

## Reflections on a Different Kind of Spirit Journey

John Cock

My acquaintance with Thomas Berry began with a book and continues with regular lunches and get-togethers that have called me to a different kind of journey.

During my first meeting with Thomas Berry, he said that Christians were hung up on redemption. He called the Protestant Reformation a “back to the Bible” movement. I laughed because he spoke as though he knew where I’d come from.

Raised in a small mountain town in southwest Virginia, even though our denomination had a long tradition of the social gospel, we were overly concerned with personal redemption and fundamental beliefs. By the time I graduated from college, I was asking big questions about my tradition. Aware of the sit-ins going on in Greensboro and other places across the country, I realized blacks could have also staged sit-ins in the churches I attended, for they were as shut out from white churches as they were from lunch counters. After graduation I taught a while, and when JFK was assassinated, I abruptly left a Ph.D. scholarship program and entered seminary, followed by a few years as a pastor but more to care for society than to redeem sinners.

During that time my wife and I attended a transforming ministers’ colloquy—much unlike what happened to me at seminary—that intensified and added another dimension to our calling. Our church denomination gave us a special appointment to live and work with a black community in a Chicago ghetto toward its redevelopment following the riots of 1968. We later served in other inner-city communities of the US and in third world villages in Indonesia and India. The mission to serve our struggling world through comprehensive and deep human development was the vision we dedicated ourselves to for nearly twenty years.

To ensure we did not become complacent in our vocational journey, our older son brought home the little book he had read at Davidson College, *Befriending the Earth*, by Thomas Berry. I read it in one night and began to envision a radically bigger calling. That was my introduction to Thomas.

In that little book Berry asks why no major religion has shown effective responsibility for the fate of the Earth community. Since we humans have not dealt well with suicide, homicide, or genocide, he asks how we are going to deal with *biocide* (the murder of nature) or *geocide* (the murder of the earth), especially if these two words are not even in our consciousness, much less in our prayers. The personal and social human self is precious, he writes, but no more precious than the Earth self or the universe self. He adds that God is not going to save the planet if we humans destroy it, and that if religions are to survive they must bring about a reinterpretation of all their teachings within the context of the universe, our primary sacred community.

John Cock has written twelve books on spirituality and care of the Earth, and he has helped create and guide “Profound Journey Dialog” events across the U.S. For most of two decades he worked at integral development in the US, Australia, Indonesia, Malaysia, and India, and over the last five years has daily composed the online “Journey Reflection.” John and Lynda are longtime members of CES.



He says the universe community is the intercommunion of all things, wherein all are elected, not just humans. There is no separate human community and history. Human community and history is a very small part of Earth community and history, which is a very small part of universe community and history.

If nature goes into deficit, we all do, writes Thomas. We cannot begin to imagine the cost of purifying the waters and the atmosphere. We have to open ourselves as self-conscious stewards to the biggest reality if we want the Earth to last for our progeny. Our uniquely human role is to imagine and implement care systems for the universe-Earth community.

For Thomas what makes the big difference is sacrifice of the kind that has made the universe possible over its 14 billion years. So, humans are authentic to the extent they enter that sacrificial mode of the universe. The whole cosmos, he says, is in the evolution process more than the redemption process.

I summed up the little book this way: Thomas is talking about loving the “neighbor” with a capital “N.” The “Neighbor” is nothing less than the universe, Earth, and humanity – all that ever was, all living humans, and all that will ever be. And the numinous, a favorite word for Thomas, meets us in the midst of all this past, present, and future creation.

*Since that night, for me Befriending the Earth has become a vocational image for me as well as a book title.*

We moved to Greensboro in 1998 to live close to the grandchildren—and, fortunately, also close to Thomas. Since then we have lunched with him at The Tavern most every month, have had many chats at his Hermitage—his name for his upstairs stable apartment on his relative’s property—and participated in myriad Thomas events.

What has struck me most about Thomas? His precision of intellect, simple lifestyle, winsome smile and hardy laugh, discipline, giving spirit, compassion, and his chastity of purpose over so many decades to communicate the call to love and serve the whole Earth.

I’ve often said Thomas has the biggest context of anyone I’ve ever known. More than that, he has the most profound articulation of our human vocation: “relating the human venture to the larger destinies of the universe. Creating such a movement might be called the Great Work of a people” (TGW, p. 1). Herein lies purpose and meaning.

*Thomas's images and motifs have stacked up in my consciousness. Coming to mind are these:*

- his “magic moment” as a youth (visiting that meadow with him, in Greensboro)
- “It takes a universe to make a child...” from his poem he recites on any occasion
- “the universe is a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects”
- his “dream of the earth” and “universe story” portraying a journey of grandeur amid travail
- “reinvent the human” to care for the Earth community
- “all have rights”...“the U.S. Constitution is destructive declaring only human rights” (said to a youth group near Greensboro)
- the “four human establishments” (religion, government, education, economy) must have one context: the universe
- through us humans “the universe reflects on itself” – our special role
- our vocation as humans: “midwife the Ecozoic age”
- “the sacrificial mode of the universe”... includes us humans
- grace: “the universe is for us rather than against us”
- “I will be cared for in death as in life. So what’s the problem?” (2008 lunch)

*How have I changed since my encounters with Thomas?*

Before I read that little book and got to know him over the past ten years, I had already done a great vocation with a global servant force, and, at that time, was helping to revitalize my hometown community. All that, however, was primarily living out of a human-centered understanding of life.

After meeting Thomas, my human-centered spirit journey is becoming a more universal spirit journey. The dynamics are the same: eventfulness, consciousness, communion, vocational decision on behalf of—but now with the biggest possible context: the universe... and, as always, spirit at its heart.

*Because of all this, I count Thomas a primary mentor.*

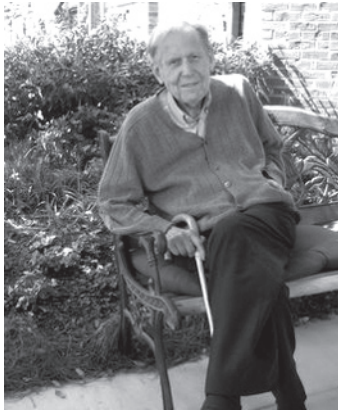


Photo of Thomas by John Cock

A Poem for Thomas:

You grew up in Greensboro  
And now spend your latter days here  
Where as a boy you experienced  
That awesome meadow as a life image  
About which you later wrote  
“It takes a universe to make a child”

Little wonder that in the monastery  
You covenanted to be brother to the Cosmos  
As St. Paul wrote and commended you  
“to unite all things...in heaven and Earth”  
And under that cosmological image  
You took up your reason for being

You have been *Befriending the Earth*  
Dreaming *The Dream of the Earth*  
Telling *The Universe Story*  
Declaring *The Great Work*  
Recollecting your *Evening Thoughts*  
And writing others and more to come

Your four score and fourteen years  
Find you reciting the never ending story  
And refolding into the universe  
Journey from whence you came  
To share the evolutionary beam  
For generations to come...to see

We celebrate your being here  
Giving thanks for your trek  
Your great work in the new age Ecozoic

Where humans take up the task  
Of reinventing themselves “in outer form  
And inner spirit” for what is and shall be