On March 29, 2001 I delivered the annual Thomas Berry Lecture at the College of Mount Saint Vincent located on the Hudson River in the Bronx, NY. The lecture appears below. For me, Tom Berry is more than the most cogent and inspiring environmental thinker of our time. He is a revolutionary humanist. His belief in the potential of our species emerges in all his work. His most recent book, The Great Work is a stirring account of how civilization's greatest moments have often come out of its darkest times. It is a call to transform our troubled environmental history into the next "Great Work" of our species, an "Ecozoic Age" where the ecology of our planet is the central lesson of our education and the organizing principle for society. -- JC

EXPECTATIONS OF PARADISE

My young life was formed by an expectation of paradise.

It was not an expectation borne of religious conviction, though I would later spend years discerning whether I had a vocation in the church. It was not borne of love of nature, which I would not discover until my adult years when, oddly, the environment would become my life’s work. It was borne of the Arthur Godfrey Show.

My mother and father were the first in our family to buy a television. It was not an easy decision. Our household budget was cut very close to the bone. They could ill afford the monthly ten-dollar payments. My mother was already spending fifty cents a week for a set of kitchen knives she had bought on the installment plan. The salesman came to the door every Monday to collect his half dollar. My father worked two jobs to meet the household expenses. To move into our own apartment and out of the three-bedroom walk-up we shared with my grandmother and three uncles, my parents had to pay an under-the-table, non-refundable cash “fee” to our prospective building superintendent, a bit of extortion common to the times.

Before they owned their own television, my folks and their friends would watch from the sidewalk as their favorite performers and the day’s events were presented live on the screens in the store windows on South Broadway. Ultimately, the lure of the new medium proved irresistible to two lives that needed the extra entertainment.

Family and friends would come to our apartment at 110 Morris Street, sit on the floor, eat, drink and watch television. The unexpected, additional expense of all that hospitality was unsettling at times. My parents wondered if my dad’s second job would go to underwriting this new audience.

I was four. Television enthralled me. I particularly enjoyed the morning shows. But of all the variety, game and children’s fare, I remember best the Arthur Godfrey Show. In 1953, Godfrey had moved his morning television variety series to Miami, Florida where he extolled the virtues of Miami to his national audience at every opportunity. “Miami” was his favorite word. He presented singers, comics and performing chimpanzees all “brought to you from Miami.” In winter he enjoyed quoting the temperatures up in the frigid north while reminding us that he was warm, playing his ukulele, lounging in tropical print shirts and enjoying Miami. Air travel was an almost universal extravagance in the 1950s but he promoted the ease with which one could simply hop a plane, take a nap and wake up in . . . Miami.

The airlines and hotels loved Arthur Godfrey. He is still credited with
single-handedly launching the migration to southern Florida, an accomplishment of such significance that The Miami Herald memorialized the move in its top 100 “Miami Milestones.” Then again, they also listed the landing of conquistador Ponce de Leon and the $20 billion devastation wrought by Hurricane Andrew.

Godfrey’s Miami captured my four-year-old imagination -- sandy beaches, palm trees, ocean surf, music and laughter. But when he rhapsodized about Miami what my young ears heard were two words -- “my ami.” I reasoned that an ami was a personal paradise to which one traveled for exotic good times -- and every family had one! After all, Arthur Godfrey was broadcasting from his ami.

I wanted to visit ours. I asked my parents, “Where is our ami?” They had no idea what I was talking about.

I was imprinted with the idea. Where is our ami? Where is our paradise, our place? Surely we each have one. Some of us spend our lives searching for it, not staying in one place long enough to remember where we have been or to know even where we are, our shared transience a substitute for shared community.

If I were to ask Tom Berry he would probably say that our ami is not a place, it is our story -- that no matter who we are or where we live we are all part of a larger story. It is not the story of the pieces of our existence, the litany of our journey or the history of our real estate transactions. It is the story of the whole of cosmological lives, particle to primate, each creature an elemental force without which creation is incomplete. “A story told by humans to one another that will also be the story that the wood thrush sings in the thicket, the story that the river recites in its downward journey,” he writes in The Dream of the Earth.

THE PROMISE

Martin Luther King also spoke of our story, an inviolable tale in which we each play a part. At the Lincoln Memorial on August 28, 1963 he preached that all people were “inextricably bound” in the quest for freedom. In his landmark speech on the Viet Nam war at Riverside Church on April 4, 1967, he preached as a "citizen of the world" and "as a child of God and brother to the suffering poor of Vietnam." Reverend King taught that each of us is shackled so long as the chains of oppression bind another. He spoke then as Tom Berry speaks now in a more universal human language that most of us who worry for the future of the environment have been slow to learn.

In 1972, the federal Clean Water Act promised that all the nation’s waters would be suitable for fishing and swimming by 1983 and free from the discharge of pollutants by 1985. It was an audacious and exciting plan, perhaps the most ambitious national initiative since President John F. Kennedy's May 25, 1961 commitment to land a man on the moon.

But the deadlines escaped like thieves in the night. Two decades later the Federal government seems no closer to leading us to those proud goals. Instead, waterway-by-waterway, citizens have struggled on their own to save their home waters. Here in New York we speak proudly of our progress on the Hudson River. Not a modest bunch, we use words like "renaissance," "rebirth," and "revival" to describe our accomplishments. But Martin Luther King might have asked, "Can the Hudson ever be said to run clean while the Mississippi does not?"

In a paper he delivered at Harvard University in 1996 Tom Berry wrote, "In the presence of the human, the natural world has no rights. We have a moral sense of suicide, homicide, and genocide, but no moral sense of biocide or geocide, the killing of the life systems themselves and even the killing of the Earth."
A moral sense. Virtually every progressive social movement in our nation's history has been driven to its prize by a moral sense that a wrong required righting, that the wrong had to be excised and the right codified into the rules and customs of society. Unfortunately, the global dialogue regarding the human relationship to nature has not yet ascended to such heights.

A moral sense. Consider that phrase for a moment. There are pollutants that evade all our senses. The PCBs that contaminate the Hudson River just outside these doors are invisible. They are odorless and tasteless. We certainly can't hear or feel PCBs. The only sense that seems useful in understanding there insidious danger is our moral sense. Yet the debate over PCBs that has raged for twenty-five years has been almost entirely political.

It is often said that as a social issue environmentalism has taken hold of American life in ways that surpass even the civil rights, labor and women's movements. Certainly, it has given birth to a vast body of law, hundreds of government agencies and an industry that employs tens of thousands of lawyers, scientists, engineers, consultants and professional advocates.

But in some ways, modern American environmentalism took root too swiftly. Earth Day 1970 is the milestone by which we most often measure the modern environmental movement's age. Consider for a moment that time in history. To the watchful eyes in Washington the millions who turned out for Earth Day were repeating the same frightening ritual as the supporters of the Civil Rights and Anti-war movements. A fragile nation could not sustain another mass movement. Nor could our leaders sustain the appearance of failing to resolve yet another popular controversy.

In the next four years, the United States passed the most progressive environmental laws in the world. A startlingly swift victory. But with a price. Environmentalists necessarily turned their attention to implementation, enforcement and program administration. They were able to skip over the wrenching national ethical debate and moral angst that accompanied their contemporary movements. They dodged the all-important transformative experience that allowed the Civil Rights and Peace movements to convert hearts and minds long before official Washington decided to follow popular opinion.

Contemporary environmentalism has been guided ever since by reaction to crises rather than the evolution of a higher moral code. Environmental laws and policies are based not on core values that transformed society and now govern our daily lives but on a measuring stick: How large a load of pollution can a stream endure? How many cases of cancer should we allow a profit-making chemical to cause? Which species can we live without? We have trapped the environment, and ourselves, on the losing side of a permanent negotiation.

Through our religions and our social ethos we discover the code that governs how we humans must treat each other. In response to that higher law we have enacted the governmental laws that organize society. But we have developed no such code regarding our relationship to the natural world. Instead, we have defined our environmental values and ethics first through the laws of legislatures and political processes. There they continually tip, heave and slide like anything built on soft ground. Their moral and ethical bases an unpoured foundation.

Imagine for a moment that a major corporation has just offered to provide every family a minimum yearly allowance of $100,000, universal college-level education and health care BUT only if the Federal government formally excuses the company from obeying laws that outlaw discrimination. The proposition would be dead on arrival because on some matters we as a people have drawn a line in the sand that we will never cross again.

Now imagine the same offer, only in this case the same corporation has requested dispensation from the Clean Water Act and the Clean Air Act and the Endangered Species Act. A national debate would ensue. Congress would call for legislative hearings. Fact-finding commissions would be appointed. The media would editorialize on all sides of the issue. We would bring out the calculators, add up the costs, compare them to the benefits and reckon a decision, because the laws that govern our relationship to nature and the environment are not themselves built on a higher law.
Evidence of the fragile nature of our environmental victories can be found by speaking to any experienced environmental advocate. It is commonly held that even those thirty year-old environmental laws would have no chance of being written or enacted today – because they were not a product of the moral and ethical struggles that usually characterize the evolution of our democracy.

And it is only out of those struggles that enduring justice has evolved. When the mining companies opposed the Child Labor Laws they cried economic ruin because the holes that went down into their mines were not large enough for adults. The debate over child labor dragged on from the end of the 19th century until 1938. Over the struggle for school desegregation in the 1960s Americans attacked fellow Americans with baseball bats, iron pipes and firebombs. More recently, otherwise intelligent adults argued against laws that outlawed sexual discrimination because they feared that women would rise to important positions in the workplace and then make bad decisions because it was the wrong time of the month.

Yes, we Americans have behaved in silly and tragic ways. But more than anything else, the slow and painful evolution of our democratic experiment has been formed by our ethical and moral struggles, by our struggles over the right and wrong of American life. The laws that emerged securing our freedoms and advancing our democracy were the product of critical processes that placed on world-wide exhibit an intimate examination of the conflicted American Dream. And though they still require daily vigilance, they find their sanctuary in the deepest part of the American soul.

Not so the environment.

MIRACLE IN OUR MIDST

As we meet here tonight, American shad are waiting off the Atlantic coast preparing to make their way up the Hudson River. My friend Bob Gabrielson is waiting as well. He is a traditional Hudson River commercial fisherman. He sets his nets by hand from his small open skiff where and when experience and tradition tell him the American shad will show themselves in the Tappan Zee. Attuned to tide, season, wind and temperature, his preparations are among the biological events that signal the season.

Like Bob, the shad are reliable. Their arrival in the Hudson in April is but one leg of a never-ending journey that takes them to the Bay of Fundy in August and to Florida in December as they circulate through the Atlantic coast following their ideal water temperature. When they are in the vicinity of their estuaries of origin they break off from the main population and head for fresh water reaches to spawn - using the very same rivers as the generations that preceded them. The shad that will migrate to the northernmost stretches of the Hudson estuary are reenacting the precise rite of reproduction performed by countless forebears.

While the behavior of this largest member of the herring family is remarkable, our knowledge of its life history is not. It is but a set of observations accumulated over centuries, passed down by fishermen, recorded by scientists, wondered upon by all who learn of it. We understand that a complex biochemical mechanism guides shad along those thousands of Atlantic coast miles and signals their sense of smell when they are near their home waters. Our explanation ends there. After that, observation and science fail us.

New York law says that the fishing season for American shad opens on March 15. But it is not statutory law that brings Hudson shad back to their home rivers to spawn. For Bob Gabrielson the annual return of shad to their ancient spawning grounds is not a matter of state but a matter of faith.

In his book, The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy, Etienne Gilson writes, “At the marriage of Cana Jesus made water into wine and everybody was astounded; but rain becomes wine in our vines everyday, and we take it all as a matter of course.”
As a young boy the New Testament miracle that most perplexed me was that of the fish and loaves, one of the few miracle stories told by all four evangelists. I was struck by it because I could grasp the sheer lunacy of attempting to feed thousands with a few loaves of Wonder Bread and some cans of Bumble Bee tuna.

But is the story of the transformation of the loaves and fish any more astounding than the miraculous and inexplicable ecological choreography that brings American shad to the Hudson estuary and to dinner tables every spring? Or is it so commonplace that we fail to recognize the miracle in our midst?

In a lecture to a novitiate class at the Gethsemane Cistercian monastery in Kentucky, the late Thomas Merton said, "Some people think creation happened back in the beginning only. Creation is taking place now. At every minute. At every second. Creation never stops. It is going on all the time."

He later went on, "In nature, every single moment every single thing around you is doing the will of God perfectly. Everything is in perfect obedience to the will of God. This makes things very simple for you. Because it leaves one little spot for you to fit into and if you fit into it you are keeping the will of God too."

Where do we fit? Where is our place?

Are we witnesses to the continuing miracle of creation? Are we beneficiaries? Participants? Saboteurs?

From the Hudson River to San Francisco Bay, waterways are posted with signs warning that the fish contain toxic chemicals. In Baton Rouge, Louisiana, restaurants are required to post advisories concerning contamination of seafood. Connecticut law closes Long Island Sound shellfish beds after just 1/4 inch of rain because of the threat of sewage overflows.

When it comes to the environment we have treated all species as expendable commodities, even humans. Today because of fishing bans due to PCB contamination only a handful of die-hard Hudson River commercial fishermen, like Bob Gabrielson, still practice their trade. And for the first time since humans walked the Hudson Valley, the children of fishermen cannot afford to continue their proud family rite.

THE POST-ENVIRONMENTAL AGE

And now, on the doorstep of a new century and new millennium, we parents of modern environmentalism have become its grandparents. It is a good time to examine our legacy.

The environmental movement to which we gave birth on Earth Day 1970 must now mature into a global moral and spiritual movement if we are ever to see lasting change.

The innocence of the early days is far behind us. No longer are we under the illusion that cleaning up sewage, stopping oil spills, and eliminating black smoke from stacks will alone save the global environment. We have learned that the invisible kills. We have learned that tropical forests in a remote corner of a far away continent are the respiratory system for our ecosphere. We have learned that there is no part of our home planet that does not harbor measurable evidence of our recklessness.

We have finally given birth to the first generation that cannot plead ignorance of the ramifications of its actions. It is now axiomatic that ignorance itself has caused the greatest environmental damage of all. Today, as many as 100 species become extinct daily and every 8 seconds a child in the developing world
dies from polluted drinking water. You have all heard similar statistics. They are not just documentation of our failures. They comprise a fragment of the mounting evidence that the state of the global environment is not partisan political propaganda but a deep moral failing.

We have moved into the post-environmental age.

There are no political shoulders broad enough to carry the burden of this undertaking. But the deadweight of injustice that we as a people have carried through slavery, child labor, sweatshops, and lynchings, and gender, religious, race and age discrimination has given us the muscle to shoulder any moral burden, no matter the weight.

And so I say to you today we have a mission -- a mission to redefine the environmental crisis in terms that all people can understand: right and wrong. It is a bold mission and one that the environmental movement has not yet undertaken. People of faith and people of prayer, religious and spiritual leaders, have a special role in delivering this challenge in the starkest terms of all: What path shall we travel? What judgment, by history and by our Creator, are we willing to endure?

I see two possible visions of the future. In both we have finally come to terms with just what we have wrought.

In the first it is too late. We have lived to bear witness to a world dying around us. Our epitaph as a species harkens the parting words of Mary Shelley’s monster: "When the images which this world affords first opened upon me, when I felt the cheering warmth of summer, and heard the rustling of the leaves and the chirping of the birds, and these were all to me, I should have wept to die; now it is my only consolation. Polluted by crimes, and torn by the bitterest remorse, where can I find rest but in death."

In the second we have ascended to the heights of which our species is capable. And here I take my words from Tom Berry's *The Hudson River Valley: A Bioregional Story*. "This is the moment of change from a sense of the valley as subservient to human exploitation to a sense of the valley as an integral natural community which is itself the basic reality and the basic value, and of the human as having its true glory as a functioning member, rather than as a conquering invader, of this community. Our role is to be the instrument whereby the valley celebrates itself."

For Tom’s story to come true, on the Hudson River and elsewhere, we must achieve a moral and spiritual ascendancy that until now has been beyond our reach even while it sleeps within our souls. But we can achieve his "moment of change" if in our hearts, homes, congregations, communities and workplaces we are willing to challenge ourselves and our institutions to accept and teach that we and all living things occupy a sacred place in the continually unfolding story of creation.

In that will be our glory. In that will be our survival. In that will be our "ami."