

## A LATECOMER TO THE WORK OF THOMAS BERRY

By Rex Barker

I was introduced to the work of Thomas Berry late in my life, some forty years after my own journey of discovery began at the age of thirty. I am not an academic and yet have lived a life full of enquiry and in many ways parallel to Thomas's. A low achiever at school, I became a paramedic with the Royal Marines because I was interested in medicine, and I wanted to travel and prove I could succeed at something.

My first tour was in Malaysia where I was offered the opportunity to explore the world and our place in it. I was confronted by different religious and cultural beliefs and values that inspired me to explore religions and their influence, languages and the meanings we attach to things, and life itself. As a paramedic my role extended beyond the men in my company because the Royal Marines actively sought to connect in heart and mind with those they protected. As a result, I was tasked with providing practical help to the local population and understanding what more we could do to help them. This meant I needed to learn to speak their dialect.

The headman, or chief as it became clear he was, agreed to teach me. After six weeks he said to me, "In the days past you have learned sufficient words to speak to us, but to communicate effectively you must learn how we live, our culture. So, with your permission I will adopt you as my son and teach you how we live. Then you can truly share our world." I agreed instantly and what I learned changed my life and how I worked with other people.

Only after many years, however, did I fully appreciate the depth of what he had communicated to me and how he had changed my worldview. He had given me an ecozoic viewpoint, and I had lived it unconsciously for many years. When I read Thomas Berry's book, *The Dream of the Earth*, I finally was able to put all the pieces together and reflect on the less travelled path I had trodden.

At the age of thirty, some eleven years after leaving Asia, I was asked by a woman I respected if I had read *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* by Richard Bach. I said I had not but would, and that was the starting point for my journey to discover what I was. There is a point in life when some people begin to ask themselves the crucial questions—Who am I, where did I come from, why am I here, and where am I going?—and this was

mine. One additional question I asked that puzzled me was “What am I?” This seemed to me to be a crucial question to ask even before asking who I am. As I asked myself the question, “What am I?” the chief’s voice echoed in my soul, reminding me that we are never separate from all that is and we are more capable and aware than we believe, if only our sensitivity is attuned to the world. In reading Thomas Berry, I could hear him respond to this with a “Hear, hear!”

My reading has guided my awareness and interest in all the religions and spiritual traditions, and given me the opportunity to meet many people significant in their fields, from Zen masters to mullahs and shamans, and, in contrast to the dominant view, they all share the same sense of the unity of the world. I have been fascinated by the ability of some gifted writers to express in words this inexpressible sense of being. John Fowles, another ecozoic voice, did so on the penultimate page of his book, *The Tree*:

It, this namelessness, is beyond our science and our arts because its secret is being, not saying. Its greatest value to us is that it cannot be reproduced, that this being can be apprehended only by other present beings, only by the living senses and consciousness.

In the writings of Thomas Berry my journey found an expression of something that I had known and lived for years and yet had never fully comprehended. In doing so, Thomas gave me a way to consciously appropriate this as the ecozoic and I was inspired anew.

I wonder how many other people have had similar experiences, of sensing the ecozoic but not being able to name what they were experiencing and the impact it was having on them? I recall having attended a rehearsal of Brahms’s *Ein Deutsches Requiem* some years ago. It begins with the word “Blessed” (*Selig*) being repeated to a gentle orchestral background. From the moment the first word was sung until some thirty minutes after the rehearsal had finished, I could not say a word, nor could I leave that place of calm and peace that enveloped me. There was no other, no separation from all that is, nothing except the present moment. Later, when I attended the concert itself, I was puzzled why the same feelings had not arisen. I spoke with some musicians who said that they had no idea when and why such a powerful transformation occurs but agreed when it does it is magical for them, too.

It is possible to be present to something like this at times. Yet, as I learned from the chief and from Thomas, it is always there. As we become more attuned to this, and as we become more able to name and claim this, we are more able to contribute to an ecozoic world.