

## Hello, Aster and Helenium

Anne Marie Dalton

It's September in Nova Scotia and here on the North Atlantic shore line there is already a wintery crispness in the air. As the sun appears lower in the sky each day, there is a quality to the light that accentuates the mature colouring of the trees and plants about to complete their activities for another year. Outside my patio doors the yellow and red Helenium, and the purple, pink and magenta Asters are still the center of attention for bees, butterflies and a myriad of frenetic bugs eager to complete their year's work as well. They ought to speak, I think—but of course they don't in any language I can understand. On their behalf, however, I say thank you to Thomas Berry. My ability to recognize that in the liturgy of their being they already are both the gift and the gratitude is the core of my indebtedness to Thomas Berry.

In the summer of 1975, I was visiting Holy Cross Centre in Port Burwell, Ontario. Having just completed my Bachelor of Science degree in Mathematics and Biology, I was confident of a career in which one of those areas would figure prominently. Women with degrees were rare in mathematics then and there was lots of pressure and incentive to pursue that area further. But one lazy morning lounging in the reading room at Holy Cross changed all that; I picked up a blue bound volume of unpublished papers by Thomas Berry and I was spellbound. The ecological crisis is a religious crisis, I read. We need a new story. Science is important but not enough. Religion is important but not enough. We must re-inhabit the planet. That's worthy of at least one lifetime, I thought. I would study with Thomas Berry. And I did.

There are many personal key moments and wonderful memories for which I thank Thomas....I recall the hours of conversation under the old oak tree during one of which times Brian Swimme showed up to begin his life conversion, the classifying of the trees around the grounds at Riverdale, the trips to Bear Mountain and the squirrel who entertained us on the window ledge of the restaurant there. Then there were the suitcases of books he provided to me week after week as I enriched my MA at Fordham University with works by John Muir, Henry David Thoreau, Conrad Bonifazi, Renée Dubos, Erich Jantsch, Ilya Prigogine, Aldo Leopold, Lewis Mumford, Amory Lovins, E. F. Schumacher, Murray Bookchin, Annie Dillard--the list goes on and on. It was a challenging, rich and delectable time of learning and visioning.

When I returned to Canada after completing my MA at Fordham, Thomas continued to play a significant role in my teaching and life plans. The yearly colloquium at Holy Cross Centre, largely the work of Stephen Dunn and Anne Lonergan, brought Thomas into conversation with thinkers, activists and scholars from diverse fields. Through my annual pilgrim-

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age to Holy Cross Centre, Thomas's vision was nurtured and kept alive for me. When it was time to begin my PhD, there was no doubt that Thomas Berry's work would be the subject of my dissertation. I wanted to be part of whatever would sustain, broaden and deepen interest in his vision. My first university position (which I still hold) included teaching a course in Religion and Ecology, first taught at Saint Mary's University in 1973 by a former student of Fordham, Emero Steigman, who was inspired by the same blue bound *Riverdale papers* that introduced me to Thomas's work. It seemed quite fitting. The power of Thomas's vision and his presence, through the various videos I use, to continue to motivate young university students to dedicate time and effort to the ecological crisis amazes me each year.

Thomas Berry was among a very first few visionaries who saw the ecological crisis as a cultural, spiritual and religious crisis. It is thanks to the vision of these few that religion and ecology has grown into a field of study, research and activism. Of course, since those early days of the 'sixties and 'seventies when Thomas first formulated his insights, post-modernism has increased all our awareness of the contextual nature of all our insights and visions. Many voices have elaborated and enriched the call for religions to pay attention to the Earth. Yet the seminal and broad range of Thomas's proposal of nothing less than a new cosmology from which to construct human existence on the planet has not lost its sting and its promise.

Because of the incredible range of his synthesis—from Taoism and Confucianism to Native Americans to traditional Christian texts—people of diverse cultures and faiths seem to find a resonance in his thought. But even deeper than that, may I suggest that as Thomas himself said of Giambattista Vico, on whom he wrote his doctoral thesis, Thomas too initiated many of us into “a new reimmersion in the natural forces out of which our cultural achievements came about.”

Hello, Aster and Helenium; hello, blue tail and honey bee; Thomas Berry has introduced us.