

What Shall I Call This Man?

Herman Greene

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“He that wrestles with us strengthens our nerves, and sharpens our skill. Our antagonist is our helper” —Edmund Burke

What shall I call this man with whom I have wrestled for years... guide, friend, icon, saint, philosopher, seer, historian, teacher, poet, sage, gentle-man, antagonist? I have been gripped by this man. I am reminded of the hymn line, “O love that will not let me go.”

At first it was just a handwritten note at the top of a paper: “Eastertide 1981.” My pastor, Finley Schaefer, Park Slope (Brooklyn) United Methodist Church, had copied an unpublished paper by Thomas Berry called “The Spirituality of the Earth,” and given it to us to study. Here was the lightning flash by which I was bolted to attention:

The subject we are concerned with is the Spirituality of the Earth. By this I do not mean a spirituality that is directed toward an appreciation of the Earth. I speak of the Earth as subject, not as object.

My life would never be the same.

In this paper Thomas wrote of a dominant religious spirituality based on redemption and a secular science that answered all of the questions that really concerned our everyday lives and our imaginations. We didn’t find in our liturgies and scriptures the meaning of the stars or even diseases, rather we read about scientific explanations. Yet, this science had no interior or numinous dimension. What we needed was an integral human presence to Earth’s processes, a creation-based spirituality by which we could be whole again.

I fought/befriended Thomas from the beginning. “Yes, BUT!”

I was fortunate to be present when Thomas came and spoke at our “hot little church in Brooklyn.” The church wasn’t big, but we had many social agitators in our midst. I remember Thomas talking about the failure of our enterprise, and this was in the early 1980s. I don’t remember many of his actual words, but I do remember him sweeping his hand across his body and saying, “They couldn’t build this again.” What he meant was that the modern mode of development would run out of resources or cause much destruction to ecosystems. A human world had been built in such a way that it could not be sustained, and it could not be rebuilt when it began to deteriorate.

Yes, BUT!

I also remember him talking about edges. “Life always begins at the edges,” he said. “In a pond, the place where new life begins is at the edges.” He told stories about people like John and Nancy Todd with their “living

machines” who had begun a new way of development, at the edges.

Yes, BUT!

I carried that paper, the “Spirituality of the Earth” with me and it sustained me for years, that along with Nikos Kazantzakis’s *Saviors of God*. Kazantzakis wrote about the “crimson line” of evolution that ascends against a crushing descending current. “[Earth] sucks at the Universe and wants to pass it through its body—thin as a thread—to turn it into a flower, fruit, seed.” Kazantzakis called on us to “save God,” the one who ever ascends, and to love the Earth...the struggle. I heard this too in Thomas who called us away from “this basic rejection of Earth in its existing form,” our attempts to subdue it and transform it with our scientific technologies and the effort to escape the discipline of Earthly experience, to the radical participation in creation-based dynamics.

I was young then, and I had a young family. I didn’t feel I could do much outside of my very demanding legal work and my home, and then my home fell apart. I was divorced and alone. I went to see Thomas speak whenever I could, which was only a few times, and I clung to “The Spirituality of the Earth.” It wasn’t just a paper, it was all around me and it was hope.

At a low point in my early legal career, I journeyed to visit my two boys where they were living for a semester with my ex-wife in Costa Rica. I took with me the recently published *Dream of the Earth* by Thomas Berry. We went to the beach at Jaco on the Pacific side of the country. There I read this book, and then I knew my calling. This was my life’s work, though I did not then have the name “the Great Work.” It was the recession of 1990. When I returned from Costa Rica to New York, I lost my job. The Great Work had begun.

Since then, I guess it has been a matter of understanding this material better and learning how to live in two different worlds—the world of the ecozoic vision and the world of how I live my daily life. I have learned not to call this a contradiction. An earlier community in which I had participated, the Ecumenical Institute, had given me a way to describe this...“living in between the no longer and the not yet.” Or I could use Kazantzakis’ line, “living to bring about the ascent in the midst of the crushing descent.” It is where I am. It is where we are.

In 1992 I returned to my home state, North Carolina, and moved to Raleigh. I wanted no more of big law firms and business. I wanted peace, I wanted to live my values. I knew that Jim Berry, Thomas’ brother, lived in Raleigh, but I didn’t know where. It was two years before I would meet “big Jim.” Jim was big in size, but I don’t simply mean big that way. Jim was big in heart, a force. I joined Jim’s Center for Reflection on the Second Law and came back into touch with those who knew and lived Thomas



Herman Greene, Thomas, and Sandi Greene

Berry's words. It was at this time that *The Universe Story* was published, and, after reading it, I began to read physics, biology, ecology, books on religion and science, and so forth.

And I began to dream of "The Thomas Berry Society." By this time I knew that Thomas also was from North Carolina because he had moved to Greensboro to live. I began to see him, first rarely and later regularly. I wrote to Thomas in 1996 about forming a "Thomas Berry Society." "No," he said, "do not form a Thomas Berry Society!" "Well," I asked, "what about 'The Ecozoic Society?'" "No," he said, "the ecozoic society is something much bigger than some little group in Chapel Hill."

Thomas has had to hold me back so many times. "Don't push the river," he would tell me. He has regularly trimmed my expectations of what I could do to represent him. And in the last two years we have been through a painful period of arguing about "ontology vs. process." Don't ask me.

At the same time, I would like to think Thomas has been something like a spiritual and intellectual father to me, and in the same vein, I have been his son. We have met and talked. Ours were not always joyful social events. Yes, there were the "oh my's," and the times of laughing, but always there has been a fierce dialogue. I would ask my toughest questions to him. I wanted to know, wanted to know, wanted to know. And he always came back with profound answers, some of which I disagreed with, and if I did I told him so.

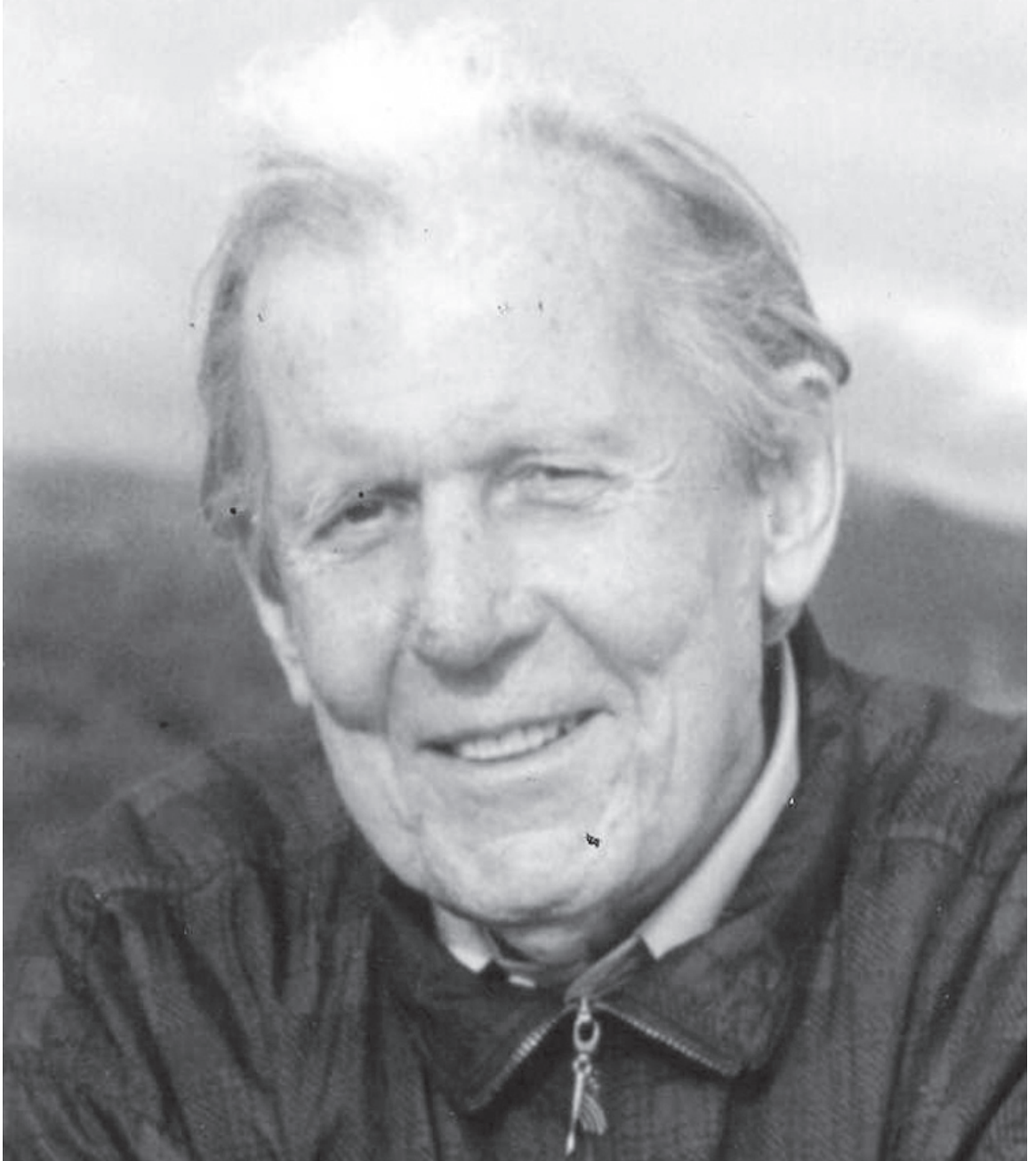
And so we would have these ardent discussions, month after month after month now for almost fourteen years.

I still want to go to Thomas and say "BUT!" and yet there is so much more of "YES, YES, YES."

Yes, I have heard you Thomas. Yes, you have turned my life on end. Yes, you have gripped me with your insight and vision. Yes, you have shaped my life's work.

Yes, Thomas...I love you. I believe you are one of the most important people of our time and that your legacy will shape the human community and Earth for ages to come.

I am so glad we met.



Thomas at Greene Mountain Monastery; photo by Gretchen McHugh.