

**Synopsis of Een nieuw verhaal voor de Aarde (A new story for the Earth)**, a documentary film based on the works of Thomas Berry. Writer and director David Andreae, Boxtel, The Netherlands. email [davidan@kpnmail.nl](mailto:davidan@kpnmail.nl) 14-05-2013

### **The challenge: we are destroying the earth**

What a wonderful planet we live on, full of beauty, balance and elegance. We have never known so much about it as now. But things are not going well with the earth. On many fronts mankind is causing damage. The air, water and soil are polluted. The jungles and oceans are being degraded.

Under the term "sustainability" the media give increasing attention to measures which can be taken. Plenty of ideas, and a lot is happening: sustainable energy, more fuel-efficient cars, green legislation, tax incentives, but it's going very slowly. Some say its time for more *action*, more dynamism. However, the discussion is usually more about solutions (technological and economic) than about deeper issues around values and ethics. Fundamental questions about our worldview would lead to faster change. There are philosophers, scientists and spiritual leaders who speak about a new worldview and a change of consciousness. One of them was Thomas Berry, an American cultural historian who lived from 1920 to 2009. He said that man has been disconnected from the earth for centuries. We must start seeing ourselves as part of nature.

### **How did it go wrong?**

The first peoples saw the world as one great whole. They looked after it. There were gods and goddesses who were intertwined with nature. But some thousands of years ago, mainly in the Christian tradition, that changed. Everything that was experienced as divine was placed under one denominator called God, who belonged somewhere above the human, and below the human was nature. The sacred was removed from the physical environment. Gratitude and respect for nature diminished. At the same time, in most religions man was seen as mainly spiritual; the material was less important, and nature was a stand-alone external object.

Philosophers such as Descartes saw the world as stripped of values. And the sciences helped too: Newton and associates had a mechanistic worldview: the universe was nothing but a big clock. At the same time there were of course thinkers who did see man and nature as a whole, such as Spinoza, Goethe, Teilhard de Chardin.

The modern era has brought tremendous progress in prosperity, culture and human rights. But especially in the last two centuries the emphasis has been on a mechanistic worldview. Industrialization has done the earth no good.

### **The New Story**

Thomas Berry sees the need for a new story. It starts with a larger context and perspective. So that we should more consciously feel what our place is in the evolution of the universe. The film *Awakening Universe* by Neal Rogin, with cosmologist Brian Swimme, illustrates this beautifully.

We can have an intense feeling of the immensity of the cosmos, through mountains for example. Some people prefer the intimacy of a flower. Immensity, intensity and intimacy: this trinity comes about when our consciousness comes into contact with the earth. It is modern science that is contributing most to the new holistic worldview. Philosophy professor Koo van der Wal sees a holistic view of nature emerging in modern science. This should help to develop more respect for the earth, and so to find solutions for sustainability issues. The new story needs to arise in various domains: moral, emotional, scientific, spiritual, philosophical. Not as a romantic or idealistic view but as a fundamental insight into the processes on earth.

### **The principles of the universe**

Berry posits that evolution is in the final phase of the Cenozoic era. The Cenozoic period began 65 million years ago after the dinosaurs had been destroyed by the collision of an asteroid. In an incredibly short time dinosaurs were replaced by a large variety of mammals such as apes, horses, cattle, pigs, whales, mice and

finally humans. Thomas Berry now sees the transition to what he calls the *Ecozoisch* era, based on ecological principles. In this age, we can adopt the role of midwife. We have the privilege to assist at the birth of a new era.

Berry gives a simple shorthand for the new story, something that you can keep with you the whole day. He has identified three basic principles, the deep principles of the universe.

1. Differentiation: the fundamental creative expression of the cosmos. The universe is ordered by diversity. Since the Big Bang, there has always been development towards more variation. Look at the miracle of so many species of butterflies.
2. Internalization, subjectivity: the universe is structured by subjectivity because each creature has its own dynamics, its own autonomy. All living forms, even simple cells, have an interiority. They have a certain level of intelligence and the capacity for self-organization in order to function properly. All creatures have their own character and work to get their own voice heard. They are not objects, but all subjects.
3. Communion: the universe is organized as a community. The galaxies are related to each other, people are dependent on each other and on other life forms. Modern science sees living beings as systems, and in this view more overlap is seen between the properties of man and those of other creatures. We are cousins of other living forms.

These three principles are great! Through them you can call up a sense of the universe in a few seconds, without a whole lot of words. And in this cosmos story, it is this *feeling* which counts the most. We have had a piece of organ music composed on these principles, and to this music three choreographers designed and performed a dance in a wood.

#### **Four sources of wisdom**

Thomas Berry says that we need wonder and wisdom. Wonder comes from the arts. Wisdom comes from four sources of wisdom that must work together.

1. The wisdom of the first peoples: the native Indians, for example, are a source of inspiration. We can learn from their intimacy with the natural world and from their participation with the earth.
2. The wisdom of women: feminine wisdom is about the body, about acceptance, being well-grounded, about creativity and intuition. It is also about the qualities of a caring mother.
3. The wisdom of the spiritual traditions: according to Berry it is time for a new spirituality. Religion is mainly about man: his own identity and purpose, his relationship with a god and with his fellow beings. The new spirituality must be broadened to cover man-and-nature together.
4. Science: scientists give deep insight into how the whole evolutionary process here on Earth works. They see the world as a system, like in Deep Ecology and Integral Ecology. Without the sciences there will be no new story.

#### **We can all take part**

We all take part: as consumers, parents, travellers, etc.. We need new values and models for the economy, education, healthcare, etc.. The earth must always be our primary reference point. We can watch out for, and join, trends which are reasoned from the earth, through thinking from out the whole:

- new ways of measuring progress, not just growth: e.g. the Global Footprint
- alternative economic models
- the trend towards localization: of energy, food, care
- the trend towards reuse, secondhand, the circular economy
- initiatives such as Transition Town groups, aimed at bottom-up local resilience
- getting children into contact with in nature and including sustainability in education