

The Power of One Sentence by Thomas

Larry Edwards

Larry Edwards earned a doctoral degree in chemical-physics from Harvard University. He taught/researched at the American University of Beirut, Lebanon, Cal State Northridge, and the California Institute of Technology before moving to the U.S. National Science Foundation. He left NSF to live and teach at Genesis Farm in Blairstown, NJ. He continues to teach there as well as at the California Institute of Integral Studies and Wisdom University (formerly the University of Creation Spirituality).



My first encounter with Thomas Berry was reading his poetic genius in *The Dream of the Earth*. It is the only book I have ever read standing up, actually walking around. I was so struck, so entranced by it that I could not sit down. I walked around our house for several days lost in Thomas's poetry. A particular sentence was the turning point for me. Thomas wrote something to the effect that scientists had this new story of the Universe; but they didn't know it. I can still remember, now almost 20 years later, the power of that sentence. I actually reeled. I realized that I was "schizophrenic". I was living in two worlds, two cosmologies. With all the science I knew, with all the conversations I had with my co-workers at the National Science Foundation, with all my interest in ecology, with all that, I was living my life totally inconsistent with my own knowledge. Even more disturbing for me was that I realized that I identified myself with my knowledge. So I was not even living myself. It was a profound identity crisis initiated by a simple and insightful sentence.

With that one sentence Thomas exposed me. My reaction went from embarrassment to guilt and finally to great sadness. For a while I wondered what I should do. Then Sr. Miriam MacGillis came down to Washington, D.C., to give her talk "Fate of the Earth" based on Thomas's work. Soon after that weekend we started attending various programs at Genesis Farm, eventually leaving our jobs and moving there.

Just before moving to Genesis Farm in the summer of 1993, I participated in the St. Thomas University summer program, "Study Abroad for the Earth," by teaching a course in modern science. We spent about four weeks in Ecuador, partly in the Andes and partly in the lowlands rain forest. Thomas came down to give a short concentrated lecture course entitled something like "America and the Wilderness Experience." He lectured all morning and all afternoon for at least three days. His wealth of knowledge of the early American nature writers was staggering. I was mesmerized by the wealth of knowledge coming from that quiet teacher. But, I must admit, what really impressed me was that his notes for the entire course consisted of a series of names scribbled on a little scrap of paper.

At Genesis Farm I studied and taught the Universe Story. Thomas said, "Tell the Story." So I did, as best I could. My biggest challenge was to face up to being wrong. Trained as a scientist, I was very sensitive to being correct even if that meant knowing a lot about very little. I soon realized that such an approach would never work for teaching the Universe Story. There was just too much knowledge of our past and that knowledge was constantly growing and being reinterpreted. So I learned to admit up front that not everything I said was correct. That was quite liberating for me. Thomas helped in this during his several trips up to Genesis Farm. He simply presented what he knew, what he saw as truly important. I learned

that sincerity mixed with a dash of humor set in a deep humility was a very effective teaching methodology. I always felt honored to be able to listen to him and have tried to follow his model throughout my teaching career.

In a way I have never recovered from that first encounter with Thomas. Sadness is still just a breath away. Our beautiful Earth suffers because we don't know who we are. So I will continue to "Tell the Story" as Thomas taught me.

I will carry in my heart forever Thomas's response to our writing him of our son's death in 2000 from leukemia. Thomas wrote back:

"...He is assuredly caught up in that abiding world that one day claims us all as voices in the great chorus of wonder and magnificence such as we observe in the dawn and in the sunset of these summer evenings."

Although I have not talked with Thomas for some time now, he lives in me as he always has since I opened *The Dream of the Earth*. And I know that I will always enjoy his presence in the great chorus of wonder and magnificence.