

# *The Double Life of Thomas Berry: Emergence and Evolution<sup>1</sup>*

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*The universe is a communion and a community.  
We ourselves are that communion become conscious of itself.<sup>2</sup>*

*We bear the universe in our being  
as the universe bears us in its being.  
The two have a total presence to each other...<sup>3</sup>*

--Thomas Berry

Thomas was a deeply religious man who, I believe, would agree with the sentiments of William James who wrote, "At bottom, the whole concern of religion is with the manner of our acceptance of the universe." Thomas both accepted and celebrated humanity's participation in the sacred story of an evolving universe. He is internationally recognized for his moving description of the cosmos as it flowers over eons of time.

Without diminishing the importance of the "horizontal dimension" and the sacred nature of evolution, I want to appreciate another vector in the work of Thomas, and that is the "vertical dimension" or the NOW where the universe spontaneously emerges as a single system—a uni-verse. At every moment, we are not a collection of objects but, as Thomas so famously says, a "communion of subjects."

The power of Thomas's great work is that he recognizes we are living at the intersection of *both* evolution (unfolding ever greater diversity) *and* continuous creation (the entire universe is emerging as a unified whole at every moment). *It is the doubly powerful nature of life at the intersection of emergence and evolution that gives such intensity and span of meaning to Thomas's dream for the Earth.*

Looking at the life and writing of Thomas in this way, we can see two remarkable dynamics at work. The first is the "universe story" and is the grand narrative of the universe evolving over billions of years. The second dynamic is the "universe emerging" as a fresh creation at every moment. Where the universe story provides a stunning narrative of the "horizontal" unfolding *across* time, an emergent universe adds a further dimension—the "vertical" emergence or continual creation of the cosmos *in* time. The universe story focuses on the evolution of the universe *through* time and the emerging universe focuses on the universe being recreated *in* time. The vertical dynamic of

continuous creation slices through all that exists and reveals everything as a single orchestration happening all at once. We are, at every moment a part of this grand unity of creation.

The coherent unfolding of the universe *through time* is manifest evidence of an amazingly powerful process at work. The continuous creation of the cosmos *in time* is another, unimaginably powerful dynamic. When we put these two extraordinary processes together at an intersection called NOW, it reveals *we simultaneously exist in a place of both creative freedom and profound communion*. Being and becoming converge into an experience beyond words—and we recognize we already live in the realm of the sacred.

Our awakening to a new understanding of the universe in *both* its horizontal and its vertical aspect represents a stunning and extraordinary re-imagining of where we are as a species. Our awakening to the living universe goes beyond the history of any particular nation, region, or ethnic group. This vision of the human journey is big enough to honor the diversity of our past and to act as a beacon for our collective future. This is a story of such immensity and immediacy that it completely transforms the shallow story of materialism and consumerism. The emerging narrative tears back the veil of smallness and reveals humanity as creatures of cosmic dimension and participation. We are bio-cosmic beings who are waking up to the fact that we live in an ever-emergent universe and our evolutionary task is to grow into the bigness of who we are, both personally and collectively. Although the idea of an ever-emergent universe has ancient roots in human experience, it is also radically new and fresh as the frontiers of modern science are only now beginning to recognize how mysterious and magnificent the universe truly is. Humanity and the universe are becoming connected once again, but now with the aid of science to cut away superstition and reveal the authentic mystery and subtlety of our cosmic home.

Because our understanding of evolution is well-established (although still evolving), I want to focus on the other aspect in this equation of existence—the continuous emergence of the universe as a unified system.

### **Scientific Views of an Emergent Universe**

Is the idea of a continuously emerging universe supported by the sciences? From the frontiers of science, we are discovering that our universe has a number of key properties of emergent, living systems. I realize that some of these are controversial, and I refer the interested reader to my book *The Living Universe* where they are explored in considerable detail.<sup>4</sup> Here I summarize six key attributes of our universe.

- *Completely Unified*—No longer is the universe regarded as a disconnected collection of planets, stars, and fragments of matter; instead, the powerful tools of science have demonstrated that “non-locality” exists. Even across vast distances, the universe is fully connected with itself. In the words of physicist, David Bohm, the universe is “an undivided wholeness in flowing movement.”<sup>5</sup> This does not mean that scientists understand how this connectivity works—only that it is real and that, at a fundamental level, the universe is a fully unified system.
- *Mostly Invisible*—Scientists no longer think the visible stars and planets represent all there is in the universe. To their shock, they have recently discovered that the visible universe represents only 4 percent of the total universe—the other 96 percent is invisible. The invisible portion of the universe is comprised of two forces: one force is causing the universe to expand at an increasing rate (“dark energy”) and the other force is causing the universe to contract into clumps of stars and galaxies (“dark matter”).
- *Immense Background Energy*— Scientists used to think that empty space was essentially “empty.” Now they realize there is an extraordinary amount of background energy permeating the universe, including empty space. Called “zero point energy,” a cubic inch of seemingly empty space contains the equivalent of millions of atomic bombs worth of background energy.<sup>6</sup> We are swimming in an ocean of subtle energy of such immense power that it is incomprehensible in everyday human terms.
- *Continuously Regenerating*—The universe is not static, sitting quietly in empty space; instead, the totality of the universe is everywhere in motion and being regenerated moment by moment—a process requiring a stupendous amount of energy. This includes not only matter-energy but also the fabric of space-time. Despite the appearance of solidity and stability, the universe is a completely dynamic system. In the words of physicist Brian Swimme, “The universe emerges out of an all-nourishing abyss not only fourteen billion years ago but in every moment.”<sup>7</sup> At every moment, the universe emerges as a single orchestration—a uni-verse or single verse of manifestation. Because nothing is left out of the regeneration of the universe, we are participants in a cosmic scale process whether we are conscious of it or not.

- *Consciousness at Every Scale*—An ancient and controversial idea is that we can find sentience or some form of consciousness at every level of the universe. Using sophisticated tools, scientists are now finding a spectrum of consciousness ranging from what might be called primary perception at the atomic and cellular level to a capacity for reflective consciousness at the human level.<sup>8</sup> From the atomic level to the human scale and in between, we find a capacity for reflection and choice that is fitting for that scale.
- *Freedom at the Foundations*—We do not live in a machine-like universe where everything is predictable. Instead, at the quantum foundations of existence there is a buzzing world of probabilities and indeterminacy. Uncertainty and freedom are built into the very foundations of material existence. We live in a world of probabilities, not certainties. Freedom and choice are real attributes of the universe and indicate the universe is a learning system.

When we bring these attributes together, we can then describe the universe as a unique kind of “living system.” *The universe is a unified and completely interdependent system that is continuously regenerated by the flow-through of phenomenal amounts of life-energy whose essential nature includes consciousness that supports some freedom of choice at every scale of existence.* This transforms our understanding of the universe around us. We are immersed within the regenerative aliveness of an ever-emergent universe. The tools of science are suggesting the possibility that life and consciousness are *both* fundamental *and* emergent properties of the universe. In this view, the cosmos is a single, living organism that is growing countless conscious creatures within its embrace. This is not a new idea. More than two thousand years ago, the Greek philosopher Plotinus described the universe as “a single living creature that encompasses all living creatures within it.” This ancient insight is being explored freshly by modern science.

### **An Emergent Universe in Wisdom Traditions**

When we turn to the “inner sciences,” what have sages across cultures and across the centuries discovered with regard to the universe? When men and women from diverse spiritual traditions invest years in deep meditation and contemplation, do they discover the universe to be a place of grey indifference without feeling qualities? Or does the universe reveal itself to us through the “spontaneities in our own being” as a place of ever-emerging mystery, vitality, and wholeness?

The understanding that we live in a living, regenerative universe is found in all of the world’s major spiritual traditions. Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism,

indigenous traditions, and more, all speak to the idea of a regenerating universe. Here are a few, illustrative quotes:

“God is creating the entire universe, fully and totally, in this present now. Everything God created . . . God creates now all at once.”<sup>9</sup>

--Meister Eckhart, Christian mystic

“God keeps a firm hold on the heavens and earth, preventing them from vanishing away.”

--Islamic Koran, 35:41

“Out of himself he brought forth the cosmos  
And entered into everything in it.  
There is nothing that does not come from him. . . .  
You are that . . . you are that.”

--Hindu, Chandogya Upanishad

“My solemn proclamation is that a new universe is created every moment.”<sup>10</sup>

--D. T. Suzuki, Zen scholar and teacher

“The Tao is the sustaining Life-force and the mother of all things; from it, all “things rise and fall without cease.”<sup>11</sup>

--Taoist tradition of China

“You have a death and a return in every moment. . . . Every moment the world is renewed but we, in seeing its continuity of appearance, are unaware of its being renewed.”

--Rumi, 13<sup>th</sup> Century Persian poet and Sufi

“Evolution presupposes creation...creation is an ever-lasting process—a *creatio continua*.”

--Pope John Paul II

“At the heart of Buddhist cosmology is ... the idea [that multiple world systems, including our own universe] are in a constant state of coming into being and passing away.”

--Dalai Lama

Based upon decades of research described in my book *The Living Universe*, harvesting the wisdom of human experience is like watching a picture gradually come into focus and seeing an extraordinary image of the universe emerging before our eyes. Within each major tradition—Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist, Taoist, Confucian, Indigenous, and more—we can find remarkably similar descriptions of the universe and the life force that pervades it: *Christians* affirm that God is not separate from this world but continuously creates it anew, so that we live, move, and have our being in God. *Muslims* declare that the entire universe is continually coming into being, and that each moment is a new “occasion” for Allah to create the universe. *Hindus* proclaim that the entire universe is a single body that is being continually danced into creation by a divine Life force or Brahman. *Buddhists* state that the entire universe arises freshly at every moment in an unceasing flow of interdependent, co-origination where everything depends upon everything else. *Taoists* state that the Tao is the “Mother of the Universe,” the inexhaustible source from which all things rise and fall without ceasing. *Confucians* view our universe as a unified and interpenetrating whole that is sustained and nourished by the vitality of the Life force or *ch'i*. *Indigenous* peoples declare that an animating wind or Life force blows through all things in the world and there is aliveness and sacred power everywhere. And a stream of *Western* thinkers portray the universe as a single, living creature that is continually regenerated and is evolving toward higher levels of complexity and consciousness. Overall, beneath the differences in language, a common reality is being described—our life is part of a larger life. It is this larger life in which we participate that is so vivid in the writing of Thomas Berry.

Despite our great diversity and differences of history, I think Thomas recognized that, when the world’s wisdom traditions penetrate into the experiential depths of existence, a common understanding emerges about the universe that is in accord with insights from science. *We live within a living universe that arises, moment-by-moment, as a unified whole. The universe is continuously sustained by the flow-through of phenomenal amounts of energy in an unutterably vast and intensely alive process of awesome precision and power. We are beings the universe inhabits as much as we are beings who inhabit the universe.* The unity of existence is not an experience to be created; rather, it is an always-manifesting condition waiting to be appreciated and welcomed into awareness. The “power of now” derives from the fact that the entire universe arises in the NOW as an extremely precise flow. When we are in the now, we are riding the wave of continuous creation. Each moment is a fresh formation of the universe, emerging seamlessly and flawlessly.

## Living at the Center of the Cross

Thomas directly embodied the experience of sacred communion while speaking of the grand narrative of cosmic unfolding. It was clear from his heart-warming presence that these were interwoven realities for him—a singular experience in the moment. Thomas’s dream was that we progressively awaken to the sacred context within which exist—a living universe where we are a communion of co-learning subjects. This is a great enterprise that our species has barely begun:

...the universe is so immediate to us, is such an intimate presence, that it escapes our notice, yet whatever authenticity exists in our cultural creations is derived from these spontaneities within us, spontaneities that come from an abyss of energy and a capacity for intelligible order of which we have only the faintest glimmer in our conscious awareness.

We are empowered to discover that, by becoming aware of our direct experience, we are simultaneously connecting with the wisdom of creation that flows through and sustains the entire cosmos, moment by moment. Thomas called this, experiencing the “spontaneities within our own being.” He writes that, in our evolution “(W)e are not left simply to our own rational contrivances. We are supported by the ultimate powers of the universe as they make themselves present to us *through the spontaneities within our own beings.*”<sup>12</sup> [emphasis added]. He further says that,

Our challenge is to create a new language, even a new sense of what it is to be human. . . . what we need, what we are ultimately groping toward, is the sensitivity required to understand and respond to the psychic energies deep in the very structure of reality itself. . . . I suggest that this is the ultimate lesson in physics, biology, and all the sciences, as it is the ultimate wisdom of tribal peoples and the fundamental teaching of the great civilizations.<sup>13</sup>

At this pivotal time in human evolution, I want to emphasize Thomas’s point that we are searching for nothing less than a new sense of what it means to be human. To accomplish this, he says we must learn the “ultimate lesson” of connecting with and responding to *the psychic energies deep in the very structure of reality itself*—a wisdom, he says, that is shared by tribal peoples and all of the great civilizations.

In conclusion, I want to celebrate the double life of Thomas Berry by acknowledging the two intersecting dimensions of his life and work—the horizontal and the vertical. In the horizontal dimension, he asks us to take the long view and feel compassion for the immensity of evolutionary development and learning that has brought us this far. In the vertical dimension, he asks us to connect intuitively with the

structure of reality as a way for the universe to speak its wisdom through us. It is the synergistic strength of this combined interaction that gives such vitality and meaning to Thomas's dream for the Earth. Thomas's "dream" grows from a wide-awake vision that we live in a sacred universe—a living, learning system that is forever emerging as a unified whole while simultaneously growing ever more diverse expressions of its aliveness.

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<sup>1</sup> Published in the book: Ervin Laszlo and Allan Combs (eds.), *Thomas Berry: Dreamer of the Earth*, Rochester, Vermont: Inner Traditions, 2011

<sup>2</sup> *The Dream of the Earth*, San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1988, p. 91

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, p.132.

<sup>4</sup> Duane Elgin, *The Living Universe*, San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2009.

<sup>5</sup> Bohm, *Wholeness and the Implicate Order*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980, p. 11.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, p.191.

<sup>7</sup> Brian Swimme, *The Hidden Heart of the Cosmos*, New York: Orbis Books, 1996, p. 100.

<sup>8</sup> See the discussion in my book, *Promise Ahead*, New York: Quill Books, 2000, pp. 52-57.

<sup>9</sup> Matthew Fox, *Meditations with Meister Eckhart*, Santa Fe, New Mexico: Bear & Co., 1983, p. 24.

<sup>10</sup> Suzuki, *Zen and Japanese Culture*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1970, p. 364.

<sup>11</sup> Lao Tsu, *Tao Te Ching*, (Translation by Gia-Fu Feng and Jane English), New York: Vintage Books, 1972.

<sup>12</sup> Berry, *Op. Cit.*, 1988, p. 211.

<sup>13</sup> Berry, *Op. Cit.*, 1988, p. 48-49.