

The Universe Story ... the Story of Our Times

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 eight 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)

5 minutes	Introduction with Video
1	Opening Prayer
10	Introduction to Video Clip
14	Watch video clip #1 from “The Church in the 21 st Century”
10	Silent Reflection and Journaling
20	Small Group Sharing
5	Large group sharing
5	Introduction to Lectio
10	Three reflections by Thomas Berry
10	Silent Reflection and Journaling
20	Small Group Sharing
10	Closing and Final Prayer

TOTAL TIME: 120 minutes

Introductory Video (5 minutes)

Start the program by asking everyone to relax and enter into a state of receptivity. Explain that the first short video clip (transcription just below) comes from the beginning of a talk that Thomas Berry gave at Loyola called "The Emergent Universe."

What is it to be educated? My definition of "educated" is very simple: to know the story, and the human role in the story, and the personal role in the story, the Great Story.

I was once in Canada at Georgian Bay. The Indians there had invited me, and I had been invited many times to participate in Indian assemblies. This time, I was, I think these were Chippewa Indians, for the most part. There were some Cree there, and some of the Six-Nations people. But, and I had been asked to speak; I wasn't entirely clear of what was expected of me. And I, the night before, I was out looking at the reflection of the moon on the waters of the bay.

And the next day, when I went into the big tent and spoke, I said, I wasn't sure what I should say, and I asked the moon, "What should I say?" And the moon said, "Tell them the story." And then I asked the wind, "What should I say?" And the wind said, "Tell them the story." And before I came in the tent, I asked the clover of the meadow, just outside, "What should I say?" And the clover said, tell them the story. My story, the river story, the mountain story, the story of the sea, the story of the birds. My story, your story, their story, the Great Story." And then I said to the group there in front of me, I said, "The difficulty of my generation, of the Euro-Americans that have settled this content, is that they could never hear, they could never consult, they could never be intimate with the wind, and the meadow, and the grasses, and the trees, and the birds. And they never came to know the Great Story."

Take a moment of silence followed by the leader posing the overall questions to be explored and asking participants to keep this question in mind throughout the session:

How is the story of the universe also your own personal story? How might learning the story in its physical and spiritual dimensions help you to discover your own role in the unfolding of the universe?

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 minute)

As we gather together, we give thanks to you, God, for this unfolding universe.
Be with us as we hear the story.
Speak to us of the wonders of your creation.
Lead us to gratitude for the process from which we emerge.
And help us to know our role in your continuing story.
Amen.

Introduction to Video Clip 2 (10 minutes)

Leader: Thomas Berry told us that what we need is a meaningful story, a guiding story of how things came to be in the beginning, how they came to be as they are, and how we fit into the story in a meaningful way. For Berry, the universe story is the ultimate referent for our lives. The universe story is our story. It is a sacred story. This story, as we know it now, deepens the story understood in biblical times. As we learn the sacred story of the universe, we learn the deepest story of ourselves. By means of introduction, we are going to read a series of excerpts from an interview between Thomas Berry and Dr. Kathleen O’Gorman called the Greenville/Chapel interview. There are seven excerpts, each carry the words of Berry. Starting with Reader #1, each piece will be read aloud followed by 5-10 seconds of silence before moving to the next excerpt. (Cue Reader #1)

Reader #1: We understand things ... primarily through story. That is why when you ask a religious leader something they don’t give you an answer. Frequently, they tell you a story. Ask Jesus a question and he tells you a story. The Bible is a great and complex story of events, and we live our lives within some kind of a narrative framework. Civilizations are founded on their stories of how things came to be in the beginning, how they come to be as they are, and the human role in the story. That is what the Bible is. The Jesus participation in the story is a very special way in which the Divine becomes present to us and to the entire human community. So this participation is within the context of a great narrative. So we need to know the narrative. The Bible gives us the Genesis narrative, and it gives us a narrative of the Exodus, and story of the prophets and so forth, the tensions that existed in the course of the history of the chosen people. At the back of it all is the great story, and the great story as we know it now, is different. It is the greatest single change in human consciousness since humans came into being. And that is what is difficult about our times, because for the first time we have a story of the universe as an emergent process. It is the same story, in a sense, but it is a story that is told as a sequence of emergent transformation episodes.

Reader #2: We have a story now of how the universe comes to be through the emergence of energy forces, through the formation of particles from atomic processes, through the formation of galaxies, and all this, and how the planet earth comes into being through the process of the sun gathering particles in space by force of gravitation and forming this immense ball of fire that has 99 percent of the matter of the solar system.

Reader #3: We know how all this happened now, but it has been difficult, and I think, an unnecessary difficulty for people to understand this doesn’t change the story. What it does is tell us more of how things came to be the way they are. In the Bible, we have the story of creation told very simply, but once that is told, that the light came and then the different processes of creation come through the six days, after that it has no more details. They didn’t know any more of the story. Now we know the story in much greater detail and so we see the universe in a much more elaborate way and in a much more meaningful way.

Reader #4: And to be able to accept this as revelatory of the modality of the Divine in creation is enormously important. Because if we reject this story simply because the scientists who discovered the story tell us that it is mechanistic or that it is a random process or it doesn’t

have any inherent meaning, then we lose all contact with the reality of the universe as it is understood in our times.

Reader #5: This tells us wonderful things, this new story of the universe. For one thing it tells us how intimate the human is with the universe. ... Everything is integral with everything else. ... Everything is present to everything else. So we can have this feeling of intimacy with the universe.

Reader #6: To know that we are intimate with the universe and that this universe is Divine manifestation, and to know that it reaches a certain culmination in ourselves, is to give us a thrilling and exciting understanding of who we are, how important we are to the universe, and how important the universe is to us, and how the mysterious Divine reality that brought all of this into being is present to us in bringing us into being, but also in activating an awareness of itself, of its power, its beauty, its magnificence, and its intimacy.

Reader #7: This is all communicated to us in and through the stars in the heavens, our experience of natural phenomena, our experience of all the beauties of the universe. It is all intimately a part of the process whereby we come into being. Not only come into being, but by which our inner life is activated. We come into being physically, but also intellectually, emotionally, sensitively, and spiritually. If we lose our sense of the universe around us, we lose our spirituality, because we have no images in our mind except the images that are given to us through the universe.

View Video 2 (14 minutes)

Leader: We are now going to watch an excerpt from a talk that Thomas Berry gave to Loyola University New Orleans called “The Church in the 21st Century.” In it, Berry gives a taste of his own telling of the universe story and talks about some of the important characteristics of the unfolding of the universe.

Watch video clip #2 from “The Church in the 21st Century”

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.

- If the story of the universe is your personal story, how does understanding yourself as an expression of a 12–15 billion–year emergent process reshape your sense of identity, purpose, and belonging?
- In what ways have you experienced creative disequilibrium and/or creative turbulence in your life? How have you experienced sacrificial moments? Have these moments helped you to grow? How do you relate to instability, tension, or disruption in your life—as threat, invitation, or source of creativity?
- What changes when the Genesis story is held alongside the universe story rather than in opposition to it? Where do you experience continuity, tension, or deepened meaning between these ways of knowing?
- Differentiation, interiority, and communion are described as the universe’s three basic tendencies. Which of these do you feel most strongly expressed in your life right now, and which might be calling for deeper attention or healing?

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 to guide 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: Invite one person from two or three groups to share an insight from their group’s discussion.

Introduction to Lectio (5 minutes)

Leader: Next we are going to hear sections from three different lectures or interviews given by Thomas Berry where he elaborates on particular understandings we have gained from our knowledge of the universe story. He speaks of: the importance of the human mode of being to the whole universe, the necessity of beauty to the functioning of the human, and how the story of a single, unified process leads to a deeper understanding of the one God whence all things come.

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

Three Reflections (10 minutes)

[Video Clip #3 to be read aloud]

Reader #8: Now, what is also interesting as regards Christology is that the scientists now see where the whole process is aimed at the human mode of being. And it's now called the cosmological anthropological concept. That is, that the whole universe looks forward to the formation of the human. Now, one scientist says, one of the most important of our scientists, I think it's Freeman Dyson, the more he studies the structure of the universe, the more clear it is to him that the universe must have known that we were coming and that everything that happened in the whole course of the universe was necessary in order to produce intelligence whereby the universe would know itself. Now, I define the human as that being in whom the universe reflects on and celebrates itself and its numinous origin and a special mode of conscious self-awareness. It's not that we know the universe; the universe knows itself. And this is why we exist, it's in order to enable the universe in this emergent process to complete itself by a reflective type of awareness of itself and rejoicing, so to speak. (Interview with Gerald M. Fagin, S.J.)

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.*

[Video Clip #4 to be read aloud]

Reader #9: And the earth was so beautiful when we came into being, amazingly beautiful. I sometimes think that humans could not come into being except in a beautiful universe with all the wonders of the birds, the animals, the vegetation, and so forth. Now, this capacity for a, to appreciate this, I think we needed something that would inspire us, that would reveal, only such a realm would reveal the Divine, so to speak, only such a world could fulfill the demands of the human soul, of the human imagination. Only such a world could sustain what we would consider the sorrows of life, or the pains of life. Whereas all living beings go through a certain pain, humans go through pain with a conscious process that gives us a...manifolds greater sensibility to the suffering. And to sustain that, we need a beautiful universe. (*Education in the 21st Century*)

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.

[Video Clip #5 to be read aloud]

Reader #10: Now, here's one of the important things about our understanding of the universe at the present time that is such of great importance. And it is that we are cousins to every reality that exists. We're cousins to every form of life because the universe begins in a very simple phase and then articulates itself through a long sequence of transformation episodes. But it's one process from the beginning. We're genetically related to all the other animal species. We're genetically related to the stars in the sense that the stars and ourselves emerge

out of a single, unified process. And it's one of the points that is enormously important, even spiritually, is because this tracing the universe back to its beginning reveals to us the fact that the mysterious power of beyond that the Divine origin whence all things come in the beginning, that that is one. It's a single view of reality because if the universe were not interiorly related, each part intimately present with every other part, then a person might argue that there are more than one deity or more than one ultimate cause beyond the universe itself. But the universe itself reveals that whatever origin it is, it is in a single reality, that the Divine is ultimately one. It reveals also that the world about us is a single world. (*Emergent Universe*)

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 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.

- What does it mean for you to be that being “in whom the universe reflects on and celebrates itself”?
- In what ways has beauty inspired you?
- We are described as cousins to every reality that exists, genetically and cosmically related to all beings. How might living from this sense of kinship change the way you relate to the Earth, other species, or people who feel “other” to you?
- The unity of the universe points to a single divine origin intimately present in all things. How does this vision of oneness shape your understanding of the Divine, and where do you encounter this unity in your daily life?

Small Group Sharing (20 minutes)

Leader: You are now going to be sent 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 to guide your discussion.

Closing and Final Prayer (10 minutes)

Leader: I would like to thank you for choosing to participate and share in the discussion process. We began by posing these questions as you listened and reflected: *How is the story of the*

universe also your own personal story? How might learning the story in its physical and spiritual dimensions help you to discover your own role in the unfolding of the universe? We hope in this season, as you continue to discern God's invitation to faithful discipleship, that the insights you have encountered today might strengthen 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 Transcriptions

Video #3: "The Church in the 21st Century" by Thomas Berry, February 1995

The story of Genesis presently is our primary story, you might say, or it's the story that guides us. But we have a new story now. That's no longer the way we see the universe. We no longer see the universe simply that way. It's not that that story is not an extremely valuable communication to the human community. But that alone is not adequate. We now know the story as an emergent process of some 12, 15 billion years old. Some say more, some say less. But of something that has come down through some billions of years. Something that originated in an emergent radiation process of extraordinary intensity that shaped itself into the elementary atoms of hydrogen and helium, was collected into galactic form, which established the basic patterns that would endure throughout the expansion of the universe through these billions of years. And this process, this emergent process, has gone through a sequence of transformation, irreversible transformation episodes that have brought the world to the world as we see it now. That which was implicated then is explicated now. We are that primordial process. And to know the story of how that primordial process passed through the sequence of transformation to become what we are now, is to know our personal story. And this is the importance of Teilhard de Chardin. Teilhard de Chardin did three things that had never before been done. And it transformed Christian thinking, to my mind, to its greatest extent since the time of St. Paul. Christian thought, to my mind, is changing now, greater, far greater than in the medieval period. Far greater than at any time since the time of St. Paul, because we have a different understanding of the universe.

Before, the universe was something, for most people, it was always there, and it was an eternal process of ever-renewing seasonal cycle. It had come into being, but it wasn't, in that sense, going anywhere. There was no history of the universe. The universe was simply there, and there was human history within that process, but the universe itself. Now we know that the total process has been a sequence of irreversible transformation episodes, moving from the less complex, less to the greater complexity of structure, from lesser to greater modes of consciousness, but to less and greater modes of freedom. And to know the stages in that are the most important. And that story is our personal story. You cannot tell your personal story without telling the story of the universe because that, that has given shape to each of us individually. It's given shape to everything that exists, and everything that has come into being is intimately related to everything else that has come into being. We're genetically related to the different animals. We're genetically related to every mode of being in the universe. And just like every atom is immediately present to every other atom and influencing every other atom no matter how far distant, so, too, we are immediately influenced by or influencing everything in the universe. There is a certain coherence in the process.

Now this is important for this reason, that our sense of the universe, our sense of reality, is our sense not only of ourselves, our sense of the Divine. But it didn't follow through on what I meant to say about Teilhard. Teilhard was the first person to tell that story as having a spiritual as well as a physical dimension from the beginning. Now this is not just a physical story. It never has been and never can be simply a physical or material reality because matter is unknowable.

Anything that has, that's knowable has a psychic quality. It has an intelligent being that can be known. It's already a spirit, has a spirit mode of being. Now, so the universe from the beginning has articulated itself. We also know what the universe is, what the beginning is, by what it has produced. Out of the universe has come, life, and so it's a living process. The process of the universe is a life-making process. Consciousness has come out of it, so we know this is a conscious-making process, and so that it is a beauty-making process, since it's made so many wonderful things. It made trees and animals and birds and fish and all of that. And it's a wonder-producing process that has made the mountain, the valley, so forth. So that this process is just, it is utterly and absolutely important in every way: intellectually, religiously, artistically, and poetically.

The Three Basic Tendencies

There are three basic tendencies in the universe: the first is differentiation. Everything in the universe is different. There are no two leaves alike, no two snowflakes alike, no two grains of sand, no two anything alike. No two birds, no two animals – everything is different. because each thing has something precious that it can give to the universe that nothing else can give and that is the first grace of everything. At the human level, we are so different that we almost seem to be different species individually. This is most important. The second tendency is that everything has its own inner spontaneity. Everything has its own voice, everything is subject not object, it has a voice, it speaks, it has spontaneity, it communicates, it is capable of presence, it is capable of intimacy. Everything. Everything has an interiority. The third tendency is that everything is bonded inseparably to everything else. Nothing can ever be separated from anything else. The universe is absolute in that sense. It is integral with itself throughout its vast extent in space and through its long sequence of transitions in time. You can feel alienated, but you can never be alienated from anything, anywhere, at any time. It is a coherent process.

Creative Disequilibrium

The universe had at the beginning the divergent process, the differentiating process and the bonding process. And this depended on the rate of emergence. If the rate of emergence were just slightly smaller, the differentiating process would not have been great enough. You must have a differentiating process that is not overcome by the bonding process. As soon as the differentiation begins the bonding must take place, otherwise you have an explosion that can go nowhere. On the other hand, if you have bonding process that overcomes the differentiation process you have a collapse. So this depended on a certain rate of emergence. If there had been equilibrium there would have been fixation and nothing could have happened. To have a universe at all, you had to have a creative disequilibrium.

Creative Turbulence

One other thing I would like to mention is the formation of planet earth. The earth is unique and is remarkable in the sense that when the solar system first took shape all the planets were the same. Why was it that the earth developed as it did? Mars turned to stone. Jupiter's surface is a fiery mass of gases with enormous heat. Nothing firm can exist there. Mars turned to rock. Nothing fluid can exist there. What was the mystery of planet earth? In the case of Mars, the

forces that were holding Mars together were not strong enough to create inside Mars the turbulence that would create volcanic processes, that would give the air and the water and make possible a vital planet. A vital planet has to be turbulent. Jupiter had too much turbulence. There wasn't a balance. Now this has a lot to do with the size of the earth. There was a very mysterious balance on the earth, and this is what is the deep mystery of the planet earth. It has this turbulence, but it is a creative turbulence. And it is out of that creative turbulence that the earth comes into existence.

The sacrifice of stars

One other thing that I would like to mention that I think is enormously important is the supernova explosion or the death of that great star. If the first generation stars survived intact, nothing could ever have happened because the first-generation stars just had a couple of elements - hydrogen and helium. There were not the 90-some elements that we needed to have life and consciousness and all the living forms that we have on the planet. To get these, you have to have a great sacrifice. There was a sacrificial mode of this first generation of stars. This supernova, as it is called, that collapsed in enormous heat to make all the various elements out of which the solar system could be formed. And when the supernova collapsed, it spilled its fragments out into space and our sun gathered up these fragments. Over 99% of the solar system is in the sun and these tiny fragments around it.

All this translates to rather effective background for appreciating the wonder of the creation itself as an emergent process. It gives us a sense of sacrificial creativity. It gives us what I call the cosmological moments of grace, because each of these transformation moments comes at a special time. There is something magnificent about the way in which the universe functions. It has this sense of creativity and it has these spiritual moments. The sacrificial moment of that first-generation star that made the solar system possible, that was a spiritual process as well as a physical process because the whole process has this psychic-spiritual dimension.

Three Reflections by Thomas Berry

Video #4

Now, what is also interesting as regards Christology is that the scientists now see where the whole process is aimed at the human mode of being. And it's now called the cosmological anthropological concept. That is, that the whole universe looks forward to the formation of the human. Now, one scientist says, one of the most important of our scientists, I think it's Freeman Dyson, the more he studies the structure of the universe, the more clear it is to him that the universe must have known that we were coming and that everything that happened in the whole course of the universe was necessary in order to produce intelligence whereby the universe would know itself. Now, I define the human as that being in whom the universe reflects on and celebrates itself and its numinous origin and a special mode of conscious self-awareness. It's not that we know the universe; the universe knows itself. And this is why we exist, it's in order to enable the universe in this emergent process to complete itself by a

reflective type of awareness of itself and rejoicing, so to speak. (Interview with Gerald M. Fagin, S.J.)

Video #5

And the earth was so beautiful when we came into being, amazingly beautiful. I sometimes think that humans could not come into being except in a beautiful universe with all the wonders of the birds, the animals, the vegetation, and so forth. Now, this capacity for a, to appreciate this, I think we needed something that would inspire us, that would reveal, only such a realm would reveal the Divine, so to speak, only such a world could fulfill the demands of the human soul, of the human imagination. Only such a world could sustain what we would consider the sorrows of life, or the pains of life. Whereas all living beings go through a certain pain, humans go through pain with a conscious process that gives us a...manifolds greater sensibility to the suffering. And to sustain that, we need a beautiful universe. (Thomas Berry, Education in the 21st Century Lecture)

Video #6

Now, here's one of the important things about our understanding of the universe at the present time that is such of great importance. And it is that we are cousins to every reality that exists. We're cousins to every form of life because the universe begins in a very simple phase and then articulates itself through a long sequence of transformation episodes. But it's one process from the beginning. We're genetically related to all the other animal species. We're genetically related to the stars in the sense that the stars and ourselves emerge out of a single, unified process. And it's one of the points that is enormously important, even spiritually, is because this tracing the universe back to its beginning reveals to us the fact that the mysterious power of beyond that the Divine origin whence all things come in the beginning, that that is one. It's a single view of reality because if the universe were not interiorly related, each part intimately present with every other part, then a person might argue that there are more than one deity or more than one ultimate cause beyond the universe itself. But the universe itself reveals that whatever origin it is, it is in a single reality, that the Divine is ultimately one. It reveals also that the world about us is a single world. (Thomas Berry, Emergent Universe Lecture)