

Spirit Earth

Introducing Thomas Berry

—Brian Thomas Swimme

“I’m having coffee with Pythagoras.” This was my first attempt to identify Thomas Berry some three decades ago. The notion came to me right in the midst of our conversation in the Broadway Diner. Listening to him was to be transported into another domain of soul. It was not just that his knowledge was so vast. It was the evocative power of his presence. As you listened, you regularly found yourself in what is called an “altered state.” Quite literally, Thomas’s reflections on the nature of things catapulted one into the archetypal realms of classical myths and psychedelic dreams and the greatest philosophy and art. Everything became more real. You found yourself at the very center of the universe and you were given a vision of the inner harmony of things. Suddenly you knew exactly what you had to do with your life. As all of this was happening to me, I thought of Pythagoras, that great sage of the ancient world whose spiritual impulse would develop into so much of Western philosophy and science. I felt certain that the deep joy and wonder filling my soul were similar to what the students in Pythagoras’s mystery school must have experienced twenty-six hundred years ago.

That I would identify Thomas Berry with a personality of the axial age—other notables would include Heraclitus, Confucius, Lao Tzu, the Hebrew Prophets, and Siddhartha—that I would dare to locate Thomas in that rarefied company is easily understood as the exaggerated enthusiasm that often accompanies an initial meeting with a great person. And, indeed, as the years went by and I began speaking, teaching, and writing with Thomas, I got to know him more closely, which inevitably altered my initial enthusiasm. But as hard as this might be to believe, the alteration was in the other direction.



Thomas Berry and Brian Thomas Swimme

Over the decades of my association with him, I came to the conviction that Thomas Berry is not just similar to Pythagoras or to Confucius or to Lao Tzu. Amazing to say, he was someone who went beyond them in certain ways. He was, to my mind, a person in the very midst of giving birth to a new order of human being, an order made possible by the great teachers of history, but an order that was, in crucial ways, not available in the forms of consciousness found in the various world religions. A new, planetary mode of human being was emerging, one that was rooted in classical spiritualities but one that reached back into the shamanic worlds and carried forward into the modern scientific forms of understanding. The entire human journey was undergoing a seismic shift, and Thomas was aware of this and of his role in this transformative process.

In future centuries, many volumes will be written on the nature of this change in the structure of human consciousness that Thomas Berry both pointed to and, in part, enacted. Future scholars will have knowledge we do not have. Where today we can only intuit darkly that the transformation amplified by Thomas will lead to a vibrant Earth community, they will know the overall effects of Thomas’s life as historical fact. But what they will not have is the actual, ineffable experience of having been in Thomas’s presence. How they will burn with envy! To have actually had coffee with Thomas Berry! What amazing historic good fortune!

EDITOR'S LETTER

Welcome to this very exciting edition of *SpiritEarth*. If you saw our spring issue, you know that for 2014 we join in the worldwide celebrations of the life of Thomas Berry in this one-hundred-year anniversary of his birth.

Initially our plan was to offer some of Thomas's poetry for our autumn edition as well as some thoughts about what progress the human community has made recently in the "Great Work" of our time. What we discovered on release of our spring issue, however, was that reflections offered by those who have been awakened into new levels of consciousness because of Thomas resonated deeply with our readers.

And so, to close out our year of celebration around Thomas, we're thrilled to offer reflections from four luminaries of the Ecozoic Era. They were privileged to have had the "actual, ineffable experience of having been in Thomas's presence," as contributor Brian Thomas Swimme describes the life-changing impact of his time with Thomas.

In addition to Brian, we're grateful to Carolyn Toben and Miriam MacGillis, O.P., for their original pieces and to Gail Worcelo, sgm, for allowing us to reprint her reflection from *The Ecozoic: Reflections on Life in an Ecological Age, Number 2, 2009* (Chapel Hill: Center for Ecozoic Studies).

Thanks once again to Bill Fleming, Pat Irr, and Tom Schemper from our Photography Committee for images they've created or selected in order to deepen contemplative space for our readers and to enhance the reflections we present.

Blessings on the next hundred years since Thomas's birth as we continue the journey toward fullness of communion among all creations of the Universe.

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The Well Spirituality Center:
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SpiritEarth

Published by
The Well Spirituality Center,
a sponsored ministry of the
Congregation of St. Joseph
1515 West Ogden Avenue
La Grange Park, IL 60526-1721
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www.csjthewell.org

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Mission Statement

SpiritEarth is a publication that expands and advances The Well Spirituality Center's mission as a regional center for telling and engaging our Sacred Universe Story and fostering the evolving role of humankind in this great drama.

SpiritEarth is supported by contributions from our readers. Donations can be mailed to:
The Well Spirituality Center: *SpiritEarth*
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As an aid to these future scholars as they contemplate the significance of Thomas Berry, I would like to end by describing just one splinter of the form of consciousness Thomas awakened in us by his personal presence.

We all fell in love. With sunshine—with the rising moon—with the rainbow trout as they hover in the shadows of Chambers Creek. With everything. And certainly with each other. The awakenings took place in every imaginable event. While driving to New York City in his little Mazda. Or while sitting with some two dozen people in those uncomfortable plastic chairs of his Riverdale library while listening to a presentation. All of a sudden an energy would come sweeping into your body, filling every artery

and bone until it could no longer be contained and just gushed out as radiance from our eyes. Everything, each person, would be exploding with beauty. You would find yourself simply overwhelmed with a desire to get married. With anyone nearby. Did I say with *anyone*? I

meant with *everyone*. With the Great Red Oak sheltering the library. Even with the sky overhead. That's just the sort of idea that made perfect sense to the form of consciousness Thomas awakened. That you'd marry the sky—that

Sky would become your central devotion—that you'd dedicate your entire life to praising its nourishing beauty until everyone fell in love with it just as deeply as you did.

“That’s just the sort of idea that made sense...you’d marry the sky.”

—Brian Thomas Swimme



Photo by Tom Schemper

“The natural world itself is our primary language as it is our primary scripture, our primary awakening to the mysteries of existence.” —Thomas Berry

His Shoes

—Gail Worcelo, sgm

It was his pair of black shoes sitting in the corner of his room that caught my attention. I had just arrived for a visit at Well-Spring and Thomas was sitting in his chair, blanket wrapped around his shoulders, with a big welcoming smile to greet me. I walked over to him and we gave each other a long, tight hug.

“Pull up a chair,” Thomas said, “and face me.”

“There you have it,” I thought. “What else would he say to me after all of these years of bonded intimacy, of teaching and loving, laughing and learning?”

“Face me.”

These are the words of a Wisdom Master to his student in the waning years of his life. I could barely heed the request because of the extraordinary demand inherent in it.

To distract myself from the monumental task of honoring his request, I allowed my eyes to glance quickly back to his black shoes, stretched and scuffed in the corner. They were like two eyes, witnessing this moment, peering out from their vantage point in the room.

I knew these shoes well and the man who had filled them during so many walks and talks, dinners and visits.

I remember one particular time when Thomas came to visit us in Vermont during Mud Season. It was the month of March and we took him to our Benedictine neighbors, the Monks of Weston Priory to give a lecture. Thomas spoke on the theme of “Stabilitas”—stability, not in terms of the traditional monastic understanding of staying in place, but in a much more challenging frame. He spoke of stabilizing consciousness, of understanding ourselves in a new way as Universe beings and placing ourselves back into the Universe in this Ecozoic Era.

On our way back to the car, we had to slosh our way through the muddy road. Once inside our own house, I recall bending low, washing off the mud that had embedded itself on Thomas’s shoes. It was a significant gesture for me, one of humility and gratitude, a reminder of the great gift I have received in this relationship of sitting for so many years at the feet of such a great teacher. At the same time I was metaphorically clearing away my own internal muddiness through Thomas’s guidance.

Another time, Thomas and I went out to dinner at the Green Valley Grill and Thomas ordered wine for both of us. The waitress came to the table with a glass of merlot and basket of bread.

Thomas took the taste test and then passed the glass across the table to me. I tasted too. We looked at each other and both agreed, “Good wine.” The waitress left to get us a bottle.

Then Thomas broke a piece of bread and passed the basket to me. I took a piece of bread and ate. In that moment the impact of Eucharist became a staggering reality. We had been talking all day about the Universe Story and now here it was, 13.7 billion years of it gathered in this gesture, without dualism or separation. I experienced a momentary sense of spiritual vertigo and when I looked down, there were his black shoes steady on the floor under the table.

Although only a few seconds had passed in recalling these two memories, the shoes still held my attention. I blinked, then pulled up a chair to face Thomas.

“There is so much more I want to say to you,” Thomas said. “It is too bad you do not live closer so we could meet each week.”

“I will come back in a month,” I replied.



“It was his pair of black shoes...that caught my attention.”

His Shoes continued from page 4 “Good,” he responded.

But we both knew that THIS was the moment of reckoning, the moment of grace. We faced into each other, our eyes locked, all boundaries blurred. It was clear we would be eternally fused in soul and spirit, that our years together had forged a unique intimacy between us and that death would be but a veil.

Thomas said, “Do you have what you need now?”

I said, “Yes.”

“Good,” Thomas said. “Then get me my shoes over there in the corner, we need to be on our way.”

I walked over to the shoes, picked them up and helped Thomas get his feet into them. Once in his wheel chair, we made our way over to the Well-Spring dining room where we met Thomas’s sister for lunch.

Sr. Gail Worcelo, sgm, is formerly a Passionist Nun who was taught by Thomas Berry during her novitiate in 1984. She continued the journey with Thomas and, with his support and guidance, co-founded Green Mountain Monastery and the Thomas Berry Sanctuary in Vermont. This Monastery for the 21st century is dedicated to the Great Work of both inner and outer Awakening.

Thomas Berry: In Memoriam

—Carolyn Toben

Here at our Center at Timberlake we knew Thomas Berry as a deep personal friend and guide for our work with children and educators for ten years. He was a frequent visitor to the earth sanctuary, walking the trails when he was able, speaking at evening gatherings at the farmhouse, participating with children for film productions about our work, conversing with friends and family over meals on the Treehouse deck, sharing in special moments of celebration...always available for guidance and support, even in the last weeks of his life.

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Photo by Tom Schemper

...through Thomas’s lens, we learned to see the sacred in the midst of the created world as we beheld the miracles of daily life. We practiced noticing the large movements and small moments—from the change of seasons and cycles to the drifting of clouds, the smells of spring rain, the intricacies of spider webs...

“Timberlake is a magical place,” Thomas said years ago, “where everyone who comes will receive what they need.”

For us, Thomas Berry was, above all, a storyteller, and the story he told in thought, word, and deed was of a new sacred story of the universe, which, if understood and shared, could bring about personal and planetary healing. His story was of the sun and moon and stars and seasons and cycles and a love that moved them all. It was/is a story unfolding today of the Earth with clean air and unpolluted waters and a multispecies Earth community living in harmony with one another. A story of hope.

The elements of Thomas’s story for our work here were first and foremost for the children. “They need to experience the dawn and the sunset, feel wet grass on their feet, watch drifting clouds, sing to stars at night, hear the whispers of the trees...” He spoke of the need for children today to have experiences that nurture their natural bond of intimacy with the natural world. “Children need to know the beauty, wonder, and intimacy of the natural world and the mystery of all we are united within.” He urged us to think of the earth sanctuary as a context in which children could discover their natural conscious identification with all living things. By discovering this attachment, Thomas knew that they could enter in to what he called a “mutually enhancing” relationship with all creatures, plants, and inhabitants of Earth in which there was a free circulation of love between them.

Once during a visit here, Thomas and I took a walk down the Creeping Cedar Trail where I stopped him and asked him to close his eyes and open his clasped hands. When he did so, I placed a small spiral of creeping cedar into them and told him to open his eyes. He did so and entered into a very long moment in which I actively felt the presence of love between Thomas and the tiny plant. It was a holy moment of observing a mutually enhancing relationship. He finally spoke and said to it, “You are so beautiful.” I will never forget that moment of grace.

Thomas’s concern for children included, as he put it in *The Great Work*, all the children, “the children who swim beneath the



Photo by Bill Fleming

waves of the sea...those who live in the soils of Earth...the children of the flowers in the meadows and the trees of the forest...All those children who roam over the land and the winged ones who fly with the wind...that all...children may go together into the future.”

“Children need to know the beauty, wonder, and intimacy of the natural world and the mystery of all we are united within.” —Thomas Berry

Thomas called on us to guide children in a new understanding of diversity, “instructions in otherness,” he called it. Meeting other living forms with deep interest and respect, feeling a sense of relatedness through remembering a shared Source and shared life processes were ways to do this. It was his

longing that we all come to recognize the uniqueness of our particular place and that of others in the universe; that we realize “we are ourselves because of everything and everyone else.” He said this often in our last visits with him at WellSpring, the retirement community where he resided.

For our educators’ programs, Thomas helped us understand that the new story was for all ages. As adults we could learn to remember our own childhood experiences in the natural world and recover their meaning to create a new future for children.

From their solo experiences in the woods during their retreats, teachers understand well what Thomas meant when he wrote in *The Great Work*, "We are touched by what we touch. We are shaped by what we shape. We are enhanced by what we enhance."

The teachers' commitment to initiate change grew out of their deepened and expanded consciousness of Thomas's new story, which they went on to animate in their own lives and circumstances with children, always adding new chapters.

Thomas Berry believed that the foundational work of our Center was/is laying down enduring value and meaning through this greater orientation to the universe in times of great mobility and change.

Above all else, through **Thomas's lens, we learned to see the sacred in the midst of the created world as we beheld the miracles of daily life. We practiced noticing the large movements and small moments—from the change of seasons and cycles to the drifting of clouds, the smells of spring rain, the intricacies of spider webs—and experienced the holiness of all creation.**

Thomas Berry remains present with us every time we begin an earthwalk with children or a retreat for educators. Every time we "behold" a flower, tree, a moment in the natural world, he is with us as we participate in the unfolding of the new story of the universe. Thomas Berry's legacy continues to in-form our heartfelt work as the sacred universe story expands through it into the lives of others. He remains present as we seek to remember "the Mystery of all we are united within," with all living forms in "mutually-enhancing relationships" with both human and non-human, as a "communion of subjects" instead of as a "collection of objects." We hear the echo of his words, "The natural world is infused with the presence of the Divine" that allows us to see anew our relationship to the open sky, brown Earth, leafy tree, golden sands, the stars in their courses, and the sense of the sacred at the heart of it all. His wisdom is imprinted within us as we journey on. In grateful remembrance...

Carolyn Toben is the founder of The Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World, a work for children and teachers inspired by Thomas Berry at Timberlake Earth Sanctuary in Whitsett, N.C. She is a teacher, a counselor, an ecospiritual retreat leader, and author of Recovering a Sense of the Sacred: Conversations with Thomas Berry.

A Reflection

—Sr. Miriam MacGillis

Now that I have lived nearly three-quarters of a century myself, there is a perspective gained from which to consider the impact of Thomas Berry on my life. I sense that half of my life was preparing me to meet him when as I did when I was 37 years old. I had entered the Dominican order in a pre-Vatican II world and had been prepared to serve as an elementary school teacher, then a high school and college art teacher, then called into the struggle for civil rights and resistance to the Vietnam war, and then to work with Global Education Associates and its vision of a just, democratic, self-governing Earth society.

Thomas's challenge to me personally at the age of 37 was to ask what "world order I was contemplating"? I was a

vowed Catholic sister in a contemplative order, and he was shifting the context for contemplation from the primacy of the written scriptures to the primacy of the created order, the revelation of the Divine through the lens of an

evolutionary Universe, Earth, life, and specifically human life. The last 37 years of my life have been committed to exploring and sharing the fruits of a stunning re-definition of human existence. The poet Yeats describes it as best can be said for me. Thomas Berry

awakened a "terrible beauty" and loosened it into the world.

"Thomas Berry awakened a 'terrible beauty' and loosened it into the world."

Sr. Miriam MacGillis is a member of the Sisters of St. Dominic, Caldwell, New Jersey. She lives and works at Genesis Farm, which she co-founded in 1980 with the sponsorship of her Dominican congregation. Miriam lectures extensively and has conducted workshops in the U.S., Canada, Europe, Asia, and the Pacific.



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A Consciousness for Our Time

Carolyn Toben

Gail Worcelo, sgm

and Miriam MacGillis, O.P.



*The human community
and the natural world
will go into the future as a
single sacred community
or we will both perish in
the desert.*

Thomas Berry, Befriending the Earth

Photo by Pat Irr, osf