

The Meadow Across the Creek

by Thomas Berry

An essay taken from a chapter of *The Great Work*

I was a young person then, some twelve years old. My family was moving from a more settled part of a Southern town out to the edge of town where the new house was still being built. The house, not yet finished, was situated on a slight incline. Down below was a small creek and there across the creek was a meadow. It was an early afternoon in May when I first looked down over the scene and saw the meadow. The field was covered with lilies rising above the thick grass. A magic moment, this experience gave to my life something, I know not what, that seems to explain my life at a more profound level than almost any other experience I can remember.

It was not only the lilies. It was the singing of the crickets and the woodlands in the distance and the clouds in an otherwise clear sky. It was not something conscious that happened just then. I went on about my life as any young person might do. Perhaps it was not simply this moment that made such a deep impression upon me. Perhaps it was a sensitivity that was developed throughout my childhood. Yet, as the years pass, this moment returns to me, and whenever I think about my basic life attitude and the whole trend of my mind and the causes that I have given my efforts to, I seem to come back to this moment and the impact it has had on my feeling for what is real and worthwhile in life.

This early experience, it seems, has become normative for me throughout the range of my thinking. Whatever preserves and enhances this meadow in the natural cycles of its transformation is good; what is opposed to this meadow or negates it is not good. My life orientation is that simple. It is also that pervasive. It applies in economics and political orientation as well as in education and religion and whatever.

That is good in economics that fosters the natural processes of this meadow. That is bad in economics that diminishes the capacity of this meadow to renew itself each spring and to provide a setting in which crickets can sing and birds can feed. Such meadows, I would later learn, are themselves in a continuing process of transformation. Yet these evolving biosystems deserve the opportunity to be themselves and to express their own inner qualities. As in economics so in jurisprudence and law and political affairs: That is good which recognizes the rights of this meadow and the creek and the woodlands beyond to exist and flourish in their ever-renewing seasonal expression even while larger processes shape the bioregion in the larger sequence of transformations.

Religion too, it seems to me, takes its origin here in the deep mystery of this setting. The more a person thinks of the infinite number of interrelated activities taking place here the more mysterious in all becomes, the more meaning a person finds in the Maytime blooming of the lilies, the more awestruck a person might be in simply looking out over this little patch of meadowland. It had none of the majesty of the Appalachian or the Western mountains, none of the immensity or the power of oceans, nor even the harsh magnificence of desert country; yet in this little meadow the magnificence of life as celebration is manifested in a manner as profound and as impressive as any other place that I have known in these past many years.

It seems to me we all had such experiences before we entered into an industrial way of life. The universe as manifestation of some primordial grandeur was recognized as the ultimate referent in any human understanding of the wonderful yet fearsome world about us. Every being achieved its full identity by its alignment with the universe itself. With indigenous peoples of the North American continent every formal activity was first situated in relation to the six directions of the universe: the four cardinal directions combined with the heavens above and Earth below. Only thus could any human activity be fully validated.

The universe was the world of meaning in these earlier times, the basic referent in social order, in economic survival, in the healing of illness. In that wide ambiance the muses dwelled whence came the inspiration of poetry and art and music. The drum, heartbeat of the universe itself, established the rhythm of dance whereby humans entered into the very movement of the natural world. The numinous dimension of the universe impressed itself upon the mind through the vastness of the heavens and the power revealed in thunder and lightning, as well as through springtime renewal of life after the desolation of winter. Then, too, the general helplessness of the human before all the threats to survival revealed the intimate dependence of the human on the integral functioning of things. That the human had such intimate rapport with the surrounding universe was possible only because the universe itself had a prior intimate rapport with the human.

This experience we observe even now in the indigenous peoples of the world. They live in a universe, in a cosmological order, whereas we, the peoples of the industrial world, no longer live in a universe. We live in a political world, a nation, a business world, an economic order, a cultural tradition, in Disneyworld. We live in cities, in a world of concrete and steel, of wheels and wires, a world of business, of work. We no longer see the stars at night or the planets or the moon. Even in the day we do not experience the sun in any immediate or meaningful manner. Summer and winter are the same inside the mall. Ours is a world of highways, parking lots, shopping centers. We read books written with a strangely contrived alphabet. We no longer read the book of the universe.

Nor do we coordinate our world of human meaning with the meaning of our surroundings. We have disengaged from that profound interaction with our environment inherent in our very nature. Our children do not learn how to read the Great Book of Nature or how to interact creatively with the seasonal transformations of the planet. They seldom learn where their water comes from or where it goes. We no longer coordinate our human celebration with the great liturgy of the heavens.

We have indeed become strange beings so completely are we at odds with the planet that brought us into being. We dedicate enormous talent and knowledge and research to developing a human order disengaged from and even predatory on the very sources whence we came and upon which we depend at every moment of our existence. We initiate our children into an economic order based on exploitation of the natural life systems of the planet. To achieve this perspective we must first make them autistic in their relation with the natural world about them. This disconnection occurs quite simply since we ourselves have become insensitive toward the natural world and do not realize just what we are doing. Yet, if we observe our children closely in their early years and see how they are instinctively attracted to the experiences of the natural world about them, we will see how disorientated they become in the mechanistic and even toxic environment that we provide for them.

To recover an integral relation with the universe, planet Earth, and North America needs to be a primary concern for the peoples of this continent. While a new alignment of our government and all our institutions and professions with the continent itself in its deep structure and functioning cannot be achieved immediately, a beginning can be made throughout our educational programs. Especially in the earlier grades of elementary school new developments are possible. Such was the thought of Maria Montessori in the third decade of this century.

In speaking about the education of the six-year-old child, Maria notes in her book *To Educate the Human Potential* that only when the child is able to identify its own center with the center of the universe does education really begin. For the universe, she says, "is an imposing reality." It is "an answer to all questions." "We shall walk together on this path of life, for all things are part of the universe, and are connected with each other to form one whole unity." This it is that enables "the mind of the child to become centered, to stop wandering in an aimless quest for knowledge." Then the writer mentions how this experience of the universe creates in the child admiration and wonder and enables the child to unify its thinking. In this manner the child learns how all things are related and

how the relationship of things to each other is so close that "No matter what we touch, an atom or a cell, we cannot explain it without knowledge of the wide universe."

The difficulty is that with the rise of the modern sciences we began to think of the universe as a collection of objects rather than a communion of subjects. We frequently identify the loss of the interior spirit-world of the human mind and emotions with the rise of modern mechanistic sciences. The more significant thing, however, is that we have lost the universe itself. We achieved extensive control over the mechanistic and even the biological functioning of the natural world, but this control itself has produced deadly consequences. We have not only controlled the planet in much of its basic functioning; we have, to an extensive degree, extinguished the life systems themselves. We have silenced so many of those wonderful voices of the universe that once spoke to us of the grand mysteries of existence.

We no longer hear the voices of the rivers or the mountains, or the voices of the sea. The trees and meadows are no longer intimate modes of spirit presence. Everything about us has become an "it" rather than a "thou." We continue to make music, write poetry, and do our painting and sculpture and architecture, but these activities easily become an aesthetic expression simply of the human and in time lose the intimacy and radiance and awesome qualities of the universe itself. We have, in the accepted universe of these times, little capacity for participating in mysteries celebrated in the earlier literary and artistic and religious modes of expression. For we could no longer live in the universe in which these were written. We could only look on, as it were.

Yet the universe is so bound into the aesthetic experience, into poetry and music and art and dance, that we cannot entirely avoid the implicit dimensions of the natural world, even when we think of art as "representational" or "impressionist" or "expressionist" or as "personal statement." However we think of our art or literature, its power is there in the wonder communicated most directly by the meadow or the mountains or the sea or by the stars in the night.

Of special significance is our capacity for celebration which inevitably brings us into the rituals that coordinate human affairs with the great liturgy of the universe. Our national holidays, political events, heroic human deeds: These are all quite worthy of celebration, but ultimately, unless they are associated with some more comprehensive level of meaning, they tend toward the affected, the emotional, and the ephemeral. In the political and legal orders we have never been able to give up invocation of the more sublime dimensions of the universe to witness the truth of what we say. This we observe especially in court trials, in inaugural ceremonies, and in the assumption of public office at whatever level. We still have an instinctive awe and reverence and even a certain fear of the larger world that always lies outside the range of our human controls.

Even when we recognize the psychic world of the human we make everything referent to the human as the ultimate source of meaning and value, although this mode of thinking has led to catastrophe for ourselves as well as for a multitude of other beings. Yet in recent times we begin to recognize that the universe itself is, in the phenomenal order, the only self-referent mode of being. All other modes of being, including the human, in their existence and in their functioning are universe-referent. This fact has been recognized through the centuries in the rituals of the various traditions.

From paleolithic times humans have coordinated their ritual celebrations with various transformation moments of the natural world. Ultimately the universe, throughout its vast extent in space and its sequence of transformations in time, was seen as a single multiform celebratory expression. No other explanation is possible for the world we see around us. Birds fly and sing and perform their mating rituals. Flowers blossom. Rains nourish every living being. Each of the events in the natural world is a poem, a painting, a drama, a celebration.

Dawn and sunset are mystical moments of the diurnal cycle, moments when the numinous dimension of the universe reveals itself with special intimacy. Individually and in their relations with each other these are moments when the high meaning of existence is experienced. Whether in the gatherings of indigenous peoples in their tribal setting or in the more elaborate temples and cathedrals and spiritual centers throughout Earth these moments are celebrated with special observances. So, too, in the yearly cycle the springtime is celebrated as the time for renewal of the human in its proper alignment with the universal order of things.

The proposal has been made that no effective restoration of a viable mode of human presence on the planet will take place until such ritual rapport of the human with the Earth community and the entire functioning of the universe is reestablished on an extensive scale. Until this is done the alienation of the human will continue despite heroic efforts being made toward a more benign mode of human activity in relation to Earth. The source of Norden's confidence that the present is not a time for desperation but for hopeful activity he finds in the writings of indigenous peoples such as James Welch, N. Scott Momaday, Leslie Silko, and David Seals, all authors with profound understanding of the ritual rapport of humans with the larger order of the universe.

In alliance with such authors as these I would give a certain emphasis here on the need to understand the universe primarily as celebration. The human I would identify as that being in whom the universe celebrates itself and its numinous origins in a special mode of conscious self-awareness. That spontaneous forms of community ritual, such as the All Species Festivals inaugurated by John Seed, have already been developed gives promise for a future with the understanding, the power, the aesthetic grandeur, and the emotional fulfillment needed to heal the damage that has already been wrought upon the planet and to shape for Earth a viable future, a future with the entrancing qualities needed to endure the difficulties to be encountered and to evoke the creativity needed.

Here I would suggest that the work before us is the task, not simply of ourselves, but of the entire planet and all its component members. While the damage done is immediately the work of the human, the healing cannot be the work simply of the human any more than the illness of some one organ of the body can be healed simply through the efforts of that one organ. Every member of the body must bring its activity to the healing. So now the entire universe is involved in the healing of damaged Earth, more especially, of course, the forces of Earth with the assistance of the light and warmth of the sun. As Earth is, in a sense, a magic planet in the exquisite presence of its diverse members to each other, so this movement into the future must in some manner be brought about in ways ineffable to the human mind. We might think of a viable future for the planet less as the result of some scientific insight or as dependent on some socio-economic arrangement than as participation in a symphony or as renewed presence to the vast cosmic liturgy. This insight was perhaps something that I vaguely experienced in that first view of the lilies blooming in the meadow across the creek.