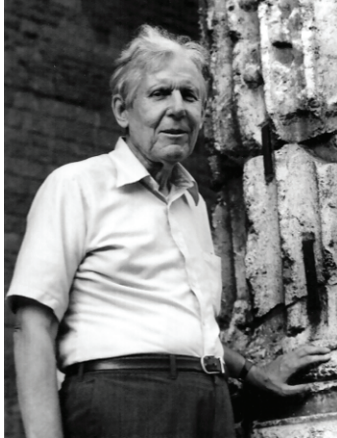


Travels with Thomas Berry

Drew Dellinger



Thomas Berry at the Temple of Minerva, Assisi, Italy, 1991; photo by Drew Dellinger

Thomas Berry can shift your worldview with a single sentence.

For example, imagine that one minute you are just a simple person, thinking simple thoughts, and then the next minute you hear Tom Berry say: “*The universe—throughout its vast extent in space, and its long sequence of transformations in time—is a single, multiform, celebratory event.*” And furthermore, Berry says, you, as a human, “*are that being in whom the universe reflects on and celebrates itself.*”

(Say what? The universe is a celebration...and I am the universe thinking about itself?)

Imagine that one minute you are a slacker college student, at an ‘eco-hippie’ school in Arizona, and then the next minute you are told: “*The entire college project can be seen as that of enabling the student to understand the immense story of the universe and the role of the student in creating the next phase of the story.*”

(Do what now? Help create the next phase of the universe story?)

And say, for instance, that you are majoring in Religious Studies, and Thomas Berry sends you his essay, “The Cosmology of Religions,” and the first sentence reads: “*The universe itself is the primary sacred community. All human religion should be considered as participation in the religious aspect of the universe itself.*”

And say, for example, that all this blows your mind.

Thomas Berry flipped wigs everywhere he went, because Thomas has a way of *making you feel* the immensity, the magnificence, and the mystery of the cosmos. He baptizes you into the presence of the galaxies, and transmits the sacredness and unity of the universe. Berry makes you feel your cosmic identity, and your connection to the earth and the universe as an unfolding process.

My introduction to Berry’s work was his 1988 collection of essays, *The Dream of the Earth*. In 1990 I met Father Thomas for the first time and heard him speak at the “Earth & Spirit” conference in Seattle.

On the opening night of the conference, after stirring talks by Brian Swimme and Joanna Macy, Berry gave a speech that lit the room on fire. He invoked the depths of environmental destruction and the mass extinction crisis, saying, “We have to be terrorized by what we have done, but without hope.” He suggested that we put the Bible on the shelf for twenty years until we learn to read the scripture of the natural world. He said we should put *Webster’s Dictionary* on the shelf as well, because we needed a new language to guide us into an ecological future.

He said the dark side of the Western tradition was its treatment of the natural world as objects to be used and exploited. He said we needed a new religious consciousness that saw the Earth as primary. And of course he uttered his sublime mantra and ethical formula: “The universe is a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects.”

For the first time in my life, I knew I was in the presence of a prophet. Later that evening another speaker said humorously, “I’ve been thinking that if they were to make a movie of the new cosmology, Joanna Macy would be played by Katharine Hepburn. Brian Swimme would be played by Steve Martin. And Thomas Berry would be played by Yoda.”

I had come to the conference with my friend and fellow student, Steve Snider, who was also becoming a Berry enthusiast. We spoke with Thomas and told him how much his work inspired us. We invited him to visit Prescott College someday. Tom gave me his plain white business card, which simply read, “THOMAS BERRY,” and at the bottom: “RIVERDALE CENTER OF RELIGIOUS RESEARCH.” (I carried it around in my wallet for years, until I saw that the edge was getting frayed.)

Through good fortune, Steve and I had the chance to study with Thomas during the summers of ’91-’93, and through Father Tom’s generosity we were able to enlist him as a mentor. I have a cascade of wonderful memories from these last 18 years.

I recall studying with Thomas in Assisi, Italy, in ’91 and learning more from him in nine days than I had in any previous year of schooling. This was during the era of the Bush/Quayle administration, and when the topic of politics arose, Tom said that the only politician he had any hope for was Senator Al Gore. Later that fall I ran into Senator Gore at a conference and I passed along the compliment. In return, Gore told me this story: One day he was talking to Thomas about his critiques of Christianity, and he asked Father Tom, “How come you haven’t been excommunicated yet?” Thomas just shrugged and said softly, “They don’t understand my work.”

I remember when Thomas came to Prescott College in the winter of ’92 and gave a speech so moving it brought tears to the eyes of several listeners. “The Earth is precious. Species are precious,” he said, in that hushed, wavering voice that made you feel like you were listening to Lao Tzu himself. “Reverence will be total or it will not be at all,” he said. “Celebration is the key to the future. It’s the key to human energies. You can’t have energies if you don’t celebrate. Prescott College should be a place that celebrates the universe, that celebrates the deep mystery of things, in a meaningful way.”

The second summer studying with Thomas in Italy, he had agreed to return on the condition that he could teach Dante. So in the mornings he guided us through *The Divine Comedy* and in the afternoons he discussed

ecology and cosmology. Berry reveled in Dante's epic poem, delighting in the grandeur of Beatrice, as well as the obscure political and historical references that went over all our heads.

I'll never forget sitting on a bench in Ecuador with Steve and Thomas, looking at the stars sparkling above the dark blue mountains, drinking beer from big brown bottles as Tom discoursed on Teilhard de Chardin. On that trip we visited a traditional healer, and the shaman, Don Esteban, remarked that Thomas had "a very strong spirit."

In 1994 many of Tom's friends and former students came together to celebrate his 80th birthday at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York. Not long after, Steve and I helped Thomas move some of his books and papers from his Riverdale Center on the Hudson River, south to the land of his birth in Greensboro, North Carolina. It was awesome to see Tom at Riverdale, surrounded by 9,000 books: Jung; Teilhard; Bergson; Eisley; texts in Sanskrit, Chinese and Pali. We also saw the Great Red Oak that sheltered it all.

This past weekend I was on Whidbey Island in Puget Sound, giving a workshop in the Whidbey Institute's Thomas Berry Hall for their annual "Thomas Berry Legacy" event. I performed my poetry, much of it inspired by Tom's cosmological vision. I also gave a talk titled, "At the Confluence of Cosmology, Ecology and Justice: Thomas Berry, Martin Luther King Jr., and the Path into the Future."

Several years ago I met with Thomas in Greensboro and told him about the topic of my doctoral dissertation, which explores the connections between cosmology, ecology and social justice, using Berry's work and the thought of Martin Luther King Jr.

"Cosmology is the foundation of justice," Tom said. "That would be the ultimate binding force between myself and King: the recognition that the universe supports justice. It's amazing how profound King was in his thinking."

"The idea of the soul of an age, or the soul of a civilization, is what you will be dealing with," continued Thomas, "because King wanted to change the soul of the modern world. Not just technologically; not just to get higher wages, or to even get physically improved conditions, but to change the *inner* world. That's why when he had that 'I Have a Dream' thing, that was a vision and a soul-type experience of a *transformed* world—not a more mechanically effective world—but something different, something new...What we're faced with now, and with King's ideas, what we're faced with, is a change in the soul of our world."

As Thomas now approaches his 94th year, it is fitting that we celebrate the contribution he has made toward transforming the soul of our world. As we face the daunting challenges of the current crisis, including climate change, mass extinction, access to food and water, green jobs and social justice, Berry's thought will continue to grow in its importance as a beacon for the present and the future.

Thank you, Thomas, for your wisdom, graciousness and authenticity; for combining the sensitivity of a mystic with the audacity of a prophet. Thank you for perceiving the planet with the soul of a poet, helping us hear the voices of the cosmos in every breeze, in every leaf, in every star, in every smile.

Sadly, the Great Red Oak at Riverdale has been felled. However, I have in my possession an acorn from this tree, which I gathered as a sacred talisman while visiting Tom in 1995. It is clear that the acorns of Berry's teaching are carried in the hearts and minds of many, many people. May the seeds of Thomas's vision and communion with the cosmos continue to blossom—for the Earth, all species, and all of us.