

Saturdays with Thomas

Mike Bell, Tom Keevey and Bob Molyneaux

Mike Bell is a management consultant specializing in community and organizational development. He has worked in communities across the Arctic with Inuit in Nunavut and with Dene peoples in the Northwest Territories. He has a special interest in using the functional cosmology of Thomas Berry to help create a bridge between the traditional teachings of the Aboriginal elders and the new science and cosmology that sees communities and organizations as organisms—part of a living universe.

Tom Keevey lives in Ewing, New Jersey, and has pursued doctoral studies in theology and liturgy at the University of Ottawa, Canada, and the Catholic Institute of Paris, France. He taught at St. John's University in Queens New York and recently retired from the New Jersey Division of Criminal Justice where he provided services to those who are victims of crime. A former member of the Passionist community, he has lived and studied with Thomas Berry.

Bob Molyneaux was a member for the Passionist Community with Tom Berry for ten years, studying and teaching Christian Ethics. For the past thirty years he has worked in healthcare administration.

Our semi-annual visits, during these past several years, to visit Thomas Berry in Greensboro, North Carolina, reminded us of Mitch Albom's visits every Tuesday to his former professor, Morrie Schwartz (recorded in *Tuesdays with Morrie*). There Morrie would sit in his chair by the window watching a small hibiscus plant and give a class to his favorite student on the meaning of life. For us the place was Thomas's room with him on the couch or great armchair, flowers peeking through the window, and the class always stimulating and provocative for it too was on the meaning of life—some fourteen billion years of cosmic life.

We had journeyed long distances to be with Thomas Berry, friend, mentor, and scholar, with whom we had enjoyed and shared the blessings and challenges of Passionist monastic life. Now we had the privilege to be with him in the latter years of his life. There was a time when we frequented his favorite restaurants, but more recently our classes have been confined to his room. There we have roamed the universe, explored the concept of cosmology, discussed human consciousness, reflected on the ways of indigenous peoples, especially the Inuit in Canada, and laughed about our days in the monastery—the characters we all knew, indoctrination into institutional life, and the events that bonded us together, in what some might call the charisma of a religious community. Our memories are strong and they have united us no matter where our separate lives have taken us. At the end of each visit, we promised to return and continue our class with Thomas, one of the greatest thinkers we have known.

Our visits were scheduled and arranged by Margaret Berry, Tom's loving sister and faithful companion at the Well Spring community. Chronicler, archivist, and keeper of the deeds and writings of her brother, she would always invite us over to her side of the complex for lunch. Our sessions with Thomas lasted for a few hours in the morning, a few hours in the afternoon, and occasionally a night session. The topics we discussed and reflected upon were many, but in general they covered such items as cosmology; church history; Earth jurisprudence; language; analogy; current events; family interactions among both his own family and our families; and the Passionist religious community.

The first item, however, was always Tom's questions: "What are you doing? Have you written anything?"—and little by little he would draw us out, listen attentively, comment and suggest. Then he would announce an outline of our course for the next couple of days. Thomas enjoyed simple things—I guess the more intelligent you are, the simpler life and things become. And nothing pleased him more than a good joke or a humorous story. He would laugh and utter his comment of approval: "Oh my...!"

Always the gentleman and solicitous for our well being, he would mix our visits with little tours of the Greensboro area. He took us to the

Guilford Courthouse National Military Park with its long, winding trails sprinkled with statues of famous American Revolutionary War generals and monuments marking the battle sites. He explained their roles and the significance of the southern battles in that founding war to us northerners. Another time, at Guilford College, we viewed the Universe Story tapestries woven by the Kopanang Women's Group of South Africa, which had been inspired by the book, *The Universe Story* by Tom and Brian Swimme. Such beauty and creativity was relished by Thomas as he walked us through each era of universe life. On another occasion we went to the Kathleen Clay Edwards Library and stood in awe under the rotunda which depicted in illustration Tom's famous dedication, "It takes a universe to make a child ...". That dedication appeared in the rotunda in his handwriting circling through forests, the night sky of stars and planets and the pale glimmer of the moon shining on the wolf, the guardian spirit of the planet. Tom said he had reservations about his handwriting being there since it is far from the Palmer method he had been taught, but the designers insisted. And you know what? It looks great and is quite legible. Once we took a leisurely ride through parts of the city where the family had lived and his father had worked and then went to the new house he had moved into in his youth, outside the city then but now part of Greensboro. When he was living in retirement off of Four Farms Road on the second floor of a converted stable (given the name, the "Hermitage") on family land still rural in character, we would take little walks near the lake. It was at times like this we would get glimpses of the strong bonds within the Berry family as well as his own concerns for his religious family.

An example of how the Berry family functioned was brought home to us one day when we met Tom's niece. We introduced ourselves and she asked, "Have you come to visit Uncle Brother?" We smiled at the term she used to refer to Tom. Later we asked Tom about "Uncle Brother." He explained that it was the custom in many Southern families to refer to an older brother with responsibilities for the family as "Brother" or an older Sister as "Sister."

However, no matter where we were—restaurants, parks or exhibits—Thomas would interject questions about cosmology, ideas on Earth jurisprudence, reflections on church councils, and ancient expressions of faith. In other words, he seemed to be constantly pondering these issues, or as he would put it, "brooding." When we took our leave to return north, he would inevitably say that we had good discussions, that we covered a lot of material, and finally, come again and we will continue to talk. So we look forward to continued classes with our professor in his chair by the window—no books required for we are pondering the meaning of life, life in the universe.