

Remembering Thomas

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I came into Thomas Berry's office in Collins Hall on Fordham University's Rosehill campus in late August 1968. He welcomed me and I asked if I should call him Doctor, Father, or Mister. "You can call me whatever you like," he quietly responded. I began to realize that I was with a teacher who could guide me through those tempestuous days of post-modern birth pains as well as my own wild ways.

Poetic, insightful, and playful, Thomas moved through diverse religious traditions with a profound empathetic feel for the pulse of their spiritual dynamics. He would remark, in light of the Vatican II document *Nostra Aetate's* recognition of a "ray of that Truth" in the world's religions, that, indeed, they held floods of illumination and truth. I recall afternoons after class when a group of us would gather with him in the campus ratskellar and discuss the Pali texts of Buddhism, the Sanskrit scriptures of Indian dharma, and the enigmatic turn of hexagrams in the I Ching. More than once he guided us through a throwing of coins to build a hexagram in response to a question. Rather than dwell on the divinatory dimension, however, he urged us on to deeper reflection of the lines of the text. I still ponder the possibility in our driven, acquisitive world that "the small get by" (hsiao kuo).

While those graduate school days focused on historical and textual developments in the many religions, Thomas oriented us towards a cosmology of religions. Under his guidance we thought about correlations and connections between rituals, texts, commentarial teachings and traditional stories of creation. We mused on metaphysical speculations about the world as it was perceived and articulated in these textual traditions. Under his guidance, students struggled to understand the history, anthropology and sociology of religions embedded in those stories.

Thomas forged ahead articulating "cultural codings," as he called them, that related to our deep and hidden "genetic codings." All civilizations, he conjectured, were motivated by dreams of the ways in which the basic urges to mate, to eat, to breathe were woven into cultural practices. Successful cultures established profound linkages between these basic genetic drives and cultural practices that expressed those drives. Thomas's penchant was to explore at the edge of his intellectual horizon. And that horizon was not simply as an existential being-in-the-world, but increasingly as a seer of a world-in-evolution presenting itself as a community of life.

In this sense, if Teilhard de Chardin articulated his profound visions on the battlefields of World War II, Thomas drew on his maturing years of reading the sacred texts and studying the world's religions to come to his vision. He was a person who, having been prohibited from teaching by his religious order in the 1950s, accomplished a personal commitment to teach the stories of the great traditions.

Gradually, we students sensed some of his feel for cosmology as that ground for investigation of a depth level of human reflection on placement, orientation, and endurance in the world. "With a story," he would say, "people can suffer catastrophe and survive. With a story, they gather the energies to change their lot." He mused that the West was between stories and cited Spengler, Toynbee, Dawson, and Vogelin to give nuance to his historian's view. Stitching his arguments together with a sense of the ages of the human, drawn from Giambattisto Vico, he would grope for that thought, that word that could capture the transition. And, then, he would cough.

Gradually, Thomas connected cosmology to the environmental issues of our day. This came slowly maturing like a fine wine connecting in its own unique ways with the texture and taste of soils, sun, grapes, airs and aging. To a large extent, he accomplished this as a contemplative thinker. He was an anomaly at Fordham's graduate school in Theology, yet, at that time, his History of Religions section had more students than any other program. His colleagues Ewert Cousins, Frs. Norris Clark, and Chris Mooney and others challenged and shaped his ideas. Students thrived on the challenges he presented: learn the textual language of at least one tradition, know the history of many, feel the bass notes of spiritual wisdom in a tradition, and read widely in an interdisciplinary fashion so that the living context of the religion might unfold.

As I have said, we students struggled to grasp the history of a chosen religion, especially those dynamic contexts that were typically masked by the term "tradition." But just as Thomas brought us to those shores, he was sailing off to new uncharted territory. Sensing his way he drew increasingly on the thought of Teilhard de Chardin for insight into the story of our times, namely, the emerging, evolutionary universe. Rather than settling on Teilhard's insights, however, Thomas pushed beyond, reading widely in the scientific literature to explore the conjunction of cosmology and ecology. When flying back from the Seychelle Islands, he realized over the Nile River at 30,000 feet that he was a "geologist." That is, the world embodied in meaningful thought, reflecting on itself.

Thomas favored phenomenology in his philosophical turns, but he was wary of the over-conceptualizing, world-transcending directions of philosophical language. Reaching into his past, he recalled his boyhood experience of a meadow with lilies and increasingly expressed his thought in poetic forms. He sought for a deep affectivity and authenticity imparted by the Earth in local biodiversity. It was in the late 1970s that these ideas coalesced in his term "ecozoic." This was his way of naming the terminal destruction of Cenozoic life in the industrial-technological bubble of consumer acquisitiveness. But rather than leaving his audience in despair, his

idea of the ecozoic imaged an emerging period in which humans would “rediscover themselves at the species level.”

Such a primal rediscovery carried forward his earlier thinking about genetic and cultural coding that could place and orient human communities in the world. Through these poetic images, Thomas has sought his own philosophical position on the question of consciousness (read: cultural coding) and embodiment (read: genetic coding)—or, as he would often muse, the relationship between intimacy and distance. Thomas’s thought in this regard remains for me a superb example of Husserl’s *epoche*, the phenomenological “reduction,” namely, the effort to distinguish, but not separate, the natural embodiment that we are and the conscious disclosure of the world that we humans accomplish. Thomas reverses Husserl’s *epoche*, which reduces toward the transcendental constituting mind and bends it back towards the natural attitude, our deep affectivity for the world that forms us in our very embodied being.

My strongest tribute to Thomas is in the stories I tell—of when he found me in a mode of dissertation-despair and “crowned and mitred me over myself”; of carrying a book that Thomas gave me when I returned to the western regions of North America, namely, William Hung’s translations of Tu Fu’s poetry; and of his self-effacing humor as he donned the cape and walked as an “honorary canon” at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City. Who can speak about the shamanic training of simply seeing the Hudson River flow from under the great red oak behind the Riverdale Center? This was during the “Golden Year,” 1977 to 1978, when I lived with Thomas, Brian Brown, and Valerio Ortolani at the Riverdale Center for Religious Research.

Thomas introduced and married several of his students to one another. So it was that I met and eventually married Mary Evelyn Tucker culminating that golden year. With gratitude, I acknowledge how he mentored my degree work with the care and critique of a true “dissertation vater.” Mary Evelyn and I journey to this day with Thomas’s guidance of old and new as we visit with him in Greensboro from time to time. In all these reflections, I have an image of Thomas, the corduroy-coat prophet, standing, talking to an audience articulating with all the wonder, beauty, and imagination of his vision fully embodied.