

## Wisdom at the Heart of the Universe

Heather Eaton

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My initial introduction to the insights of Thomas Berry was in theology courses taught by Stephen Dunn in the mid-1980's in Toronto. Having never heard of Tom, and knowing little about the worldview issues embedded in the Western traditions, my initial impression was that his 'prospectus' seemed reasonable and straightforward, and even just plain common sense. I had lived most of my life on the wondrous shores of Lake Huron, had always been mesmerized by the power of the waters, the magnitude of the night sky, and the stunning beauty of the bioregion. I did not accept the supremacy of any one religion, had studied Teilhard de Chardin and knew in my bones that we lived in a Divine milieu. And, already I was deeply disturbed by the ecological crisis. Thus when I encountered Tom's analysis and proposal, it fit like a glove. That was my first of many reactions to the genius that is Thomas Berry.

Although it is not well known, Tom Berry and his work have had a great influence on many Canadians. I would hazard a guess that there are more Canadians who have done post-graduate studies on Tom's work than any other nationality. Much of this is due to the influence of Stephen Dunn, and the retreat centre at Post Burwell, Ontario. Tom came every year to this retreat centre, nestled in the mild wild of the shores of Lake Ontario. These yearly colloquia provided three or four days of listening to and learning from Tom, always in conversation with someone: feminists, indigenous leaders, activists, artists, scientists, and even theologians!

Reading Tom is not the same as listening to him. As he speaks, one is slowly drawn into the depths of his knowledge, his analysis, his distress and his vision. It is profoundly compelling. But I have learned that one does not just 'get it' and move on. There are many levels to awakening to the universe and of becoming aware of being a self-conscious dimension of the universe.

I had heard Tom speak a few times, and was increasingly intrigued by and attracted to his insights. Then, one night at Port Burwell, I had a dream. In the dream I was alone, and descending into the Earth. I walked along dark tunnels with earthen walls, looking for something. It was a long journey, feeling my way along rocky pathways and barely able to see. I was deep inside Earth. Then the pathway opened into a cave at the heart of Earth, and there stood Tom Berry, holding a light and ready to greet me. He said, "I have been waiting for you for a long time." I took this to heart, and to mind, and began an adventure deeply influenced by Tom.

It is difficult to explain how and why my appreciation for Tom is so ample. When I began my doctoral work I was fairly sure that I had already understood the new cosmology. I had read *The Dream of the Earth*, a few of the *Riverdale Papers*, heard Tom speak many times, and even argued

with him about this and that! For the thesis I intended to focus on Tom's description of a functional cosmology and apply it to radical social political ecofeminism. In order to unpack what a functional cosmology meant I had to probe his work, the presuppositions, and how he could make these claims. An intuitive understanding, or being gripped by the vision do not suffice in academia. At that point *The Dream of the Earth* was out but not *The Great Work*. There were a couple of books by others, a few tapes, my notes from his talks, and not much else. To complicate matters for the academy, Tom's work is not in any conventional genre. His publications are typically in the form of speeches and presentations in a writing genre something similar to interpretative historical essays. Others depict it more akin to poetry, mythology or story telling. In addition, Tom's commitment to disregarding references made for a sad state of dissertation affairs! So I had to figure out how he put these things together without much to go on. Along with a couple of others doing a Ph.D. on Tom's work, (Anne Marie Dalton, Cris Vanin, Dennis O'Hara, Billie Grassie ) and with many, many conversations with Anne Lonergan, Steve Dunn and other Port Burwell comrades, we tried to figure out the dimensions of his thought. This process has been an exhilarating, daunting and humbling adventure.

Academically I journeyed through Giambattista Vico and cultural transformation, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and cosmogenesis, Mircea Eliade and the role of myth and cultural narratives, Carl Jung and psychic archetypes, science and the origins of the universe, religious consciousness and religious experiences, the tapestry of revelations from world religions, and the limitations within Christianity. My learning was vicarious, however, because I did not learn Sanskrit or Chinese to be able to read Hindi, Buddhist or Confucian texts, or live in China, or read Vico in Italian, or read all of Thomas Aquinas in Latin. That is what Tom did.

I became utterly overwhelmed by the breadth, depth and sheer volume of Tom's knowledge. Although I thought that I knew what the new cosmology was and meant, it was dawning upon me that what Tom's proposal entails had required this amount and level of study, travel, and genuine learning, as well as keen observation and pondering, or brooding, as he says. Tom's proposal of a functional cosmology had taken all this learning and about sixty years to work out. There was nothing facile or basic about it, in spite of the smoothness and elegance with which he presents it. I became aware that I was sitting at the feet of an exceptionally wise master. I realised that I was only beginning to 'get it', and at that only barely. I decided it was imprudent, not to mention farcical, to argue with Tom! At that point I listened as often as I could to Tom, and sat at his feet and tried to learn.

Over the past twenty years I have learned, debated, taught, published and thought a lot about this ‘new cosmology’ and what it means. My own inclinations represent a combination of activism and academia, and I have tried often to build bridges between Tom’s work and those oriented toward social, political and ecological activism. Until recently those who followed Tom tended not to be activists, and activists could not see the relevance of the new cosmology. My doctoral work was an attempt to think through an ecofeminist cosmology that retained the best of the international ecofeminist efforts and took seriously Tom’s contributions. There is much to say about these alliances, and the necessity of building bridges between Tom’s insights and other initiatives. Today his work is taken into more disciplines than we can count. His influence is growing. He is considered a genius, and a leading original thinker of the twentieth century. All of that I appreciate, marvel at, and am delighted by!

Today, after over twenty years of being influenced by the great work of Thomas Berry, and trying to participate in the Great Work to which we are all called, I still need to hear Tom and to learn from him. I have passages memorized from the books, and I know at least a dozen Berry phrases by heart: religion as we know it is over; it takes a universe to raise a child; differentiation, subjectivity, communion; we are upsetting the entire Earth system; patriarchy is anti-feminist, anti-human and anti-Earth; the Earth is primary, the human derivative; the magnitude of the crisis; the universe is the only self-referent mode of being in the phenomenal order; the Earth is a single reality and cannot be saved in fragments; and, the universe carries the deep mysteries of our existence within itself. Yet the meanings of these phrases need to be pondered over a lifetime.

Tom’s teachings have been like water in the desert for me. His work has affirmed my experience of living within a Divine milieu, provided me with a sophisticated intellectual framework within which to reflect and communicate, and strengthened my convictions of the urgency of the ‘great work.’ My earliest intuition that his insights are straightforward is both true and false. It is true in that they have emerged from the depths of wisdom, from those great traditions whereby the complex is made clear, the obscure made obvious, where underlying patterns surface to consciousness, where ethics impact current reality and future possibilities, and where knowledge, vision and spiritual awakening coalesce. It is false in that his work represents involved concepts containing constellations of ideas and meanings gleaned over a lifetime of experiences and reflection.

My appreciation for Tom’s gracious presence and truly incredible insights is immense. I have followed this road, beginning with an intuitive sense of its power and accuracy. His work has oriented so much of my

life. It has allowed me to move from a impoverished understanding of the world to a universe of the most profound revelations. It has allowed me to honour my religious experiences of this magnificent Earth, and my profound despair at its ruin. More important to me is that his work has affirmed the awareness and experiences that we indeed live in an immense drama within a living universe: one much more extraordinary than anything we can imagine.

Tom is a teacher, leader, visionary, activist, and without question a wise elder. He writes: “The deepest crises experienced by any society are those moments of change when the story becomes inadequate for meeting the survival demands of a present situation...The revelatory aspect of the ecological age finds its most effective expression in the great story of the universe.”

In gratitude to you, Tom, for awakening me to the story of the universe. It has made all the difference. It is an immense privilege to thank you.