species. ... The sacred part of every being – of every atom, of every molecule, of every bird, of every tree, of every leaf even is that each brings something to the universe that is unique, that is not repeatable. If we do not realize the possibilities within ourselves as individuals, something is lacking in the universe that can never be replaced. There is a failure, so to speak, that is beyond remedy, because no one else will ever be able to do what each individual is called to do. Each individual is expressing the Divine perfection in a unique way, and to carry that uniqueness to its full expression is the obligation of each individual being. (Thomas Berry, taken from The Emergent Universe Lecture and the Universe as Moral Guide Interview)

Leader: We will take a few moments of silence while you share a word or phrase or brief idea that resonated with you as you listened.

***Note:** If you are in person, invite the participants to speak their word or phrase out loud. If you are on zoom, invite the participants to type their word or phrase into the chat box. You can then read them out loud to the group.*

Communion, the importance of our bondedness

Reader #5: St Thomas tells us in the Summa Theologica that because the Divine could not express itself in any single being, the Divine created the great multiplicity of beings so that the perfection lacking to one would be supplied by the others, and thus, “The whole universe together participates in and manifests the Divine more than any single being whatsoever.” ... Just like with any work of art or any achievement, the primary work is the design of the whole, and each part is not seen simply in itself, it is seen in the context of the whole. And the whole has its purpose as the unifying aspect. It elevates all the parts into a new level of being, a new level of majesty. The human neither exists nor functions independent of its relation with the natural world to which it belongs. The human belongs completely within the created order as a part of a more integral whole. ... The human is a special mode of being in the universe. In the human the universe reflects on itself and its numinous origin in a special mode of reflective self-awareness. That is what humans are. We belong to the universe as a functioning role in the universe, and without us neither the universe has its ultimate meaning nor do we have meaning. (Thomas Berry, Taken from The University in the 21st century and The Difference Between the 20th and 21st Centuries Lectures)

Leader: We will take a few moments of silence while you share a word or phrase or brief idea that resonated with you as you listened.

Subjectivity, the importance of finding our voice

Reader #6: Now we have many selves. In fact the great secret of existence, to my mind, is the secret or the mystique of discovering the unity between our smaller self and our Great Self. The Great Self is the universe itself. So that in discovering the universe we discover ourselves. ... the

whole universe has been required to produce ourselves individually. We're significant in that sense, and I think we don't understand our individual self until we are able to place ourselves within this larger context. ... Why are scientists so drawn to experience the universe? Well, it is the call of the Great Self to the small self, and we cannot be at peace until we venture into this. And the fact that this is endless is so important because if you ever came to the end, then the interest is gone, the discovery will be gone. And the wonderful thing about the Divine is that it is endless discovery on discovery on discovery. And that is to a large extent, the key to a successful and fulfilling life is keeping always the wonder of the child. As life unfolds, mystery unfolds unto mystery unto mystery unto mystery. And to be able to follow this and to experience this never ending sequence of wonders is the key to life itself. And it is a requisite for our fulfillment. (Thomas Berry, taken from The Universe as Moral Guide Interview and an interview with Kathleen O’Gorman)

Leader: We will take a few moments of silence while you share a word or phrase or brief idea that resonated with you as you listened.

Silent Reflection and Journaling (10 minutes)

Leader: We are again going to take some time for silent reflection and journaling followed by group sharing. The following questions are meant to guide this time. We will take 10 minutes of silence, after which we will move into breakout groups for 20 minutes to share.

Show the following questions on the accompanying PowerPoint. Suggest that participants pick one or two for reflection.

- If our uniqueness is part of the Divine expression, what might it mean for you personally to “carry that uniqueness to its full expression”? What gifts or qualities within you might the universe be waiting to receive?
- St. Thomas Aquinas taught that the Divine could not be expressed in a single being, so the universe was created in multiplicity. How does this insight deepen your sense of interconnection with other people and with the natural world?
- Berry speaks of discovering the unity between our “small self” and the “Great Self.” How do you experience that relationship between your individual life and the larger life of the universe?
- Kathleen O’Gorman once asked Thomas Berry: “How do you live differentiation?” He responded: “It’s the fidelity that a person has to their own special gifts. We live differentiation in every act that we do.” How might you live differentiation?

Small Group Sharing (20 minutes)

Leader: We are now going to move into small breakout groups for 20 minutes. I invite you to share some of the insights you gained from the video and your subsequent reflection. Use the questions for guiding your discussion.

Large Group Sharing (5 minutes)

Leader: I invite one person from two or three groups to share an insight from their group's discussion.

Closing and Final Prayer (5 minutes)

Leader: I would like to thank you for choosing to participate and share in the discussion process. We began by posing these questions: *How do we come to understand our individual identity—our “small self”—in relation to our cosmic identity—the “Great Self”—and can we truly know who we are without recognizing our deep communion with the whole community of creation that brings us into being and sustains us?* We hope that this series of reflections and the insights you have encountered today might strength your understanding and help guide your journey in this wondrous universe.

Final Prayer

A prayer for our Earth

All-powerful God, you are present in the whole universe
and in the smallest of your creatures.
You embrace with your tenderness all that exists.
Pour out upon us the power of your love,
that we may protect life and beauty.
Fill us with peace, that we may live
as brothers and sisters, harming no one.
O God of the poor,
help us to rescue the abandoned and forgotten of this Earth,
so precious in your eyes.
Bring healing to our lives,
that we may protect the world and not prey on it,
that we may sow beauty, not pollution and destruction.
Touch the hearts
of those who look only for gain
at the expense of the poor and the Earth.
Teach us to discover the worth of each thing,
to be filled with awe and contemplation,

to recognize that we are profoundly united
with every creature
as we journey towards your infinite light.
We thank you for being with us each day.
Encourage us, we pray, in our struggle
for justice, love and peace.

—Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'* #246.

Video Clip Transcription

Cosmic Liturgy - Lecture by Thomas Berry, September 2000

If we go outside at this time in the evening, we would witness the setting of the sun in a gorgeous display of color. The fading sunlight would be reflected by the clouds as they move across the evening sky. This stunning display fascinates the mind with wonder, the imagination with beauty, and emotions with intimacy. So would the autumn color of the leaves, the richness of the harvest, the migration of the birds to warmer regions. Here in the delta region we have a winter refuge for vast numbers of birds as they return from colder climates. It is all a kind of gorgeous liturgy aimed to overwhelm the human mind. That this order of the universe should be considered a sacred world, that it should be experienced as a cosmic liturgy **inviting personal and community participation**, is hardly to be wondered at.

In response to this invitation from the natural world, when a child is born to the Omaha Indians, the infant is taken out under the sky and presented to the universe with the invocation:

Oh ye sun, moon, stars, all ye that move in the heavens, I bid you hear me. Into your midst has come a new life. Consent ye, we implore, make its path smooth that it may reach the brow of the first hill. Oh, ye winds, clouds, rain, all ye that move in the air, I bid you hear me. Into your midst has come a new life. Consent ye, we implore, make its path smooth that it may reach the brow of the second hill.

Then the invocation is addressed to the hills, rivers, trees, and all that lives on the Earth, with a corresponding invocation that the child be protected to reach the third hill. Then the invocation to the birds that fly in the air, the animals great and small that dwell in the forests, and the insects that move among the grasses. Then a final petition that all creatures everywhere will take care of the child that it may travel beyond the four hills.

This personal intimacy with cosmic powers finds expression also with the Sioux Indians, especially in the vision quest at the time of maturity. At this time, while the initiate is fasting on the hillside, the basic symbols are presented to the initiate; symbols that will provide guidance and protection throughout life. And then a song is revealed to the initiate that will enable the person to pass safely through the perils to be encountered at the time of death. This intimacy can be further expressed with the taking of personal names that relate the individual person to some life form or some phenomenon of the natural world.

In 1863 when Black Elk, the Sioux medicine man, was nine years old, he had a remarkable vision of his historical situation acted out in the heavens in the form of the elders presiding over the future, with special attention being given to the role of Black Elk himself. He was a recipient of a remarkable vision of the six grandfathers representing the four directions, the sky, and the Earth. At one moment in the prolonged vision, a great stallion in the heavens sang a song that rang out throughout the universe. As narrated by Black Elk:

His voice was not loud, but it went all over the universe and filled it. There was nothing that did not hear, and it was more beautiful than anything can be. It was so beautiful that nothing anywhere could keep from dancing. The virgins danced, and the circled horses, the leaves on the trees, the grasses on the hills and in the valleys, the waters in

the creeks and in the rivers and in the lakes, the four legged and the two legged, and the wings of the air—all danced together to the music of the stallion's song.

I sometimes think that this, a comparison could make with the physicist, when the physicist describes how all the components of the universe are intricately related to each other and nothing exists apart from everything else, that **the universe itself is the Great Self of each individual self**, so that each individual mode of being has two presentations of itself. It is as its individual form and its comprehensive universe form. It's one form, two modes. To tell the story of each individual requires that we tell the story of the universe itself.