

Founder of a School of Wisdom

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In the summer of 2007 I made a pilgrimage to seek a blessing. It was a journey that had its beginnings decades before when as a first semester graduate student at Fordham University in the mid 1970s, I unwittingly found myself in class with the teacher who was to become more than a mentor to me, but a true master. I had no idea at the time who Father Thomas Berry was that first day in the Keating Hall Religious Studies wing in the Bronx – I just knew I wanted to learn about the “Great Mother.” I sensed immediately on entering the room that I had wandered into a community of scholars awaiting the arrival of their esteemed teacher—there was an expectancy and also a tremendous cordiality and hospitality even to a new-comer like me. I remember in particular the graciousness of an exceptionally intelligent and elegant young woman, Mary Evelyn Tucker, who broke through my shyness and made me feel welcome among a cohort of what seemed to be the brightest and the best. I had no idea how and why I was really there.

At last Dr. Berry arrived. At the time I had no way of knowing that this apparently frail and humble man was the transformer and illuminator he would disclose himself to be over the weeks and then semesters and years to come, as I majored in “Thomas Berry,” whatever the course on offer – Native American Spirituality, The Sacred City, The Religions of India. It didn't matter. All that mattered was sitting before him laboring to comprehend the depth and scope of the worlds he was excavating and exploring for us, trying to decipher his unique argot, trying to understand. He was teaching us the languages of wisdom spelled out in a myriad of inspired tongues, and he himself stood within these multiple worlds as an adept, at once a translator and interpreter, engaging us in conversations of meaning that were themselves revelatory. I felt as if I had been dropped into an accelerated class in sacred studies, indeed, a class that had for its term project a noetic evolution that was the academic equivalent to enlightenment. Every class—regardless of the syllabus—had this one comprehensive assignment: the awakening of one's sense of deep planetary purpose, one's cosmic vocation. And the medium of such a potent message: Father Berry's gentleness, his lovely courtesy, his ferocious intention, his self-effacing charm.

At the end of my Master's studies, I asked Father Thomas to mentor my thesis on the Shakers. By then I realized who he was; by then I knew his greatness. Still shy and somewhat awed in his presence, I nevertheless made my way to the Riverdale Center for Religious Research on the Hudson for his guidance. In time that thesis would become my first book thanks to him. I lamented his retirement from Fordham as I began my doctoral studies, but I took every tutorial opportunity with him I could find, attending his lectures and presentations in the New York area until he moved to North Carolina.

I transformed his lecture notes into my own for my high-school and then college students, setting all my teaching within the context of the New Story and the Great Work. I wrote songs that echoed in lyrics what resonated in

my own awareness because of his transformative teaching. With what felt like the subtle unfolding of a larger purpose I became friends with Father Thomas's exceptional students Mary Evelyn Tucker and Brian Brown, when they joined the faculty at Iona College and brought to it the riches of their scholastic work with Thomas Berry, and, from a distance, with John Grim, and Miriam Therese McGillis whose Genesis Farm became a kind of first-fruits of his vision. And there were others; and their numbers grew.

As my ecological awareness and commitments deepened, my own academic and creative work became my service to the Great Work, always and ever with Father Thomas as my guide, and the exceptional band of disciples he had trained my inspiration and allies. Graciously he agreed to write the forward to my volume of *Thomas Merton's Writings on Nature*. The more I read of his growing corpus of published writings the more I felt called to take up The Great Work in earnest, as the context and content of my own teaching and writing life. Responding to a call to become a GreenFaith Fellow, I promised as my fellowship project to bring to my mission communities and commitments the vision of Father Thomas Berry and the challenge of The Great Work.

For this reason in the midst of my training with GreenFaith to become a religious environmental leader, I desired to see again, for the last time, this mentor, this master who had changed my life and directed the course of its deepest commitments. When another GreenFaith Fellow and I arrived at Well-Spring in North Carolina in the summer of 2007, Father Thomas was more than ready for us—two full days' tutorials on his latest work! What a privilege to be able to sit in his presence again and hear such sonorous wisdom sounding from so frail a form. He was transitioning even then, knowingly, intentionally. His Great Work was ending, as ours was intensifying. He was leaving an extraordinary legacy—not just a patrimony of vision spelled out in his literary works; not just a band of students willing to carry it forward. He was—like so many great sages before him—leaving “a school of wisdom” that would grow over the years and decades to come as his teaching would find its way to larger and larger audiences, be taken up in a variety of arenas, play itself out in a multitude of theaters, work its influence explicitly and subtly in a range of worlds, on new generations waiting to be awakened and empowered as we had.

So to his great surprise and embarrassment I knelt down before him my hand in his, my eyes on his, and said: “Father Thomas, I have come for your blessing that I might be faithful to The Great Work, and grateful for your mentorship.” With a shy smile and an unwillingness to disappoint—he raised his right hand over me, made the sign of the cross—the sign of the four directions of this expanding universe—and said: “I bless you in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost.” Then like a bishop, confirming--(ordaining?)—he gently touched my cheek. And I said: Amen.