

Inspiring My Work

Rick Clugston

Rick Clugston is a Senior Fellow in Education for Sustainability at the Center for Respect of Life and Environment (CRLE) in Washington DC, where he served as executive director from 1989 to 2007, and where he is an editor of *The International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education* (IJSHE). He was director of the Association of University Leaders for a Sustainable Future (ULSF) from 1997 to 2007, and has taught and published on human development, strategic planning, educational reform, and most recently on environmental ethics, spirituality and sustainability.

In the summer of 1988, reading *The Dream of the Earth* was a major inspiration and direction setter for what was soon to be a major shift in my career. I spent the next year searching for a job that would enable me to care for our sentient planet.

I moved to Washington, D.C., to join the Center for Respect of Life and Environment. On my first day on the job (September 28, 1989), I met Thomas. He was on the CRLE board which was meeting that day. Later that fall I traveled to the Riverdale Center to interview him for a special Earth Day 1990 issue of “The Animal Activist Alert.” He picked me up at the train station. By the oak and by overloaded bookshelves and piles of papers, we talked about the challenges we face and the way forward. Thomas ended the interview on this hopeful note, “We are ready to affirm the natural world as a sacred community, to celebrate its cycles and even accept its limits. The question is whether enough of us will change our lifestyles and social priorities quickly enough to keep its richness and diversity alive.”

We adopted as a slogan for our Center the following quote from Thomas: “Existence is a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects.” (Of course many of the communing subjects live by devouring other subjects, but this does not diminish the point.)

And we used another Thomas quote in our brochure. “Every being has its own interior, its mystery, its numinous aspect. To deprive any being of this sacred quality is to disrupt the total order of the Universe. Reverence will be total or it will not be at all.”

These quotes resonated with the HSUS mission—to protect all animals as individual beings and fellow citizens (a la Leopold) in the sacred life community.

In October of 1992, I drove to the Denver airport to pick up Thomas. He was coming to the CRLE board meeting which was being held in conjunction with the HSUS Annual Meeting, where Thomas was to receive the HSUS James Herriot Award “in recognition of the contributions of his thoughts to growing public appreciation of and concern for the animals of this world.” At this conference he was appointed the HSUS Scholar-in-Residence. I met him at the gate and started walking to the baggage carousel when he told me he had no baggage. All he had in hand was a little bag (with a toothbrush and change of underwear?) for a four-day event in 35 degree weather. We collected a variety of winter clothing so he could explore the snowy Rockies and travel to workshops at Naropa.

Thomas was the major speaker and inspiration for six “Spirituality and Sustainability” conferences in Assisi, Italy, sponsored by St. Thomas University in Miami and CRLE. Elizabeth Ferrero, a professor at St. Thomas, had created a Study Abroad for the Earth program, bringing students to

Assisi to study with Thomas. The conferences expanded the audience to include leaders in the sustainability movement, and were organized around the new cosmology/world view of Thomas and how this thinking would transform the major institutions: economics, law, religion, higher education. They wove together the new story with the sensibilities of St. Francis, the Patron Saint of Ecology, and St. Claire, ironically, the Patron Saint of Television.

Creating a humane and sustainable future became the central focus of CRLE's work. But Thomas deeply disliked the term "sustainability," seeing it and its cognate "sustainable development" as anthropocentric and greenwash for business as usual, making minor refinements in humans' exploitation of nature. He preferred regenerative. A considerable portion of many CRLE board meetings were spent debating these terms and the underlying theories of social change, which made me embrace "sustainability" and him reject it. Visionary that he is, Thomas found it difficult to put up with our more adaptive, incremental approach.

In 1998, John A. Hoyt, the HSUS CEO, created an annual "Thomas Berry Lecture and Award" honoring those who had been inspired by Thomas and had found ways to translate his vision into a range of initiatives that would help usher in the Ecozoic Era.

Thomas's contribution is not only the depth of his insights and his warmth, it is also the wonder-filled community that surrounds him. This award gave us a chance to recognize some of the many creating mutually enhancing human-Earth relations. In order of their appearance:

- Mary Evelyn Tucker, as "mother hen" along with her "crowing rooster", John Grim, carefully incubating the great transformative vision of Thomas, hatching his great work in countless ways, and assisting him in so many practical ways.
- Brian Swimme, the wild cosmologist creating with Thomas the rich complexity and mystery of the new story in all its psychic, physical and spiritual depth.
- Tu Weiming, deeply involved in weaving together Thomas Berry's thought, the Enlightenment legacy, the ecological resources of the religions of the world, and the Earth Charter into a creative synthesis to inform the dialogue of civilizations on globalization.
- Steven C. Rockefeller, receiving the award, described us "as pilgrims inspired by the promise of the Ecozoic Era." Thomas commented "Through the Earth Charter, Steven has worked so ardently to articulate of an integral community of humans and the Earth, and the intimate relationships we have with the Earth, other humans and all animals."

- Reverend James Parks Morton, bringing Thomas into the incredible venue of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, creating a grand platform supported by sustainable practices for realizing the birth of the Ecozoic.
- Miriam MacGillis, grounding the vision in the practices of Genesis Farm- community supported agriculture, Earth Literacy, contemplative retreats—where visitors are able to engage deeply in an understanding of the new cosmology and the practices it requires for living in the 21st Century.
- Fritz and Vivienne Hull, the builders of the Thomas Berry Hall on Whidbey Island, whom I first met at the 1990 Earth and Spirit Conference which introduced me to the wonderful community surrounding Thomas: Brian, Miriam, Jim, Danny Martin, and many associated with Chinook.
- Martin Kaplan, the 2009 recipient, who is a stalwart supporter of this great work, not only through helping it find the financial support that makes the dream become reality, but through his sage advice and counsel on how to keep the great work going in the midst of the difficult organizational challenges we all must deal with.

Tom Berry's analysis of the challenges we face and the depth of the shift we need to make certainly inspired me to seek my great work, as it has done, and will continue to do so, for countless others.