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REINVENTING THE HUMAN

Thomas Berry's book *THE DREAM OF THE EARTH* (Sierra Club Press), reached bookstands last month. It is the first entry into the Sierra Club Nature and Natural Philosophy Library. The back cover says what Sierra Club wants of the series:

Revolutionary advances in physics during the first three decades of this century shattered the view of reality that has prevailed in the Western mind since the seventeenth century. In place of the static, mechanical world that was hypothesized by Descartes and Newton, twentieth century researchers are discovering a universe that is dynamically alive: a whole system, fluid and interconnected.

The implications are profound. The insights of particle physics are beginning to resonate through other branches of science. In fact, science is discovering a new version of the "enchanted" world that was part of the natural mind for most of human history. Since the loss of this world view in the last three hundred years is arguably at the heart of our current environmental crisis, its rediscovery may be the key to an eventual solution.

But we are just beginning to explore what it means to be part of a universe that is alive. For most people, the emerging view of nature remains in a realm separate from the emotions and textures of daily experiences. This missing link between scientific breakthroughs and the general consciousness is the focus of the Sierra Club Nature and Natural Philosophy Library.

Sierra Club picks up a lot of the thought in those paragraphs from a wide range of writers who are in agreement that what we are today is the result of what has come to be known as the Industrial Age, or the Scientific/ Technological Age, or the Baconian/ Cartesian/ Newtonian Age or perhaps the Age of Enlightenment. Which locates us at the end of three hundred or more years of belief that the world and the human presence in it can be understood if only we pursue linear, reductionist, mechanistic, cause and effect analysis. Given initial conditions present and future states can be explained and predicted.

Thomas Berry might say that today's human was *invented* by Bacon and Descartes and Newton and those who followed in their footsteps. That invention seems to be portrayed on our TV screens and in our political campaigns. This Baconian human is one who can be persuaded of most anything the persuaders want: can be made to believe that the automobile is a gift of freedom; that the beer barons are not the greatest drug pushers of all but that their product brings on joy and happiness ("it doesn't get any better than this"); that wealth is the sign of God's blessing; that the accumulation of stuff is the purpose of living; that shopping is the primary expression of personality; that big business means us well, even while Union Carbide, General Motors and Electric and Dynamics, and Nestle and a lot of others prove the opposite; that the military service makes youth into the "best you can be"; that politics is the exercise of superficiality; that it's OK for the strong to exploit the weak; that great talent should be used for personal gain, and placed at the service of whoever pays the most, thus the best brains go to Madison Avenue and into military research; that we have got to put up with industry's destruction of the earth because industry provides the only road to economic health. Materialism, profiteering, consumerism are deplored and embraced at the same time. The sense of connection to the whole of the life process is almost totally absent as is the sense of the sacredness of earthly things. Indeed it was the job of Bacon and Descartes to make the earth profane and hostile so that it could be exploited over the resistance of the pagan peasants and the witches, whose burning marked the advent of the modern age. "Why are they afraid of us?", asks Starhawk, "We didn't burn them."

The universities see it as their function to prepare youth to serve industry, to fit into the technological society. For what industry needs are engineers and managers to draw out from the earth its wealth and turn it into dollar value. The religious universities are not less assiduous at producing marketable graduates than the secular. The wisest of our institutions, the schools and the churches, and those seemingly the most disinterested in the success of industry and of military recruiting, the professors and the priests, become the allies of the power structure, turning over to industry and to the military service youth trained for and attuned to a value system ruinous to the welfare of the earth.

The work ethic is a curse on the modern human because it does not distinguish between work that ought to be done and work that ought not to be done. So it is that throughout Tom's book appears the idea of reinventing the human. So I wonder what the reinvented human might look like. I come up with a picture that shows a society of people engaged in activities which seek the well being of the human within the requirement that the well being of the natural endowment of the place where the human is is also enhanced. The providing of food, clothing, shelter, healthcare, education, entertainment, restoration of damaged places, work and study which enlarges the human vision and seeks to find ways for the human to know better how to be an asset to the earth and the earth process. Religion must exercise its most essential function, the interpretation of the divine for the human, mediation between God and the human, between human and human and between nature and the human; and celebration of the universe, of earth, of all creation and of the creator.

Thomas has said for a long time that the purpose of the human is to bring to the earth celebration, self awareness and admiration. To recognize beauty and to acknowledge it and take joy in it, in his world, becomes the primary occupation. Since it is our duty to set off the earth in all its fearsome majesty and elegance and violence and magnificence then we ought to be occupied in doing that. Not only the earth but the universe also. So that science really works at the very things that science has most succeeded in: revealing the way the earth and the universe function so that it can be sufficiently celebrated and held in awe. And science must show us how we can be present on and in the earth without ruining the earth. And science can show us how to keep the marvels of nature in their proper habitat so that all things can flourish. We are not meant to wipe out the whales or the tigers or the snail darters.

Surely there is enough stuff to be had and used and recycled for decent human existence. Surely it is not the role of the human to turn the earth into a wasteland. So surely the modern human invented by Descartes and Newton must be reinvented on a new model which accepts the fact that the human may occupy the earth only on the earth's terms. Whatever that requires is what must be conformed to. There are reinvented humans already, lots of them, working out models of how to live on the earth's terms. You find them in many places, persons who have chosen alternative life styles, living simply, gardening, repairing streams and wetlands, setting up communities, celebrating the earth and its creatures and its life connections. They are persons of joy and happiness. To portray the reinvented life as one of dreary and joyless denial is wrong, but withdrawal from addiction is painful and that must be anticipated and prepared for.

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