

# Thomas Berry Manchester

## Spring 2021



Photograph by Felix Mittermeier [www.pexels.com](http://www.pexels.com)

*'In the Forest'*

by Kelvin Ravenscroft © 2021

*“We might reflect on {the} sense of the wild and the civilized when the dawn appears through the morning mist. At such times, a stillness pervades the world - a brooding sense, a quiet transition from night into day. This experience is deepened when evening responds to morning, as day fades away, and night comes in the depth of its mystery. We are most aware at such moments of transition that the world about us is beyond human control. So too in the transition phases of human life; at birth, maturity, and death we brood over our presence in a world of mystery far greater than ourselves. I bring all this to mind because we are discovering our human role in a different order of magnitude. We are experiencing*

*a disintegration of the life systems of the planet just when the Earth in the diversity and resplendence of its self-expression had attained a unique grandeur.”*

- Thomas Berry in 'The Great Work'

*“Those who  
contemplate the  
beauty of the earth  
find reserves of strength  
that will endure as long  
as life lasts.”*

- Rachel Carson in 'A Sense of Wonder'



Photograph by Julius Silver [www.pexels.com](http://www.pexels.com)



Photograph by Eberhard Grossgasteiger  
[www.pexels.com](http://www.pexels.com)

*“Those who dwell, as scientists or laymen, among the beauties and mysteries of the earth are never alone or weary of life. Whatever the vexations or concerns of their personal lives, their thoughts can find paths that lead to inner contentment and to renewed excitement in living.”*

- Rachel Carson in 'A Sense of Wonder'



'The Forest' by Lottie Robertson ©

Age 9; Glasgow

*“Without the soaring birds, the great  
forests,*

*The sounds and coloration of the insects,  
the free-flowing streams, the flowering  
fields,*

*the sight of the clouds by day  
and the stars at night,*

*we become impoverished in all that  
makes us human.”*

- Thomas Berry in 'The Great Work'



Photograph by Luis del Rio [www.pexels.com](http://www.pexels.com)

In her painting '*The Forest*' presented above, Lottie Robertson, aged 9, has shared with us her way of seeing, her perspective, her point of view, of an aspect of the world of nature.

Throughout history writers, painters, and poets have explored the many and varied ways in which humankind views, encounters and responds to the forest environment.

For writers such as the Brothers Grimm, the forest was a place of potential threat and danger in which dark forces were lurking, ready to prey upon those who passed

through. The forest was viewed as a wild, untamed place, which was malevolent. In his *Inferno*, Dante Alighieri (1265-1321) declared:

*"Midway upon the journey of our life*

*I found myself within a forest dark,*

*For the straightforward pathway had been lost."*

In the classic story *Snow White*, the Brothers Grimm present us with this scene:

*"Meanwhile the poor child was all alone in the great forest. She was so afraid that she looked at all the leaves on the trees and didn't know what to do. She began to run, she ran over sharp stones and through brambles, and the wild beasts passed by without harming her. She ran as long as her legs could carry her and then, just before night fall, she saw a little house and went in to rest."*

Walt Disney's 1933 animation *Snow White*, based upon the Brothers Grimm story, presents the archetypal view of the forest as a forlorn and fearsome place of ever-present danger. *Snow White* runs through the forest and is

presented with a range of malevolent phenomena from whom whose clutches she manages to escape.

However, in Lottie's 2021 painting we are presented with quite a different view of the forest. The colours that she has utilised in her painting, gentle blue and white, present us with a view of the forest that suggests that it is a place of warmth and welcome. It is as if Lottie's forest invites the viewer to enter, to go on a journey and to be curious about what may be found within. Indeed, at the foot of the painting there are what appear to be, perhaps, little creatures, who possibly live in the forest and are exploring their environment.

Lottie's forest, therefore, can be viewed as being a place of welcome, a place and space in which we can feel safe and secure. As we enter the forest and journey deeper into it, we are wrapped in the reassuring blanket of trees and the presence of the little creatures at the bottom of the painting indicate that we are not alone; they are quite likely kindred spirits who can act as our

guide as we make our way through, and explore further, all that the forest has to offer.

The warm colours that Lottie has used in her painting, I suggest, make us curious. We want to find out more; we begin to imagine what it would be like to venture into this forest. In our mind's eye we can embark upon a journey of discovery, experiencing the sights, sounds, smells, thoughts, feelings, and emotions of our forest exploration.

Lottie's forest painting, therefore, can be regarded as being the opening chapter in the telling of a story; the painting could be the first of a series in which one's journey through the forest is presented frame by frame, step by step, image by image. A story, therefore, begins to unfold; a narrative emerges.

To accompany her evocative painting, Lottie has written her thoughts about what inspired her to undertake the painting. These are presented below in her own hand. There are several key ideas which I feel are significant and, I suggest, reflect ways of seeing and being which

are congruent with Thomas Berry's world view and, indeed, express an Ecozoic outlook on the world.

In the reflections on her '*The Forest*' painting Lottie clearly identifies what it is that has led her to create this work. She uses three key words which underpin her creative process: *Relaxed*, *Excited*, and *Inspired*. She is, therefore, presenting us with a tri-partite view of the foundations which underpin the process of creating the painting.

*Relaxed* can be defined as being free from tension or anxiety. It connotes calmness, comfort, and informality. Lottie, therefore, is telling us that in order to engage in the process of painting she was able to put herself in a state of mind, a positive mood, in which she could approach the creative task without being encumbered and burdened by external stresses and strains.

*Excited* can be defined as the state of being very enthusiastic and eager characterised by a heightened state of energy and eagerness. Lottie, therefore, was clearly motivated to create work of a high standard.

*Inspired* can be defined as being of extraordinary quality as if arising from some external creative impulse. Lottie was animated to create *The Forest* painting. She put energy and enthusiasm into her work.

In his October 1991 E. F. Schumacher lecture *The Ecozoic Era*, Thomas Berry declared:

*".... The universe is a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects. Every being has its own inner form, its own spontaneity, its own voice, its ability to declare itself and to be present to components of the universe in subject- to- subject relationship. Whereas this is true of every being in the universe, it is especially true of each component member of the Earth community. Each component of the Earth is integral with every other component. This is also true of the living beings of the Earth in their relations with one another."*

Berry, therefore, is affirming that each and every life form has its own integrity, its own unique identity, what he terms *"... its own inner form, its own spontaneity, its own voice."*

All manifestations of life have their own, to use philosophical language, *Being*. This *Being* can be regarded as intrinsic to each life form and constitutes its 'nature', its 'essence'.

In her written reflections on her *The Forest* painting, Lottie has declared:

*"When I did this painting, I thought that trees are lovely: Don't cut them down. It is basically like someone you love dies, it's the same with trees so people who chop them down are killing the forest."*

I suggest, therefore, that this statement by Lottie is in harmony, is congruent with, Thomas Berry's affirmation that *"Every being has its own inner form, its own spontaneity, its own voice, its ability to declare itself ...."*

It is as if Lottie is instinctively, intuitively, recognising that to cut down trees is, in effect, an act which destroys the forest's essence, its being, its form, its own unique identity. She recognises that to cut down trees, to devastate the forest, *"is basically like someone you love dies, it's the*

same.” To experience the loss of the forest, to respond to the programme of wanton destruction and pillage, as is currently taking place in the Amazon rainforest, is to be in a state of mourning, to be in a condition of grieving.

The Australian Philosopher Glen Albrecht has coined the term *Solastalgia* to refer to the experience of pain and loss when one recognises that the place where you live, your environment, your eco-system, is under threat and might, ultimately, disappear. This experience often incorporates an erosion, a wasting away, of a sense of belonging and a displacement of one's sense of self in relation to an unwelcome negative change in the places and spaces we love, often beyond one's control, which results in distress.

The filmmakers Pascal Tremblay and Sean Stiller have created a short lyrical film entitled *Solastalgia* which can be viewed here:



In their film, Tremblay and Stiller visualise the feelings and emotions which are articulated in the poetry of Craig Santos Perez.

The poetry affirms that 'humans and nature are kin' and it illustrates that what happens to nature happens to humankind; each one of us is inextricably linked to, and with, the wider web of life.



In the film above, Glen Albrecht explores the concepts of *Solastalgia* and *Soliphilia*. Whereas *Solastalgia* denotes the experience of loss, distress, and dislocation in response to, often destructive, changes in our environments, in the ecologies in which we are rooted, *Soliphilia* is the state of responding to *Solastalgia* by undertaking action, whether as an individual or with others, which aims to repair, to heal, the brokenness which arises from,

for example, climate change, global heating, deforestation, and species extinction.

I felt Relaxed when i Did this  
Painting it was really Relaxing  
But i also Felt excited to see the  
Result OF the Painting.

When I Did this painting  
I thought that trees are  
Lovely Don't cut them Down.  
It is Basiclly Like Someone  
you Love Dies it's the same  
with trees so People who chop  
them Down are Killing them  
Forever.

What inspired me to Do  
this. Well actually it was  
a task For homework But  
i wanted to put a really good  
eFFort into this task  
Because I Love painting!

'The Forest' Inspiration by Lottie Robertson © Age 9

In his *The Ecozoic Era* lecture, Thomas Berry declared:

*“Ever since the time of Descartes in the first half of the seventeenth century, Western humans, in their dominant life attitude, have been autistic in their relation to the non-human components of the planet. Whatever the abuse of the natural world by humans prior to that time, the living world was recognised until then in its proper biological functioning as having an ‘anima’, a soul. Every living being was by definition an ensouled being, with a voice that spoke to the depths of the human of wondrous and divine mysteries, a voice that was heard clearly by the poets and musicians and scientists and philosophers and mystics of the world, a voice heard also with special sensitivity by the children.”*

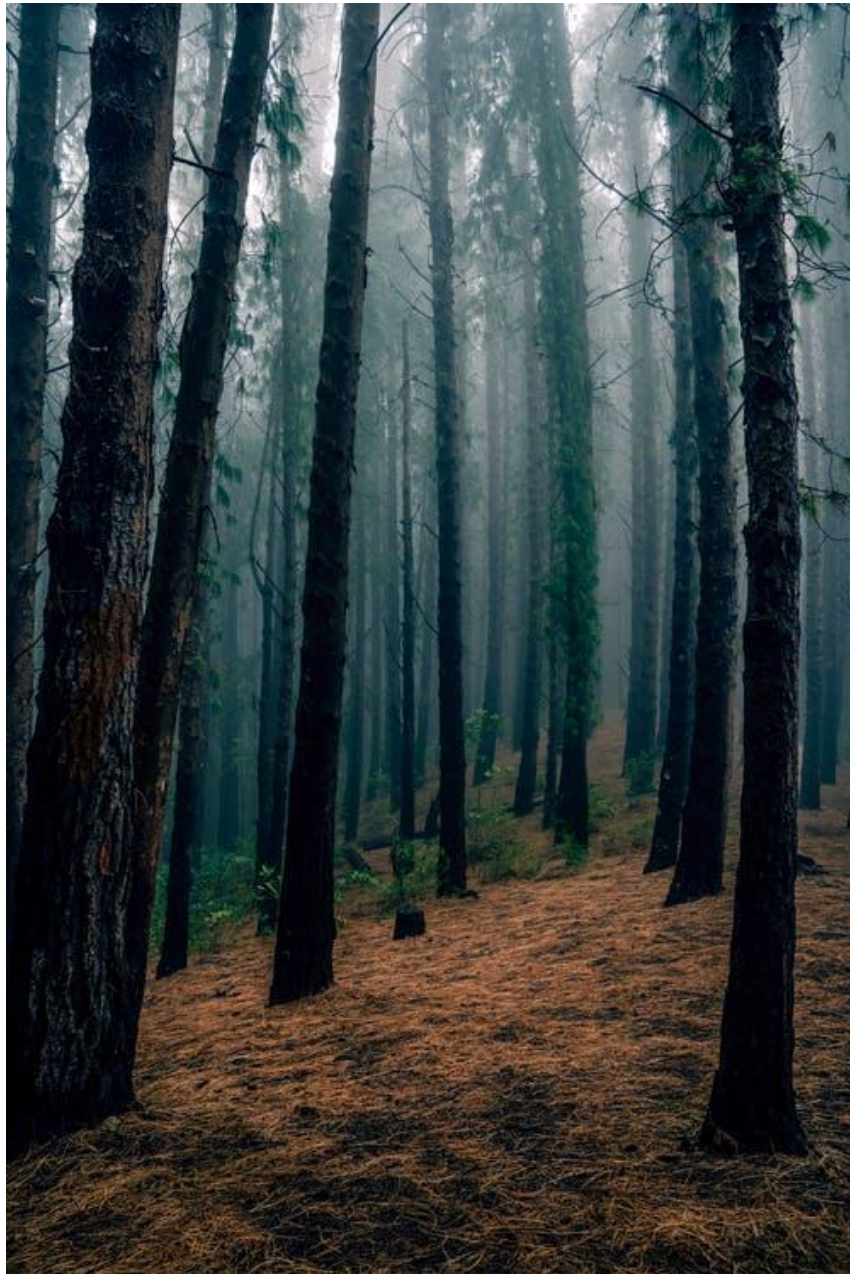
I suggest that in *The Forest* painting and in her reflections upon the process of creating it, Lottie does indeed demonstrate this *special sensitivity*. Permeating Thomas Berry's writings and his way of seeing and being in the world is the recognition that we will not care for that which we do not love.

Reflecting upon her creation of *The Forest* painting, Lottie has written that:

*“I wanted to put a really good effort into this task because I love painting.”*

In addition to the words *relaxed*, *excited*, and *inspired* explored above in relation to Lottie's creative process, it is also possible, therefore, to add the word *love*. In her declaration that she loves painting, Lottie is rooting her

work in care, a care for her craft, a care for her art, which articulates a love, a care, for the trees of the forest and, by extension, to a love of the wider Earth and its many and varied life forms, the Earth community, the Web of Life.



Photograph by Jose Vega [www.pexels.com](http://www.pexels.com)

*Inspired by Lottie's 'The Forest' painting, let us go on a journey... This document, with its Meditations and Reflections, can be regarded as presenting stations on the way, cairns, beacons, which provide us with space to rest and time to pause. Enjoy your journey into the Forest...*

## **PROLOGUE:**

"Reality is haunted by the otherness which lurks behind the fragile structures of everyday life.... From time to time we catch glimpses of transcendent reality as the business of living is interrupted or put into question for one reason or other. And, occasionally, rarely, the other breaks into our world in manifestations of dazzling, overwhelming brilliance."

This reflection by the sociologist Peter Berger upon the nature of reality presents a perspective in which it is possible to identify eleven significant dimensions of experience. Firstly, he is suggesting that human

beings, in their ways of seeing and being in the world, are aware of, intuit or experience a sense of something 'Other', that which is distinct, different, and apart from themselves. Secondly, he affirms that it is possible to 'catch glimpses' of this 'Other'. To 'catch glimpses' suggests that the 'Other' is seen or perceived partially or briefly, that it is momentary, fleeting.

The writer and broadcaster Clive James has written poignantly about his experience of watching his Japanese maple tree come into bloom in Spring.



Photograph by Artem Saranin [www.pexels.com](http://www.pexels.com)

He commented that:

*"Each glimpse of the tree reminds me of a beautiful Italian word my future wife taught me 50 years ago in Florence. The word was scorcio .... It means a glimpse. From one of our coffee bars we could look down a narrow street and see the spire of the abbey-church of the Badia outlined against the sky. The spire was a revelation of elegance, as my tree is now. Looking back, you realise that glimpses are all you ever get. There is so little time."*



## Abbey Church of the Badia, Florence

James incorporates into his reflections, his memories, the concept of 'revelation' which connotes the act of making something known that was secret. Although Berger does not explicitly make reference to the experience of 'revelation' I suggest that his acknowledgement that, the third dimension of his statement, that what is glimpsed is 'Transcendent', can be viewed as recognising that humankind experiences something or someone beyond themselves which impacts upon them and transforms their ways of seeing and being in the world.

The 'Transcendent' can be regarded as being that which is beyond the range of normal human experience. The Transcendent, therefore, can be regarded as being that which is experienced as being outside, and independent of, normal or

everyday existence. The 'Transcendent' therefore, is perceived and experienced as being distinct and independent of the self; it has its own independent ontological existence and status. It has, to utilise philosophical terminology, its own 'being'. Fourthly, Berger affirms that the 'Transcendent' interrupts daily human existence. To 'interrupt' is to break the continuity or flow of an action, activity or process. This interruption breaks into our lives. This suggests an experience of unexpectedness, something from outside, from beyond oneself, enters into our normal sensory experience. This can also connote that what interrupts our lives is not necessarily called for; it enters our lives without us necessarily wanting, requesting, anticipating, or being prepared for it. Fifthly, Berger's declaration recognises that this Transcendent Other 'put(s) into question' our lives. To be aware of, to experience,

to discern this 'Other' is to find that, to borrow a phrase from Paul Tillich, there can be a 'shaking of the foundations' of our existence. This 'Transcendent Other', therefore, can interrupt, disrupt, and challenge the very core of our being. To 'put into question' can suggest doubting, challenging, and querying. The 'Transcendent Other', in some sense, therefore, interrogates us; this Other asks something of us. Closely related to this calling into question is Berger's recognition, an eighth dimension, that the 'structures of everyday life' are 'fragile'. He is, therefore, identifying a feature of the human condition namely that it is not always strong, sturdy, or resilient, that existence can be weak and is, therefore, easily threatened or destroyed. Throughout this quotation, therefore, Berger, in his elucidation of the nature of the 'Transcendent Other' closely relates this to

characteristics of the human condition. His perspective has, therefore, an existential dimension.

Berger's quotation incorporates a ninth dimension when he declares that '.... the other breaks into our world in manifestations of dazzling, overwhelming brilliance.' He is affirming that the experience and awareness of the 'Transcendent Other' entering into our lives can be powerful, significant, extremely bright, illuminating and giving clarity of perception. Berger's exploration of this 'Transcendent Other' includes a tenth dimension which is that human beings are 'haunted' by this other and that it 'lurks'. To 'haunt' and to 'lurk' suggest that the 'Other' manifests itself in such a way that, for most of the time it remains hidden from view.

Berger's statement also includes an eleventh dimension in his acknowledgement that the

experience and awareness of the 'Transcendent Other' is 'rare' and 'occasional'; it is his view that the Other is not commonplace and everyday but is infrequent, exceptional, and sporadic.

I am of the view that the eleven dimensions articulated in Berger's quotation can, taken together, form a framework from which to explore the nature of existence including what can be termed the 'spiritual' dimension of life. Indeed, what I find striking about the dimensions articulated by Berger is that they can be regarded as having affinities with the language of religious experience such as the Sacred, the Divine, the Holy and the Ineffable, what Rudolf Otto termed the 'numinous', that which R W Hepburn defines as being "the distinctive experience of God, as once ineffably transcendent remote, yet stirring a recognition that here is the primary source of beauty and love."

This acknowledgement that the experience of the numinous evokes a sense of the primary source, the origin, of beauty and love can be regarded as connecting significantly with the ways in which art, in its many and varied forms, is able to speak profoundly to humankind's search for meaning.



Image by Artem Podrez [www.pexels.com](http://www.pexels.com)

*“Life is not primarily a quest for pleasure,  
as Freud believed, or a quest for power,  
as Alfred Adler taught, but a quest for  
meaning. The greatest task for any person  
is to find meaning in his or her life.”*

- Viktor Frankl in 'Man's Search for Meaning'



'Magnolia Stellata' by Malgorzata Kmita

Spring 2021

## **PREVIEW:**

*This document includes a series of Meditations which invite us to consider, and reflect upon, our experience of the world.*

*These Meditations include exploration of the perspectives presented in the creative endeavours of, for example, painters, musicians, filmmakers, writers, poets, and scientists.*

*The Meditations are complemented by Reflections which present a series of questions, observations, and activities which invite us to pay attention to, and creatively respond to, the environments and ecologies that we encounter.*

*The Meditations and Reflections do not have to be read sequentially; it is possible to 'dip into' this 'In the Forest' document and sample its contents in any order. In effect, each section of the document can 'stand-alone'; they are distinct yet are interrelated with what precedes and follows them.*

*The approach of this document is to encourage a dialogue, a conversation, an encounter with the concepts, themes, ideas, images, and sounds presented. As the reader progresses through this document, I encourage you to try to make connections with Peter Berger's dimensions of spirituality which I have explored in the Prologue above and also to consider how the concepts, themes and ideas explored can relate to, and connect with, Thomas Berry's 'Twelve Principles for Understanding the Universe and the Role of the Human in the Universe Process' which he presented*

*in a 1984 lecture. These Principles were subsequently presented in 'Evening Thoughts' published in 2006.*

*The Twelve Principles are as follows:*

1. The Universe, the solar system, and the planet Earth in themselves and in their evolutionary emergence constitute for the human community the primary revelation of that ultimate mystery whence all things emerge into being.

2. The Universe is a unity, an interacting and genetically-related community of beings bound together in an inseparable relationship in space and time. The unity of the planet Earth is especially clear: each being of the planet is profoundly implicated in the existence and functioning of every other being of the planet.

3. From its beginning the Universe is a psychic-spiritual as well as physical reality.

4. The three basic laws of the Universe at all levels of reality are differentiation, subjectivity and communion. These laws identify the reality, the values and the directions in which the Universe is proceeding.

5. The human is that being in whom the Universe activates, reflects upon and celebrates itself in conscious self-awareness.

6. Earth, within the solar system, is a self-emergent, self-propagating, self-nourishing, self-educating, self-governing, self-healing, self-fulfilling community. All particular life systems in their being, their sexuality, their nourishment, their education, their governing, their healing, their fulfilment, must

integrate their functioning within this larger complex of mutually dependent Earth systems.

7. The genetic coding process is the process through which the world of the living articulates itself in its being and its activities. The great wonder is the creative interaction of the multiple codings among themselves.

8. At the human level, genetic coding mandates a further trans-genetic cultural coding by which specifically human qualities find expression. Cultural coding is carried on by educational processes.

9. The emergent process of the Universe is irreversible and non-repeatable in the existing world order. The movement from non-life to life on Earth is a one time event. So too, the movement from life to human form of consciousness. So also, the

transition from the earlier to the later forms of human culture.

10. The historical sequence of cultural periods can be identified as the tribal-shamanic period, the Neolithic village period, the classical civilization period, the scientific-technological period and the emerging ecological period.

11. The main human task of the immediate future is to assist in activating the inter- communion of all the living and non-living components of Earth's community in what can be considered the emerging ecological period of Earth's development.

12. Functionally, the great art of achieving this historical goal is the art of intimacy and distance.

*In the Meditations and Reflections presented below, you may wish to ponder upon the ways in which the concepts, themes and ideas explored may relate to, and connect with, Thomas' twelve principles and how they also may reflect some of the elements of Peter Berger's perspectives on the spiritual dimension of life.*

## *Meditation 1: 'The Tree House'*



Photograph by Caleb Oquendo [www.pexels.com](http://www.pexels.com)

In 2006 the feminist writer Naomi Wolf published 'The Tree House' which explored the profound affect her Father has had upon her. She wrote:

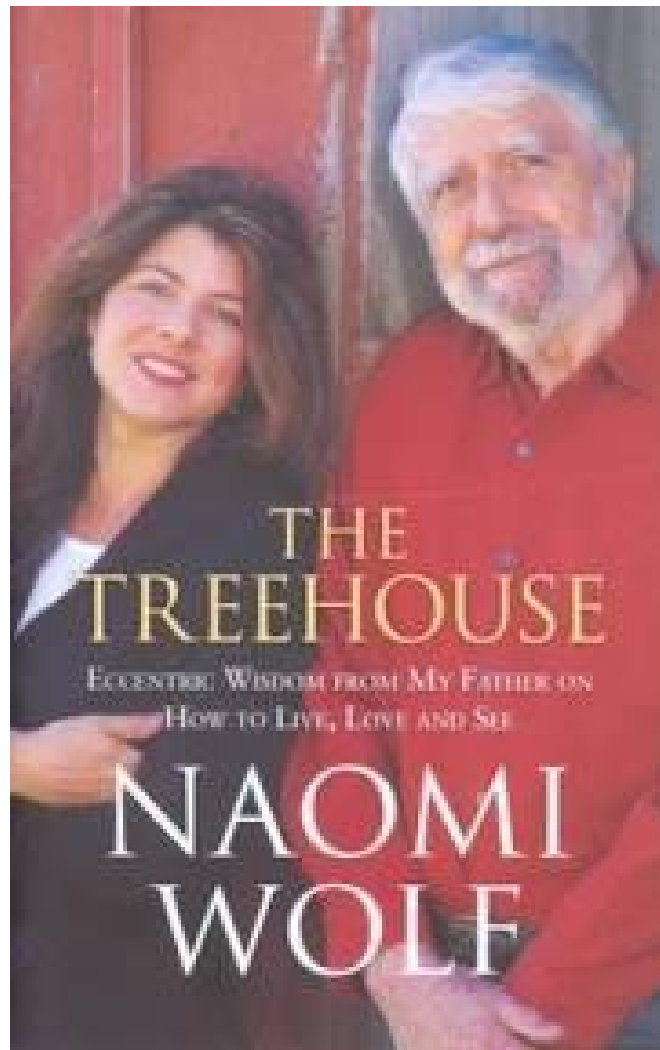
*"During a year of chaos, right after I turned 40, I bought a nearly derelict house in the midst of a desolate meadow in upstate New York. After we closed the deal, I got what I had been longing for: silence. I had been besieged by e-mail, CNN deadlines, phone calls; by my weighty, warm, engulfing responsibilities as wife, mother, teacher. I sat in the desolate house for a whole afternoon, alone, on the wooden floor, missing no one – no context, no family, no computer, no byline, no phone -soaking in the silence ...*

*A while later my father came up to help Rosa, my daughter, and me build a tree house.... I understood her longing for a place in the trees that no one could get to.*

*My father, Leonard Wolf, is a wild visionary poet. He changes people's lives because he believes that*

everyone is here on earth as an artist; to tell his particular story or sing her irreplaceable song; to leave behind a unique creative signature. He believes that your passion for this, your feelings about this, must take priority over every other reasoned demand: status, benefits, sensible practices.

All my life I have seen how his faith in this possibility – that an artist inheres in everyone - actually does change people's lives; the students he has taught over the course of four decades are changed, but so are the lives of people who are simply passing through. I have seen how his belief has led people with whom he has come into casual contact – friends of mine, friends of his, strangers he meets on trains – to suddenly drop whatever is holding them back from their real creative destiny and shift course; to become happier people."



In the extract from *The Tree House* presented above, Naomi acknowledges that at the time she bought the new house in upstate New York she was, in effect, immersed in, and somewhat overwhelmed by, the many and varied demands of her professional and family relationships. However, in just a few short sentences she evocatively recounts the experience of being still, in silence, sitting on the floor. She was able to soak in a time

of no demands being made upon her. Her words suggest a sense of freedom, of liberation, albeit perhaps temporary, in which she could listen to her own inner voice, perhaps contemplating what the future would hold for her and her family in their new home environment. Her reflections in '*The Tree House*' revolve around the life lessons that her father Leonard has taught her, and the focus of these reflections takes place around the task of Leonard working with Naomi to build a tree house for her daughter Rosa. Naomi acknowledges that Rosa desired a 'place in the trees that no one could get to'. It appears to be the case, therefore, that Rosa was desiring her own personal special place and space, a sanctuary, in which she could immerse herself. The extract presented above from *The Tree House*, therefore, affirms the importance of human beings requiring places and spaces of stillness, silence, solitude. and simplicity to which one can retreat to be renewed, refreshed, revitalised, and reinvigorated.

*For Reflection:*

*Bring to mind a place or space where you go to take 'time out' from the demands of life.*

*What is it about this place or space which you find to be restorative?*

*Many people find what can be termed 'Sacred' or 'Holy' places to be environments in which they can thrive. What for you, makes a place or space 'Holy' or 'Sacred'?*

*For many, places of worship are environments where people encounter the 'Sacred' and the 'Holy'. What do you think it is about such places that are conducive to being thought of in these ways?*



*The Cambridge Central Mosque opened in 2019 and is an example of a place of worship which has been designed with Ecological and Islamic principles in harmony.*

*What for you, would a place of worship be like if it was to be designed and operated according to an integration of ecological and spiritual principles?*

*The Polish-American Eco-Philosopher Henryk Skolimowski has explored the concept of 'Oikos', meaning 'home' or, in its broadest sense 'a sacred*

space'. In Skowlimowski's way of seeing, 'Oikos' is a central dimension of an ecological mode of being in the world.

What for you is it that 'home' denotes? What does it consist of? In what ways do you think that 'home' can have an ecological dimension?

*“The universe conceived as a sanctuary gives you the comfort of knowing that you live in a caring, spiritual place, that he the universe has meaning and your life has meaning.”*

- Henryk Skolimowski



Photograph by Jill Burrow [www.pexels.com](http://www.pexels.com)

*"To act in the world as if it were a sanctuary is to make it reverential and sacred; and is to make yourself elevated and meaningful."- Henryk Skolimowski*

## Meditation 2: 'Sumiregusa'



### 'Sumiregusa' by Enya

In 2004 the Irish composer, singer and musician Enya and her record company were invited by Panasonic to provide some suitable music for a marketing campaign in Japan for a flatscreen television. The result was a song called *Sumiregusa*. Enya's lyricist, Roma Ryan explores the inspiration for the song:

*“The lyrics for Sumiregusa were inspired by a Hokku, or Haiku, written by the Japanese poet Basho while he was travelling to Otsu.*

*He says that on his way through the mountain road a wild violet touched his heart.*



Photograph by Pixabay [www.pexels.com](http://www.pexels.com)

*It is likely that we have all been moved by the beauty of nature so I am sure that we can all relate to those seventeen syllables that Basho wrote.*

*We have all had a moment that pulls at our heartstrings. One such moment for me was when I was walking in the woodlands and I came across an old, broken, dying thistle. He was such a sad sight. There was a small history in him that would soon be lost. And yet he struggled on. I called him Don Quixote.*

*I went everyday to see him until he wasn't there anymore.*



Photograph by Anna Hinckel [www.pexels.com](http://www.pexels.com)

*The following year his children bloomed, he did not return. Even today, even though that place has been taken over by the ever vigorous bramble, and there are no signs of any thistles. I still pass by and remember him.*

*Perhaps these moments are an epiphany. Perhaps it is our own acceptance of the world and the way it is. Perhaps it is a celebration of life, or just a moment that is ours alone.*

*In {the song} Sumiregusa all of nature is equal in its power to inspire, to move, to touch – from a small pebble to a great mountain, from one green leaf to the many colours of autumn, from the song of birds to a purple flower.”*



Photograph by cottonbro [www.pexels.com](http://www.pexels.com)

## *For Reflection:*

- 1. Identify a phenomenon from nature such as, for example, a flower, a tree, a sunrise, a sunset, or birdsong. Observe this over an extended period of time and pay attention to how it changes.*
- 2. Present these changes and your response to them in, for example, prose, poetry, drawing, painting, or prayer.*



*3. Reflect upon your experience of paying attention over an extended period of time and consider the ways in which this is an activity that you could possibly extend to other areas of your life.*

## *Meditation 3: 'Walden'*

*“I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practise resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow out of life...”*

These are the words of Henry David Thoreau in his classic 1854 work *Walden*. In *Walden* Thoreau chronicles his experience of living simply in solitude in a small cabin at Walden Pond in Concord, Massachusetts. His observations and reflections have inspired many to undertake their own journey to live deeply and to articulate ways of seeing and being which present radical and creative alternatives to much of what is often considered to be economic, political, educational, moral, and religious orthodoxy.

The entire tenor of Thoreau's life can be summarised in his declaration: *"I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow out of life..."*



The artist Vincent van Gogh declared that *"Poetry is all around us."* Peter Weir's 1989 film *Dead Poet's Society* explores the experience of Mr Keating and his students in a school in 1950's America. The film illustrates the many and varied ways in which Mr Keating inspires his students

to reflect upon their lives. In the video clip above, Mr Keating affirms the power of poetry and its capacity to change lives. Mr Keating draws his students' attention to the Romantic poets and Transcendentalist writers such as Henry David Thoreau and Walt Whitman.

In the clip from *Dead Poet's Society* presented below, Mr Keating makes reference to Thoreau's declaration that "*Most men live lives of quiet desperation.*"



It can be suggested that the concept of living lives characterised by the experience of "quiet desperation" is an existential phenomenon which, in the world of the

early years of the 21st century, can be regarded as being a perhaps understandable response to the many and varied challenges facing the world including, for example, climate change, global heating, deforestation, species extinction, an inequitable distribution of resources, soil despoilation, racial injustice and the phenomenon of the Covid-19 global pandemic.

In his time spent in the cabin at Walden pond, Thoreau was reflecting deeply on the questions which life presents to us. His cabin in the woods provided a place and a space of stillness, silence, and simplicity.

## *Meditation 4: 'Follow Your Bliss'*

*"If you do follow your bliss, you put yourself on a kind of track that has been there all the while, waiting for you, and the life that you ought to be living is the one you are living. Wherever you are — if you are following your*

*bliss, you are enjoying that refreshment, that life within you, all the time."*



*"And when you can see it you begin to deal with people who are in the field of your 'bliss' and they open doors to you." - Joseph Campbell*

## *Meditation 5: 'Your Sacred Space'*



Image by Egil Sjøholt [www.pexels.com](https://www.pexels.com)

*“Your sacred space is where you can  
find yourself over and over again.”*

- Joseph Campbell

*“[A sacred place] is an absolute necessity for anybody today. You must have a room, or a certain hour or so a day, where you don’t know what was in the newspapers that morning, you don’t know who your friends are, you don’t know what you owe anybody, you don’t know what anybody owes to you. This is a place where you can simply experience and bring forth what you are and what you might be. This is the place of creative incubation. At first you may find that nothing happens there. But if you have a sacred place and use it, something eventually will happen.”*

- Joseph Campbell in ‘The Power of Myth’

## *Meditation 6: Yūgen*



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Yūgen:

*'An awareness of the Universe  
that triggers emotional responses  
too deep and powerful for  
words'*

This document includes exploration of several Japanese concepts including, for example, *Kintsugi* and *Hanami*. In addition to these concepts this Meditation explores the concept of Yūgen.

Thomas Berry has declared, in *The Great Work*, that:

*".... We will recover our sense of wonder and our  
sense of the sacred only if we appreciate the  
universe beyond ourselves as a revelatory*

*experience of that numinous presence whence all things came into being. Indeed, the universe is the primary sacred reality. We become sacred by our participation in this more sublime dimension of the world about us."*



Image by Hristo Fidanov [www.pexels.com](https://www.pexels.com)

Berry, therefore, affirms that the Earth, humankind, and all other-than-human life forms are an integral element of the Universe and its evolving and unfolding story. Indeed, he presents the view that the Universe is intrinsically sacred and that we participate in, and respond to, this sacred reality by

*“... our participation in this more sublime dimension of the world about us.”*

Berry recognises that in our lives, in our existence upon the planet Earth, it is possible to discern, experience and respond to what he terms the *sublime*. Philosophers, Theologians, Poets and Artists, for example, through the ages have explored the nature, meaning and significance of the Sublime.

In aesthetics, ‘the Sublime’ refers to the quality of greatness, whether spiritual, moral, intellectual, metaphysical, or artistic and it is regarded as having the capacity to inspire awe, wonder and reverence.

Berry recognises that the Sublime permeates the whole of existence and that we can participate in its sacredness. In effect, Berry is suggesting that we

are, ultimately, not passive observers, static onlookers, and bystanders of the world around us, but we are, as part of our very nature as human beings, active, dynamic participants, persons in process, included in the story of the Earth and its location in the larger context of the Cosmos.

Berry affirms, that *“Perhaps a new revelatory experience is taking place, an experience wherein human consciousness awakens to the grandeur and sacred quality of the Earth process.”*

Words such as ‘revelatory’, ‘grandeur’ and ‘sacred’ are profound words, with deep layers of meaning to be explored, understood, and responded to. Such words, I suggest, are constituent elements of the Japanese concept of ‘Yūgen’ which I have introduced at the beginning of this Meditation.

Yūgen is a key concept in Japanese aesthetics. It primarily refers to the emotional response of a person who looks upon a phenomenon which has the capacity to inspire and evoke a sense of awe and wonder, a deep sense of the mysterious nature of that which is being observed. It, therefore, does not explicitly refer to beauty itself but to the response that one has to beauty, including the beauty and scale of the Universe.

Motoyiko Zeami (c.1363-c.1443), a Japanese aesthetician, playwright and actor articulated examples of the nature, the essence, the heart of Yūgen as follows:

*“To watch the sun sink behind a flower-clad hill. To wander on in a huge forest without thought of return. To stand upon the shore and gaze after a boat that disappears behind distant islands. To contemplate the flight of wild geese seen and lost among the clouds.”*



Photograph by Pixabay [www.pexels.com](http://www.pexels.com)

I suggest, therefore, that, in the exploration of Peter Berger's dimensions of spirituality presented in the Prologue to this document, *Yūgen* can be regarded as a manifestation of the dimension of existence in which:

*“Reality is haunted by the otherness which lurks behind the fragile structures of everyday life.... From time to time we catch glimpses of transcendent reality as the business of living is interrupted or put into question for one reason or*

*other. And, occasionally, rarely, the other breaks into our world in manifestations of dazzling, overwhelming brilliance."*

In addition to the experience of denoting an emotional response to the Universe, it also incorporates a sense of the sheer contingency, the temporality and finitude of life in which it is recognised that all phenomena come into being. Grow, develop, mature, and, as time passes, fade away. *Yūgen*, therefore, acknowledges that the response of awe and wonder to the Universe incorporates a recognition of the impermanence of all things; all that exists is temporary and fleeting. Such a recognition and acknowledgment of the nature of existence can be regarded as being deeply rooted in elements of Buddhist anthropology and philosophy, including the Four

Noble Truths, the first one of which declares that "All existence is suffering".

*Yūgen*, therefore, can be regarded as having a bitter-sweet quality; awe, wonder, reverence, and an awareness of the sacred are inextricably linked to an existential acknowledgement of the temporariness of all that is, from both the microscopic and macroscopic dimensions, from the coming into being and passing away of cells to the origination of stars and galaxies, and, over time, their ceasing to be.

*Yūgen's* recognition that the experience of awe and wonder, emotional responses often too deep and powerful for words, can, ultimately, be regarded as being 'ineffable'; the experience of the Sublime is beyond words, it often, in a strange and mysterious sense, transcends language and our capacity to articulate what it is that we have

experienced. Indeed, Clive James' description of catching a glimpse of the Ineffable, the Sublime, which he describes as being a 'revelation of elegance'. One of the definitions of the word 'elegance' is 'refined grace'. In *Moments of Grace*, Thomas Berry declared:

*"There are cosmological and historical moments of grace as well as religious moments of grace. The present is one of those moments of transformation that can be considered as a cosmological as well as a historical and a religious moment of grace."*

## *For Reflection:*

- 1. Recall an experience in your life which you can describe as being a 'revelation of elegance'.*
- 2. In what way(s) has this influenced your life?*

3. Why do you think Thomas Berry declares that  
'The present is one of those moments of  
transformation'?



Photograph by Sam Kolder [www.pexels.com](http://www.pexels.com)

4. *Peter Reason, echoing Thomas Berry, in his article also entitled 'Moments of Grace' declares:*

*"If we cannot see the stars, how can we be open to those moments of grace when we see ourselves reflected in the mysterious infinity of which we are part?"*

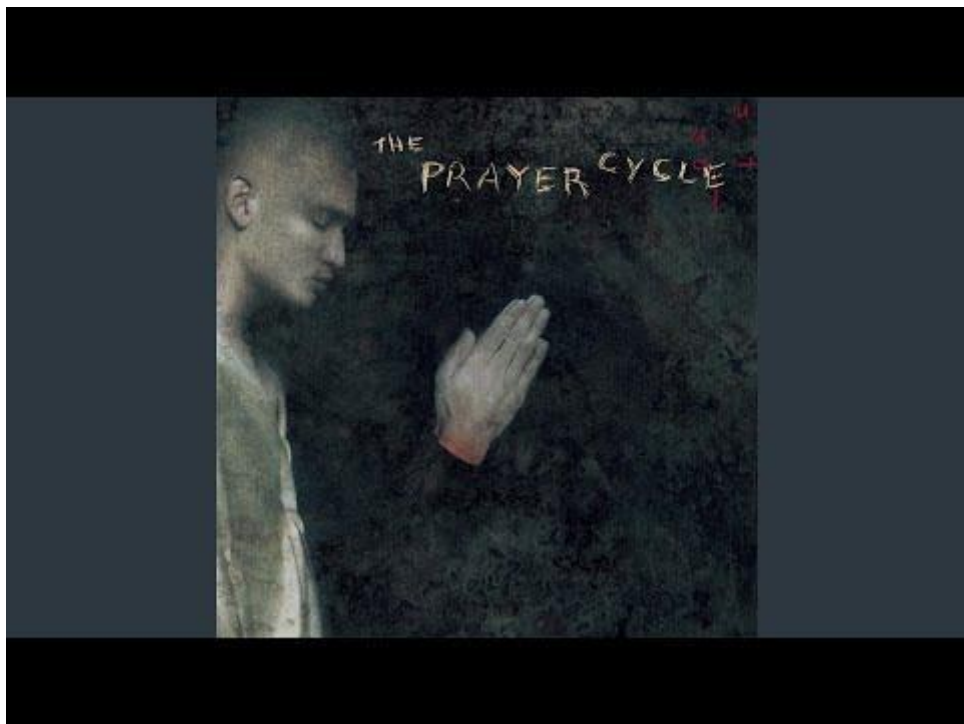
*In what sense do you feel that seeing the stars can be a 'moment of grace'?*

5. *Create an artwork such as a painting, drawing, collage, or poem, for example, which, for you, presents a 'moment of grace'.*

6. *Where are the places and spaces in which you encounter a 'revelation of elegance'?*

7. Go outside and look at the night sky. What do you see? How do you feel? Is the night sky a 'revelation of elegance'?

8. Please listen to Jonathan Elias' 'Movement V: Grace' from his 'Prayer Cycle' presented below.



9. The first of Thomas Berry's Twelve Principles is "The Universe, the solar system, and the planet

*Earth in themselves and in their evolutionary emergence constitute for the human community the primary revelation of that ultimate mystery whence all things emerge into being."*

10. *What, for you, is this 'ultimate mystery'?*

*Meditation 7: 'Kintsugi'*



‘Kitsungi’ Vases by Rachel Ho,

Ceramicist and Educator

‘**KITSUNGI**’:

*The Japanese art of repairing broken pottery by mending the broken areas with a lacquer mixed with powdered gold. Such a technique affirms that by accepting and embracing the imperfections which arise from the damage, it is possible to*

*create a work of beauty which is even stronger, more durable, and more beautiful.*

Kandice Kumai, author of *Kintsugi Wellness: The Japanese Art of Nourishing Mind, Body and Spirit*, suggests that *Kintsugi* can be regarded as a “metaphor for your life, to see the broken, difficult or painful parts of you as radiating light, gold and beauty.”

I suggest that the concept of *Kintsugi* can also be related to our relationship with the Earth and other-than-human life. The Naturalist and Broadcaster Sir David Attenborough, in a recent speech on Climate and Security to the United Nations Security Council has declared that:

*“If we continue on our current path, we will face the collapse of everything that gives us our security... if the natural world can no longer support*

*the most basic of our needs then much of the rest of civilisation will quickly break down."*

Attenborough's speech is available on the video below.



Just as a ceramic pot which is damaged and restored with gold can have a new lease of life, can be revived and renewed, it can be suggested that the urgent task which faces humankind at this critical point in our history is to renew, restore and return to fullness of life all those environments,

ecologies and nature's processes which have been damaged, broken, as a result of human activity and action. Attenborough's stark warning is, in effect, a call for humankind to do things differently, to become nurturers of the planet and its myriad, diverse and glorious web of life. One should not understate the challenge which lies ahead. It is likely that it will require significant changes and sacrifices in order to live simply and sustainably.

## *For Reflection:*

- 1. What do you consider to be the most significant challenges facing the world at this point in time?*

*2. Is it too late to respond to the challenges that we face?*

*3. What do you think needs to change in order to meaningfully address these challenges?*

*4. What changes do you think you, your family, and your community can make in order to bring about change?*

## *Mediation 8: 'Your One Wild and Precious Life'*



On 17 January 2019, the acclaimed poet Mary Oliver died. In the above poem entitled "The Summer Day" Oliver, reflecting upon her experience of the natural world, asks a series of questions. She begins with the question of origins and causation in her declaration "Who made the world?" She begins her poem, therefore, by introducing an aetiological dimension as she encourages the reader to consider the identity of that which gives rise

to the genesis of the earth. She is inviting us to consider beginnings, what is the source of all that is? Following the poem's opening line, Oliver then moves on to enquire of the origin of specific forms of life such as the swan, the black bear, and the grasshopper. It may be that Oliver is not asking a question to which she wishes to receive a specific answer; it could be that her questions are rhetorical which aim to bring about reflection not so much on the actual origins of things but upon their very nature or essence, that which makes them what they are. In her description of the grasshopper, she observes that the insect has jumped from the grass into her hand, eats sugar which is on her hand and this gentle creature moves her jaws back and forth and looks around with her large eyes. Oliver recognises the large size and complex

structure of the grasshopper's eyes and notes that with its forearms it can wash its face. The poet testifies to the impermanence of the encounter with the grasshopper by stating that it flew away. Throughout her exploration of her meeting with the grasshopper Oliver does not refer to this living creature as 'it', rather she refers to this beautiful creature as 'she'. The poet, therefore, is not relating to the grasshopper as an object but, instead, by ascribing a gender to the insect she is, tangentially, referring to the grasshopper as, utilising the terminology of the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber, a 'Thou', a creature which has its own individual unique identity to which one can relate in some depth. Although the grasshopper is a non-human life form, it can be suggested that there is a sense in which, implicit in Oliver's exploration of her fleeting

meeting with this insect, is an attribution of, in some form, 'personhood' to it.



Photograph by Pixabay [www.pexels.com](http://www.pexels.com)

The description of the meeting with the grasshopper is then followed by Oliver presenting the declaration "I don't know exactly what a prayer is". It is possible to regard this statement as the turning point of the poem which transports the reader to the experience of paying attention to the phenomena of the natural world which surround us. Although Oliver appears agnostic about the

nature of the phenomenon of prayer, she is able to affirm that she can 'pay attention', to fall and kneel down in the grass, to be idle and to stroll, activities and experiences which she regards as 'blessed'. 'Blessed', in an informal and general sense can be defined as 'to be lucky to have a particular thing' or the experience of 'bringing you happiness, luck or something you need.' However, there are also more specific and formal meanings of the word 'blessed', utilised in religious contexts, which describe that which is holy or sacramental. Oliver's poem, therefore, despite its agnosticism regarding the nature of prayer, can be regarded as articulating a way of seeing and being in the world which recognises, affirm and testifies to experience of the sacred within our midst. Oliver's poem can be viewed as illustrating a profound

existential fact: that the experience of paying attention to the glorious multiplicity and diversity of the earth's life forms takes place in the context of the passage of time; the recognition that, in the fullness of time, all phenomena come to an end. The poem, therefore, testifies to the reality of impermanence, that everything changes, nothing stays the same, all things are in a state of flux, they come into being, mature and grow and, eventually, will cease to be. It is Oliver's recognition of this existential reality which leads her, in the last two lines of her poem, to present the reader with a question: 'Tell me, what is it that you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?' This conclusion to the poem presents a challenge to the reader: it clearly and directly invites us to consider very carefully what kind of life are we going to live when we

face up to the fact that we only have the one life and that it is time limited. For Oliver, this life is 'precious' and her description of it as being 'wild' can suggest that it has a spontaneous dynamic energy which can be channelled into whatever our life's vision, mission, calling, vocation or goal might be.

I have indicated earlier that Oliver died in 2019. That year was also the tenth anniversary of the passing of Thomas Berry (1914-2009) which was marked by the conference TB19 which took place in North Carolina which reflected upon and celebrated his life and vision. In addition, 2019 was the bicentenary of the birth of John Ruskin, (1819-1900) the Victorian writer, artist, critic, social reformer, philanthropist. and visionary. Events have been held internationally to celebrate, respond to, engage

with, and reappraise his ways of seeing the world. Russell, in reflecting upon Ruskin's views, has commented: "the core of his claims remains relevant and important. That is to say: our aesthetic experience, our experience of beauty in ordinary life, must be central to thinking about any good life and society. It's not just decoration or luxury for the few. If you are taught how to see the world properly through an understanding of aesthetics, then you'll see society properly." Ruskin's interests and projects were many and varied and he can be regarded, like Thomas Berry, as being truly a polymath. Ruskin and Berry were both interdisciplinary in their ways of seeing and being in the world and, particularly following the Ruskin Bicentenary year, I have begun to reflect upon what I

perceive as being deep connections between Ruskin's philosophy, indeed his spirituality, and that of Berry.

The ever-present outpouring of news in the multiplicity of media today can easily lead us to the view that all is lost, that there is no hope, that things cannot change. The reality of global heating, species extinction, desertification, and water scarcity, for example, can appear to be overwhelming and intractable issues for which no straightforward responses and solutions appear to be available. However, Berry's response to the realities with which the world of the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is faced can be regarded as transcending any 'problem-solution' approach. He reminds us, in 'The Great Work' that "The human venture depends absolutely on this quality of awe and reverence and joy in the Earth and

all that lives and grows upon the Earth” and he also affirms that “... we will recover our sense of wonder and our sense of the sacred only if we appreciate the universe beyond ourselves as a revelatory experience of that numinous presence whence all things came into being. Indeed, the universe is the primary sacred reality. We become sacred by our participation in this more sublime dimension of the world about us.” Berry is, I feel, taking us back to the very basics: he is drawing our attention to the foundational attitude, way of seeing and responding to the world in which we live and to recognise and affirm that humankind, non-human life forms and the Earth are all part of a great unfolding, evolving Cosmic narrative, the story of the Universe. Each person, every living thing, is part of what Fritjof Capra has termed the Web of Life, an

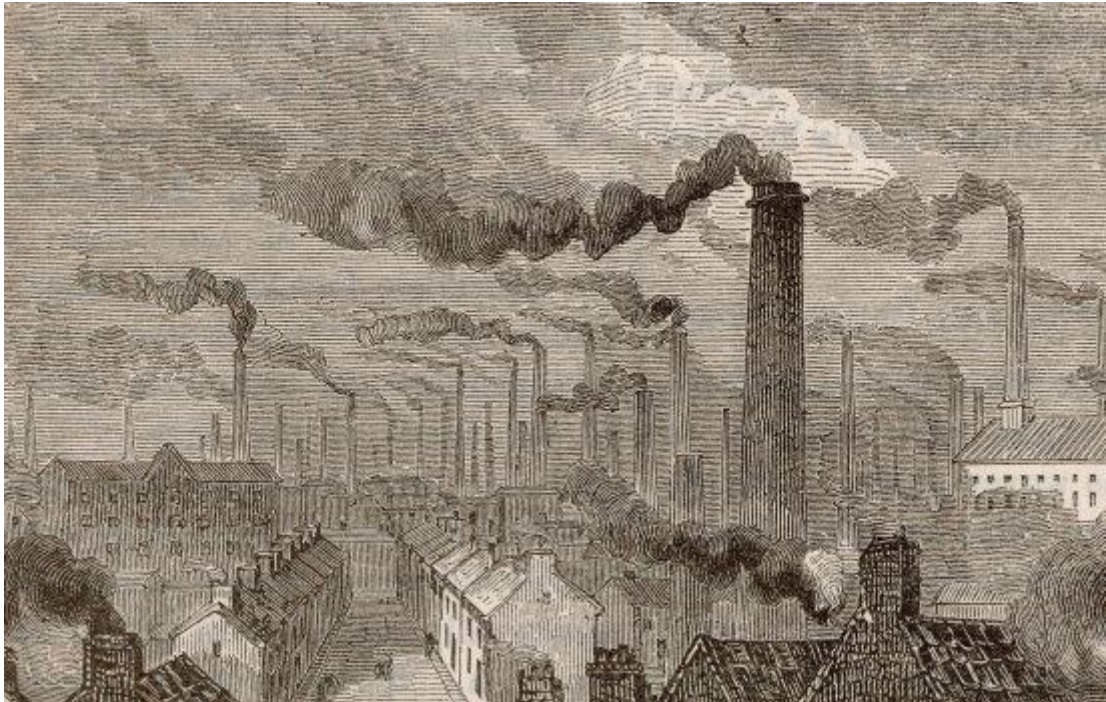
interconnected, ever changing, developing, great chain of being.

There is a deep sense, therefore, in which, like Ruskin, Berry's cosmic vision presents a profound counter-cultural and radical ecological and spiritual vision which, I suggest, can speak directly to the world of the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. They can be regarded as calling humankind to reconsider the values by which they live and the vision of society which they aspire to work towards creating. Their lives can be interpreted as being prophetic in that they point us towards a vision of a better, transformed world, an Ecozoic future. Critics of Ruskin and Berry may, however, take the view that they share a vision of a romanticised and idealised pre-industrial past but, I suggest they can, instead, be

thought of as articulating a vision of a transformed future, an ecologically sustainable and harmonious alternative way of being in which humankind and the natural world and its diverse creatures live together; I regard their ways of seeing, therefore, as being ultimately spiritual because they have the capacity to inspire. To inspire is to breathe into, to give life, energy and vitality and to animate the spirit. In this tentative, and brief, proposal for a Ruskin and Berry encounter and dialogue, I draw attention to what I suggest are three initial areas for exploration in such a meeting: firstly, the response to industrialisation and global capitalism; secondly, the affirmation and celebration of beauty and, thirdly, the experience of what David Hay has termed 'Relational Consciousness'.

Firstly, I suggest that in their ways of seeing the world, both Ruskin and Berry present critiques of industrialisation and the consequences of this upon the well-being, the flourishing of life, both human and non-human. Ruskin, in response to the increasing urbanisation of Victorian Britain and the consequent movement of populations from a rural economy to work in the factories and mills of cities such as Bradford and Manchester, which polluted not only the bodies and souls of the workers but also impacted upon the quality of the air that people breathed and the water they drank, in his essay 'Unto this Last', originally published in the Cornhill Magazine in 1860, railed against the industrial revolution, in particular free trade, competition and market economics. He commented that economists such as Adam Smith and

John Stuart Mill were restricting 'multitudes of human creatures' to a 'dim eyed and narrow-chested state of being'.



In the preface to 'The Queen of the Air', in 1869, Ruskin declared "I have seen strange evil brought upon every scene that I best loved or tried to make beloved by others. The light which once flushed those pale summits with its rose at dawn, and purple at sunset, is now umbered and faint; the air which once inlaid the clefts of

their golden crags with azure is now defiled with languid clouds of smoke, belched from worse than volcanic fires; their very glacier waves are ebbing, and their snows fading, as if hell had breathed upon them...The light, the air, the waters, all defiled!" Berry has commented that "When we awaken to a revelation that the industrial world, as now functioning, can exist only exist for only a brief historical period, we might begin to consider just how we can establish a more sustainable setting for our physical survival and personal fulfilment." Ruskin and Berry, therefore, in their different historical contexts, have both testified to the limitations of industrialisation and its capacity for, often irreversible, damage to the web of life. They both look to what can be termed the "bigger picture", a consideration of that which contributes to the

flourishing of life. Indeed, Ruskin, in *Unto this Last*, a publication which significantly impacted upon the thinking and philosophy of Gandhi, affirmed that "There is no wealth but life. Life, including all its powers of love, of joy, and of admiration. That country is the richest which nourishes the greatest numbers of noble and happy human beings; that man is richest, who, having perfected the functions of his own life to the utmost, has also the widest helpful influence, both personal, and by means of his possessions, over the lives of others."



Statue of Mahatma Gandhi, Manchester by Ram V Sutar

In addition to their critiques of industrialisation, Ruskin and Berry I suggest, affirm the significant value of the experience of beauty. In 'Beauty and Nature' Ruskin commented that "The sensation of beauty is not sensual on the one hand, nor is it intellectual on the other, but is dependent upon a pure, right, and open state of the heart, both for its truth and intensity, insomuch that even the right after-action of the intellect upon facts of beauty so apprehended, is dependent on the acuteness of the heart feeling about them ..." He recognises, therefore, that apprehension of the beautiful closely relates to the response of the heart. He reminds us that whenever and wherever beauty is located, it has the capacity to inflame the heart, to inspire and empower the person to, as Berry

has indicated earlier in this paper, “.... become sacred by our participation in this more sublime dimension of the world about us.” Artur Schopenhauer, in ‘The World as Will and Representation’ explored the relationship between beauty and the sublime. He recognised that they are distinct, yet connected, and I find in Ruskin’s exploration of beauty and Berry’s understanding of the sublime, the potential for a fruitful dialectic. It is in such a dialectic that I suggest that the third dimension of a Ruskin-Berry encounter, the affirmation and celebration of the primacy of relational consciousness, can be discerned.

The phenomenon of Relational Consciousness has been explored by David Hay, particularly in his studies of the spiritual development of children. “The Encyclopaedia of Religious and Spiritual Development” notes that “It refers

to an awareness of our interdependence with other beings, including God, animals, and other humans. It suggests a nuanced sensitivity to the complexity and connection of all creatures. More specifically, the phrase refers to an intuitive, experiential awareness, a felt sense, rather than a mere intellectual awareness." I regard Mary Oliver's encounter with the natural world presented above as being an example of Relational Consciousness in its profound, sensitive, and evocative presentation of a connection with that which is outside and beyond the self.

This relational consciousness, the capacity to understand and imaginatively enter into another person's experience, is echoed, I suggest, by the Deep Ecologist Arne Naess' observation that: "Part of the joy stems from the

consciousness of our intimate relation to something bigger than our own ego, something which has endured for millions of years and is worth continued life for millions of years. The requisite care flows naturally if the self is widened and deepened so that protection of free nature is felt and conceived as protection of our very selves.”

Although neither of them used the term Relational Consciousness, I suggest that Ruskin and Berry can be regarded as visionaries who testify to its centrality to life in their ways of seeing and being in the world. Berry's declaration that “Our studies in what we call ecology must lead to such intimacy with our natural surroundings. Only intimacy can save us from our present commitment to a plundering industrial economy” can be regarded as being congruent with Ruskin's declaration that “The

greatest thing that a human soul ever does in this world is to see something, and tell what it saw in a plain way. Hundreds of people can talk for one who can think, but thousands can think for one who can see. To see clearly is poetry, prophecy and religion-all in one." The artist Vincent van Gogh declared that "Poetry is all around us". Like Ruskin, Berry and Oliver, to be an Ecozoian includes, I suggest, the capacity to be able to see the world anew, to envision the re-enchantment of the world, to recognise and affirm the sacredness of all life, and to live and act in ways which promote flourishing for the whole of the glorious, fragile, beautiful, and inspiring creation. Our task is to be agents of transformation creating spaces and places of beauty, nobility, inspiration, contemplation, and action. As Oliver has asked each one of us: *'Tell me, what*

*is it that you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?'*



Photograph by David Alberto Carmona Coto [www.pexels.com](http://www.pexels.com)

## *Meditation 9: 'Wintering'*

The first day of February marked the mid-point between the Winter Solstice and the Spring Equinox, and as I write this document we can now, very slowly and almost imperceptibility, begin to discern signs of us moving, in due course, into a new season, the world, once again, blossoming and bursting into new life. Indeed, 20 March will mark the arrival of the Spring Equinox (also known as the Vernal Equinox) when

During the Autumn and Winter, I have been reading Katherine May's book '*Wintering*' in which she explores how the Winter season can be a time of stillness, rest, and recuperation, of taking stock of one's life and gently moving forward with a renewed vision. It is a most thoughtful, reflective, and contemplative, book.



## *Meditation 10: 'Lost in Wonder'*

This Meditation takes the form of an extended exploration and reflection upon perspectives upon nature and existence with particular reference to the ways in which

the educational philosophies, the pedagogies, of Janusz Korczak and Vasily Sukhomlinsky affirm the child's encounter with the natural world and it relates their perspectives to the experience of the Thomas Berry Manchester (TBM) community study group, with particular reference to the meetings which took place during July 2015 to December 2016 to consider the cosmological concepts, themes and ideas of Thomas Berry and how the film and book *Journey of the Universe* illustrate how an understanding of the evolution of life can impact upon our ways of seeing and being in the world. It suggests the development of approaches to teaching and learning which place the child's encounter with, and response to, the natural world, and the experience of awe and wonder, at the heart of the school curriculum.

Vincent Van Gogh declared: *"I experience a period of frightening clarity in those moments when nature is so beautiful. I am no longer sure of myself, and the painting appears as in a dream."*

As I write this Meditation Spring gently approaches. The sun is shining, the flowers, trees and bushes are bursting into life and the birds are singing. There is a very real and positive sense in which things are now very different from the recent wet, windy and cold weather of late winter. The arrival of Spring can have very positive effects upon our ways of seeing the world as each day brings more daylight and the glorious sunlight and Vincent Van Gogh yellows bring about a positive effect upon our mood and our general sense of well-being. Spring can bring about thoughts, feelings and ideas of new beginnings, a fresh start, and hope for the future and the anticipation of the eventual arrival of summer.

In her painting *The Forest* presented and explored earlier in this document, Lottie Robertson inspired and invited us

to look carefully, to look deeply, to pay attention to what she

has captured in her work. She invites and encourages us to enter the forest, to walk upon its paths and to embark upon a journey of discovery and exploration. This journey, perhaps even a pilgrimage, is not only the experiencing of traversing the physical forest but also entering deep into the forest of one's psyche, soul, or spirit; an inner journey alongside an outer journey.



Photograph by Tyler Lastovich [www.pexels.com](http://www.pexels.com)

One initiative which explores the task of learning to live deeply, as Henry David Thoreau wished to do, is the Thomas Berry Manchester (TBM) group (formerly known as

Journey of the Universe (JOTU) community study group which has met regularly in Manchester, United Kingdom, since September 2015 to explore together the key concepts, themes and ideas of the Cultural Historian, Philosopher and Theologian Thomas Berry. Berry's ideas are significant because they relate spiritual perspectives on life to the insights of modern cosmology and evolutionary theory and they locate the development of human consciousness within the wider story of the universe and its origins in the Big Bang 13.7 billion years ago. There is sense in which, like Thoreau, Berry inspires us "to live deep". Berry's way of seeing and being in the world is characterised by a profound recognition and awareness of the interconnectedness of all that exists and the affirmation of the sacredness of the natural world.

The starting point for the development of Berry's thought can be traced back to his experience as a twelve-year old when he encountered a field of lilies. He has described this moment as "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 experience I can remember." He recalls that:

*"The field was covered with white lilies rising above the thick grass. A magic moment, this experience gave to my life something that seems to explain my thinking 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 a clear sky.... as the years pass this moment returns to me, and whenever I think about the basic life attitude and the whole trend and causes to which I have given my efforts, I seem to come back to this moment and the impact it has had upon my feeling for what is real and worthwhile in life."*

For Berry, his encounter with the field of lilies when he was young had a profound impact upon the overall orientation of his life. His experience of the flowers, insects, clouds, and woodlands was very significant for him. It was as if his senses were heightened and he had a finely

tuned awareness of the world around him so much so that it affected the overall direction and viewpoint of his life. He acknowledges that the experience impacted upon his "feeling for what is real and worthwhile in life." Berry's experience illustrates how an encounter with, and a receptivity to, the natural world can have far-reaching consequences. Such experiences can provide the inspiration and motivation to develop an outlook on life which affirms what is "real and worthwhile".



## "Magnolias"

Photograph by Malgorzata Kmita; 24 March 2017

It is likely that each one of us has experienced the sense of awe and wonder that is evoked by the beauty of the natural world. A wonderful sunrise or sunset, a starry night,

a rainbow or the radiance of a field of sunflowers, for example, can move, inspire, and even overwhelm us. Such experiences capture our attention and elicit positive feelings and emotions. They can be described as 'wonderful' because they are beautiful, amazing, and even breath-taking. Such experiences are, indeed, of "inexplicable wonder" and "magic moment(s)"

Berry talks of "the realm of the sacred" and of "special sacred moments" and that "myth is our approach to the deepest realities of the universe". He talks poetically and poignantly of the earth speaking to humankind and affirming that it has "interior riches to bestow upon (us)." For Thomas Berry the recognition and affirmation of the sacredness of all that is presents a call to change. He invites humankind to respond to what is fundamentally a radically new cultural story, a contemporary great cosmological narrative of the unfolding universe which he believes can present a rationale for hope and a catalyst for change.

It can be suggested that Berry has cogently and wondrously illustrated how an understanding of the origins, evolution and development of the universe can facilitate the experience of awe and wonder as human beings reverentially contemplate their place in the cosmos. Each person can begin to develop a sense that their existence is part of a much bigger picture, they are not separate from nature, they are part of the universe. Ultimately, therefore, each person belongs; they are at home in the cosmos.

It can be suggested that Berry's evolutionary framework can be a significant resource for facilitating an elucidation of what I term the contemplative pedagogies of Janusz Korczak and Vasily Sukhomolinsky which can be closely related to dimensions of a curriculum for the world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century which are identified and outlined below. These dimensions are: encounter with nature, aesthetic and creative sensibility, contemplation, the power of story, service and an ecological and reverential perspective.

In his celebrated work *To Children I Give My Heart*, Sukhomolinsky declares:

*In one of his letters, outstanding Polish educator Janusz Korczak ... reminds us of the necessity of gaining entrance to the spiritual world of the child, without condescending to it. This is a very subtle idea, the point of which we educators must understand thoroughly. The genuine educator must assimilate the child's perceptions of the world, its emotional and moral reactions to the surrounding reality with all their distinctive clarity, sensitivity, and immediacy..*

Sukhomolinsky is affirming the importance of the educator's capacity to integrate into her ways of seeing the world the child's perceptions, perspectives, and understandings of the world around them including their emotional and moral response to the environments with which they interact. He recognises, therefore, the vital importance of the educator being able to enter into the multi-dimensional world of the child. Sukhomolinsky follows this statement by affirming that:

*I firmly believe that there are qualities without which a person cannot become a genuine educator, and foremost among them is the ability to penetrate into the spiritual world of the child.*

For Sukhomolinsky, therefore, the child's way of seeing and being in the world is, ultimately, a spiritual response. Korczak commented:

*"I no longer wonder over the fact that God has no beginning and no end, for in him I see the harmony of an infinity of stars. It is creation which testifies to the existence of the creator, and not the priest. I have created a new religion for myself, it has no direction yet, but it is the manifestation of spirituality."*



Photograph by Pixabay [www.pexels.com](http://www.pexels.com)

Korczak appears to be articulating a perspective in which the existence of the cosmos, the infinity of stars, is a pointer to a transcendent reality, the ground of being of all that exists. However, he acknowledges that this ultimately spiritual perspective does not necessarily have to be rooted in a traditional theistic framework although he affirms that it is a new form of religion. Although Korczak's perspective may be regarded as pantheistic in approach it can be viewed as the expression of an emerging view of the universe which has found its expression in Thomas Berry's *Universe Story* and in the

insights of the Polish-American Eco-Philosopher Henryk Skolimowski who has affirmed that

*“To think reverentially is first of all to recognise human life as an intrinsic value; is to recognise love as an essential and indispensable force of human existence; is to recognise creative thinking as an inherent part of human nature; is to recognise joy as an integral part of our daily living; is to recognise the brotherhood of all beings as the basis of our new understanding of the Cosmos at large.”*

It is possible to consider such perspectives in relation to Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child because they powerfully suggest that a significant vehicle for the development of the child's capacity for articulating their voice, for affirming their right to be heard, is the teacher's capacity to relate to, and engage with, the child's ways of seeing and experiencing the world. Ultimately, therefore, it can be suggested that, echoing the Austrian psychiatrist Viktor Frankl's affirmation of the primacy of meaning, the child's right to be heard is grounded in a dialogic encounter between the child's

view of the world and the educator's engagement with this.

Sukhomlinsky articulates an approach to education in which the child's encounter with nature is affirmed:

*We went to the meadow in the quiet of early evening. A pensive pussy-willow with tender foliage stood before us, and in the pond was the reflection of the endless firmament. A flock of swans flew across the clear azure sky. We listened attentively to the music of the beautiful evening. We heard a surprising sound from somewhere in the pond, as if someone were softly striking the keys of a clavicord. It seemed that the pond itself, the bank and the firmament were all ringing with the sound.*

It is possible to suggest that his evocation of the sights and sounds of nature echoes, and connects deeply with, the reverential respect for nature presented in the 1930 film *Zemlya (Earth)* by the Ukrainian director Alexander Dovzhenko in its poetic and lyrical portrayal of the deep connection with, and to, the land. It is possible to regard

*Zemlya* as an example of lyrical Ukrainian pantheism, a celebration of humankind's relationship with, and rootedness in, the soil rather than in the beliefs and practices of the Orthodox Church.

*Zemlya* can be viewed below.



Sukhomlinsky encouraged the children to engage with the sights and sounds of the natural world and to relate in

depth to what they experienced. His declaration that “we listened attentively” illustrates that he was affirming a response to the beauties and joys of nature which required focus, concentration and an attitude of being fully present to, and with, the phenomena he and his children encountered. Such an approach echoes Korczak’s declaration in his *Ghetto Diary*:

*Thank you, Merciful Lord, for the meadow and the bright sunsets, for the refreshing evening breeze after a hot day of toil and struggle. Thank you, Merciful Lord, for having arranged so wisely to provide flowers with fragrance, glow worms with the glow, and make the stars in the sky sparkle.*

He is offering a prayer of thanksgiving for the beauties of the earth. His cosmic gratitude is rooted in an appreciation of the natural world which, despite the challenges he and his children faced, presented to him a vision of beauty and joy. Korczak's pedagogical approach sensitised his children to the positive and the good which was present even in the midst of what often

appeared to be the chaos which surrounded them in the wider world.

A curriculum which engages children with the natural world also encourages the development of the aesthetic, creative and contemplative dimensions. Sukhomlinsky illustrates the importance of the aesthetic dimension in his declaration that:

*The chief aim for me was to teach (the children) the ability to relate emotionally to the beautiful and to give them a need for impressions of an aesthetic nature. Beauty must become an integral part of people's lives, and this task is accomplished by education.*



“Lost In Wonder” by Kelvin Ravenscroft ©

Acrylic on Paper; 2016

Indeed, Sukhomlinsky celebrates the transformative power of beauty in his affirmation that:

*Working to create beauty enobles the young heart and prevents indifference. In creating beauty on the earth, the children become better, purer and more beautiful.*

Sukhomlinsky recognises, therefore, that beauty is not only to be perceived and discerned, it has also to be actively created. For example, he reflects upon the creation by the children of what he terms a Nook of Beauty:

*Between the school plot and a thicket of bushes, the children found a clearing covered with thick grass by the slope of the ravine. There was a lot of moisture during showers. We weeded the clearing and began to transform it into a green lawn. 'Our nook will be a Kingdom of green', I told the children ... This dream inspired the children.*

It can be suggested that a key element of Korczak's contemplative approach was his recognition that the telling of stories is a powerful vehicle for exploring the world and for making sense of our experience. In works such as *King Matty*, *King Matty and the Desert Island*, and

*Kajtek the Magician* together with the stories he told as the Old Doctor on Polish Radio, Korczak introduced children of all ages to the experience of wonder, inspiration, of being spellbound by the power of an unfolding story. He recognised that we all need myths, narratives, dreams to live by; they provide meaning, hope and motivation in an all too uncertain world. Where can we look as a source of stories for the young people of today? Thomas Berry suggests that an understanding of the origins and unfolding of the Universe and our place within it provides an all-encompassing cosmic story for our times.

Sukhomlinsky echoes Korczak in his affirmation of the power of story. He wrote:

*Why do children listen to stories so eagerly? Why do they love the twilight, when the very atmosphere supports flights of the imagination so? Why do stories develop the speech and strengthen the thought processes of the child? Because the images of stories are clearly emotionally coloured. The words of a story live in the*

*child's imagination. The child's heart stops when it hears or pronounces the words painted by fantasy.*

His recognition that stories 'develop the speech and strengthen the thought processes of the child' can be regarded as presenting a pedagogical foundation for the development of the child's voice, their capacity for authentic self-expression, affirming their right to be heard. For the child to present their voice can involve them sharing their story, their experience, aspects of their personal narrative, their own perspectives or ways of seeing things. Through listening to stories, enacting them and through writing their own stories children are encouraged and empowered to find their personal voice through which they are given the confidence to assert who they are and to share their memories, dreams and reflections, their concerns, hopes and aspirations.

It can be suggested that programmes of Teacher Education in the world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, therefore, should have at their heart the themes of personal, social, and ecological awareness, respect for others and the

world in which we live and for the development of values such as respect, empathy, and compassion. The developing curricula of the future can creatively combine academic rigour, practical skills, and positive values, facilitating a contemplative appreciation of the sheer gift of being alive. Such a pedagogical approach can be regarded as being truly faithful to the radical, deeply spiritual, contemplative humanism of Janusz Korczak and Vasily Sukhomlinsky.

Through this creative activity the children are being socialized into the dimension of service as a significant feature of life. Through articulating their creative voices, they are being inspired, encouraged, and motivated to act not only with regard to self-interest but they are also being nurtured into an altruistic understanding of the world. Indeed, Viktor Frankl affirms that:

*... being human always points, and is directed, to something, or someone, other than oneself – be it a meaning to fulfill or another human being to encounter. The more one forgets himself – by giving himself to a*

*cause to serve or another person to love the more human he is and the more he actualizes himself.*

Korczak and Sukhomlinsky both recognized and affirmed in their work with children that meaning, value, significance and purpose is located in encounter with, and service to and for, others. Their pedagogies, therefore, are infused with a profound moral dimension. This moral dimension and the capacity for the child to be heard and express their voice are also located in the storytelling dimension.

The interplay of the aesthetic, service, and storytelling dimensions of the curriculum is consolidated by what can be termed the contemplative dimension which is characterised by, for example, attention, focus, mindfulness, reflection, meditation, and prayer. A contemplative curriculum recognises that both teachers and pupils require opportunities for silence and stillness so that they are liberated from the all too pervasive barrage of concepts, themes, and ideas which the curriculum can overwhelm and overload us with.

For Korczak trust is at the heart of the pedagogical enterprise. The essence of trust is located in providing the child with the opportunity, and environment, a safe space, in which her views can be articulated. The child should be able to share her perceptions, thoughts, concerns, anxieties, hopes, aspirations and dreams in an atmosphere where she will be truly heard by the adults who listen to her. The relationship between educator and child is that of a dialogue in which the child learns to trust the adult as a result of genuinely being given a voice. As a result of being heard the adult gains respect. Respect, therefore, is mutual and grows from trust.

Mary Rose O'Reilly has explored the concept of what she terms Radical Presence and she draws upon Parker Palmer's idea that "To teach is to create space..." In *To Know As We Are Known* Parker identifies three key features of a learning space: openness, boundaries and an atmosphere of hospitality. For Parker, hospitality denotes "...receiving each other, our struggles, our new born ideas, with openness and care." It can be suggested

that the “space” to which Palmer refers includes both the physical space, the material environment, which is the location for teaching and learning, and also the nature and quality of the relationships and interactions within the classroom. “Space”, therefore, can be regarded as having both inner and outer, subjective and objective, dimensions in which the existential encounter, the learning dialectical space, between teacher and students is located in a physical space, the classroom environment. Indeed, recent years have seen the emergence of an interest in educational circles in the relationship between physical spaces and children's wellbeing with particular reference to the ways in which experience of the natural world promotes flourishing of both children and teachers. Point (e) of Article 29 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states that “Parties agree that the education of the child shall be directed to ...the development of respect for the natural environment.” Indeed, it can be suggested that ‘respect for the natural environment’ underpins all aspects of Article 29 because,

ultimately, the 'environment' is not restricted to the physical, material, natural world but also refers to the dynamic network of relationships and interactions, the 'web of life' which characterises the whole of creation.

Ultimately, therefore, "to create a space", in an educational context, can be regarded as creating sanctuaries, places of safety, security, meaning and value. I have previously explored the importance of places of sanctuary and their relationship to the natural world in two of the five Janusz Korczak Projects I developed during the summer of 2009 which were introduced at the International Korczak Association meeting in Warsaw in September 2009 and which were subsequently distributed by e-mail to Korczakians throughout the world.

The Space for Reflection and Sanctuary Projects explored the concept of respect for the natural environment through the planning, development, creation, and maintenance of natural spaces which embody the values of peace, tolerance, equality, friendship, understanding

and responsibility which characterised Korczak's life and are affirmed in the United Nations Convention. The Projects aimed to explore Korczak's affirmation of the primacy of oases of calm through the creation of Spaces for Reflection, Sanctuaries, what Henryk Skolimowski has called *Oikos*, a Sacred Enclosure.

The Projects have two distinct, yet related aspects to them. Firstly, they aim to create physical spaces in which, for example, pupils, students, teachers, therapeutic groups, and faith communities can create what can be termed a sanctuary, a space apart, a place of quiet and calm. Secondly, the creation of these physical spaces is complemented by the establishment of reflective, contemplative, meditative and mindfulness-based programmes, teaching and learning activities, which aim to actively foster the positive peaceful values articulated both in Korczak's vision and in Article 29 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Unused or underutilised spaces in schools, colleges, or universities, for example, are identified with a view to

transforming them into Quiet Spaces and Places. Alternatively, land adjacent to museums, galleries or public parks or land belonging to faith communities could be identified.

Thomas Berry has declared:

*“We have no inner spiritual development without outer experience. Immediately, when we see or experience any natural phenomenon, when we see a flower, a butterfly a tree, when we feel the evening breeze flow over us or wade in a stream of clear water, our natural response is intuitive, transforming, immediate, ecstatic. Everywhere we find ourselves invaded by the world of the sacred..... An absence of the sacred is the basic flaw at many of our efforts in ecologically or environmentally adjusting our presence to the natural world. It has been said ‘We will not save what we do not love.’ It is also true that we will neither love nor save what we do not experience as sacred.”*

Echoing Berry, the Korczak inspired Spaces and Places projects can be regarded as affirming the creation of environments which are loved in which transformative teaching and learning, and community engagement and activities can take place. Such places and spaces can be regarded as laboratories for the creation of freedom, trust, and respect.

*“It has not yet crystallised within me, nor has it been confirmed by reasoning, that the child’s primary and irrefutable right is the right to voice his thoughts, to active participation in our considerations and verdicts concerning him. When we will have gained his respect and trust, once he confides in us of his own free will and tells us what he has the right to do there will be less puzzling moments, less mistakes.”*

This declaration by Janusz Korczak in his work *How To Love A Child* affirms the importance of the child’s right to be heard, to be an active participant in a process of creative dialogue in which she can find her authentic voice.

The existential therapy of the Austrian Psychiatrist Viktor Frankl, complementing Korczak's pedagogical philosophy, affirms the primacy of the search for meaning. Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child can be regarded as connecting deeply with the pedagogical process of nurturing the authentic voice of the child at the heart of which is a profoundly spiritual way of seeing, and engaging with, the world.

Frankl has commented that:

*Man's struggle for his self and his identity is doomed to failure unless it is enacted as dedication and devotion to something beyond his self, to something above his self.*

As a result of his own personal experiences in the Dachau and Auschwitz concentration camps he developed an approach to psychiatry which recognises the primacy of humankind's search for meaning. He believed that existential frustration and spiritual problems can lead to the development of a form of neurotic illness which he has identified as noogenic neurosis in which the individual

struggles to come to terms with the value and meaning of his life. Frankl developed a psychotherapeutic approach called Logotherapy which explores questions of meaning, value and purpose. Frankl noted that:

*A literal translation of the term 'logotherapy' is 'therapy through meaning' ... it could also be translated as 'healing through meaning'...*

Frankl is affirming that questions of meaning, value and purpose are at the heart of being human and it can be suggested that Janusz Korczak's pedagogical philosophy consistently and profoundly engages with the nature and meaning of existence and the questions which arise from it.

Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child affirms that children have the right to say what they think should happen, when adults are making decisions that affect them, and to have their opinions taken into account. Point 1 of the article states that:

*... parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express these views freely...*

The reference “to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views” suggests that at the heart of this Article is the recognition and affirmation of the developing autonomy and capacity for self-expression of the child. The pedagogical enterprise can be regarded as having at its heart the aim of facilitating, developing and nurturing the capacity for children to grow in their ability to discover and articulate their own unique voice and to express their ways of seeing and being in the world cogently and confidently. Indeed, programmes of, for example, Citizenship Education, Personal, Health and Social Education and Critical Thinking can all be regarded as playing an important role in encouraging and empowering children to develop a growing sense of independence in a framework for the management of schools and creation of a teaching and learning ethos in

which active pupil participation in decision making is affirmed.

However, although it can be recognised that there are many creative, innovative and inspiring contemporary examples of curriculum programmes and initiatives which aim to reflect and actualise the principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, including Article 12, it can be suggested that there is a much more fundamental question which needs to be addressed and explored in relation to the development of the capacity for children to express their views freely, namely the question of what philosophies or pedagogies of education can be considered as authentically creating an environment and an ethos in which the nurturing and development of the child's capacity for autonomous self-expression is found to permeate every aspect of the curriculum? Ultimately, the child's capacity for self-expression, to share their personal voice, does not develop in a vacuum, it is nurtured in an affirming context

in which personal growth and development, in all its many and varied forms, is encouraged.

Janusz Korczak's approach to the child is encapsulated in his affirmation that:

*An educator who does not enforce but sets free, does not drag but uplifts, does not crush but shapes, does not dictate but instructs, does not demand but requests, will experience inspired moments with the child.*

Such an approach can be regarded as one in which the child is, indeed, empowered, encouraged, and enabled to articulate their voice, their often-unheard cry for meaning, and enables them to have a voice and be listened to. It can be suggested that in order to actively nurture and develop children's capacity for self-expression, to embark upon a journey of creating mechanisms through which their voice can be heard, it is possible to propose a creative synthesis of the pedagogical approaches of Korczak and Sukhomlinsky and Frankl's affirmation of the vital importance of creating

and/or discovering meaning in life together with the Journey of the Universe cosmic narrative of Thomas Berry.

Reflecting upon the explorations undertaken in the Thomas Berry Manchester community study group, amongst the diversity of perspectives discussed, there are five dimensions which can be considered.

Firstly, the experience of Wonder, Re-enchantment, and Transformation. Common to the spiritual traditions of the world is the experience of transformation. Sacred scriptures tell of individuals and communities who have undergone a turning around, a leaving behind of the old self and the emergence, at times involving significant loss and pain, of a new identity. Using Biblical language, it is possible to talk of metanoia, conversion, a reorientation of the self to the Divine. For Thomas Berry, rooted in the Roman Catholic Christian tradition, and, in many ways echoing the spiritual vision of Francis of Assisi, he articulated a spirituality which encompassed the whole of creation, affirming the importance of awe, wonder, reverence and a sense of the unity of all things at the

heart of which is cosmic creativity. In essence, Berry invites us to undergo the task of rediscovering the enchantment at the heart of life. He calls us to abandon any sense of despair, cynicism and nihilism and to (re)discover the glorious gift of life in all its fullness.

Secondly, related to the experience of Wonder, Re-enchantment and Transformation is the relationship between Worship and Value. We worship that which is of worth. Echoing the theologian Paul Tillich, it can be said that Berry calls us to reappraise and re-evaluate that which, in our individual and collective lives, is our Ultimate Concern. At the heart of Berry's way of seeing is a profound reverence for life.

In *The Dream of the Earth* Berry declares that:

*"If the earth does grow inhospitable towards human presence, it is primarily because we have lost our sense of courtesy towards the earth and its inhabitants, our sense of gratitude, our willingness to recognise the sacred*

*character of habitat, our capacity for the awesome, for the numinous quality of every earthly reality."*

This sense of the "numinous quality of every earthly reality" suggests a third significant dimension of Berry's way of seeing, namely, what can be termed Contemplative Awareness.

It can be suggested that Berry's vision has significant implications for the experience of teaching and learning in all its diverse contexts. The development and introduction of a Journey of the Universe curriculum into schools, colleges, and universities, and also within community groups and faith communities, has the potential to nurture the contemplative capacity, the capacity of what Simone Weil termed "attention" which she said is "the rarest and purest form of generosity." The Biblical tradition frequently invites us to "Behold!" To behold is to look deeply, to see in depth, to transcend superficiality, and to, ultimately, experience things in a new way and be transformed.

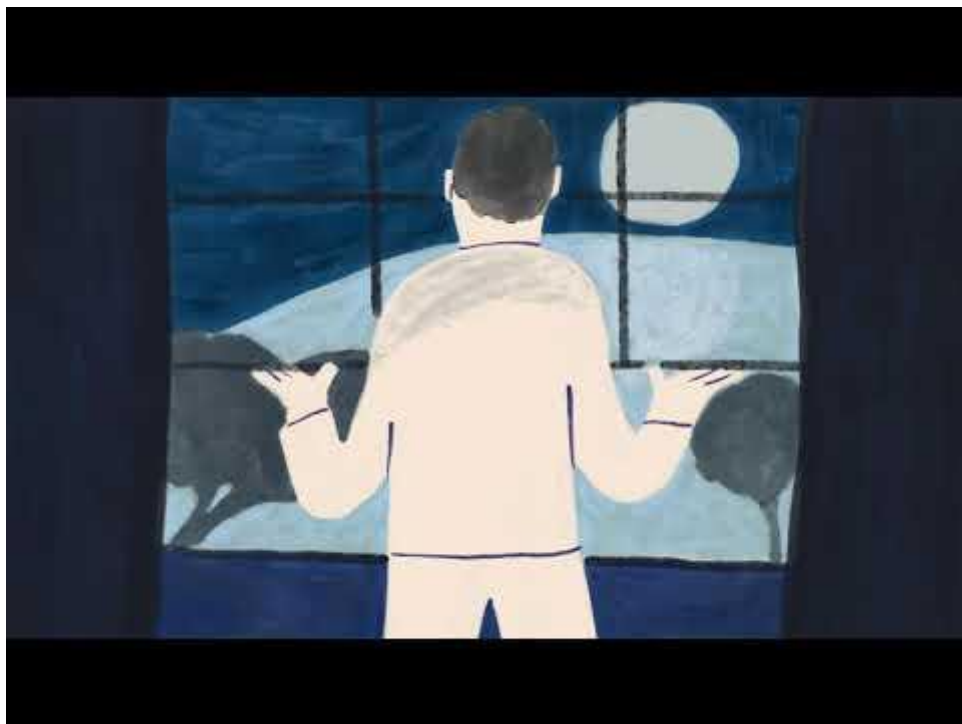
Experiencing things in a new way and being transformed connects with what can be regarded as the fourth dimension arising from Berry's Universe Story which is the concept of Sacred Activism. It is possible to creatively explore Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan through the lens of the Journey of the Universe and retell and rediscover its core message anew through a recognition that the man attacked and wounded on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho is the wounded earth who is responded to with compassion by the unexpected outsider, who nurtures, renews, and restores through reverential Sacred Activism. Thomas Berry calls us to love the Earth and each other. Echoing Jesus' parable, we love God when we love the earth, our host and neighbour, in all its bounteous diversity.

Jenny Grut, in her book *The Healing Fields: Psychotherapy and Nature to Rebuild Shattered Lives* has commented:

*"If we do not consider ourselves connected with nature we are in a state of disconnection and this is what shattered lives are about. If we cannot make a link with*

*what is outside ourselves, we cannot get to know ourselves."*

The link with "what is outside ourselves" is powerfully and beautifully articulated by Wendell Berry in his poem: *'The Peace of Wild Things'*:



Berry's poem illustrates that it is possible for nature to provide a sanctuary from despair and fear. He suggests that the natural world can provide a space for rest, peace, grace and freedom. It can be an oasis offering physical and spiritual refreshment when faced with existential challenges. Fifthly, however, it is important not

to romanticise nature and to view it as a panacea for curing all the ills of contemporary society. Indeed, in his cosmological narrative, Thomas Berry acknowledges and recognises that the origin, process, and evolution of the universe is characterised by change which is, all too often forceful and destructive in its power and energy. Nature can, indeed, be restorative, but it can also, as evidenced by regular news bulletins from around the world, be a cause of great suffering to both humankind and the animal kingdom.

Reflecting upon the experience of the 2011 Fukushima nuclear disaster in Japan, Koyu Abbe, the Chief Monk of the Joenji Temple community has declared: "To put Buddhist belief in one word: life doesn't go as you wish. Everyone runs into obstacles; therefore, in order to overcome this disaster we should accept that this disaster had happened and need to face the reality squarely." He is recognising the reality that existence is characterised by contingency, finitude, and impermanence. As the experience of the Buddha in his encounter with old age,

sickness and death confirms, life presents challenges, which are all too often unexpected, which can shake the very foundations of our being. Suffering in its many and varied forms can have the effect of destabilising and subverting what we consider to be the reassuring predictable reliability of the positive routines and experiences of daily living. When suffering breaks into our lives it is understandable why individuals and communities ask “Why has this happened?”, “What does this all mean?”, “Why do people suffer?” “Is there any purpose to what has happened?”, “What can we do?” and “How should we respond?”. The irruption of dukkha, suffering, into our lives can present a profound existential challenge because it powerfully and painfully illustrates that our understandable and laudable aim to construct individual and social lives characterised by order, routine, predictability, and some degree of certainty can, often violently, be sabotaged by forces beyond our control.

Indeed, the experience of Janusz Korczak and his orphans in the Warsaw Ghetto of Nazi-occupied Poland was

located in the context of an apocalyptic vision of a world which appeared to have gone mad. The old order had been subverted and a chilling ideology was systematically and clinically defining millions of people as undesirable, as being less than human, for whom the only fate was certain death. The early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century have also seen many challenging examples of war, conflict and injustice which, at times, can be perceived as overwhelming and rendering individuals, communities and nations powerless to restore order, security and peace.

The significance of transformation, both personally and socially, and the primacy of the “will to meaning” has been demonstrated in the action undertaken by the Zen Buddhist monks of the Joenji Temple in Japan following the Fukushima nuclear disaster in 2011. Koyu Abbe, declared: “I contemplated what I could do. I decided to receive the radiated dirt at my Temple. The Temple ground is vast.” Together with his community, Koyu Abbe made the decision to undertake transformative action in

order to try to alleviate the radioactivity emanating from the Fukushima nuclear power plant. The Temple took large quantities of the radiated soil and stored it in the Temple grounds and established a project entitled “Hana ni Negaiwo”, “Make A Wish Upon Flowers” which encouraged the local population to plant sunflower seeds and mustard seeds together with other plants in order for them to absorb and transform the radiation. In effect, the Joenji monks have taken their practices of meditation, mindfulness, contemplation, and reflection and made connections between their individual and collective spiritual disciplines and the wider ecology of their Temple grounds and the surrounding towns and villages. The spiritual disciplines, therefore, engage with the environmental, social, and economic challenges presented by the Fukushima nuclear disaster. The deep inner contemplative spirituality of the monks makes profound and practical connections with the outer transformative challenges and opportunities of the wider

environment. In his 14 Principles of Engaged Buddhism Thich Nhat Hanh indicates:

*“Do not avoid suffering or close your eyes before suffering. Do not lose awareness of the existence of suffering in the life of the world. Find ways to be with those who are suffering, including personal contact, visits, images and sounds. By such means, awaken yourself and others to the reality of suffering in the world.”*

Through their sunflower project the monks of Joenjai Temple are, indeed, awakening themselves and others to the reality of suffering in the world and are undertaking action aimed at alleviating some of this suffering motivated by “metta”, loving kindness.



Photograph by Susanne Jutzeler [www.pexels.com](http://www.pexels.com)

The Joenji monks and the Make A Wish Upon Flowers project in their planting of sunflowers to transform the radiated soil can be regarded as saying a joyous Yes! to life and are presenting a simple, yet profound illustration of the capacity of spiritual traditions to engage with the challenges and opportunities of life. Their transformative action affirms and embodies Frankl's declaration that man's struggle for self-identity is rooted and located in "... dedication and devotion to something beyond his self, to something above his self."

Koyu Abbe has declared:

*“My hope is, as we wish upon flowers, the seeds of sunflowers and many other flowers we have distributed will bloom in Fukushima and become everyone's flower of hope and happiness for the future. I wish this from the bottom of my heart.”*

In this perspective the act of growing sunflowers is a practical meaningful act of transformation. As the sunflower plants absorb the radiation from the surrounding area they act as a profound symbol of transformation in the personal, social and ecological dimensions of existence. What can be regarded as a simple act of planting and nurturing seeds illustrates that simple actions have the potential to have significant, even far-reaching, consequences. Confirming the understanding of the Buddhist law of karma, actions do have consequences. How we live, what we do and say, how we relate to, and connect with, others and with our wider ecologies, all

have significance. It is like the pebble tossed into the lake. Once the pebble is thrown into the water we are no longer in control of what happens. We are actively involved in the casting of the stone into the water but we are not in control of, and we cannot ultimately predict, the extent and the force of the ripples on the lake which arise from the act of casting the stone. There is a profound sense, therefore, in which in a world in which we can easily become overwhelmed by the sheer scale of “dukkha”, suffering, in its many and varied forms, the inspiring and ennobling example of the monks of the Joenji Temple present us with a contemporary role model illustrating how small acts can have very significant consequences. Indeed, from a small seed a mighty oak can grow. It can be suggested that in his declaration that “The Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed” Jesus, in harmony with the Buddha, draws our attention to the importance of “planting seeds”, preparing the ground for, and nurturing actions, activities, initiatives and projects which can transform lives and transform, in the process,

darkness into light, hopelessness into hope and despair into meaning and purpose. The Kingdom of God, therefore, is present wherever and whenever positive transformation is manifested.

In *The Boarding School* Janusz Korczak wrote:

*"Is it not enough that I experience a feeling of joyful gratitude? As I see them grow and toughen? Is this in itself not a sufficient reward for the work done? Haven't I the right to be a disinterested worshipper of nature, to watch the shrub become green?"*

In this metaphor Korczak is affirming that as a pedagogue, a sculptor of children's' souls, he experiences a sense of joyful gratitude when he sees the children in his care blossom and flourish and reach maturity. Every pedagogue, therefore, can be regarded as being a "sower of seeds" which she nurtures and cherishes so that the fruits can be made manifest in the lives of the children in their care.

This idea of an educator 'sowing seeds' links closely to the growth, the development of personal "roots", the places, spaces, people and experiences which have grounded them and provided a sense of purpose and direction in their lives. The pedagogue, therefore, provides an environment, an ecology, in which the seeds of learning grow and flourish and become the "roots" and "fruits" of the child's life. To be a pedagogue, therefore, can be regarded as acknowledging a calling, a vocation, to embark upon the life-long journey of being a sower of seeds of wisdom, knowledge, understanding and inspiration who, in dialogue and encounter with the child creates and nurtures teaching and learning environments in which the children can blossom and flourish.

In his '*Ghetto Diary*' Korczak declared:

*"Thank you, Merciful Lord, for the meadow and the bright sunsets, for the refreshing evening breeze after a hot day of toil and struggle."*

*Thank you, Merciful Lord, for having arranged so wisely to provide flowers with fragrance, glow worms with the glow, and make the stars in the sky sparkle."*

He is offering a prayer of thanksgiving for the beauties of the earth. His cosmic gratitude is rooted in an appreciation of the natural world which, despite the sufferings of life, presented to him a vision of beauty and joy. Korczak's contemplation, reflection and meditation were undertaken in the midst of the challenging life of the orphanage in the Warsaw Ghetto at a time when the lives of he and his children hung in the balance. The future was most uncertain. Despite this Korczak took the time to mindfully and attentively focus not solely on the challenges, stresses and strains of running the orphanage but, instead, he took the time to be grateful for each positive aspect of the children's existence. He said a glorious Yes! to life when it would have been understandable for him to have been ground down by the daily challenges he and his children faced.

The Monks of the Joenji Temple gently, humbly, yet powerfully, illustrate that significant transformation can arise from relatively small acts of “*metta*”, loving kindness, in which individually and collectively persons can create and leave a legacy. Each human being, responding to the precious gift of life in all of its fragile glory, can create the ripples on the pond confirming that, ultimately, all things exist in a dynamic, creative and interconnected web of life. Each person begins where they are, in their own context and situation. From this context they exercise their freedom to choose and act and, in this process they can actualise transformation. Inspired by the teaching and way of the Buddha, the “*Dharma*”, the Joenji monks affirm the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path and mindfully, creatively and with compassion for all beings bring about, at

times almost imperceptibly, profound personal, social and ecological change. The Joenji monks and the Make A Wish Upon Flowers project articulates clearly and unambiguously the philosopher Jean Paul Sartre's perspective that "Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself." To be a person is to be embodied and engaged; we do not exist as disembodied minds engaging purely in rational thought. Thinking and reflection is translated into engagement with the world. We are what we do. Who we are is how we act.



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## *Meditation 11: Harmony*

This Meditation and Reflection reviews the key concepts, themes and ideas explored in several of the Thomas Berry Manchester community study group meetings held between September 2015 and December 2016 and

includes examples of approaches to teaching and learning which can be regarded as being in harmony with the pedagogical philosophies of Janusz Korczak and Vasily Sukhomlinsky.

HRH The Prince of Wales has commented:

*"If people are encouraged to immerse themselves in Nature's grammar and geometry they are often led to acquire some remarkably deep philosophical insights."*

The Thomas Berry Manchester meeting in December 2015 began by considering a quotation from Thomas Berry alongside a painting *Eternity* (watercolour on paper; 2011) by the artist Joseph Raffael. The group discussed what the painting suggested to us and we shared a range of perspectives on the possible meaning(s) of the artwork.

It was suggested that the fossil image connected with Thomas Berry's *Journey of the Universe* because it illustrates that the earth and its many and varied life forms has a long history which is itself part of a much greater history, the history of the Big Bang until the present day. It

is particularly striking that in the unfolding of this story humankind are relative newcomers. The sharing of ideas also suggested that the fossil illustrates that the past, even the greatly distant past, is, in some sense, always with us. At all times we are surrounded by, and immersed in, that which has preceded us. This view also closely connects to those persons whom we have known and loved and who have greatly influenced us but who have passed away. There is a very profound sense in which our connection with them continues to be real, present and sustaining. Indeed, both Janusz Korczak and Vasily Sukhomlinsky are no longer with us yet their lives and legacies continue to inspire and motivate us to develop meaningful and transformative pedagogical approaches and strategies. The shape of the fossil in Raffael's painting raised the theme of patterns and design in nature. Indeed, the shape, form and pattern of the fossil in the painting was also presented in a variety of examples from nature in the film *Harmony* which we viewed together.

*Harmony*, which had its world premiere at the Sundance film Festival in London in April 2012, is inspired by HRH Prince Charles' long-standing recognition of the requirement for a new way of seeing and being in the world and it presents contemporary case studies from the United Kingdom, the USA, India and Canada in which humankind works with nature, not against it, in sustainable and harmonious ways. A trailer for the film is available below.



The film inspired wide ranging discussion of ways in which the values and principles embodied in the projects could

possibly be applied to our local contexts in Manchester. How could we translate the vision, the new ways of responding to the ecological, economic, political, educational and spiritual challenges and opportunities, articulated in the film to our local contexts? In particular, how is it possible to nurture spaces and places which people will love and respect? Can a sense of the sacred and a reverential way of seeing, being and relating to oneself, others and the world be developed? How might the citizens of Manchester, Warsaw, Amsterdam, Kiev, Berlin, and Paris, for example, create spaces and places and develop projects and initiatives which inspire and facilitate flourishing and well-being? Exploration of this question connects significantly with the themes and ideas explored in the Korczak projects developed in 2009 which are discussed earlier in this paper.

The January 2016 Thomas Berry Manchester meeting commenced with a reading and exploration together of pages one and two of Richard Louv's book *The Nature Principle – Reconnecting with Life in a Virtual Age*. In this

introductory section of the book entitled *Nature-Deficit Disorder for Adults* Louv recounts the experience, twenty years earlier, of visiting the home of friends in New Mexico. After settling in to the home (from which his friends were away) Louv describes the experience of sitting alone and looking out over a field towards “a line of distant cottonwoods that rimmed the Pecos.” He notes:

*“I watched the afternoon thunderheads rise above the high desert to the east and the layers of sandstone across the river. The field of chili shivered in the sun. Above me, leaves rattled and tree limbs scratched. My eyes settled on a single cottonwood at the river, its branches and upper leaves waving in a slow rhythm above all the others. An hour, perhaps more, went by. Tension crawled up and out of me. It seemed to twist in the air above the green field. Then it was gone. And something better took its place.”*

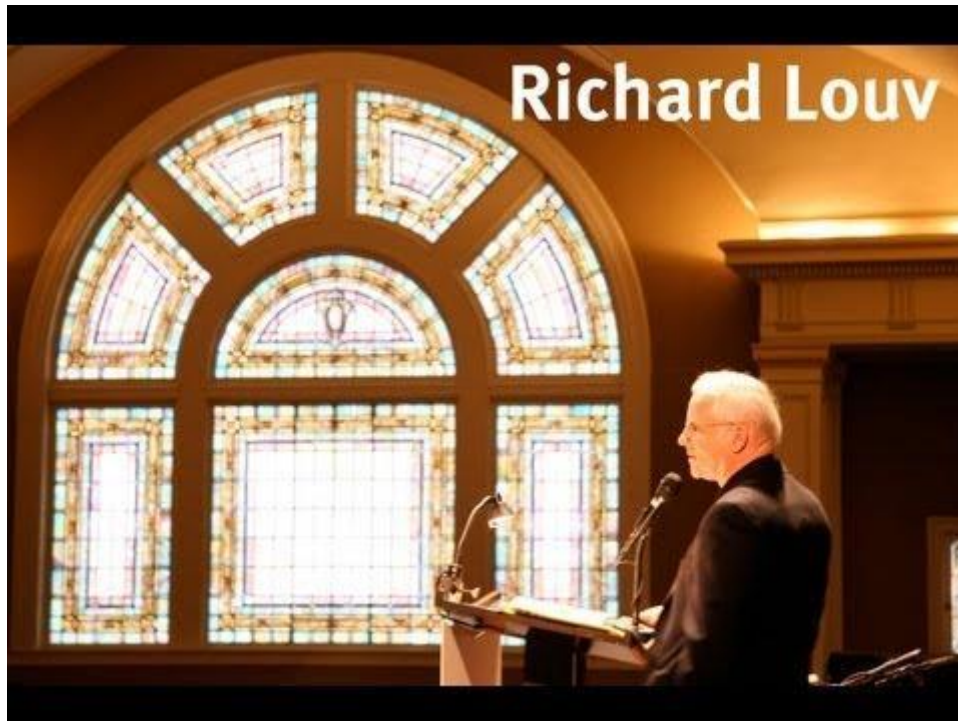
Louv’s account illustrates that he is clearly paying attention to the detail of the environment around him. He is aware, for example, of the thunderheads, the layers of

sandstone, the field of chili, the rattling and waving of leaves. He is silently observing carefully and thoughtfully the phenomena of the natural world. He is giving time to this activity. However, this experience is not detached, dispassionate and clinical monitoring of the world around him. The experience affects him profoundly because it has palpable somatic consequences in his declaration that "Tension crawled up and out of me." The experience of sitting, watching and waiting results in a profound cathartic physical release. The tension which is released from his body is described as "(twisting) in the air above the green field." It is as if something which was not positive, tension, was let go of and, as Louv affirms, something positive, "something better took its place."

Louv recalls this experience in the introduction to his book because it had a deeply restorative and life enhancing effect upon him. He comments that:

*"I often think about the cottonwood at the river's edge, and similar moments of inexplicable wonder, times when I*

*received from nature just what I needed: an elusive it for which I have no name."*



In his affirmation of such “moments of inexplicable wonder” Louv’s experience can be regarded as an illustration of the transformative power of nature which we explored in the first meeting of the Journey of the Universe group in September 2015 in which we considered together the experience of Thomas Berry as a twelve-year-old encountering a field of meadows. Berry describes this experience as “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 experience I can remember.”

Following our exploration of the extract from Richard Louv's book we viewed the dvd *Thomas Berry Speaks* which consists of two short films: *Thomas Berry-The Great Work* and *Thomas Berry-The Power of Story and the Capacity for Change*. In our discussions following the films we recognised that running through them was the concept of the sacredness of the natural world. Berry talks of “the realm of the sacred” and of “special sacred moments” and that “myth is our approach to the deepest realities of the universe”. He talks poetically and poignantly of the earth speaking to humankind and affirming that it has “interior riches to bestow upon you.” For Thomas Berry the recognition and affirmation of the sacredness of all that is presents a call to change. He invites humankind to respond to what is fundamentally a radically new cultural story, a contemporary great cosmological narrative of the unfolding universe which he

believes can present a rationale for hope and a catalyst for change.

The meeting concluded with consideration of the challenge presented in Richard Louv's declaration: *"What would our lives be like if our days and nights were immersed in nature as they are in technology? How can each of us help create that life-enhancing world, not only in a hypothetical future, but right now, for our families and for ourselves?"*

The focus of the February 2016 Thomas Berry Manchester meeting was the viewing and exploration of the concepts, themes and ideas presented in the film *Animate Earth*.

*Animate Earth* is written and presented by Dr Stephan Harding and it presents the personal and professional transformation which Harding has undertaken. In the January 2016 meeting we explored the experience of Richard Louv and his deep transformative encounter with the natural world. His response was profoundly visceral in

its impact and it radically affected his way of seeing and being in the world. Stephen Harding too has undergone a significant transformation in his experience and perception of the world. Since childhood he has had a deep fascination with the natural world, which inspired studies in Zoology at the University of Durham and then a doctorate on the behavioural ecology of the muntjac deer at Oxford University.

He recognises that his studies of the muntjac deer involved careful and systematic observing, measuring, recording and quantifying of data with mathematical precision. However, in the film he also talks passionately of sitting still in nature in which "calmness enveloped" him. Such experiences have led him to an "intuitive connection" with the natural world and with all creatures.



For Harding, intuition is a valid way of knowing which can contribute to the development of a holistic science combining numerical and intuitive minds. Such an approach to science, Harding believes, can provide a rationale for revering everything around us. In the dance between intuition and reason Harding is of the view that green technologies and a new economics have the potential to emerge which manifest a new moral attitude to the earth, characterised by a deep intuitive knowing and a recognition and awareness, echoing Thomas Berry, of the sacredness, the divinity, of the earth. Such a way of seeing and being in the world can, Harding affirms,

embody, and promote coherence, health and vitality and positive qualities such as beauty, wellbeing, joy, and love.

Discussion of the concepts, themes and ideas explored in the film raised the issue of the relationship between transformative experiences and holistic and reverential ways of seeing and being in the world. Thomas Berry, Richard Louv and Stephan Harding can all be recognised as undergoing in their lives transformative, life changing experiences which have profoundly impacted upon how they relate to themselves, others (including non-human life), the earth and the cosmos. Is seeing the earth as sacred inextricably related to, and dependent upon, such transformation and can transformation actively be nurtured and developed? If nurturing and development of transformation is a possibility then what are the vehicles or channels for bringing about personal and social change and what are the potential implications, for example, for parenting, education, healthcare, ecology, science, technology, the arts, and spirituality?

Such questions can be regarded as relating closely to the observation by Thomas Berry in *The Dream of the Earth* that:

*"If the earth does grow inhospitable towards human presence, it is primarily because we have lost our sense of courtesy towards the earth and its inhabitants, our sense of gratitude, our willingness to recognise the sacred character of habitat, our capacity for the awesome, for the numinous quality of every earthly reality."*

The Thomas Berry Manchester meeting held in March 2016 commenced with listening to an audio recording of an extract from Richard Louv's book *The Nature Principle – Reconnecting with Life in a Virtual Age*. In this introductory section of the book entitled *Nature-Deficit Disorder for Adults* Louv recounts the experience, twenty years earlier, of visiting the home of friends in New Mexico which is explored above.

Listening to Louv's account of his profound and transformative experience reminded us that for many

people an encounter with the natural world can be a life changing and life enhancing phenomenon. Although nature can be powerful, overwhelming and, all too often, violent and destructive, there appears to be a sense in which an encounter with the beauty of the natural world in all its glorious diversity can evoke a powerful sense of awe and wonder in which people perceive that they are, in some sense, aware of something, a power, energy or reality, beyond, yet at times related to, the self.

We followed listening to Louv's experience with an exploration of the 1818 painting *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* by the Romantic artist Caspar David Friedrich.



Charles Sala has commented that: 'Friedrich .... Considered the visible and tangible phenomena of nature to be manifestations of the invisible and ineffable, like shadows of God .... His landscapes appear as the fragments of a lonely man dealing with the fundamental questions of life, and in particular the relationship between Man, Nature, and God.'

In paintings such as *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog*, *Two Men Contemplating the Moon* and *Woman Before the Setting Sun*, Friedrich presents scenes in which human contemplation of the world appears to reflect a spiritual

quest in which people interpret the natural world as a giver of meaning and a focus for the discernment of the Transcendent. Friedrich portrays the experience of contemplation, reflection, silence, and stillness in the presence of nature.

In responding to the '*Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog*' artwork, the group considered two questions:

*What is the man in the painting experiencing as he stands on the rock?*

*Is there any sense in which the man has been changed by his experience?*

Viktor Frankl has reflected upon his experience of mountain climbing and the way in which it has impacted upon his life. His reflections have as central themes the concepts of encounter and dialogue. Frankl regarded mountain climbing as an activity in which he engaged in dialogue with himself; he was in an environment in which he could contemplate, reflect, and meditate upon his experience and be inspired and empowered to make

meaningful life choices. The mountain sojourns also were opportunities for Frankl to be refreshed, renewed, and strengthened. The solitary nature of these experiences meant that Frankl was able to know himself more deeply and, in view of his work as a psychiatrist, it is likely that this self-knowledge impacted positively upon his knowledge of his clients and the ways in which he engaged in meaningful dialogue and encounter with them.

In addition to self-dialogue and the way in which this related to his dialogue with his clients it can also be recognised that Frankl entered into a profound dialogue, encounter and engagement with the natural world. The world of the mountains is the physical world, the world of the challenges and opportunities presented by the experience of nature.

The Polish composer Wojciech Kilar, in his symphonic poem *Koscielic 1909* recalls the death of Mieczyslaw Karlowicz as a result of an avalanche in Maly Koscielic, one of the summits of the Tatra mountains in February 1909. Karlowicz declared:

*When I stand on the top of a steep mountain, having only the blue hemisphere of the sky above and the sea of the plateau with waves of other summits beneath, I feel as if I were blending with the surrounding space. I cease to perceive myself as a unique entity, instead, I sense the eternal and almighty breath of the universe.*

For Karlowicz, his experience of the mountain was one in which he became aware of a dimension to life, a presence, a reality, which affirmed his connectedness with all things.

In our exploration of Caspar David Friedrich's *Wanderer* painting a range of ideas were expressed. It was suggested that the man in the painting was experiencing a sense of freedom. He had left behind the burdens and responsibilities of his daily life and had been liberated, albeit perhaps temporarily, to experience the fresh mountain air which invigorated and renewed his spirit. It could be that because of walking in the mountains he gained a new perspective, both literally and existentially, as a result of which he was able to understand his life

context in a new way. He may have been able to be open to the possibility of a new way of seeing the world. As in the experience of Viktor Frankl explored above the man in the painting may have gone to the mountains to make a decision. Being away from his usual context may have given him the place, space, and time to consider what course of action he should possibly take. In addition, his sojourn in the mountain provided him with the opportunity to experience the awe and wonder of the majesty of the natural world. Perhaps Friedrich's painting portrays the archetypal experience of humankind's encounter with the forces of nature of which they are, ultimately, a part. Each human being is not separate from, but a part of nature, an element in the web of life.

Following exploration of Caspar David Friedrich's *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* painting the group viewed the film *Earth Pilgrim-A Spiritual Journey into the Heart of Dartmoor*.

This BBC Natural World film, originally broadcast on BBC2 in 2008, presents a reflective autobiographical and

spiritual journey into the awe-inspiring landscape of Dartmoor (in the south-west of the United Kingdom) with Satish Kumar, the internationally acclaimed ecologist and Editor of Resurgence and The Ecologist magazine.

As the seasons change and unfold Satish walks the moor and he explores and responds evocatively to the ancient woods and rivers in which lives a diversity of wildlife including, for example, red deer, foxes, emperor moths, kestrels and starling roosts. His meditations on the relationship between ecology, peace, non-violence, and the natural world can be regarded as profoundly complementing the way of seeing and being in the world of Thomas Berry in its recognition of the sacredness of life. Satish has commented that:

*“We can relate to our planet Earth in two ways: either we can act as tourists and look at the Earth as a resource of goods and services for our use, pleasure and enjoyment, or we can act as Earth Pilgrims and treat the planet with reverence and gratitude. Tourists value the Earth and all her natural riches only in terms of usefulness to themselves.*

*Pilgrims perceive the planet as sacred and recognise the intrinsic value of all life. The living Earth is good in itself with all its grace and beauty."*

The 2015-2016 cycle of Thomas Berry Manchester meetings concluded in December 2016 when we met together to explore themes and ideas which related to, and connected with, our previous monthly meetings. Our meeting began with each member of the group identifying something positive that had happened in their lives during the previous week. The experiences that were shared affirmed the importance of holding on to those aspects of our lives which are positive particularly when faced with challenges and stressors individually, collectively and on a global scale. It was recognised that it is all too easy to let go of the positive in our lives and focus on that which challenges us giving rise to the experience of anxiety and uncertainty about where we are heading.

This introductory activity of identifying examples of the positive was followed by a visualisation exercise in which

each member of the group was invited to imagine in their mind's eye a place or space, either real or imagined, which they regard as being a positive, meaningful and safe space. They were invited to visualise the details of this place or space, being aware of the sights, sounds and smells, for example, of the environment which they visualised. The group was also invited to become aware of the thoughts, feelings and emotions they experienced in relation to the space or place of which they found themselves immersed.

Each member of the group shared their experience of the visualisation exercise all of which were of significant memorable experiences of the natural world. The experiences gave rise to responses of awe and wonder, a sense of an awareness of, and a connection with, a power or reality beyond oneself, together with a profound sense of gratitude, appreciation and thankfulness. The responses from the group members testified to the restorative power of nature and their relationship to meaningful life-enhancing memories and their capacity

to transform our perspectives, our ways of looking at the world.

This visualisation exercise was then followed by a viewing of the short film *Crows* which is one of eight short films which together make up the feature *Dreams* directed in 1990 by the late Japanese film director Akira Kurosawa. *Crows* begins with a Japanese man in an art gallery viewing paintings, in silence, by Vincent Van Gogh. He passes from one artwork to another looking briefly at each one. When looking at one of the paintings he suddenly finds himself transported to, and located within, the painting which has come alive. He has become a character in the drama which is unfolding in the painting. He asks a group of women, who are washing their laundry in the river, if they have seen Vincent Van Gogh. They point him in the direction where Vincent can be found but they warn him that Vincent has been in what they describe as a lunatic asylum.

The Japanese man walks through the landscape looking for Vincent, but the landscape is made up of changing

scenes from Vincent's paintings. It is as if Vincent's artworks have come alive and the boundary between the observer in the art gallery and the paintings he is viewing have been dissolved. The Japanese man, in effect, has become a living part of Van Gogh's visual world.



'Crows' from 'Dreams' by Akira Kurosawa

The man sees Vincent (played by the acclaimed auteur Martin Scorsese) in a wheat field painting and as they meet there is a short exchange of questions and responses. Vincent appears to be in a hurry, determined

to capture on his canvas the scene he sees before him. He is impatient with the Japanese man, asking him why he is not painting. Vincent expresses the view that the beauty of nature should be captured in creative activity and he declares "The sun, it compels me to paint." Vincent declares that there is so little time in which to paint, and he declares that he feels driven like a locomotive. Vincent walks away from the man and he appears to disappear from the scene. The Japanese man continues to search for Vincent and, as the figure of Vincent slowly disappears over the horizon, a flurry of crows burst into the foreground filling the wheat field. In the final scene of the film we find the Japanese man back in the art gallery gazing at Vincent Van Gogh's painting *Wheat Field with Crows*. He looks at it carefully and attentively and, respectfully and reverentially, takes off his hat.

The viewing of the film was followed by a discussion responding to the question "What do we make of this?" A variety of perspectives were presented regarding

responses to the film. In summary, it can be said that the film raised the question of how humankind responds to nature, is nature something that we simply pass through without giving it attention and really observing what is before us? Are we observers who do not fully experience and participate in the world? What is the relationship between beauty and creativity? How can each of us respond positively, meaningfully, and creatively to the environments we experience? In what ways can we respond to the world around us, and our relationships within it, in an existence which is finite in which each human being is a traveller on the earth?

The Crows film presents Vincent and the Japanese man both located within a specific place, space, and time in which, in a very powerful sense, they are both challenged to be transformed.

This sense of a call to personal, social, and ecological transformation led into the conclusion of the Journey of the Universe meeting in which we revisited the experience of Thomas Berry (which was explored in the first Thomas

Berry Manchester meeting in September 2015, and which we have regularly revisited) as a twelve-year-old experiencing a field of lilies, an event which he recounted in his book *The Great Work*. Thomas Berry's recounting of this transformative experience of nature points to the capacity for the natural world to act as a catalyst for providing meaning, purpose and value to life and for its potential to frame our basic life orientation. Berry concludes *The Great Work* with the declaration that:

*"The distorted dream of an industrial technological paradise is being replaced by the more viable dream of a mutually enhancing human presence with in ever-renewing organic-based Earth community. The dream drives the action."*

May our dreams, inspired by the transformative visions of Janusz Korczak, Vasily Sukhomlinsky, and Thomas Berry, drive our vision and our actions.



Photograph by Eberhard Grossgasteiger [www.pexels.com](http://www.pexels.com)

## *Meditation 12: 'Beyond the Blue'*

*“After you have exhausted what there is in business, politics, conviviality, love, and so on - have found that none of these finally satisfy, or permanently wear - what remains? Nature remains... the trees, fields, the changes of seasons, the sun by day and the stars of heaven by night.”*

- Walt Whitman



Photograph by Hristo Fidanov      [www.pexels.com](http://www.pexels.com)

On 18 February 2021 NASA's Perseverance Rover made its final descent on Mars. The Rover continues to send stunning images of the red planet which, over time, will increase our knowledge and understanding of the topography, landscape, geology, and processes for this largely hitherto unexplored world.

Throughout history humankind has explored the Earth, pushing the boundaries of the possible and, in the process, illuminating our scientific, biological, technological, anthropological, cultural, spiritual, and psychological perceptions of the variety of life forms and the processes which nurture and sustain life.

Alongside the quest to understand the Earth in all of its glorious complexity and diversity, human beings have also looked beyond the Earth, gazing at the night sky and its

panoply of stars and planets. Just as the regions of the Earth have been studied and mapped out, astronomers and space scientists have been engaged in a process of probing deeper and deeper into the Cosmos. It is possible to suggest that in this exploration of space, humankind has reflected upon not only their place in the Earth but have also considered how they fit into the vast expanse of space. This reflection raises many scientific, philosophical, existential, and spiritual questions of meaning, purpose, and value such as 'Does the Universe have a beginning an end?', 'What was the origin or cause of the Universe?', 'Does non-human intelligent life exist beyond the Earth?' and 'What is the place of human beings in the Universe?' Throughout history humankind has looked at the starry night and pondered such questions.

Significant scientific and technological advances have enabled humanity to explore the deepest recesses of spaces through, for example, radio telescopes, and significant discoveries continue to be made. Our understanding of the Cosmos continues to unfold and, to borrow a phrase from Thomas Berry and Brian Swimme, humankind, in their explorations, are embarked upon 'The Universe Story'.

*"I know nothing with any certainty, but the sight of the stars makes me dream."*

- Vincent van Gogh

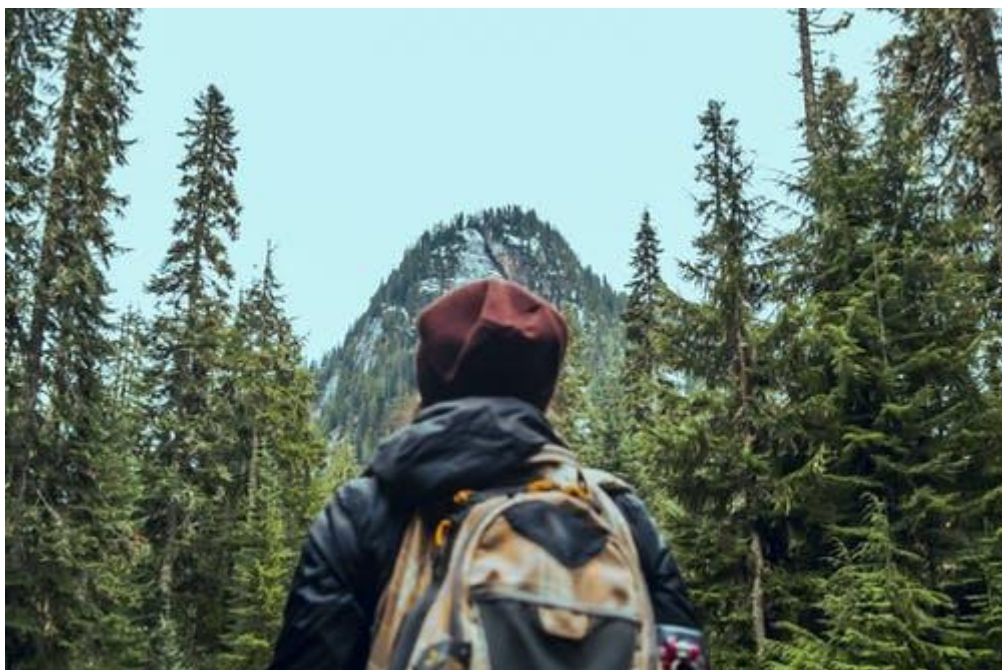
Poets, artists, and mystics have gazed upon the night sky and have been inspired to create works of profound beauty. Many will be familiar, for example, with Vincent van Gogh's 'Starry Night' paintings and drawings which continue to deeply evoke a sense of the awe and wonder of the Cosmos.

In this '*Beyond the Blue*' Meditation I explore the artwork of Lottie and Tilly Robertson, aged 9 and 7 respectively, from Glasgow, Scotland. They were invited to create an artwork in which they portray their ways of seeing the night sky and their reflections upon what they see as they gaze upon it. I suggest that Lottie and Tilly's creativity and their reflections upon the experience of gazing upon the night sky indicate that there is a deep receptivity to

immersing themselves in this experience. Thomas Berry has commented that:

*"The ecological age fosters the deep awareness of the sacred presence within each reality of the universe. There is an awe and a reverence due to the stars in the heavens."*

In this exploration of Lottie and Tilly's artworks I suggest that they provide us with gentle intimations of this 'awe and reverence'.



Photograph by Visually Us [www.pexels.com](http://www.pexels.com)



'The Night Sky' by Tilly Robertson ©

Age 7; Glasgow

Tilly writes:

*"The three colours are orange, red and yellow and that is the sunset. Underneath you can't see the buildings because it is very dark. There are only a few stars because it is very late and in the morning there will be less stars. At night time there are more.*

*I like to look at the night sky with my telescope. It makes me feel excited because you can see the moon and stars and other interesting stuff. It makes me want to do drawings and gives me ideas about drawing the sky."*

Tilly's artwork incorporates three distinct, yet related elements. Firstly, in her statement that 'The three

*colours are orange, red and yellow and that is the sunset'* she is drawing our attention to the fact that before the stars are able to be perceived, the light of day has to gradually fade away, sunset has to occur before the night sky appears and the stars are manifest. Tilly, therefore, is demonstrating her awareness of the sequencing of the day, how light gradually gives way to darkness. However, her artwork presents three layers or levels: the starry night is presented in the top layer of the artwork, the sunset is the middle layer, and the houses, people's home environment, are presented in the bottom layer. Tilly clearly understand the process of daylight, over time, giving way to the emergence of darkness, a sequence of events, an unfolding narrative, yet she has chosen to represent this movement of time in what can be termed a 'tri-partite' artwork. Although it may appear that Tilly has presented three elements or dimensions of the movement from day to night at the same time in her artwork, I suggest that what she is doing, in a very subtle way, is drawing our attention to the fact that all three stages, dimensions, or elements of the process of moving from daylight to the darkness of night are necessary, are essential, each stage gives rise to, and is interrelated with, the next stage. Tilly, therefore, gently draws our attention to the

interconnected unfolding of the passage of time. In her representation of the sunset in the middle of her artwork, the three colours of orange, red and yellow, evoke the form of a Mark Rothko abstract painting. In this sunset image, therefore, Tilly is illustrating that sunset represents a turning point in the day, a period of transition, a movement in the cycle of the day and she thoughtfully and sensitively captures this sense of movement.

Tilly confirms that she finds the experience of looking at the night sky with her telescope to be exciting and it enables her to view more closely the phenomenon of the moon and the stars. At a young age, therefore, Tilly is clearly engaged in a process of discovery. Through careful observation she is undertaking a voyage of learning about the Universe. She concludes her reflections upon gazing at the night sky through her telescope by confirming that *"it makes me want to do drawings and gives me ideas about drawing the sky."*

Tilly, therefore, acknowledges that one activity, gazing through her telescope, is an inspiration, a catalyst, for undertaking her artwork. One discovery and learning activity gives rise to a related, yet distinct activity, of creating art. She is

confirming the relationship between careful, focussed observation and creative activity. Thomas Berry has made a distinction between what he terms the 'Great Self' and the 'Small Self'. He comments:

*"That's why the child, when the child delights in flowers, is reaching for its Great Self. When we plunge into a river or a lake to experience the refreshing waters, that's our Great Self. When we look at the stars, that's a self-presence, that's what I call intimacy, and the child experiences the intimacy, and the child needs to learn to follow its attractions in this regard and not let its limited self be seduced away."*

In her artwork and reflections, I suggest that Tilly is gently and evocatively sharing with us the gift of the emergence of her developing 'Great Self'.



'The Night Sky' by Lottie Robertson ©

Age 9; Glasgow

Lottie writes:

*“When I am looking out at the sky at night I wonder if there is an astronaut on the moon. It would be cool to see an astronaut in real life. I also want to see a shooting star one day so I included that in my picture.*

*At the bottom of the picture there is a house and huge telescope in the attic window. There is a girl looking out who sees the stars and is looking at the night. She sneaked out because it is the middle of the night.*

*When I look at the night sky it makes me feel calm and gives me ideas for stories to write, it is pretty beautiful*

*actually. I also like to write poems about the night sky, acrostic poems."*

In 'Evening Thoughts' Thomas Berry has noted that:

*"A radical new adaptation is taking place, a new awakening to the divine not only through the awesome qualities of the universe as experienced immediately but also through the immense story of the universe and its long series of transformations."*

I suggest that it is in the interplay, a creative dialectic, between the insights of scientists, philosophers and artists, for example, that this 'awakening to the divine can take place. In her reflections upon her artwork, Lottie has asked the question 'I wonder if there is an astronaut on the moon'? She is, therefore, asking questions about what may be happening on the surface of the moon as she creates her artwork. The creative process leads her to a place of curiosity, of asking questions, of contemplating

what might be. To 'wonder' can be regarded as a search for clarification, for meaning, to make sense of one's experience of the world. Lottie, therefore, is entering into a dialogue with the experience of gazing at the night sky.

'Wonder' can also be defined as a feeling of amazement, admiration and appreciation of a phenomenon which is beautiful, remarkable, pleasing and satisfying. Lottie acknowledges that looking at the night sky makes her feel calm, she finds it to be relaxing, she, in effect, is experiencing a state of peace and tranquility. To gaze upon the night sky, for many people, is deeply soothing. It can have the effect of helping them to put things into perspective; individuals can develop a sense that they form part of something much bigger than themselves, that they are, ultimately, part of a much bigger story or picture.

Lottie's picture incorporates '*a house and huge telescope in the attic window. There is a girl looking out who sees the stars and is looking at the night. She sneaked out because it is the middle of the night.*' Lottie uses the word

'looking' twice in this description which emphasises that the girl is engaged in a deep act of gazing, concentrated observation. Also, the fact that the telescope is described as '*huge*' suggests that it is powerful, capable of seeing the phenomena of the night sky clearly and in sharp focus.

Lottie indicates that the girl who is gazing upon the night sky '*sneaked out because it is the middle of the night*'. The act of '*sneaking out*' suggests that she has gone outside with others in the household unaware of her activity; she is engaged in viewing the night sky when it is likely that all other members of the family are asleep. The girl, therefore, is able to savour an experience that, at that moment in time, is only available to her. It is a private experience, special to her, which may well stay in her memory for a long time to come. By going outside to gaze upon the night sky there is, in effect, a sense of immediacy. Viewing the moon and the stars is not mediated through a house window. One can feel the air,

be aware of the sights, sounds and smells of the night when outside the home. This makes the experience multi-sensory. In his essay '*The Great Work of the New Millennium*', Thomas Berry included a poem he had written to accompany a volume of children's poetry. It reads as follows:

“The child awakens to a universe.  
The mind of the child to a world of wonder,  
Imagination, to a world of beauty,  
Emotions, to a world of intimacy.  
It takes a universe to make a child  
Both in outer form and inner spirit.  
It takes a universe to educate a child.  
It takes a universe to fulfil a child,  
And the first obligation of one generation  
In relation to a succeeding generation  
Is to bring these two together  
So that the universe is fulfilled in the child  
And the child is fulfilled in the universe.”

Lottie's creative work, I suggest, is deeply rooted in a sense of the wonder, beauty, and imagination of the Universe.



Photograph by Avery Nielsen-Webb

[www.pexels.com](http://www.pexels.com)

## *For Reflection:*

*Go outside to gaze upon the night sky. Be aware of the sights, sounds, and smells together with your thoughts,*

*feelings, and emotions. Reflect upon this experience in a medium of your choice.*

## *Meditation 13: 'Blossom Circles'*

*"Every child in every country is owed the teaching of natural history, to be introduced to the awe and wonder of the natural world and to appreciate how it contributes to our lives."*

- The Dasgupta Review, 2021



The National Trust are working with a range of Partners to provide communities with wider access to nature through the creation of green spaces and, echoing the Japanese phenomenon of *Hanami*, the creation of blossom circles.



The first of the National Trust's Blossom Circle projects is to be located at the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park in East London and will include thirty-three United Kingdom grown trees such as cherry, plum, crab apple and hawthorn.

The National Trust hopes that this Blossom Circle will be a place where all those who have lost their lives during the Coronavirus pandemic can be remembered and will be a space where the very challenging experiences of the past year, particularly those of key workers, can be brought to mind. Further Blossom Circles are currently planned for Newcastle, Nottingham, and Plymouth. In addition, each Member of Parliament will be offered a blossom tree for planting in their local constituency.



Photograph by Susanne Jutzeler    [www.pexels.com](https://www.pexels.com)

There is a profound poignancy attached to the cherry blossom phenomenon as they have a symbolic meaning, rooted in Buddhist philosophy and spirituality which recognises the impermanence of all things. Japanese culture is aware that the short life span of the flower is a metaphor for the human condition which is characterised by the transience of life. The blossoms bloom and they erupt into a symphony of colour yet, within two weeks, the blossoms fall to the ground. Beauty and melancholia, therefore, are deeply intertwined.

## *Meditation 14: 'All Things Must Pass'*

2020 can be regarded as a year during which what unfolded challenged and subverted what can be called the view of 'business as usual'. Many of the political, economic, business, commercial, technological, scientific, health, educational, cultural, and spiritual

orthodoxies, and ways of doing things, which have been dominant for many years, are being called into question.

Whilst writing, collating, and editing this extended Thomas Berry Manchester *'In the Forest'* document project much of the world's population has continued to be engaged in responding to the challenge of Covid-19, a coronavirus, which has resulted in much suffering and many deaths. Lives have been disrupted and, for many people and their families, the experience of continuing ill-health, bereavement and the associated grief will, understandably, overshadow their lives for some time to come.

The current pandemic has clearly illustrated that many healthcare systems, including those of developed and well-resourced nations, have been severely tested, pushed to their very limits, and it has also highlighted the interdependence of the human family and its relationship with wider ecologies and the whole of the web of life.

This point in history is also illustrating how many people are sacrificially doing their utmost to do whatever good is required to, for example, share resources, feed those who are hungry, volunteer to be of help in the community and to consider new, creative, and innovative ways in which people can work together for the common good.

A significant factor in having the time and space in which to prepare this document (and those documents emailed to the members of the Thomas Berry Manchester group during 2020) is that in the United Kingdom, along with many other countries, citizens are being encouraged to remain in their homes in self-isolation, limiting their contact with the outside world to restrict the spread of the virus. Many people, for a wide range of reasons, can find a time such as this to be understandably significantly challenging.

However, during this period of containment I have found that I have been given a place and space in which I can read, write, contemplate, meditate, pray, and share memories, dreams, and reflections (to borrow a phrase

from Carl Gustav Jung) with my family and (remotely through the gift of technology) friends. I am finding this point in time, therefore, to be, in a very profound sense, a period of being in the wilderness, an experience of the desert, but a wilderness and a desert in which there are oases of calm, encouragement and inspiration together with moments and glimpses of intense insight and dazzling luminosity.

Throughout the ages there have been visionaries, creatives and innovators who have prophetically pointed to alternative futures, to radical new ways of seeing and being. The spiritual traditions of the world, at their best, call us to personal, social, and ecological transformation and to see the world anew.

During this challenging point in history, which for many is experienced as a profound period of darkness, whilst writing this document, I have found myself revisiting music, art, and literature, for example, which I have encountered in earlier periods of my life which I find continue to speak to me deeply regarding the joys and pains, the

challenges and opportunities, the gains, and losses, of existence.

2020 was the fiftieth anniversary of the release of George Harrison's seminal album '*All Things Must Pass*'. Although George had released the solo albums '*Wonderwall Music*' and '*Electronic Sound*' in 1968 and 1969 respectively, '*All Things Must Pass*' was the first record that George made following the dissolution of the Beatles and it can be regarded as being a profound statement of his spiritual vision.



*“What more do you want of me?*

*Ask no more of me. I have made known the teaching. You are the community now. I have reached the end of my journey .... All created things must pass, strive on diligently.”*

- The Buddha

## **FINIS:**

*“I cannot say exactly how nature exerts its calming and organizing effects on our brains, but I have seen in my patients the restorative and healing powers of nature and gardens, even for those who are deeply disabled neurologically. In many cases, gardens and nature are more powerful than any medication....*

*...Clearly, nature calls to something very deep in us. Biophilia, the love of nature and living things, is an essential part of the human condition. Hortophilia, the desire to interact with, manage and tend nature, is also deeply instilled in us. The role that nature plays in health and healing becomes even*

more critical for people working long days in windowless offices, for those living in city neighbourhoods without access to green spaces, for children in city schools or for those in institutional settings such as nursing homes. The effects of nature's qualities on health are not only spiritual and emotional but physical and neurological. I have no doubt that they reflect deep changes in the brain's physiology, and perhaps even its structure."

- Oliver Sachs in 'The Healing Power of Gardens'

## CONTEMPLATIO:

### 'Life is a Wonder of Wonders'

Please listen to, and immerse yourself in, this evocative and poignant track 'Life, Life' from the album 'async' by the Japanese composer Ryuichi Sakamoto.

The track includes a reading by David Sylvian (formerly of the art-rock band Japan) of a translation of words written by the Russian poet

*Arseny Tarkovsky (Father of the acclaimed auteur  
Andrey Tarkovsky).*

