

To My Teacher of Thirty-Seven Years

Brian Brown

Brian Brown is interested in the legal, moral, and spiritual dimensions of humanity's relationship with the natural world. Among his publications are articles which have addressed the ecological implications of the Buddhist and Native American tribal traditions, as well as contemporary jurisprudence on the conflicting values of land as sacred reality or as mere property. He is the author of *The Buddha Nature: A Study of the Tathagatagarbha and Alayavijnana, and Religion, Law and the Land: Native Americans and the Judicial Interpretation of Sacred Land*.



Dear Thomas,
It is a rainy Sunday afternoon here in New York; all the trees have dropped their leaves and stand starkly in the gloom. Yet, tomorrow, December 1st, promises to be clear and a “balmy” mid-fifties day. Not surprisingly, that forecast may extend for the whole week, the no longer subtle indication that we have truly entered a new moment in Earth's history. But if there is a heaviness to the prospect of warmer, damper New York winters and all that they portend, I write, filled with deep gratitude for the gift of your ninety-four years.

How wonderful to have been your student these past thirty-seven years and to know the guidance of your wisdom that offers the inestimable interpretive context for understanding how we have arrived at such a juncture and what the present demands. As you have so remarkably demonstrated through the testimony of your own life, the present seeks attentive and comprehensive listening to the multitude of voices that is the Earth in its planetary integrity. How fortunate for all of us that you were so rapt a hearer, so articulate a voice in response! Whether it be in *The Dream of the Earth*; *The Universe Story*; *The Great Work*; or *Evening Thoughts* you have schooled us in the Great Narrative, positioning us all in an entirely new perspective, a truly cosmic framework from within which we all continue to find our bearings and draw continued animation.

Certainly, for me, life would have been much simpler had I remained a mere Buddhist scholar, working with texts, poring over their richness, interpreting their meanings and significance. But there you were in that wondrous year 1977-1978, working with the idioms of cosmology, geology, biology and physics, and presciently seeing the glory and the threat from, and challenge to, the human. With calm authority you were off to how many conferences and fora to tell The Story and challenge the governance, religious, corporate and educational institutions to a more responsive task. What did Buddhism have to say, and a few years later, what did Law itself have to say? My life has been immeasurably complexified in countless ways by your kind but firm expectations. Having just completed co-editing a text on Augustine and World Religions, I turn once again to jurisprudence, even while I teach my four undergraduate classes, and prepare to teach my first class in the Fundamentals of Environmental Law at Iona. But before ever we look to the expansive and highly technical developments of the Clean Air and Water Acts, the National Environmental Protection Act, the Endangered Species Act or the multitude of other relevant statutes and their judicial interpretations, *The Great Work* will be the irreplaceable prolegomenon that will guide all our subsequent ponderings.

As I end, I listen to the beautiful and joyful intricacies of cello, violin and piano of Beethoven's Archduke Trio. And on this, the ninety-fourth

celebration of your extraordinary life, I offer you the delight of its strains and the poignant memories I cherish of listening to it with you and John as we sat by the Hudson in Riverdale. Long after its passage, that year with its music, laughter, vision and grace, remains a blessing that no poetry could capture, however I tried. I hold you in my heart and brace for all that the future demands, guided by your presence that neither time nor distance can diminish.

With gratitude and deepest affection,
Brian