

In-spirare: Latin Meaning To Breathe

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Bernadette Bostwick, S.G.M., is an artist, vegetarian cook and co-foundress of Green Mountain Monastery and the Thomas Berry Sanctuary in Greensboro, Vermont. She has spent many hours with Thomas exploring the history of the Catholic tradition and its emergence into its new cosmological phase. Through the unfolding of Green Mountain Monastery she has dedicated herself to the Great Work of inner and outer Awakening.

What Thomas Berry means to me and how he has influenced my life is not easy to write about. It is like asking me to explain how breathing influences my well being. But the act of breathing may very well be the best metaphor for my experience of Thomas. I breathe in Thomas; he is present like the breath moving in and out of my being.

I have read all of Thomas's books more than once, and can recite the now famous quotes that have become koans to those who know his work:

- The Earth is a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects.
- The Earth is a one-time endowment.
- We are part of a Single Sacred community.

His principles of Differentiation, Interiority and Communion have been woven into the silver medallion that we of Green Mountain Monastery wear. The medallion is a symbol of fidelity and commitment to our vision and life work—a vision in which Thomas himself has been intimately involved in bringing to life.

I have read innumerable books by many great men and women. They did not inspire me, as Thomas has, to go beyond myself to accept responsibility for my small circle of life as well as for the whole of life, and to celebrate the great community of existence. What was it that made Thomas and his teachings different?

As the universe would have it, in 1994, at a pivotal moment in my own unfolding story, I met Thomas. He was giving a talk I attended at St. Gabriel's Monastery. He spoke about the universe and our role in it. As Thomas spoke, I felt as if I was being pulled out of a dark, damp, suffocating space and placed on a mountaintop with fresh, clean air and vastness of perspective.

Because of my involvement in the co-founding of Green Mountain Monastery, I have had the privilege of spending time with Thomas on countless visits to his hometown in Greensboro, North Carolina. Thomas said it was a "Touch of Heaven" that our new monastery happened to be in the town of Greensboro, Vermont. We have enjoyed the synchronicity of the mystery of Greensboro South and Greensboro North.

I hold so many memories of times spent with Thomas—our walks in Battleground Park, Thomas teaching us in "The Hermitage," then in his room at Well-Spring, his visits to Vermont, and, in all, his speaking for hours about the wonders of the universe. I hold memories of Sr. Gail taking furious notes while I listened intently when we went out to dinner at the Green Valley Grille, all of us laughing and toasting to life and the universe with a glass of Merlot.

In particular I will always remember the celebration for Thomas's 80th birthday at the Cathedral of St John the Divine in New York City. I didn't

know Thomas very well then, but was standing with a friend who was greeting him. I stepped aside to let that interaction take place. Thomas, to my surprise, pulled me in and greeted me too with such warmth and attention that I felt the full weight of his presence touch my spirit. Since that birthday celebration I have witnessed Thomas in many situations, and as most students of Thomas know, and what never fails to inspire me, is that he gives his full attention to both the street sweeper and head of state alike; he treats each person with the same respect and dignity.

So what is it that inspired me most? What has “breathed” life into me? What has compelled me to change? It wasn’t his books or towering intellect, as incredible as they are. It is the tremendous quality and dignity of Thomas the man, the inspiration of someone who is in love with life, who is fully human. It is the quality of profound courtesy and genuine transparency that radiates out of Thomas. For me it is his gift as sage and teacher that has been the inspiration, the greatest teaching.

Thomas is a man full of Presence. When I say “I breathe in Thomas,” I mean that with each breath, I try to be more like him, and in each new situation ask myself, “What would Thomas do? How would Thomas meet this moment?” Thomas has taught me more than just the Universe Story. He has taught me how to be a human in love with life and has inspired me to keep striving to be my highest self. Thank you, Thomas!