

Watching the Night Sky with Thomas

David Cook

Thomas Berry is brother to Jim Berry, who with his wife, Mary, for many years held an annual eco-spiritual conference at Camp New Hope near Chapel Hill, North Carolina. After Jim's and Mary's deaths, "the Conference," as we affectionately called it, lived on another several years, owing largely to the dedication of my wife, Joanna, and a few others. In the next to the last year of the Conference at Camp New Hope, I had the gift of watching the Leonid Meteor Shower with Thomas Berry. The evening before, Herman Greene had stood up and reminded us that the meteor shower was to be particularly spectacular that night; what was usually fifteen shooting stars per hour was to be 1,000 or more. He'd said some of us ought to rise up several hours before daylight and watch it. Of the twenty-five or thirty people in attendance, Thomas, wanting to see this marvel, was one of the ten or eleven who had raised a hand. I, too, had raised my hand.

At home before going to bed, I'd said something to Joanna about Thomas having raised his hand, and whether, at the age of 85, and in uncertain health, he would really want to get up at four in the morning and watch the quiet splendor so easily slept through. Joanna said to me, "If Thomas raised his hand, it means he wants to see it." I set my alarm and before going to bed set out several bottles, one of bourbon whisky, another of Schnapps—I had been trained years before by Helen Waite, a delightful leader of people of all ages, who believed wonder at the natural world should be celebrated in the best forms imaginable, one of which is alcohol, when kids aren't around. I sensed the Leonid Meteor shower would be such occasion.

I reluctantly rose at four the next morning. I went outside and looked up into the sky. It was happening! Almost as if my gaze had created them, three shooting stars illuminated the dark sky above our oak trees. Mollie, my beloved black spaniel, didn't wonder why I was up so early; I sometimes rose almost that early to write. But she knew a singular morning was underway when I packed the car with several folding chairs and drove the seven or eight miles to Camp New Hope where the guest speakers were spending the night, including Joyce Wilding, Gene Marshall and Thomas.

When I arrived, Mollie and I went to the ball field where the sky opened overhead. There were ten or twelve people in the field, some from the Conference and others from another retreat being held at Camp New Hope that same weekend. We watched, some in chairs, some lying on blankets, some standing with their blankets wrapped around them to ward off the chill. We "oohed" and "awed" at the spectacle, children of the universe beholding the wonder of the cosmos celebrating itself. We were doing our part, conscious of the beauty as it was anciently dreamed by the first dreamer.

Mollie trotted off through the new-fallen oak leaves, and I offered drinks around in plastic cups I had brought in a paper bag. I was hugely disap-

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pointed that no one except Joyce would share in this ritual celebration of the glorious celestial event. I sipped my whisky and asked, "Is Thomas here?"

"No," Joyce said. "None of us dared to wake him. We don't know him as well as you. Maybe you should wake him up."

I thought of what Joanna had said, and I, too, wouldn't have dared to wake him up if not for that. I didn't think of myself as knowing Thomas well, there were many who knew him better, but Joyce offered me her flashlight and whistling Mollie up, we set out for Thomas's cabin. Mollie liked nothing better than setting out wherever it was, for however long.

I stopped once or twice along the short way to watch the sky. I had never seen anything like it. I watched for shooting stars, hardly believing they were going to be there at the end of my gaze, dozens after dozens of them, as promised. It was a promise not of science that has an explanation, and not of religion that has faith, but a promise of the universe that is astoundingly immense and personal at the same time. If Mollie was amazed, I didn't recognize it. The trail was an immense enjoyment to her, as was life. To me she was like a saint.

When we arrived at Thomas's cabin all the lights were out. I used Joyce's flashlight to find my way to the back of the cabin where she had told me Thomas's room was. The door was closed.

I admire my courage; I opened the door.

"Thomas," I whispered into the dark, but no soft whisper would do. "Thomas!" I said a little louder. I thought, "What if he is dead and I am finding him?" Worse yet, he might be so shocked out of sleep by my attempts to wake him that he would die.

"Thomas!" I said, loud enough to wake a sleeping drunk.

"Wuh! Wuh!" I heard him rise up in his bedsheets.

"It's Dave," I said. "Dave Cook. I didn't know if you wanted me to take you, but the meteor shower is happening."

"Oh, yes!" he said. Thomas came awake faster than I thought an old man could. "Give me a minute. I'll be right there. I'll get dressed."

I went outside. I watched the shooting stars from the boardwalk of the cabin. I was glad I had woken Thomas, but felt an enormous sense of responsibility. I sighed. My anxiety lessened. There had been enthusiasm in Thomas's voice. He was very willing. I listened to Mollie going around the back of the cabin and when I heard Thomas's feet thumping toward the door, I called for her to let her know our job was done.

Thomas appeared at the door. I could see him now, in the subtle light of the stars on this cloudless night. He was wearing that old brown coat of his and a toboggan cap on his head. His old face was getting more and more benevolent with every passing year. He stumbled up the boardwalk toward the gravel road. He may have been a bit surprised by being awakened—I'll

never know—but he accepted it as the next delightful thing that would happen in his life. Mollie briefly nuzzled his low-slung hand.

“Oh!” he said gently, and said something kindly about our four-legged friends, about dogs, about Mollie. He remembered her and she was delighted by that; she loved him in a touch and he could feel it. I noticed that Thomas had left the cabin door open on his way out and went back to close it. I heard Thomas go down with a thump, his whole body fell in a heap on the boardwalk. I gasped.

“He’s killed himself!” I thought for an instant. “Anne will never forgive me.” Anne Berry was a dear friend, Thomas’s niece and Jim’s daughter, who watched over Thomas and his welfare. She rankled whenever anyone took advantage of Thomas’s natural generosity and kindness, told scorching stories of people who invited Thomas to come and speak to their group and didn’t even offer him a glass of water. And here was, pitched forward on the boardwalk, having tripped over the half-step in the dark. Mollie was already there before me.

“Thomas, are you alright?”

“I’m fine,” he said. I almost didn’t believe him. I helped him to his feet. He was a dead weight, so heavy I almost couldn’t lift him up. He stuck his toboggan cap back on his head where it had been knocked askew and off we went up the dirt road with Mollie proudly leading the way in the dark.

Halfway up the road, Thomas stopped. He looked into sky. There was then a lull in the meteor shower. I didn’t see a single shooting star. But Thomas saw with new eyes. “Oh my!” he said, “Oh my!” I looked again. There were no shooting stars. It was the night sky as it always was.

“Oh my!” he said again. “It couldn’t get any better than this!”

I didn’t know what to say. He saw the night sky for the marvel it was, gazing at it as a child might. Perhaps we were back in time, when shooting stars hadn’t happened yet, when the first dreamer hadn’t yet dreamed them. I didn’t say anything. Thomas wasn’t wrong; he simply was more in the moment than I. Already several hundred feet ahead of myself, I was thinking about the people standing in the ball field watching for shooting stars.

I think I said something about joining the others, and he agreed we should. I gave him my arm as we climbed a short hill and came onto the field. People gathered around him in the delight of being with Thomas, and we briefly watched several glorious shooting stars and people gave wordless voice to their wonder. I looked at Thomas. He seemed strangely bewildered, as if something was the matter. I was concerned. Earlier that year he had collapsed after giving a talk I had attended.

“Thomas,” I said. “Is everything all right?” Several other people closed in towards him, as if they had sensed something as well, or detected the concern in my voice. Joyce was one.

“I can’t get my bearings!” he complained. “Where’s the Big Dipper; where’s North?” But just then he located it for himself, and pointed it out for everyone. “Ah! There it is!” When his finger found the North Star, a particularly bright shooting star crossed from horizon to horizon.

“Ahhhhh!” All was right in the world. We clapped in delight. I offered Thomas a folding chair and he, looking up at the cosmos celebrating, enjoying itself in him, sat more comfortably. I offered him some whisky, which he took with delight. All of us together shared in the inspiration of the early morning sky, where stars were strewn like luminous seeds cast for wonderment.

Thomas asked, “Where’s that whisky?” It was a pleasure to pour it for him. By the time the sky began to pale, Mollie, having returned from excursions in the dry leaves of the oaks bordering the field lay at his feet. People, in ones and twos, began to drift back toward their cabins.

Joyce, Thomas, and I were the final threesome watching the stars. Joyce decided she’d go back to bed and sleep until the Conference resumed at 9:00 am. It was a twenty-minute drive back home; I thought I’d journal or take a walk. But Thomas said he wasn’t going back to bed.

“Let’s make some coffee,” he said, and we did. Mollie went with us to the kitchen in the meeting building. Five minutes later Joyce came in, saying “I was going back to bed, but then I thought, ‘I’ve got a chance to be with Thomas Berry for a couple of hours, with nobody else around. Why would I want to go to bed?’”

We stood for an hour and a half with Thomas leaning against the kitchen counter to support himself. Joyce had questions; mostly I listened, as most do when they’re with him. From time to time he’d look down at Mollie asleep on his foot and marvel at her compliment. I’ve never been in a room where there was a wiser man.

I don’t remember much of what he said, mostly details to his larger thoughts, things Joyce was concerned about. Some matched my own concerns. Towards 8:30 a.m. we each spent a short while alone, Thomas at a table with coffee, Joyce looking out the window at the big sun coming up behind the bare trees of the east. I settled some matters so the conference could resume.

There will never be another day like it: Joyce is back in Tennessee, Thomas is in Greensboro, Mollie is gone.