

# Thomas Berry: Universing through Language

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The Wisdom of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and  
Thomas Berry

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## Abstracting

The work of Thomas Berry, a cosmologist and geologist (Earth-knower),<sup>i</sup> who lived between 1914 and 2009, questions our current anthropocentric approach to the natural world. Berry examines the cultural conditioning that disconnects human beings from the planet and suggests a “new story” for creating relationship with our surroundings. Berry’s new story—premised on a sense of deep relationality—aspires to increase intimacy between the human and entire cosmos through enchantment and, with it, the possibility of reversing the ecological devastation. It can be argued that humans crave—perhaps even require—a narrative that unifies, instead of alienates, us with all of existence; orienting us within the vast mysteries of the cosmos. Berry’s new story moves us ever more closely towards this understanding. However, the inventing and telling of stories would not be possible without words. Therefore, before we can begin to form a new story, we must first transform our language. Insofar as story requires the use of words this paper will show that, in order for Berry’s new story to be fully realized, a change in language itself must also occur. It is through the work of Ernst Cassirer I will examine the ability and importance of humans to re-evaluate our relationship to language.

## Introducing

Today, more than ever, humans in Western culture experience a profound loneliness. Behind this isolation sits a deep seeded belief the human is separate from others, from the cosmos, and ultimately, from ourselves. Through our modern rational mode of thinking we continually seek knowledge and answers somewhere “out there” leaving us unable to witness and experience the wisdom already within us. For hundreds of thousands of years language has

been the way in which we create a world with our words and then conclude it has fact. It is only through a new way of understanding our relationship to symbolic form, as language, and bringing back the sacred meaning of symbols, that we can move more fully into a relationship with all that is.

According to Ernst Cassirer, a German philosopher who lived between 1874 and 1945, symbolic form, when given as language, gave us the capability to have ideas and communicate them to one another.<sup>ii</sup> For Cassirer, it is the use of symbols that differentiates the human from other animal species.<sup>iii</sup> I disagree with Cassirer and argue it is not just the creation of symbolic forms, but the human ability to transcend and question the meaning of specific symbols that differentiates us from other species. The difference between a sign and symbol is an important part of Cassirer's philosophy. A sign or signal may have only one meaning while symbols have many. Symbols also have the capacity to refer to something outside of a given moment, whilst signs do not. Humans use symbols to help us *interpret* our external world by creating meaning and concepts. This idea seems equally important in Berry's thoughts about the new story, for we cannot tell a new story without using our symbolic form.

In the next level of Cassirer's philosophy, meaning and concepts are represented through the use of specific symbolic forms—either through myth, art, science, or history.<sup>iv</sup> In their own way each of these modes of expression demonstrates how a complex system of symbols can produce an entire culture and way of reflecting upon existence. For the purposes of this paper I will focus on language as the primary symbolic form and main expression demonstrating how a complex system of symbols can produce an entire culture and way of

reflecting upon being. In this way humans have the potential to build up a universe and then question what we have built. This questioning of our current universe model opens the space for new ideas to enter, such as Berry's, and build a new model according to a new way of being within it.

Berry's thoughts inspire us to re-evaluate our existing universe story, predicated on a detached mechanistic worldview, and reclaim language as a way into promoting the inherent connection between human and cosmos. Berry's work challenges us to overcome our past conditioning of relating to Earth and the cosmos as somehow separate from us; allowing for a reintroduction re-connecting ourselves as cosmic beings deeply intertwined with all of creation, to another, and ourselves. According to Berry, Humans do not exist outside of the reality of the universe; we cannot find ourselves without also finding the universe.<sup>v</sup> As Berry states, "[the universe is] the only self-referential reality in the phenomenal world. It is the only text without context."<sup>vi</sup> Everything else can only be described in relationship to and with the universe.

As has been mentioned, an important aspect of Berry's thought involves the significance of story—for without knowing your story you do not know yourself. As Berry puts it:

It's all a question of story. We are in trouble just because we do not have a good story. To have a story means to have a point of reference. We are between stories. The old story, the account of how we fit into it, is no longer effective. Yet we have not learned the new story.<sup>vii</sup>

A story could be described as the plot of a narrative, background information, or an account of events; for Berry it's all of the above. Humans have a deep need to orient themselves within the planetary community. In this way, the story of the Earth and the story of humans have been

inextricably linked together as a necessary way of finding our place. Berry argues, "The story has its imprint everywhere, and that is why it is so important to know the story. If you do not know the story, in a sense you do not know yourself; you do not know anything."<sup>viii</sup> Without a story to establish relationship, humans can become lost in the vast expanse of our physical reality.

### Alienating

For Berry alienation is one of the oldest and most common experiences of being human.<sup>ix</sup> To be isolated from the natural world, as the sacred community to which we belong, makes us destitute in all that makes us human.<sup>x</sup> Berry believes anthropomorphism and consumerism further created this gaping hole of isolation already present in the human.<sup>xi</sup> It is here I disagree with Berry. I believe it was the creation of language, and especially Germanic languages such as English with a firm separation and lack of verbs, which contributed the most to our current feelings of loneliness. The human desire for orientation and self-knowledge consists of the obligatory, and alienating, process of differentiating between externality and internality. With language we moved into a mode of being and consciousness that divided us from our environment, each other, and ourselves. We created a world that reflects our words and now wonder how we felt so separated.

I feel strongly that this labeling of things in our experience ultimately reflects our seeking of a relationship to Self/Origin/Universe; we would not seek an orientation to it if we already believed ourselves to be included in it. In this way language structures our thinking to then see what we have said. This powerful symbolic form transforms our very way of being in the world, both to our possible detriment and advantage. While language has given us the

ability to reflect upon our words, making the creation of new ideas possible, it has also contributed to the ecological disaster initiated by our seeming separation from our environment. Without this process we could not find our way out of our own symbolic creations. Since language requires “an other,” perceived to be outside of ourselves, in order to have meaning, the more externally we look we cannot help but participate in the necessary process of simultaneously looking back at ourselves. Language is, in its human form, an externalization of thought and at the same time an internal analysis of thoughts. This capacity enables us to recognize the symbolic forms we already employ, and thus consciously participate in their ongoing reformulation and our own reunification.

### Universing

The larger the disconnection from the whole, the stronger the drive for unity becomes.<sup>xii</sup> In this way separation acts as a necessary part of the unification process—without this division we cannot recognize oneness. When we find ourselves as separate we can only then have the willingness and desire to stop orienting to others and the external world and instead orient to ourselves as a part of it. In the end it seems this desire for orienting ourselves requires us to share and communicate our shared experience of isolation through language. This transcendence and change of humanity’s symbolic form comes about in contemplation. We escape mistaking the symbolic systems for “just the way things are” and, open up into a new dimension of freedom – a freedom to participate in the creation of new symbolic forms and also transform or shed the old ones.

Using language and symbolic form, we can see through our thinking and establish a new way of relating to all that is. In this way words do not release us into a new world of symbolic

form by giving us a way to objectify reality, rather, words liberate us by enabling us to see through them rendering them transparent. The way back into “communion” with the universe not only involves an examination of our current symbolic form as language, but also a return to sacred symbols—I would also add a re-enchantment with etymology. Berry calls for a reintroduction of sacred symbols of the past putting us back in the touch with the connection felt by our ancestors.<sup>xiii</sup> He reminds us of the deep unifying powers associated with the symbols of the Great Mother, Cosmic Tree, and mandala.<sup>xiv</sup>

Our symbolic form can now be used as a tool for creating separation as well as unification. In this way, language is our way in and our way out of relationship with the cosmos. We cannot get rid of language and start all over, but we can witness how it shaped our experience and develop a deeper sensitivity to it. Reviving the original meanings of words also re-enchants us with language and the true connotation of our terminology. Take for example the words “universe” and “unity.” Both stem from the Latin root word “unus” meaning “one.” The word “universe” comes from “uni-versa” literally meaning “turning back of many into one.”<sup>xv</sup> In this case, language suggests harmony of the whole and also a distinctly individual being. While Berry wishes to bring us more into unity, it is Cassirer who acknowledges the separation created by our necessary relationship to language. These two thinkers complement a process for re-enchantment.

### Concluding

Berry’s work calls for a new story to reunite us with our lost sense of self, a new story that cannot be possible without a new relationship to language, particularly in the West.

Through the philosophy of Cassirer we recognize our relationship to language and symbols, and then find our way out the isolation created by their usage. We can then rediscover ourselves within the universe as a source of our being. Using the same language we used to develop our current situation we can tell a new story freeing us from our past. We don't just examine our beliefs, but examine the language we use to express our belief. Language as symbolic form gives us this ability. To recreate the universe we live in, we must first recreate our language and then live into this world created by our words.



## Endnotes

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- <sup>i</sup> Robert McDermott, Hand-out October 2011, 2.
- <sup>ii</sup> Ernst Cassirer, *Essay on Man* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1944), 21.
- <sup>iii</sup> Cassirer, *Essay on Man*, 7.
- <sup>iv</sup> Cassirer, *Essay on Man*, 25.
- <sup>v</sup> Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth* (San Francisco, CA: Sierra Club Books, 1988), 57.
- <sup>vi</sup> Berry, *The Dream of the Earth*, 58.
- <sup>vii</sup> Berry, *The Dream of the Earth*, 75.
- <sup>viii</sup> Berry, *The Dream of Earth*, 70.
- <sup>ix</sup> Thomas Berry, *The Sacred Universe* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2009), 35.
- <sup>x</sup> Berry, *The Dream of the Earth*, 77.
- <sup>xi</sup> Berry, *The Sacred Universe*, 36.
- <sup>xii</sup> Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man* (Portland, OR: Sussex Academic Press, 1955), 75.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Berry, *The Sacred Universe*, 37.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Thomas Berry, *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future* (New York, NY: Three Rivers Press, 1999), 34.
- <sup>xv</sup> Thomas Berry, *Evening Thoughts: Reflecting on Earth as Sacred Community* (San Francisco, CA: Sierra Club Books, 2006), 114.

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