

## **Mentor of the Half Light**

John Brinkman, M.M.

John Brinkman, M.M., is a historian of religions with particular reference to East and Southeast Asia. His present work focuses on the inter-religious environmental dialogue under the Commission on Ecology and Religion. His activities include participation in the U.N. Framework Conferences on Climate Change (UNFCCC) from Kyoto 1997 to Poznan 2008, with his analysis and interpretation published by the Oriens Institute for Religious Research in Tokyo and the Office of Global Concerns in Washington, D.C. Other activities include presentations at the October Equity Summit in Chennai, India; at the Islamic Response to Climate Change Conference in Bangkok; and at the Uppsala Interfaith Climate Summit this past November as a member of the "Ecology and Asian Dialogue" panel.

I am thankful to Herman Greene for his invitation to contribute to a publication tribute to Thomas Berry. This project is one of many that Mr. Herman Greene has undertaken to advance the work and make known the thought of Thomas Berry from Greensboro, North Carolina—the congenial ambiance and birth place of this historian of cultural history and religious thought who continues to embody in his disposition and decorum a gentility and quiet persuasion most at home in this South land. The invitation to write came at a time of delayed response due to conference work in Southeast Asia and thereafter Eastern Europe.

Yet, appropriately, I start to write this essay on 25 December 2008 Anno Domini, the day of commemoration that uniquely encompasses reflection on the journey of the universe and the role of the human within it. I am profoundly aware on this day of how Thomas has been a constant companion in my life journey since our initial encounter in the summer of 1968. I was then a young instructor at a small liberal arts college situated on the banks of the Saco River precisely where its waters tumbled into the Atlantic Ocean in Biddeford, Maine. Hence, this brief writing recollects over forty years of fond familiarity with his person, vision and insights.

Years ago, I was with Thomas in Assisi, during a sequence of presentations on Sustainability and Spirituality. There the Lombard hills offered vistas of unique beauty. The salmon-pink stones of the village almost seemed diaphanous in the early morning light as larks skirted the fields of sunflowers. During the course of the day, the vast array of high standing sunflowers would in unison face and follow the course of the sun. They seemed most aware of the lengthening shadows of dwindling light. They sought radiance while being keenly aware of encroaching darkness. They were it seemed to me, life forms sensitive to the half light.

From my perspective, Thomas was quintessentially a person of the half light. My fondest images of this priest-scholar are situated on the slight hill-rise path that led to the back door of the Riverdale Center for Religious Research. When the pre-dawn light from his second story window traced a soft glow on the snow bound oak or when he spryly walked up the path out of a summer's morning mist to sequester himself in his room, he was that disciplined, solitary monk at home with his thoughts and with his gift for writing. He would later appear with hand written papers for Mrs. Doyle to decipher and print in a legible text for constant revision and refinement. Out of this half light emerged clarity of thought that would challenge established presumptions and yet offer a profound sense of continuity in its interpretation. In this effort, he invited his students to enter the widest context of things, the overarching sweep of history and its perdurable meaning.

He was also a mentor in regard to the half light of one's inner life. During the summer of 1970, I had experienced a brief cultural immersion in the Huehuetenago Province of Guatemala with particular regard to the native communities in the region. It was clear to me that the mentoring in Thomas' thought was now perceived as all the more relevant for my life's direction. However, horse back experience in the cloud forests, the fording of turbulent rivers and even the encountering of signs of the coming political violence in the area were heady experiences for a young man. I may have emerged a bit too confident when I visited Thomas at the end of that summer. He spoke to me about "skillfulness" for the task ahead. I inquired whether he meant a sense of confidence that one can actually do it. His response was: "No, I disagree with you there. If you are sure you can do it—it may be best not to take it on. If it is not all that much of a challenge you would receive little benefit from it. You must *be certain of the possibility of failure* and then take it up."

Thomas was a mentor of the half light, a guide to the thresholds where failure and achievement, darkness and light vie as equal contenders in a yet to be decided outcome. Although this quality is best known by its effect in his writings and although it is notoriously difficult to put into words, I believe that this is a compelling hallmark of his gift and thought. It is far more than gleaning clarity from contrast. It is the basis out of which he can write conclusively of the most desperate conditions of the human alienation and do so with a sense of hope that the human mind and heart can manage a salvific outcome. The awareness of darkness in our experience of life is essential for seeking the radiance of insight and the stimulus for the pursuit of what may indeed be true and good. Such were the lessons gleaned from the insights of Shantideva; the sublime writings of Mencius to Wang Yang Ming; the meditative records of Ju-chng to the Zazen essays of Dogen, all of which were part of the core curriculum of our early discourse and instruction with Thomas Berry.

The sense of half light took on particular prominence in his later ecological phase of interpretation. He defined in prescient terms the on-going alienation of the human community from the earth community and uncovered the origins of this desperate disjuncture. He looked into the abyss and yet wrote of our common human destiny to meet the most profound challenges of our time. He did so with sober evaluation and stark confrontation which continue to be compelling. In his preface to Kathleen Deignan's "When the Trees Say Nothing," he did not underestimate the task before us nor was there any doubt that he was certain of the possibility of failure.

An absence of a sense of the sacred is the basic flaw in many of our efforts at...adjusting our human presence to the natural world...The

deep psychic change needed to withdraw us from the fascination of the industrial world, and the deceptive gifts that it gives us, is too difficult for simply the avoidance of its difficulties or the attractions of its benefits. Eventually only our sense of the sacred will save us.

Such are the insights drawn from the half light of our existence.

In those early days at the Riverdale Center, there were many occasions at lectures and seminars and shared gatherings that enhanced the ties of the association of students who were referred to at times as the “Berry Patch.” There was word-wonder and listening-silence above the Hudson River and below the great arms of the ancient Red Oak in Riverdale during those years. I remember one series of talks given by Thomas on the great Dante Alighieri. He stated in his opening lecture that Dante refused to succumb to the dark currents of his times. Even as one exiled from his beloved Florence, he refused to write a Tragedy but instead purposefully wrote a Comedy, a story of ascent from the depths to the heights of beatific vision. At the end of his life’s journey, Dante turned to his guide and asked the quintessential question of every one at such a moment of final reflection: “Why Me?” He is told that not even the luminary nearest to the throne of God knows the answer to that question.

I suspect that most of us who have had Thomas as a mentor are happy for the guidance and astonished at the ascent. We are also aware that no one, not even a Dante can ever quite convince us that the stuff of our existence is quivering with meaning and grace. At least we do not stay convinced for a very long period of time. Hence, the living poets must continue their work as mentors of life. For us Thomas has been such a living poet. He has embodied for us a tradition of lived insight which in the half light of our lives lends promise and purpose to the pathos and the plight of our times. He has pointed to the well springs that continue to renew our sense of hope and engagement even in face of the inexorable and encroaching darkness. For this I am most grateful.

It is a happy circumstance to write these reflections as I look forward to the Feast of the Epiphany and its imaged sense of guidance.

It has been surmised that star bursts are intimate to the origin and processes of Life.

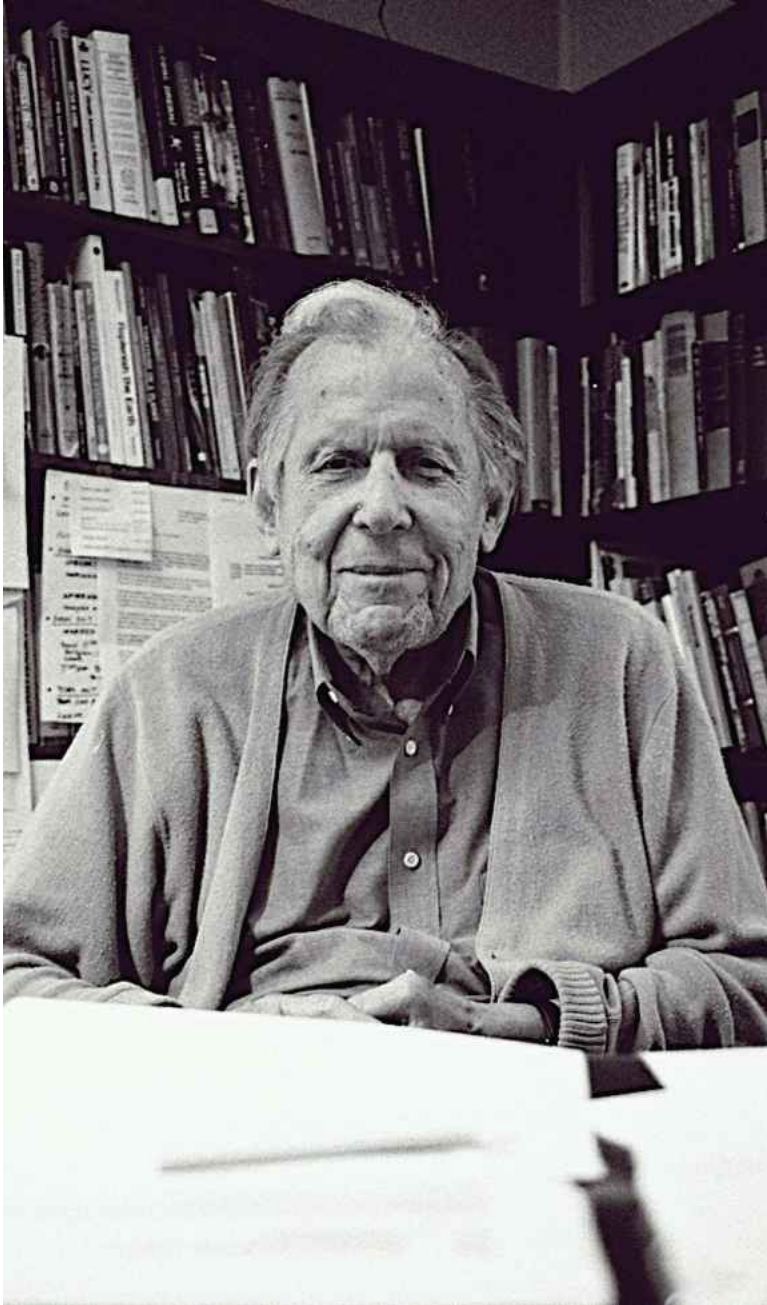
We are stardust made conscious of the Journey.

The Sun—no less a star—has shown Light on the Earth for time beyond imagining.

Giving sight to matter and vision to thought.

How like us is the One whose coming was made known by a star.

In Confucian texts, the Pole Star is a metaphor for the true way. It tells one not where one must be, but wherever one finds oneself, it will guide you.



Thomas Berry at his desk in Greensboro, NC, 2003. Photo by Caroline Webb.