

P.R.E.S.E.N.C.E.



The Universe as Moral Guide

An Interview with Thomas Berry

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The Thomas Berry Project
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Interview Engagement Guide

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Overview

Thomas Berry argues that the universe itself is our primary moral teacher. For Berry, the greatest moral issue of our time is humanity's destructive impact on Earth. He insists that morality must expand beyond human justice to include the rights of nature, and that all human activity must be reoriented around reciprocity and reverence for life. The interview is conducted by Kathleen O'Gorman, Ed.D.

Transcript

Kathleen: Thomas, you speak of the universe as the primary moral teacher. Can you tell us what you mean by this?

Thomas: When I say the universe is the primary moral teacher. I'm concerned with the fact that the universe in the phenomenal order is the only self-referent mode of being, and everything else in the universe is universe referent. This is where everything begins whether its morality or economics or law or whatever or medicine. Now, there are three directions to the universe, three tendencies. And law we can consider as basic inborn tendencies – that is, natural law. It's a guide for action in everything. Everything is guided in its activity in a very unique way, but it is all out of the primordial structure and function of the universe.

The primary direction of the universe is towards differentiating. The universe by definition is a differentiating tendency. And this is what St. Thomas says is the perfection of the universe. Difference, he says, is the perfection of the universe. You notice this. No two leaves are the same. If two leaves were the same, or if all oak leaves were the same, then each would lose its grandeur because it would just be equated with another leaf. Or two snowflakes, or two grains of sand, or two atoms, or two butterflies. The 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. And so it establishes that perfection so that 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. So the uniqueness is the first thing. The second thing is the fact that everything has an interior spontaneity, no matter what it is, everything radiates. Everything in a sense has a voice. Everything carries the mystery of the universe within it. So it has the very structure of the universe there. The third tendency is toward the bonding of everything to everything. Everything is attracted to everything else and everything attracts everything else. So there's that mutual relatedness that is comprehensive as regards to the universe.

These are the three basic moral laws: that sense of value of each individual, that sense of carrying the deep mystery of existence within a person's being, and then bondedness. Now, this is expressed in a distinct way in all the different modes of being. It is expressed in the pre-living world in a certain way in the attraction that every physical thing has to everything else. It's called gravitation. Now gravitation is something much more than just physical. It's a physical, psychic-spirit thing. It's a psychic-spirit thing as well as a physical-material thing and this attraction carries in it the possibility of developing into the relatedness in the living world and the human world to affection. And it is one of the most elementary tendencies that need to be fulfilled. So that in the human order, I would say that these three tendencies are the basis of morality. That is, fidelity to the structure of our own being, our unique life situation. Morality in the concrete is unique, and we have general laws of morality, but the application of those laws requires a certain genius and a certain sense of how this functions in the life of each individual. And that is why we have spiritual directors to help us move from a general tendency phase to the interrelatedness that humans have with each other as to how this is fulfilled, how this is fulfilled in family relations, how this is fulfilled in social life, how this is fulfilled in the larger pattern of human affairs, how it relates to different human cultures. But the basic law is that there is relatedness and there is the intimacy at the human level.

Kathleen: How do you live differentiation?

Thomas: Well, it's the fidelity that a person has to their own special gifts. We live differentiation in every act that we do. Take a mother with children. Children are so totally different. They have totally different needs, and they have different personalities, and a parent has to have the genius of sensitivity to the specific needs of the child. Now, what might be moral to one child might not be acceptable to another because children have different sensitivities and different needs. I'll always remember once, it's something in my own life, I never thought in my family (I was one of a number of children), it never occurred to me that a parent would favor one child over another. But I heard another child say that their mother liked one of their children better than the other. That was kind of bothersome to me. I was about 10 years old, 10 or 11, so I was with my mother once and took a little nerve and said, "Do you like one of us more than the other?" Just instantaneously she said, "I feel closest to the child that needs me the most at any moment." This has a sense of the difference of things and being sensitized to the uniqueness of the moral issue of any moment of time. This occurs constantly.

Let's go back, though, to this question of the dimensions of the universe. Now this has, I think, profound relationships with Christianity particularly because, I think, these three tendencies give us our deepest insight into the mystery of the Trinity. Because we have in the bible the family model of the Trinity: the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. St Augustine used a more psychological model of the Trinity: a knowing subject, the act of knowing, and the object known in the way they identify. And then the social model

that sometimes proposed the self, the other, and the community. But the emergent differentiation accords with the role of the Father. The Son is the icon, the intelligibility, the interior structure of things, and the Holy Spirit is the bonding. So that we have in these three tendencies of the universe I think we have a very profound mode of the universe reflecting the deepest mystery of Christianity. And carrying this out in the moral order becomes a great urgency.

Kathleen: What do you perceive to be the most crucial moral issue of our time?

Thomas: The most crucial moral issue of our time I consider to be the issue of establishing a mutually enhancing mode of human presence on the planet Earth. Just now, I think the deepest moral disaster is the devastation of the planet Earth. We are killing the planet Earth. We generally think of the evil of suicide, of homicide, that is, the killing of a personal self. We understand the morality of that. We understand the morality of killing someone else. We understand the morality of genocide, the killing of a whole community. But we are committing biocide, the killing of life itself, and geocide, the killing of the planet Earth. Obviously, this is enormously more significant a moral deed and a moral disaster than the killing of a group of humans or the killing of a single human or the killing of a person's self. Strangely, we have no sensitivity to this terrible thing, and I consider this the greatest deficiency, the greatest failure of Christianity in the total course of Earth history, the total course of Christian history. That we have not been able to identify and to resist or to overcome this supremely disastrous situation. We haven't even identified it adequately. Our Catholic universities have not taken it seriously. We're constantly talking about the need to accommodate to other people. But if we don't accommodate to the Earth, if we don't have a viable presence on the Earth, or if we destroy the conditions of survival, then our social capacity to be present to each other is not going to be very meaningful.

Let me give you this illustration: in the United States we are losing four to six billion tons of topsoil every single year. We're committing a crime against the soil by our use of chemical processes, fertilizer, pesticides, herbicides, all the chemical forcing of the soil to produce more than it can produce in its ordinary cycles. We're not replenishing the soil. We're taking from it without giving to it. And a person ordinarily well, is this a moral issue? I say a supreme moral issue. Why? Because by losing topsoil, by rendering our topsoil to a deadening condition, we won't be able to feed anybody. If it's evil not to see that the poor are fed or have nourishment, this is going to take away food from everybody. We won't be able to feed the community, to feed our population in a certain period of time because the soil is being washed away by the water, blown away by the wind, or simply made non-fruitful, and even the food it produces will not be nourishing. This is something that we consider this something outside our religious order, we can't deal with. So when it comes to why what we call the ecological issue is not dealt with adequately. Whoever hears a sermon in church on the devastation of the natural world?

Another saying that I use sometimes: only the grandeur of the natural world can save our souls. Why would I say that? It is because it is the grandeur of the natural world that awakens us to the splendor and beauty and wonder of the divine. If we lose the grandeur of the natural world, we will lose our sense of the divine. It is something we don't refer to very often because we get our sense of the divine from a book. We get it from scripture. But that's not adequate. If we don't get our sense of the divine from the air we breathe, the water we drink, the sky over our heads, the stars in the heavens, and the mystery of wilderness areas, of the birds and so forth, and the butterflies. Well, we may read about things in the book, but that's not going to supply what's missing.

Kathleen: Is there a connection between this understanding of the problems that we are wreaking on the planet and an understanding of the natural law tradition? Will reason lead us to recognize our sins?

Thomas: There is the question about whether reason will be a sufficient moral guide to us in a very direct way apart from this sense that our moral guide rests deep in the structure of things, in the structure of the universe, in the structure of the planet Earth, in the very structure of life. In the tradition of things, we have been taught that our moral guide is the reasonable nature of the human, that we must act according to reason, according to the nature of a reasonable human being. Well, that's a good orientation, but I would say that it is inadequate. It does not adequately relate us to the universe. Our reasoning faculty emerges in relationship to an emergent universe. And it needs the guidance, even our reason is guided by the very structure and functioning of the universe. Well, how does our reason function? It functions in reference to certain inborn tendencies. Now where do these tendencies come from? They come from the pre-human, from the pre-human formation of the universe itself, the formation of the Earth, the formation of life. We carry in the structure of our being every phase through which the universe has passed. And our deepest instincts, even reason, depend on tendencies that are pre-reasoning. That is one of the values of Carl Jung - his explanation of the archetypal world. That is, we call it the instinctive world. In other words, reason itself, conscience functions in a pre-rational way. Children, even before they can consciously reason about something, they know justice and injustice. Where does that come from? That is not coming from reason exactly. That is coming from certain inner instincts that exist deep in the nature of things and we participate in that, and the more profoundly we appreciate the pre-human dynamics of the human, the pre-human dynamics of the human, the more we will feel comfortable with and recognize our indebtedness to the natural systems.

Kathleen: How might we achieve an integral relation with the Earth?

Thomas: To achieve an integral relation with the Earth there is one primary requisite. That we recognize that we live in a universe of subjects, not a universe of objects. The universe is a communion of subjects. It is not a collection of objects to be exploited. This is perhaps the most powerful cause of our immoral destructiveness of the planet Earth. And when I speak of the destructiveness of planet Earth, we have to recognize the criminal deeds that we are doing in relationship to the next generation. We are depriving the next generation of what is their rightful heritage, an integral natural world. We are devastating their world. It is not simply devastating our world. And we are in a sense making just enormous suffering for our children into the next generations. By our overuse of petroleum, we are depriving them of treasures that they deserve as part of their heritage.

So this whole question is why do we do this? Why are we so unconcerned or acting in such a difficult way as regards our children? Well, I trace it to the fact that we have divided the world between the human and the non-human and consider the non-human as a world of objects to be exploited, not primarily of subjects to be communed with. Let me give you an example. There is the question of the old growth forest in America. Actually, we've cut 95 percent already. Five percent survives. One percent is protected. We are cutting one of the most wonderful manifestations of the divine, which is the wilderness of these great forests, and we are cutting them for economic gain, for jobs, for money. Actually, there are more jobs in saving trees than there is in cutting them and exploiting them. But what do we lose when we lose the old growth forest? We lose our souls. Why? Because we don't have that wonderful experience of the divine that exists in wilderness in a unique way. It is something like the pollution in our cities. The pollution in our cities may cause us physical damage. It may poison us. But

that is not the main thing even. It is not the economics. It is not even human health. The main thing is that it destroys our souls. It is a soul loss. If we have pollution like light pollution, that at night will not permit the children to see the stars. Now for children not to see the stars kills something in them. It deprives them of something that is irreplaceable. If they don't see the stars, if they don't see butterflies, if they don't hear the crickets, if they don't wade in streams, if they are deprived of all these very basic experiences that they need in the physical order. They need to see and hear and taste and feel a world that is exciting and ecstatic and all of that.

But then again, they can go to the ocean. They can see the ocean, and they are taught recreation. What they need is to be awakened to is what, I believe it was Rachel Carson who wrote, "A Sense of Wonder." If we do not awaken in our children a sense of wonder, that is what the divine is. We get it through a sense of wonder. So if all the children get in contact with is wheels and wires and concrete and steel and machines and computers and gadgetry and Disney World affectation, they are morally corrupt.

Kathleen: So what you've just done is catalog a whole series of moral problems.

Thomas: Well, they are the moral problems of our time.

Kathleen: What about habitat?

Thomas: When it comes to questions of habitat and we talk about population. We try to get to population ... we still have the rational, reasonable activities of humans that's supposed to be our guide. That is one of the ways in which we approach it, through reasonable activity, but we should, through our reason, we should know that humans should not take exclusive rights to habitat. That is, humans should not so occupy the planet, so occupy the North American continent, that they leave no place for anything else, any other being. So that the birds don't have a place to go. Don't have a place to feed. Don't have a place to nest. Where the butterflies begin to disappear. Where the trees can't grow. Where humans just take it for granted that we have all the rights. That is a profoundly immoral stance. But people don't recognize it.

Going back to this question of population, it should be approached. I would say, from the standpoint of the way life functions. Take the basic biological law. The basic biological law is that every species should have opposed species or conditions that limit each species so that no one species or group of species would overwhelm the other. Now this is coded into the genetic sequence in the non-living world. It is coded not simply in the individual; it is coded into the community of life so that the community of life is so guided by the instincts that come from genetic coding that one species can't overdo the others. There are the natural enemies, there are the natural conditions that limit. Humans have to do this by reason, but we have the cunning that we can subvert that basic biological law and overpopulate, overdo our position of habitat. The law comes, and the guidance comes, from the deeper law of the planet Earth. I say biological law, but every law of the pre-human is both a psychic-spiritual as well as a physical-material law. So that law is not just a physical thing or a biological thing, it has a spiritual-psychic dimension. It is not the same as the human psychic structure, but it does have its own guidance. It is not just mechanism.

Kathleen: What might be done in our social, political order to point us toward that understanding of the moral life?

Thomas: Well, in the social, political order, one of the greatest difficulties as I see it is the Constitution of the United States. That is our ultimate reference in our social affairs, our political affairs. It is founded on

three basic positions. That is, it is a commitment to participatory government, to individual rights, and to property ownership. An unlimited type of property ownership, with inadequate safeguard as regards how that ownership is exercised. At the present time, I would say this is our biggest obstacle to any really effective improvement of the situation in the United States. Because the Constitution is founded on an inadequate jurisprudence. It is a jurisprudence that provides no rights for the non-human.

The first principle of the future has to be the recognition that we live in a universe of subjective communion with other beings. The second has to be that the human is a subsystem of the Earth system. The humans on the North American continent should consider themselves a subsystem of the continental system. And so we need a constitution that does not just guarantee humans rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness at the expense of the natural world. That is not adequate. We need to provide rights for every living being has its own rights. Trees have tree rights. Rivers have river rights. Everything has rights to be according to its nature. So that rivers have rights to not be disturbed in fulfilling their role in the total community of the North American continent. For instance, salmon have rights to their spawning grounds. But in our legal system, the salmon would need a human person to speak for them. But there should be a way in which the salmon could sue for their rights to their spawning grounds. At the present time that doesn't exist. So the forest, it should be recognized that everything has rights according to its mode of being because if we do not recognize the rights of other modes of being, eventually we will destroy all rights.

Kathleen: So the social order needs to be reimagined and our traditions need to become more inclusive. What about it in terms of the religious order or scripture, which is a moral guide for many people, the ultimate moral guide for people?

Thomas: Concerning the scripture as a moral guide for the conduct of our lives, I would simply say that it is not adequate. It is enormously helpful. It has a certain primary status, but it is not absolutely primary since the very nature of things is the primary guide that we need to go by. Scripture elucidates further aspects of this, but the scripture, since it was given in a certain time, a certain place, with certain social issues, certain historical circumstances, a certain view of the universe. Well, that can be carried over into different times, different cultural developments and all that, but it is never going to be an adequate guide in the sense of covering all of the issues that need to be dealt with. There has to be a further development. And also there is the natural law which was recognized by St. Paul. which is the interior guide that every person has, that is not dependent on the scripture, and it is this that is constantly appealed to in the Christian tradition. So that a scripture is not available for these basic issues with the human.

There is the question that if everything has rights, how would one mode of being survive without intruding on the rights of others? The wolf intrudes on the rights of the deer and so forth. Or the other animals intruding on the rights of the grass or the fruit. Well, every being has its own right to survival, but it also is part of the larger intercommunion of life. Everything supports everything else, is supported by something different from itself, and it supports things that are different from itself. So the rights are always in relationship to the larger constant exchange of life. And this is so set up by the structure of the universe that the total community prospers and each individual species prospers and each individual being has its own grandeur and its own glory. But there's a sacrificial dimension to everything. One being nourishes another being, and in turn, is nourished by other beings. And so there is a question that a deer has rights, but even the right to survival will not long last unless the deer is associated with a wolf

or with a predator that feeds on the deer. But if that does not happen, the deer overpopulate, the deer dies out because it destroys its food supply, so the wolf is a protection for the deer ultimately.

And there is also this, it has to deal with communion. I think it is why the Eucharist is important because there is an intimacy of relatedness. Is a predator-prey relationship an intimacy or an enmity? In a certain sense it is both. There is an enmity on one hand, but also an intimacy. So that the enemy is very frequently our best friend in teaching us things. Now at the human level this has a special mode, and this interrelation of species with each other and their dependence on each other is something that at the human level needs to be exercised with the type of human compassion, the type of human intimacy that is appropriate. So we do have rights to food. We need to have our nourishment, but in proper perspective.

As regards this issue of the relationship of a species with each other, the human with the natural world, I would like to say something about a passage written by Lawrence Van der Post who is one of the great journalists, truly great journalists, of our time. He comes from South Africa and has an association with England, and he writes in English. He wrote about the Bushmen. He grew up with the Bushmen of Africa. In one of his stories, he tells about an older Bushman talking to a boy who is growing into an adult. And he says, "Remember, everything has its own right to exist apart from what you think. You may like it, you may not like it, but everything has its right to exist. The bush understands necessity. What is done out of necessity, the bush understands and accepts. But what is not done out of necessity the bush will never understand or accept. And the bush has its watchperson. You might think that when you are deep in the forest and alone, you may think that you are unobserved, but this would be a most dangerous illusion. In the bush you are never unobserved."

This gives you that rapport – that what a species or a human needs the natural world accepts, but when we exceed what is needed, when you exceed one's proportion, when we lose our sensitivity, and then overwhelm the natural systems, then we become the terror of the life systems, the terror of the planet. So it is a question of sensitivity, of giving and receiving. If we take, we must give, and we must do this with an awareness that there is a price to be paid. If we take more than is appropriate, then the whole planet is turned into turmoil.

Kathleen: That speaks to our economics and what we need to be doing about that system. How might we rework our economics to be more moral in terms of our role in the universe?

Thomas: Well, we need to rethink our economics in terms of reciprocity. Which is the supreme law. People asked Confucius, when Confucius was teaching, he had all of his students, and they followed him for years and they listened to him. Confucius told them a lot of things and one day his disciples, or his students, said, "You tell us too much. Couldn't you do it more simply?" He says, "Sure. No problem. I'll give it to you in one word: reciprocity. If you take you must give." That is the basic law of the universe. If you take, you must give. This is a supreme moral reality. Now the taking and the giving are not always at the same level, but the primary thing with the human is gratitude. You take with gratitude, and you pay, in a certain sense, with gratitude. But beyond that in the economics, when it's in the economic order and we're taking from the soil, we have the moral obligation to give back to the soil. And we frequently say that it is an economic obligation. We don't say it is a moral obligation. It is the supreme moral obligation how we treat the soil, because the soil is life, the soil is destiny, the soil is survival. It is too precious a reality to treat in an unthoughtful way.

Kathleen: What about sexuality?

Thomas: Sexuality is one of the deepest mysteries of the universe and one of the most exquisite inventions of the universe. It is exquisite like flowers. Flowers, and the beauty of flowers. These are sex organs and life becomes possible, the great wonder of diversity of life comes about because of sexuality. The discovery that rather than life proceeding by constant division of some original thing - and you have eternal youthfulness and no death in the early mode because things divide and multiply that way, and an older being becomes two young beings simply by dividing so that in a certain sense there is no death — but there is this discovery that what was needed was diversity and you needed this communion relationship. You can't have communion unless you have diversity. Gender difference is just one of the deepest mysteries and supreme inventions of the universe, and how this works out is so important because there would be no evolution such as we know it without the sexuality. And this began very early in the story of life. It began a billion years ago or something like a billion years ago at least, at a very primordial level. And then at each stage there is found different manifestations. Now take in the life of birds, the mating rituals, their song is a mating process, one of the most exquisite things humans do is to carry on mating, which is the moment when you experience the divine in a very special way. That is why marriage has this sacred dimension to it. So that the whole process of sexuality is a very precious thing. At the human level, it has to be developed with a certain discipline, a certain amount of restraint, a certain appreciation of what it is. A person will spoil it if it is abused, if sexuality is abused. The whole thing, one of the most beautiful things in the universe becomes deadly, becomes a source of agony, a source of despair, and all of that. So that is why young people need to be prepared for, and I don't know how it is accomplished, but to be able to undergo an experience at this level of fulfillment because this is one of the deepest fulfillments that humans have, one of the deepest experiences of the divine. But to have this experience in any satisfying way, there is a price to be paid and a willingness to pay that price. A discipline of not becoming simply propagative or simply an abuser of this capacity is certainly one of the important things in life, the most important things in education.

Kathleen: How might this perspective on morality be communicated to people whose vision of morality does not generally extend beyond human suffering and issues of justice; for whom the neighbor is another human person? How might we promote a morality that has a more cosmological perspective? How do we get from a realization or an appreciation of injustice in a human situation to an understanding of "thou shalt not kill the planet"?

Thomas: When we come to the question of how we get beyond a morality that is concerned with purely human issues, purely human relations, to a sense of our obligations to the larger community of life, there is a need to reflect on what I would call the various modes of the self. I would say that we have many selves. We have a personal self, a married self, a family self, a community self, a nation self, an Earth self, and a universe self. Every being has a universe dimension. Anything that happens to the outer world happens to the inner world. And so there is only one community. There is not a human community or a family community and then some other community. As someone has frequently said that we are all in this together. We live or die together. We live or die not simply as individuals, but as communities. What affects one being affects the whole community, and I think that we are beginning to recognize that in a broad way, but the breakthrough that is required at the present time is to be able to include this larger dimension.

I would say that from here on, this larger dimension is going to be the key to everything else. Our western religious traditions are good at divine-human relations and inner-human relations, but we are not too good so far with human-Earth relations. But now this is going to be the key to the other two. We

will not have peace among people unless we have peace with the Earth. We will not even be able to feed people unless we have peace with the Earth. Our sense of the divine is not going to prosper if the Earth does not teach us the wonders of the divine. So these go together.

Here is one indication of how this is important. We are honored by our larger self, not by our smaller self. For instance, George Washington is honored in this country not as simply an individual, but as individual who had integrity. He fulfilled a social role. He had a nation self, had a community self, so his personal self and his community self, these somehow go together.

Now take a scientist. Why does a scientist spend such extraordinary amounts of time inquiring into the universe? Why are we so insistent that we understand the universe? And although this sometimes, well generally, has certain economic rewards and all that, a real scientist is not really concerned with that. A real scientist is trying to understand “why?” It is the call of the great self to the small self, and we feel that we are discovering ourselves and the divine.

For instance, a scientist. Why is a scientist 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.

Kathleen: Can you tie this to an understanding of the moral life in terms of being about the Great Work?

Thomas: Sometimes when I talk about issues of this nature, of moral issues, I talk about the Great Work, that is, the larger work of a generation, of a community, or something of that nature. We need to do our particular work as individuals or as communities in the 20th century community, or whatever. But there is also the Great Work. For instance, in passing from the classical period to the medieval period, the people of the 10th, 11th, and 12th centuries had the excitement of creating the medieval period, of creating a Christian world and that sense of creating a Christian world just fascinated the people. And they had enormous intellectual energy, enormous creative energy in all the arts and sciences. In fact, the early American historian Henry Adams said that humans were never so active in the full range of human activities than in the 13th century. An extraordinary period of activity with the Great Work. The cathedrals took centuries to build.

So with us. We have a great work to do which is to move from a profoundly disturbed planet to a planet where humans will be present on the Earth in a mutually enhancing way. Where the other life forms, as well as the human form, would prosper because neither human nor non-human can prosper without the other. Now at one time the non-human could prosper without the human. It is not so anymore. So that the human and the community of the natural world need to go into the future as a single sacred community, or we will both experience disaster on the way. And I think particularly as regards children, children are naturally drawn to each other. Children of different speciation; notice children with young animals. Children associate with each other very easily and very graciously. And so I sometimes say that I look forward to the time when the children of all the Earth, the children of the birds, the children of the animals, the children of the trees, the children of every mode of life, the children of the insects, and the human children will all go into the future together in a mutually supportive way. Because there is no

future for human children without all the other children, and no future now for all the other children unless the human children are there in a supportive role. So, looked at from the standpoint of the human, that is the best thing we can do.

Discussion/Reflection Questions

1. What does it mean to view the universe not as an object to be studied or used, but as the primary moral teacher? How might this shift in perspective change the way we live?
2. Berry says each being expresses divine perfection in a unique way. How do I honor my own uniqueness, and how do I recognize and respect the uniqueness of other beings?
3. If every being has an “inner voice” or carries the mystery of the universe, how might this affect how I listen to, learn from, or relate to the natural world?
4. Berry emphasizes the deep interconnection of all life. Where in my life do I experience this bondedness most strongly, and how might I cultivate it further?
5. Berry names ecological devastation—biocide and geocide—as the most urgent moral issue today. How do I see myself participating in or resisting this destruction?
6. “If you take, you must give.” How can I practice reciprocity and gratitude more intentionally in my relationships—with people, with the Earth, with daily resources like food, water, and energy?
7. How do you live differentiation?
8. Thomas Berry calls reciprocity—the law of giving back when we receive—the supreme law of the universe. In what ways do I take from the Earth (food, water, energy, beauty, inspiration)? How do I, or how might I, practice giving back in gratitude so that my life reflects this sacred balance?

Journaling Prompts

1. Write about a time when you felt the presence of the sacred in nature—perhaps in a forest, by the ocean, under the stars, or even in your own garden. How did that experience awaken a sense of wonder or deepen your awareness of God’s presence?
2. Reflect on the idea that the universe is a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects. How might this truth reshape your relationship with animals, plants, rivers, soil, or even the air you breathe? What practices might help you live more reverently and relationally?
3. Thomas Berry says that every person carries within themselves “the deep mystery of existence.” Where do you sense this mystery in your own life? How does it speak through your longings, your creativity, your questions, or your silence? Write about how you might honor and live more faithfully from this inner depth.

Meditation/Prayer Practice

Spend some time in quiet prayer and contemplation around one of the following:

- *Only the grandeur of the natural world can save our souls.*
- *A sense of wonder, that is what the divine is.*

- *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.*

Take a moment to write down any thoughts, questions, or new understandings that came to you.