

Sinai Blessings

Catherine Browning

Catherine Browning is a teacher, writer, and contemplative who holds degrees in anthropology, creation spirituality, and nursing. She is a mental health nurse practitioner and educator who helps bridge peace and understanding between the Middle East and the United States. She has studied, written about, and taught the work of Thomas Berry for the past twenty years. Catherine and her colleague, Mark Steiner, developed an experiential workshop entitled "Out of the Box and Into the Cosmos" which was inspired by the cosmology work of Thomas Berry and Brian Swimme. This workshop has touched the lives of hundreds of participants. Catherine is the author of *Blazing Radiance*, a collection of creation-centered poetry written while living in Kuwait.



I am a frequent pilgrim to the sacred Sinai desert of Egypt. That historic place repeatedly beckons me to stand amidst its intimidating glory. I reflect upon the story of Moses who encountered a mysterious, burning bush that heralded the primary revelation of the Divine. In this ancient place, sacred to Jews, Muslims, and Christians, God once chastened Moses, "Remove your shoes, for the place where you stand is holy ground." Out of loyalty to this presence, Moses humbly bowed down and then accepted the great work required of him: to lead disillusioned people from one land to another. He climbed granite peaks to accept commandments from his fierce Creator and guided the people with courage and wisdom. Moses's face shone like the sun and all who beheld him were infiltrated with powerful awareness of divinity. Each weary, uncertain sojourner was enlightened by the messenger and the message.

Thousands of miles away from Egypt, thousands of years after Moses, a man named Thomas Berry shines like the sun as he provides stories and explanations about our place in the world. Secluding himself from the pharaonic world in order to think and commune in a vast way, Father Thomas gifts us with his vision, his awakening to a whole new way of perceiving. His burning bush experience ignites him with the ability to see that all of this world, all of this Earth, is truly sacred: EVERYWHERE we stand is holy ground. This enlightened elder tells us "The universe, the solar system, and the planet Earth, in themselves and in their evolutionary emergence, constitute for the human community the primary revelation of that ultimate mystery whence all things emerge into being."

Theologian Matthew Fox aptly describes Thomas as the "new Moses" whose assignment it is to lead the people from anthropocentrism to the liberating new cosmology, from the era of human domination to the ecozoic era of inter-species communion. Through his spiritual devotion, deep scholarship, and telling of the new story, Berry synthesizes powerful teachings. He discerns the interconnected meanings burning within science, religion, history, and anthropology. He presents us with a list of truths relevant to our times and formulates these into the "Twelve Principles for Understanding the Universe." Though not chiseled into stone tablets, these wisdom commands are nonetheless critical to our survival into the new ecological era. The most profound of these principles is the one which proposes a specific role for humankind: "The human is that being in whom the universe reflects upon and celebrates itself in conscious self-awareness."

Our unique species is invited to commune with the very Universe itself. Our creative species is urged to commune with all other vibrant and unique species. We are not irrelevant to the divine scheme of creation. We are integral to that process. At the same time, our existence is neither privileged, nor guaranteed. We simply have been assigned a task, much as

the ant or the bee are assigned a task, and our survival depends upon the faithful execution of that task.

Whereas the ancient Biblical and Qur'anic texts saw human's primary role as obedience to the hierarchical laws and supreme deity, the new cosmological texts discern human's primary role as developing awe-inspiring consciousness. Creation, as well as Creator, is viewed as sacred because it emerges out of the Divine itself. Thus, God in essence is IN everyone and IN everything. There is nowhere, where God is not. The result of this shift in consciousness from exclusive focus upon a transcendent being to focus upon a transcendent AND immanent God is greater reverence for dwindling natural resources, endangered animal species, and diversity among humans. When the Divine presence is felt deeply within all of creation, no creature or substance excluded, then global decision-making sets as priority respectful, sustainable, simple, cooperative, and ecologically-balanced living.

Directives from different spiritual and scientific persuasions offer advice and perspectives about where we come from, our purpose for being here now, and where we are headed in the future. Their stories and explanations give us an identity to cling to and a boost to keep us going. They give us a sense of being within the great mysterious glory. They also give us a sense of certainty. We need helpful hints on how to make chaos more manageable, essential wisdom on how to survive human relations while chartering through rugged new territory.

The work of Thomas Berry, and those great teachers, scientists, artists, and ministers who have worked alongside with him, provide us with important guidelines for surviving into the harsh future. We have a long way to go before we are actualized into beings consciously reflecting upon and celebrating the Universe itself. We need a lot of help moving from one land of consciousness to another. It's easy to become disillusioned, fatigued, and hopeless along the way. We need sustenance for the journey and enormous hope that we can in fact endure to the very end. Each teacher, scientist, artist, and minister sharing the new cosmology and the great work of Thomas Berry, helps us to get closer to living our dream.

The geography of the Sinai, while sublimely breathtaking, is completely inhospitable. With the exception of some wandering camels, a few nomadic Bedouin tribes, and the isolated St. Catherine's monastery, there is nothing with which to comfort oneself. The desert is stark, scorching, and debilitating. The metaphorical similarities between the desert journey led by the historic Moses and that led by the new Moses provide inspiration for the soul. Life's desert experiences teach us about perseverance and patience. Without these qualities we too easily squander the holy when the going gets tough. During this 21st century the going is getting tougher and tougher. As a result, people are ripe for both disillusionment and enlighten-

ment. Many people in the modern world are trying to escape from the enslavement of Western materialism, fall-redemption thinking, and anthropocentrism. They seek liberation from the paradigms that have held them as prisoners for thousands of years. They seek a new way of living that enriches the soul, appreciates creation, and places the human within a proper cosmological perspective. The work of Thomas Berry shows the way.

This work skillfully educates and motivates people so they can understand the new role expected of them. Thomas and his colleagues move people from one land of consciousness to another. After all these years in the wilderness, Father Berry has succeeded in initiating us into the new story, the new cosmology which articulates our very reason and role for existence. He guides us to the precipice of cosmological wonder and ecozoic responsibility. He stands boldly peering off into the unknown, uncertain future. He fulfills his job nobly and trusts evolution and human compassion to shape the human species in their future decisions.

When God spoke during the ancient days there were fires, lights, and spiritual fireworks. Mount Horeb and Mount Sinai were places of magnificence where the divinity of God was revealed to the people for the purpose of revitalizing and renewing their faith. These mountain places were associated with quintessential primary revelation from the Divine. In a whole new way of perceiving the world from a cosmological perspective, the mountains themselves are now also seen as primary revelations from the Divine. Their jagged peaks and enduring prominences speak loudly to the greatness of the Universe and the Creator who, through deep evolutionary time, fashioned their awesome aesthetic presence and powerful spiritual potential.

As I gaze at the twenty prophetic Sinai mountains, I am consumed with fiery humility. I feel the penetrating sun flooding me with warmth and the light from the Divine pouring through me. I read the words once exclaimed by Moses and see how hauntingly similar they are to those of our beloved Thomas: “Blessed be the land, for the precious things of heaven, for the dew, and for the deep that coucheth beneath, and for the precious fruits brought forth by the sun, and for the precious things put forth by the moon, and for the chief things of the ancient mountains, and for the precious things of the lasting hills, and for the precious things of the earth and fullness thereof, and for the good will of the One who dwelt in the bush, let the blessings come...” (Deuteronomy 33: 13-16, KJV).

The message from the Sinai is compelling. It speaks of heroic journeys and long-awaited arrivals. It blesses us with knowledge about sacred land and perfected Earth. The voices of traditional Moses and contemporary Thomas Berry echo wisdom throughout the crevices and canyons. If you listen carefully, you can hear the message that is being conveyed: “We are

standing on holy ground. Don't pretend otherwise. It is a privilege and a requirement to evolve consciousness for the sake of the Divine so that we can truly know how holy is this ground."

Be patient, yet persevering. We as a species do not quite yet have a clear view of the route we are to follow. But we are close and some of our modern day prophets have cleared pathways for us. Follow the guidelines presented for our time in order to properly reach our most promised and hopeful destination. Have faith. Have hope. Don't give up. Even if we don't live to see the new dream come true, we can help make it happen for our loved ones, and their loved ones, and all species who are yet to come. Blessed be the fiery blaze of God. Blessed be the Universe, the galaxies, the Milky Way galaxy, the solar system, planet Earth, the ant, and the bee. Blessed be the evolutionary manifestation of the Divine. Blessed be the dream of the Earth. Blessed be the luminescent human. Blessed be the interconnectedness of all creation. Blessed be the ancient and modern messengers and the holy messages they bring.

May the sacred Sinai continue to bestow blessings for thousands and thousands of years. May we learn, individually and as a species, to remove the shoes from our feet thus affirming that all of creation and the Ultimate Mystery from whence all things come are indeed sacred. Yes, it's painful to remove our shoes while standing upon craggy rocks, but when confronted with spiritual presence, non-participation is not an option. It is the only way to see us through.

Remove our sandals or perish.



Sinai Mountains with St. Catherine's Monastery