

The Great Work: Our Way into the Future

Chapter 1 from "The Great Work: Our Way into the Future"

By Thomas Berry

History is governed by those overarching movements that give shape and meaning to life by relating the human venture to the larger destinies of the universe. Creating such a movement might be called the Great Work of a people.

There have been Great Works in the past: the Great Work of the classical Greek world with its understanding of the human mind and creation of the Western humanist tradition; the Great Work of Israel in articulating a new experience of the divine in human affairs; the Great Work of Rome in gathering the peoples of the Mediterranean world and of Western Europe into an ordered relation with one another.

So too in the medieval period there was the task of giving a first shape to the Western world in its Christian form. The symbols of this Great Work were the medieval cathedrals rising so graciously into the heavens from the region of the old Frankish empire. There the divine and the human could be present to each other in some grand manner.

In India the Great Work was to lead human thought into spiritual experiences of time and eternity and their mutual presence to each other with a unique subtlety of expression. China created one of the most elegant and most human civilizations we have ever known as its Great Work. In America the Great Work of the First Peoples was to occupy this continent and establish an intimate rapport with the powers that brought this continent into existence in all its magnificence. They did this through their ceremonies such as the Great Thanksgiving ritual of the Iroquois, the sweat lodge and the vision quest of the Plains Indians, through the Chantways of the Navaho, and the Katsina rituals of the Hopi.

Through these and a multitude of other aspects of the indigenous cultures of this continent, certain models were established of how humans become integral with the larger context of our existence here on the planet Earth.

While all of these efforts at fulfilling a Great Work have made significant contributions to the human venture, they were all limited in their fulfillment and bear the marks of their deeply human flaws and imperfections. Here in North America it is with a poignant feeling and foreboding concerning the future that we begin to realize that the European occupation of this continent, however admirable its intentions, has been flawed from the beginning in its assault on the indigenous peoples and its plundering of the land. Its most impressive achievements were establishing for the settlers a sense of personal rights, participatory governance and religious freedom.

If there was also advancement of scientific insight and technological skills leading to relief from many of the ills and poverty of the European peoples, this advancement was accompanied by devastation of this continent in its natural florescence by the suppression of the way of life of its indigenous peoples and by communicating to them many previously unknown diseases, such as smallpox, tuberculosis, diphtheria, and measles. Although Europeans had developed a certain immunity to these diseases, they were consistently fatal to Indians, who had never known such diseases and had developed no immunities.

Meanwhile the incoming Europeans committed themselves to development of the new industrial age that was beginning to dominate human consciousness. New achievements in science, technology, industry, commerce and finance had indeed brought the human community into a new age. Yet those who brought this new historical period into being saw only the bright side of these achievements. They had little comprehension of the devastation they were causing on this continent and throughout the planet, a devastation that finally led to an impasse in our relations with the natural world. Our commercial-industrial obsessions have disturbed the biosystems of this continent in a depth never known previously in the historical course of human affairs.

The Great Work now, as we move into a new millennium, is to carry out the transition from a period of human devastation of the Earth to a period when humans would be present to the planet in a mutually beneficial manner. Such a transition has no historical parallel since the geobiological transition that took place 67 million years ago when the period of the dinosaurs was terminated and a new biological age begun.

Since we began to live in settled villages with agriculture and domestication of animals some ten thousand years ago, humans have put increased burdens upon the biosystems of the planet. These burdens were to some extent manageable because of the prodigality of the nature, the limited number of humans, and their limited ability to disrupt the natural systems. In recent centuries, under the leadership of the Western world, largely with the resources, psychic energy and inventiveness of the North American peoples, an industrial civilization has come into being with the power to plunder Earth in its deepest foundation, with awesome impact on its geological structure, its chemical constitution, and its living forms throughout the wide expanses of the land and the far reaches of the sea.

Some 25 billion tons of topsoil are now being lost each year with untold consequences to the food supply of future generations. Some of the most abundant species of marine life have become commercially extinct due to overexploitation by factory fishing vessels and the use of drift nets 20 to 30 miles long 20 feet deep. If we consider the extinctions taking place in the rain forests of the southern regions of the planet with the other extinctions, we find that we are losing large number of species ear year.

Much more could be said concerning the impact of humans on the planet, the disturbance caused by the use of river systems for waste disposal, the pollution of the atmosphere by the burning of fossil fuels, and the radioactive waste consequent on our use of nuclear energy. All of this disturbance of the planet is leading to the terminal phase of the Cenozoic Era. Natural selection can no longer function as it has functioned in the past. Cultural selection is now a decisive force in determining the future of the biosystems of the Earth.

The deepest cause of the present devastation is found in a mode of consciousness that has established a radical discontinuity between the human and other modes of being and the bestowal of all rights on the humans. The other-than-human modes of being are seen as having no rights. In this context the other than human becomes totally vulnerable to exploitation by the human, an attitude that is shared by all four of the fundamental establishments that control the human realm: governments, corporations, universities, and religions -- the political, economic, intellectual, and religious establishments. All four are committed consciously or unconsciously to a radical discontinuity between the human and the nonhuman.

In reality there is a single integral community of the Earth that includes all its component members whether human or other than human. In this community every being has its own role to fulfill, its own dignity, its inner spontaneity. Every being has its own voice. Every being declares itself to the entire universe. Every being enters into communion with other beings. This capacity for relatedness, of presence to other beings, for spontaneity in action is a capacity possessed by every mode of being throughout the entire universe.

So too every being has the right to be recognized and revered. Trees have tree rights, insects have insect rights, rivers have river rights. Mountains have mountain rights. So too with the entire range of beings throughout the universe. All rights are limited and relative. So too with humans. We have human rights. We have rights to the nourishment and shelter we need. We have rights to habitat.

But we have no rights to deprive other species of their proper habitat. We have no rights to interfere with their migration routes. We have no rights to disturb the basic functioning of the biosystems of the planet. We cannot own the Earth or any part of the Earth in any absolute manner. We own property in accord with the well-being of the property and for the benefit of the larger community as virulent industrialization well as ourselves.

With the new technologies that emerged in the last half of the 19th century and the automobile industry that developed in the early 20th century, industrialization achieved anew virulence. Roadways, superhighways, parking lots, shopping centers, malls, and housing developments took over. Suburban living became

normative for the good life. This was also the time when the number of free-flowing rivers began to decline. The great dams were built on the Colorado, the Snake and especially the Columbia rivers.

Yet this was also the time when resistance began. The increasing threat to the natural life-systems of the continent awakened the sense of need for grandeur in the natural world if any truly human development was to continue in our cultural traditions. This new awareness began in the 19th century with such persons as Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, John Burroughs and George Perkin Marsh; with John Wesley Powell and Frederick Law Olmstead; also with artists, especially Thomas Cole, Frederick Edwin Church and Albert Bierstadt of the Hudson River School.

In that same period the first voluntary associations were formed to foster a deepened appreciation of the natural world. The Audubon Society, founded in 1886, was concerned primarily with appreciation of the various bird species. The Sierra Club was founded in 1892 and the Wilderness Society in 1924. Both sought to create a more intimate relationship between the human community and wild world about us.

These various groups were the beginning. The larger dimensions of what was happening could not have been known to those living in the 19th century. They could not have foreseen the petroleum industry, the automobile age, the damming of the rivers, the emptying of the marine life of the oceans, the radioactive waste. Yet they knew that something was wrong at a profound level.

Some, such as John Muir, were deeply disturbed. When the decision was made to build a dam to enclose Hetch-Hetchy Valley as a reservoir for the city of San Francisco, he considered it the unnecessary destruction of one of the most sacred shrines in the natural world, a shrine that fulfilled some of the deepest emotional, imaginative, and intellectual needs of the human soul. "Dam Hetch-Hetchy! As well dam for water-tanks the people's cathedrals and churches, for no holier temple has even been consecrated by the heart of man."

Perhaps the most valuable heritage we can provide for future generations is some sense of the Great Work that is before them of moving the human project from its devastating exploitation to benign presence. We need to give them some indication of how the next generation can fulfill this work in an effective manner.

The Great Work before us, the task of moving modern industrial civilization from its present devastating influence on the Earth to a more benign mode of presence, is not a role that we have chosen. It is a role given to us, beyond any consultation with ourselves. We did not choose. We were chosen by some power beyond ourselves for this historical task.

We must believe that those powers that assign our role must in that same act bestow upon us the ability to fulfill this role. We must believe that we are cared for and guided by these same powers that bring us into being.

Our own special role, which we will hand on to our children, is that of managing the arduous transition from the terminal Cenozoic to the emerging Ecozoic Era, the period when humans will be present to the planet as participating members of the comprehensive Earth community.

This is our Great Work and the work of our children, just as Europeans in the 12th and 13th centuries were given the role of bringing a new cultural age out of the difficulties and strife of that long period from the sixth throughout the 11th centuries. At this time, the grandeur of the classical period had dissolved, the cities of Europe had declined, and life in all its physical and cultural aspects was carried on in the great castles and monasteries to constitute what came to be known as the manorial period in European history.

In the ninth and 10th centuries the Normans were invading the nascent culture of Europe from the north, the Magyars were moving in from the east, and the Muslims were advancing in Spain. Western civilization was situated in a very limited region under siege. In response to this threatening situation, Medieval Europe toward the end of the 11th century began the crusading wars that united the nations of Europe and for two centuries engaged them in an eastward drive toward Jerusalem and the conquest of the Holy Land.

This period might be considered the beginning of the historical drive that has led European people in their quest for religious, cultural, political and economic conquest of the world. This movement was continued through the period of discovery and control over the planet into our own times when the Western presence culminates politically in the United Nations and economically in such establishments as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the World Trade Organization, and the World Business Council for Sustainable Development. We might even interpret this Western drive toward limitless domain in all its form as leading eventually to the drive toward human dominion over the natural world.

The immediate achievement, however, of the 13th century was the creation of the first integration of what became Western civilization. In this century new and dazzling achievements took place in the arts, in architecture, in speculative thinking, in literature. By raising up the medieval cathedrals a new and original architecture was created. In these soaring structures an artistic daring and refinement was manifest that has been equaled only in rare moments in the larger history of civilizations.

This was also the period of Francis, the poor man of Assisi, and also the period of Thomas Aquinas. As the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead has noted, this was the time when the Western mind took on that critical keenness and reasoning process that made our modern scientific thought processes possible. In literature the incomparable Dante Alighieri produced his *Commedia* in the early 14th century, a time when Giotto was already-beginning, with Cimabue, the great period of Italian painting.

The importance of recalling these shaping forces in the narrative account of Western civilization is that they arose as a response to the Dark Ages from the sixth-through 11th-centuries in Europe. We need to recall that in these and in so many other instances the dark periods of history are the creative periods; for these are the times when new ideas, arts, and institutions can be brought into being at the most basic level.

Just as the brilliant period of medieval civilization arose out of these earlier conditions, we might recall the period in China when, in the third century, the tribal invasions from the northwest had broken down the rule of the Han dynasty and for several centuries brought about disunity throughout the empire. Yet this period of dissolution was also the period of Buddhist monks and Confucian scholars and artists who gave expression to new visions and new thoughts at the deepest levels of human consciousness.

Following the T'ang period the Sung period of the 10th through 14th centuries would bring forth such masterful interpretations of traditional Chinese thought as those presented by Chou Tun-I and Chu Hsi. Artists such as Ma Yuan and Hsia Kuei of the 12th century and poets such as Su Tung-p'o would complete this creative period in the cultural history of China. We must consider ourselves in these early years of the 21st century as also experiencing a threatening historical situation, although our situation is ultimately beyond comparison with any former period in Europe or in Asia. For those peoples were dealing with human adjustment to disturbances of human life patterns. They were not dealing with the disruption and even the termination of a geobiological period that had governed the functioning of the planet for some 67 million years. They were not dealing with anything comparable to the toxics in the air, the water, and the soil, or with the immense volume of chemicals dispersed throughout the planet. Nor were they dealing with the extinction of species or the altering of the climate on the scale of our present concern.

Yet we can be inspired by their example, their courage, and even by their teachings. For we are heirs to an immense intellectual heritage, to the wisdom traditions whereby they were able to fulfill the Great Work of their times. These traditions are not the transient thoughts or immediate insights of journalists concerned with the daily course of human affairs; these are expressions in human form of the principles guiding human life within the very structure and functioning of the universe itself.

We cannot doubt that we too have been given the intellectual vision, the spiritual insight and even the physical resources we need for carrying out the transition that is demanded of these times, transition from the period when humans were a disruptive force on the planet Earth to the period when humans become present to the planet in a manner that is mutually enhancing.