

## Meeting Thomas Berry, Biospherean

### Peter Berg

Peter Berg is founder of Planet Drum Foundation and is acknowledged as the originator of the terms bioregion and reinhabitation to describe land areas in terms of their interdependent plant, animal and human life. He is the author of numerous articles and three books: *Discovering Your Life-Place: A First Bioregional Workbook*, 1995; *A Green City Program for the San Francisco Bay Area and Beyond*, 1989; *Figures of Regulation: Guides for Re-Balancing Society with the Biosphere*, 1981; and editor of *Reinhabiting a Separate Country: A Bioregional Anthology of Northern California*, 1978. A collection of essays titled *Envisioning Sustainability* is due in 2009.



Thomas Berry watches the same eclipse of the sun we all see. Many observers are shocked by the gradual loss of light and point at the darkness, shouting alarms. Thomas concentrates on the bright nimbus continuing around the shadow. He believes the full sun will gradually return and tells us how it will look then.

Within minutes of first meeting Thomas in the '80s at his sanctum above the Hudson River, he asked if it was all right to borrow the words "bioregion" and "reinhabitation" for an essay he was writing. It was a highly memorable introduction to his interpersonal sensitivity and elegant manners, traits that were always present whenever we spoke. Those ideas were being used by a widening circle of people at that time (although no one had requested permission before) and it was gratifying to know he thought they were useful for illuminating the future post-eclipse era.

Paul Ryan, the visionary video and ecology artist who had once been his student in the Catholic Passionist Order, had arranged that meeting apparently at Thomas's request. It seemed by happy chance that the three of us very quickly started discussing topics such as homo sapiens seen from the same perspective as other mammals, so-called "primitive" people, and the place of ecological consciousness in civilization. It wasn't an accident, of course. Berry isn't oriented toward spirituality in the conventional sense. He never used the word "God" when we spoke, saying instead, "We ought to close the Bible and not open it for a hundred years." He knew we shared awareness that there was an urgent need to radically reinterpret civilization in order to preserve Earth. He wanted to get right on with exchanging possible solutions.

Berry comes by his eco-centrism (a "geologist" he calls himself) authentically as an assistant to cosmologist-philosopher Teilhard de Chardin who originally coined the term "biosphere." Wide travels in Asia stimulated his interest in trans-cultural ideas. (His personal collection of anthropological works seemed dominant in his study and was one of the largest outside an institutional library I have seen.) There is a North Carolina down home country rootedness under it all that was as omnipresent as the gigantic hundreds-of-years-old oak tree that grew just outside his window. Thomas's eyes can narrow at times like the edge of a stone outcrop when he is carefully listening or making a point. More than just a serious facial expression, it is a canny look that a hill farmer might have making a crucial survival judgment. It was visible when he explained the difference between himself and the people who called themselves conservatives. If self-declared conservatives clear-cut forests or destroy topsoil or pollute air and water to make money, they're acting radically. Thomas said he was the real conservative because he wanted to preserve the environment.

At that time Berry's written work was reproduced on an office copier and sent to his mailing list or handed out. He didn't seem to have any intention to distribute it in a more formal way than this forerunner of contemporary Internet distribution. It was obviously an extension of his "mission" rather than a career. And it was autobiographical in a way because he was steadily working his way toward his eventual personal philosophy. I always think of this when I see his later books. There is a shining seam of dedication that runs through their original self-publication and the work of strongly committed non-academic environmental activists.

Thomas Berry is strikingly genuine and original. He was an insider as a leading priest in a formal religion, but developed a major outsider view. It arose from searching for earth/human unity in his own and other religions, and when a satisfying version to lead out of the present eclipse couldn't be found, he courageously formulated a New Story.