

## **The Great Oak, the Great River and The Great Work**

Brother Conrad Federspiel, C.P.

One cannot speak of Thomas Berry's days in Riverdale, New York without reference to the red oak tree, some 500 years old, and the beautiful Hudson River, both marking the place where so much of his work was conceived and brought to life. The Hudson lies to the west of the Riverdale Center for Religious Research where Tom hosted conferences, taught students and wrote volumes of papers on a variety of topics. So too the great red oak stood near the house offering shade and nourishment to the ideas, conversations and gatherings taking pace at the Center. Thomas had great respect and reverence for this tree for, like the elders among indigenous peoples, it represented a wisdom, a living history of the landscape at Riverdale overlooking the Hudson and observing the exceptional rock formations across the river called the Palisades.

When I lived in our monastery at Riverdale, I was invited by Thomas to walk with him on Sunday afternoons. I learned about ecology, Teilhard de Chardin, global warming and a host of other topics. We gravitated toward each other and the result was a friendship and companionship that lasted some fifteen years as we lived together in the old house which became his Center. These photos are a kind of pictorial essay which attempts to capture a few of those memories framed by the river and the red oak. Visitors and students usually ended up with Thomas in front of the red oak.

The landscape at the old Riverdale Center still harbors silent memories of our days together and speaks in ways known to those who dare to live "the dream of the Earth" – the dream that Thomas incarnates in mind and spirit.

Brother Conrad Federspiel, C.P., is a Passionist monk who lived in Riverdale, NY, when Thomas Berry was there. In 1970 he moved to the Passionist Monastery in Boston and later to Union City, and he continues his service to the Passionist Community at Holy Family Monastery, West Hartford, CT.



Brother Conrad Federspiel (left) with B. Griffiths by the Great Oak