

DEVELOPING THOMAS BERRY'S FUNCTIONAL COSMOLOGY IN THE TRENCHES

BY MEANS OF

STORY AND SHARED DREAM EXPERIENCE

A Talk By

Mike Bell,

Comox, British Columbia, Canada

May 29, 2014

Thanks you for inviting me to speak to you today at this colloquium on *"The Functional Cosmology of Thomas Berry in the Trenches by means of Story and Shared Dream Experience."*

A colloquium, by definition, is a meeting of academics or experts. Since I am neither, as I look out at the room I am somewhat intimidated.

My situation reminds me of the story about the elderly woman who lived in a home for assisted living. One day she got up in front of the group, cupped her hands, and said, "I'll have sex with anyone in the room who can guess what I've got in my hands." A voice in the back of the room said, "An elephant." And the woman said, "Close enough."

I'm hoping that my version of Thomas' thinking is "close enough."

I'm counting on what Thomas wrote in the introduction to Anne Marie Dalton's wonderful book on *A Theology for the Earth*. He said, "...my intent is simply to present and to have the reader respond out of whatever background the reader might have." My background is that of a practitioner—working as a community organizer in American inner cities and Canadian communities, as a Student Chaplain in Paris, and in my 27 years in the Canadian Arctic walking between indigenous Inuit and Dene cultures on the one hand and Euro-Canadian government "cultures" on the other hand.

In 2006 my wife and I moved from Yellowknife in the Northwest Territories to the Comox Valley on Vancouver Island in British Columbia—one of the most beautiful places to live in Canada. Since then I've been organizing against fossil fuel projects in our valley.

As you are aware, my subject is *Developing Thomas Berry's Functional Cosmology in the Trenches By means Of Story and Shared Dream Experience*. It is a bit of a mouthful so I thought I'd start with some explanations. Then I'll tell you where I'm going and where I'm hoping to take you.

SOME CLARIFICATIONS

First, the meaning of a Functional Cosmology.

As you are all aware, cosmology is the study of how the universe and the earth were created and how it developed, along with the study of how other species and our human species developed. A functional cosmology is, in essence, a determination of meaning. It is how we translate this awareness of the universe and Earth into actions that guides our lives. And, since Earth and we ourselves are continuing to grow, develop, and change—what Thomas referred to as part of a cosmogenesis—we find ourselves in a sort of hermeneutical circle, only this time the “text” is the universe and Earth. This is what Thomas called “The only text without a context.” So we are influenced by changes in Earth and Earth is influenced by changes in us—big time—which shall become abundantly clear in a few minutes.

Now we come to Thomas' statement about our mission.

The Historical MISSION of our time is:

- *To reinvent the human*
- *At the species level*
- *With critical reflection*
- *Within the community of life systems—*

- *In a time-developmental context—*
- *BY MEANS OF STORY AND SHARED DREAM EXPERIENCE—Whoa! Where did those two come from?*

It strikes me that the first five—reinventing the human, species level, critical reflection, systems level, time developmental (historical) are simple to understand but not easy to accomplish. They are all a more in depth explanation about the WHAT of reinventing the human. But the last two, story and shared dream experience, starting with the words “by means of” are about the HOW. And these are the two I’d like to talk to you about today.

So how do we translate Thomas’ message to a broader audience: in the streets, in diverse cultures and in trenches—and the word “trenches” is deliberate for what was once a challenge is indeed becoming a battleground?

Two final introductory, but essential, comments before leaving this famous statement. Thomas begins with the word “mission.” He was telling us that we are not engaged in an intellectual exercise nor even a philosophy or a theology. This is about our role in The Great Work. He is telling us that we have an obligation to go forth and, if you will, preach the gospel of a mutually enhancing relationship between the human species and Earth—the emerging Cenozoic Era.

The last word in the text is “Experience”—and it is important. We are going forth not only with a story of a shared dream but we are going forth with *our own experience of telling the story and sharing the dream*. Experience is critical.

Erich Fromm once noted: *“People never think their way into new ways of acting. They act their way into new ways of thinking.”* And Lao Tzu put it even more succinctly: *“If you know, but do not do, you do not know”* And that brings me to a picture of the way forward

ABOUT THIS TALK

Often, after a talk, when people asked Thomas what they should do he'd say, "Tell them the story." He was referring to the cosmological story. So, in this talk, I'm going to follow Thomas' lead and tell you my functional cosmology story.

Actually I'll tell you four stories that I will weave together into one big story.

The first story is about my experiences in Paris and the Arctic. Out of these experiences emerged an understanding of Thomas' functional cosmology.

The second story is about framing and reframing. If we are to carry out our mission we must understand where people are coming from. We must step outside our personal frames, understand their frames and determine how we can help them reframe.

The third story is about my understanding of the two key elements: Story and Shared Dream Experience and how they fit together.

Finally I'll talk about the new story and shared dream experience in the trenches. In this final part I will describe how we are trying to tell the story and share the dream while wrestling with coal mines and pipelines in our valley and in the waters around Vancouver Island. The common thread in these stories is how my version of a functional cosmology has emerged and is still emerging out of my experiences.

ABOUT PARIS

Several years after my ordination I went on for further theological studies, first in Ottawa and then in Paris where I worked part-time as a student chaplain at the Cite Universitaire. The Cite is a unique student campus on the edge of the city. It houses 6,000 students in forty national houses and brings together students from around the world. Paris and the Cite were interesting but even more interesting was what happened when I was there.

In May of 1968 the student riots broke out. The universities were closed and I spent my days and nights working with students. One day I went across the campus to get lunch in a huge cafeteria. It

was an amazing sight. Students were eating lunch in their cultural groups, some of them dressed in traditional dress, and speaking in their own languages. But they had to yell at one another to be heard over the din of the tin plates and the other languages. It was like the ground floor of the Tower of Babel. I was standing in line next to two American Students waiting to be served. We were looking out at this marvelous site of so many diverse cultures. I heard one student say to the other, "Gee, I wish we had a culture, don't you?" I never forgot those words. I finally realized what Marshal McLuhan meant when he said, "I don't know who it was that first discovered water but I'm sure it wasn't a fish." This experience helped prepare me for a future life walking between cultures.

In the following years I left the my monastic community and the institutional priesthood, married, got a degree in communications from the University of Wisconsin and worked as a community organizer in communities in the U.S. and Canada. Then I took a job on Baffin Island (in the high Arctic, north of Quebec, running parallel to Greenland). I was the Superintendent of Social Services.

ABOUT BAFFIN ISLAND

When I first got to the Baffin I was quite confident in my abilities. I was well-educated, had a lot of relevant street work experience, and had even worked for five years as an administrator of a health care facility in northern British Columbia. At times, in my arrogance, I figured I was just who the Inuit were waiting for.

I knew that having a workable management context was essential. I was most anxious to try out my management theories: performance measurement, management by objectives, zero-based budgeting, etc. etc. But I bombed. I quickly discovered that these contexts weren't working in the cross cultural environment I found myself in.

Another thing. I ran into some competition trying to help folks in the communities "develop." I'd be way up at the top of Baffin Island in community meetings. It would be in the dead of winter, -40 below without the wind-chill, in twenty-four hours of darkness, and I'd be holding forth in community meetings on child welfare services or correctional services or mental health services—very serious stuff. But I'd find myself competing with elders. As I listened to their speeches through an Inuktitut translator, they would be saying over and over different versions of the same mantra

“Learn from the land. Learn from the land.” I thought their words were interesting from a cultural point of view, even quaint, but not relevant. So with my organizational contexts falling apart, and the elders, in my opinion, not addressing the real issues, I was going through a vocational crisis. Was I really cut out for this type of work?

Then one day, in the search for a new organizational context that would work in this environment, I picked up one of Thomas’ books and read these words: “The universe is the only text without a context.” The words began to sink in. Could this be the context I had been looking for? Could it be that all human endeavours should be organized the way Earth and life organizes itself? And a short time later I read the clincher: “We are not a collection of objects. We are a communion of subjects.” As I read these words the teaching of the Elders flashed into my mind: “We have come from the land, we will return to the land. Learn from the land.”

From my experience in Paris and the Arctic I came to realize that my role in the Great Work was essentially about communications. And to communicate effectively I had to step outside my own frame and comfort zone and explore and discover the other person’s frame—his or her beliefs, values, and concerns—the way he or she sees the world and gives it meaning. Only then could I carry out my mission.

A bit more about frames and reframing.

ABOUT FRAMES AND REFRAMING

Most of you, I’m sure, are quite aware of frames and reframing. This is Marshall McLuhan and his medium is the message, Thomas Kuhn’s paradigm shifts, Howard Gardner’s Frames of Mind, Paulo Freire’s praxis, George Lakoff’s framing, and particularly the Indigenous frame of elders about learning from the land. In the theological context we might turn to concepts of Kenosis and Metanoia.

My definition of a frame is *“the living context within which we send, receive and interpret messages, establish relationships, see the world and give it meaning.”* Our frames are not visible to the eye but they are real. They are “living” because they are part of us and change as our life experiences

change. They are the compilation of our family history, our work experiences, our values, our successes, our failures our education and so forth.

Because frames are so much a part of our personalities and way of life we have a vested interest in preserving them. Our frames are deep within us and defend us from unwanted intrusions. They filter out information we do not agree with, and they let in things that support our values and viewpoints. Because of our frames, Anais Nin has noted, *"We do not see the world the way it is. We see the world the way we are."* That is why it is so difficult to help people to reframe—even the good guys.

Over the last ten years of Thomas' life I went down from the Arctic once or twice a year to visit him in North Carolina. He would always ask me about my work. And the discussions helped me to understand more and more about reframing. I remember a reframing experience I had during one early visit to Thomas. I said to him, "Tom in the Arctic there are many people interested in an Earth-based spirituality. Have you ever written anything on an Earth-based Spirituality?" He paused for a moment and said, "No I haven't. But I have written something on the Spirituality of Earth that you might find interesting." Perhaps this was Teilhard again: "We are not human beings on a spiritual journey. We are spiritual beings on human journey."

Now some application of frames in practice around story and shared dream experience.

STORY AND SHARED DREAM EXPERIENCE.

We tend to think of story and shared dream experience as two different things. I think they are two distinct elements of the same dynamic creative spirit and driving force. One day, in the midst of a discussion, Thomas said "Context is everything." He saw story as providing the context in which life could function in a meaningful manner. He was talking about the essential role of story as the creator of context. For me, shared dream experience is the inner spirit that enables us to manifest and activate the story by sharing it with others in some kind of community setting. So a few words about story and then about shared dream experience.

THE POWER OF STORY

Some years ago a First Nation band (you would likely call it a tribe) in northern British Columbia wanted to negotiate their land claim. The federal government officials arrived from Ottawa and held a meeting with the band council and some of the elders. During the course of the meeting one of the civil servants said, "I hope you realize that this land we are talking about belongs to the federal government in Ottawa." The elders were shocked. One of them stood up, looked across the table at the civil servant who made this statement and said, and "If this is your land, where are your stories?"

The stories we tell confer identity. They validate our persona and power.

For Carl Jung, stories were not just something people told. They were part of a person. He noted that everyone has a story and when psychological problems occur it is because our personal story has been denied or rejected. Healing comes when we discover or re-discover our personal stories. So, in a very real sense, we are our stories.

Stories have power. It is through the telling of stories that we often become aware of the presence of Spirit. Most of the great leaders have used story to motivate people.

St. Mathew's Gospel tells us "Jesus spoke to the crowds in parables; indeed he would never speak to them except in parables." (Mt 13:34)

Mahatma Gandhi was a story teller. He entitled his autobiography, "The Story of My Experiments with Truth." Martin Luther King was a great story-teller as we see in his "I have a Dream" speech."

For many years Thomas told the story about the degradation of Earth. But today we have something that he didn't have—a name for that degradation: *The Anthropocene Epoch*. It emerges from science. Its primary manifestation is Global Warming. It is having universal impacts and is affecting all aspects of life as we know it: all environments, cultures, populations, economies, lands, oceans.

Unlike previous epochs—like the Holocene which began 11,700 years ago with the retreat of the ice shields—the Anthropocene is relatively recent. It began at the beginning of the industrial revolution in the early 1800s and unlike all previous natural epochs, it is man-made—thus the name "Anthro" for "human" and "cene" for new.

The predictions are dire. Denis Meadows, one of the authors of the 1972 M.I.T. study "Limits to Growth" states that we have overshot the so-called "limits" described in the study. Our only option now is to try and build resilience into the declining systems. I think of us as triage workers on declining systems. Other scientists state that we are on our way to the Sixth Great Extinction.

The anthropocene is the dominant story in our lifetime but it is not the emerging story that Thomas called for. So we are faced with a puzzle. As we all know, Thomas said "We are in between stories now...The old story is no longer effective...yet we have not learned the new story." How can we tell the story if we do not have a new story to tell? Who will create it?

I think if Thomas were here today he would say to us, "You must create it. You must not only tell the traditional cosmological story, you must create and tell the new cosmological story. This is what a functional cosmology is all ab

The anthropocene is the dominant story in our lifetime but it is not the emerging story that Thomas called for. So we are faced with a puzzle. As we all know, Thomas said "We are in between stories now...The old story is no longer effective...yet we have not learned the new story." How can we tell the story if we do not have a new story to tell? Who will create it?

I think if Thomas were here today he would say to us, "You must create it. You must not only tell the traditional cosmological story, you must create and tell the new cosmological story. This is what a functional cosmology is all about. This is The Great Work. This is your mission."

ABOUT SHARED DREAM EXPERIENCE.

What Thomas meant by "dream" is a bit uncertain. It probably goes back to *The Dream of the Earth*—some dynamic, conscious, powerful force that created the universe, our Earth and its species, and our human species. But if "dream" is a bit uncertain, the concept of a "shared dream" is not. Whatever the dream is it must be a shared dream. It brings together humans with Earth and its species. There is a communion of subjects who, work together to help carry out the mission of the great work. So the shared dream is a community enterprise.

Indigenous people in the Arctic understand this. They lived a nomadic existence. So their concept of a community was not defined by geographical boundaries, nor limited to relationships with humans. Here is one Dene definition of community. *A community is an intimate relationship with all living things, both animate and inanimate.* I'll say it again. *A community is an intimate relationship with all living things, both animate and inanimate.* I think this definition was written for the white guys who will quickly point out that something can't be both living and inanimate at the same time. You've got an oxymoron—unless of course you believe that Earth—all of it—is indeed living." (A bit of reframing there).

As Dom Helder Camara noted: *"When we dream alone it is only a dream. When we are dreaming with others, it is the beginning of reality."*

THE CHALLENGE IN THE TRENCHES

As I indicated earlier I spent a lot of my early life in the United States and I've always enjoyed the American perspective of Canadians. We are seen as people with funny accents who are polite, genteel, deferential and not at all pushy. American question. "How do you get 100 Canadians out of a swimming pool? Answer: You say to them, "Please get out of the swimming pool." I'm here to tell you that if you still have this impression of Canadians, you have to do some serious reframing.

The federal government under Stephen Harper and the provincial government in British Columbia under Christy Clark are trying to turn our country into a super energy state by digging up tar sands, gas and coal and transporting them by pipelines and huge tanker ships for sale abroad. They are doing away with environmental laws, lying to the public, silencing scientists, attacking environmental groups, disregarding their responsibilities to aboriginal peoples' traditional lands and their self-government and forbidding ordinary citizens to participate in environmental project reviews unless they can demonstrate that they are directly affected by impacts. (Try and prove that you are personally affected by climate change.) They are signing international agreements which give foreign companies access to our resources. The Chinese, Japanese and Koreans have more say over the future of our Comox Valley than we do. We Canadians now live in very different times.

This is life in the trenches. Thomas tells us in *The Great Work* that we each have to figure out how to carry out our role. I have no intention of suggesting to you how you should carry out your role in your own discipline or your own community. I can only tell you what we are trying to do in our community. And, once again, much of it is about reframing.

When I was new to the valley and first got involved in a project, people told me I should talk to Ruth Masters. Ruth, now in her mid-90s, has been involved in every environmental project in the valley for the past fifty years. She shows up at demonstrations wearing a sign that says, "*Senior Citizen Shit Disturber.*" So I phoned Ruth, explained what the project was about, and asked her to join us. She asked me one question. "Are you in it for the long haul?" I said I was and she joined us.

Ruth's question was insightful. She knows that many people get involved because they think we can win. But we lose more battles than we win and many people drop out. Sometimes they flare out. We have to reframe. Our work is not about winning—though it is nice when we do. It is about some spiritual power that rises up within you and makes you do things *because it is the right thing to do.* You don't get this from the project. It is something you bring to the project or develop when you get involved. To survive in this work you have to be spiritually grounded. For some it is a daily practice of meditation or contemplation, for others it is a walk in the woods and communing with nature, for some it is prayer—listening to creation for guidance, but it is always some kind of spiritual practice that grounds us and enables us to continue for what Ruth calls the "long haul." Just as we need to ground ourselves in some kind of spiritual practice, so we need to do something similar on a community level.

We have numerous groups in our valley, most of them dedicated volunteer groups providing a range of community services: environmental groups, labour unions, farm groups, food security groups, health care groups, etc. They are all doing their own thing, but they have difficulty finding a common ground that provides a solid basis for working together to deal with resource development in the valley. Is there a common ground? I think there is. Years ago I remember a conversation with my friend Tom Keevey. We were discussing the ecumenical movement and the problem the churches were having finding a common ground. Tom said, "*The first things the churches seeking a common ground have to realize is that they are standing on it.*"

I think the same principle applies to our groups in the Comox Valley. We try to build coalitions around our love of this valley. This is our common ground. We don't just complain about things. We stress the need for positive alternatives—clean energy and green jobs, better public transportation, limits to carbon, better housing, support for small businesses, longer-term jobs, and so forth. We try to reach out beyond the “usual suspects.” We try to and build upon issues that affect people directly and about which they have an emotional investment.

SUMMARY

Let me summarize. I think in Thomas Berry's concept of a functional cosmology there are three essential elements.

First comes a new awareness emerging out of the new cosmology and an earth spirituality. This is requires an intellectual and spiritual reframing. We learn to think about Earth and our relationship with Earth in a different way. Along with this new awareness comes a sense of responsibility, a mission, if you will, to create a different kind of world based upon a mutual enhancing relationship between our species and Earth.

Second comes an awareness, based upon critical reflection, about how we are destroying Earth. This is where story comes in. In Thomas' *The Great Work*, before he tells the story about “Re-inventing the Human” he talks about the destruction of Earth by telling the story of politics, corporations, the extractive economy, and petroleum.

In our efforts to tell the story we have, of course, the overwhelming evidence of science. But in the trenches at the street level I turn to the advice from a character in a movie. In the film *All The Presidents Men* about the Watergate Scandal there is a scene late at night in a dark parking garage. Robert Redford, at a loss to determine the culprits in the scandal, desperately needs help. He meets with Deep Throat. And Deep Throat says to him, “Follow the Money.”

Third comes an awareness of the need for alternatives. We are becoming triage workers for declining systems. But we can't become “doomers.” We need to communicate a sense of hope. This is where Shared Dream Experiences come in. We make people aware of the dreams of others around

the world who are developing alternatives. We work together in our own communities to share our thoughts, ideas and suggestions for alternatives and encourage and support one another to pursue them.

CONCLUSION

So that is my version of Developing Thomas Berry's *Functional Cosmology In The Trenches By Means Of Story And Shared Dream Experience*.

Thomas Berry has changed my life and given it meaning and I'm sure he has done the same for you. I think of my visits and conversation with him as very special times—what he called "Moments of Grace" in times of transition.

In terms of our mission, I liken the difficult situation we are all going through as our chrysalis experience. When the caterpillar's body breaks down into a mass of protoplasm, a few cells—very different cells—begin to emerge. They are called imaginal cells. They carry within them the image of the butterfly that is waiting to be born. At first they are attacked by the caterpillar cells trying to protect its immune system. Some of the imaginal cells are destroyed. But eventually the imaginal cells become more numerous and succeed in the transformation.

Somehow Thomas has placed the image of the Ecozoic Era within us. We are going through a painful transition—but new life will emerge. This is what we hang on to. It is our hope. And, as Teilhard said, "The future belongs to those who can give a reason for hope."

Thank you

(*I am indebted to Herman Green, Director of the Center for Ecozoic Societies, who organized this colloquium on Thomas Berry's Work, Difference, Importance, Applications , University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill N.C. August 28-30, 2014.